

We are going to talk about the desert today. God took the Israelites out of Egypt, brought them to Mount Sinai, and got married there. After the wedding ceremony at Mount Sinai, where did God and God's people go for their honeymoon? The desert! The wilderness! It is the place just for themselves and getting to know each other. There are lessons in the wilderness we are to learn as a newlywed.

The Hebrew word for "wilderness" is *midvar* (מדבר) which is derived from the Hebrew word *davar* (דבר), meaning "word" or "speak." It was in the wilderness that God spoke to Moses and to the Israelites. The Spirit drove Jesus from the banks of the Jordan River into the wilderness so that He could speak words of power against temptation. God speaks in the wilderness, and there are lessons from the wilderness we are to learn.

In Exodus and Deuteronomy, God speaks, and Moses responds. In the dialogue, a friendship, a personal relationship, a dramatic new retirement plan is developing between Moses and God. The dialogue begins in the backside of the desert near Mount Horeb, an alternate name for Mount Sinai. Moses was wandering in the wilderness after running away from Egypt. There, a personal relationship between God and Moses has begun, and his true identity was found in the wilderness—from a Prince of Egypt to a Leader of the Israelites.

The Christian life is a wilderness journey toward the Promised Land. As we follow Jesus, we will at some point realize that we are in the wilderness—not a physical one, so much as a circumstantial one. It is how God does God's best work at shaping us into God's bride, God's treasured possession. It could be a significant loss or a period of terrible uncertainty like COVID-19 we are journeying through these days. It could be a time of spiritual dryness or one of seemingly unbearable suffering.

Whatever the wilderness we go through these days, please know that it is a place where God speaks to us closely and teaches us to rely on God alone. It is not a place God will destroy us or punish us. In the wilderness, God will remove the dross of "slavery" out of us. God is at work sanctifying God's people and teaching them to fully rely on God.

For the Israelites, God could get them out of Egypt, but He could not get “the Egypt” out of them. In the wilderness, God is at work getting “the Egypt” out of them to make them be His bride for becoming a holy nation for God. If I use the terminology of The United Methodist Church, the wilderness journey is the sanctification process—the process of perfecting our faith until we enter the Promised Land.

After the Red Sea deliverance, God has now sent the Israelites on their way three days’ march into the wilderness of Shur. And for three days, they find no water to drink until they come to Marah. Marah means bitter. And soon after tasting the bitter water, they begin to grumble against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” (vs. 24).

Now what’s so remarkable, actually stunning really, about this moment is not simply that the people are unhappy or that they are venting their spleen at Moses. What is so remarkable is that this all takes place only three days after God had split the waters of the Red Sea and brought them across in safety.

What is so remarkable about this episode is that while they complain, they live under the shadow of the pillar of cloud and at night in the light of the pillar of fire. The presence of God made manifest right in their midst. God is with them, and still, they complain.

What is so remarkable is that the kind of forgetfulness of God’s past mighty deeds that was so characteristic of Pharaoh. Do you remember Pharaoh in Egypt? Again and again, God displays His power before Pharaoh, and it seems as though Pharaoh would change his mind, and then he seems to forget, hardens his heart, and turns back to unbelief. The kind of forgetfulness of God’s mighty deeds that so characterized Pharaoh, the anti-God, anti-Christ figure in this whole story, now seems to characterize by God’s own covenant people themselves. In the wilderness, God is at work getting “the Egypt,” “the Pharaoh,” out of them to make them be His bride for becoming a holy nation for God.

That is stunning, I think. And while we shake our heads and roll our eyes at Israel’s behavior, let’s not forget Apostle Paul’s reminder in 1 Corinthians 10:11. He says that these things happen to them as examples for us. In other words, as we read the story of the Israelites, we are looking in the mirror. The fact is, when the hardships of life in the wilderness really begin to press us and stretch us, yesterday’s salvation is so terribly easy to forget.

When the Israelites left Egypt, miracle after miracle happened in the wilderness. God parted the Red Sea, and they crossed on dry ground. Then God defeated the Egyptians as they drowned in the sea. Then God gave the Israelites food from the sky and water from a rock. During the day, the pillar of cloud guided their journey in the wilderness as the light of the pillar of fire did during the night. But they constantly complained. They were complaining after complaining without remembering the blessings they received.

The whole complaining generation of the Israelites had to die out in the wilderness first for entering the Promised Land. God had to get “the Egypt,” “the Pharaoh,” out of them to shape them up as God’s bride, God’s treasured possession, to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation for God (Exodus 19:6; Revelation 1:6). It should take 11 days, but it took 40 years for them to enter the Promised Land because the first generation of the Israelites complained so much to the point of losing their privilege to enter the Promised Land.

Well, during this pandemic, we are good and thoroughly in the wilderness now, aren’t we? I think we all are starting to get a sense of what the Israelites were feeling in the COVID wilderness we are journeying through these days. The Israelites were tired, afraid, quarrelsome, and complained like we are.

However, we’ve heard today that complaining would not do any good. So, when we feel like complaining about whatever wilderness we go through, I would like to encourage us to check ourselves with a bit of P.S.A.—Pray, Seek, and Ask God what God wants from us. Is this simply a test? Are we resistant to a change that needs to happen? Are we getting in the way of God’s plan for us? Or for others?

While practicing P.S.A. in the wilderness of life, let us be kind to each other with a thankful heart. Kindness matters. And also, let us trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding; in all our ways let us submit to God today (Proverbs 3:5-6a). Amen.