



“Among Us”
Scripture – Exodus 17:1-7
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, October 1, 2017

We have all been to the wilderness.

Not necessarily the *physical* landscape where groves of ancient pines stretch on for miles, or where sun-scorched hills give way to rocky ravines carved out by streams that have run dry. Some of us have been there, too ... to a wilderness so vast, so rugged, we feel we might be swallowed whole if we wander too far from the trail or the tour bus.

But we have all been to the wilderness. The *spiritual* wilderness, that is. To a place of trial, a place of isolation, a place of wandering for days or years, until the way forward becomes clear. Of course, we call this wilderness by different names: Grief. Unemployment. Prolonged illness. Divorce. That season when you lose your way, or lose yourself ...

It's a well-worn landscape — this spiritual wilderness. One where our ancestors of the faith spent anguished hours in search of solace and hope. Throughout Scripture, the people of God return time and again to the physical wilderness, and find themselves on spiritual journeys as well. We know Jesus spent forty days in the desert, where he was tempted to choose glory and wealth and power over obedience to God. But there were others before him. There was Hagar, who wandered in the desert with her firstborn son; she was sure that all was lost until God opened her eyes to a well of water. And there was the prophet Elijah, who sought refuge in the wilderness when Queen Jezebel threatened his life, and found God in the sheer silence. And then there were the Israelites. The whole covenant community wandered in the wilderness for forty years after the Lord of Life delivered them from bondage to freedom.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness, at least we know we are in good company.

The wilderness is a place of waiting, of longing for the Holy One to appear in our midst. It's a landscape where many people of faith have sojourned for days, or for years, wondering if the Lord really is present in our doubt, in our distress, in our despair. And, during our own wilderness wanderings, many of us have uttered the question the Israelites voice in this passage: Is the Lord among us or not?

We meet our Israelite ancestors in the wilderness. The physical one. And the spiritual one. They are a mere three months into a forty-year sojourn in the desert, and they are already losing faith. In fact, their faith has wavered from the beginning, from the moment that Moses led them to the shore of the Red Sea during their flight out of

Egypt. As they stood on those muddy banks, with the army of Pharaoh in hot pursuit, the people cried out in fear: Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?

And the people's complaints have only amplified as they've trudged on through a harsh and unforgiving landscape, dragging cattle that are weary and over-burdened, carrying children whose bellies are empty and whose lips are parched. As they journey farther into the desert, their hope diminishes, for food and water are scarce. They wonder if the Lord, who has delivered them from death to life, will now sustain their lives in the desert. So they cry out in fear: Is the Lord among us, or not?

In this story, the wilderness is more than a rugged backdrop to the drama unfolding. It's a spiritual landscape — an environment that mirrors the Israelites' hunger for assurance, their thirst for hope. The wilderness reflects the people's rocky journey with the God who has led them out of bondage into a vast and untamable desert.

It's easy to criticize our Israelite ancestors for their faithlessness and fear, for they have seen displays of God's power and presence beyond anything *we* can imagine. After all, it's not every day that the Holy One parts the Red Sea, so that a whole nation can pass through its waters on foot. Was their faith so easily shaken, that it dissolved with the first sign of hardship?

We forget that each and every day brought new challenges for this community. Wandering in a parched land left them desperate — desperate for bread that could sustain life and water that could quench thirst. Desperate for the God who led them out of Egypt to become known — once again — in their midst.

The good news is the Holy One does become known — in visible signs of divine faithfulness, in vestiges of grace that the Israelites can taste and see and touch.

God satisfies their hunger by raining down manna from heaven. Remember the story? In Exodus chapter sixteen, the people discover that God's mercies are new every morning. Each day, when they rise from their beds, there is a layer of flaky manna covering the rocky desert terrain. God gives just enough bread to fill empty stomachs, until the next morning's offering of life-giving food.

And now, in the story before us today, we witness another act of divine grace. Upon hearing the people's distress, the Holy One makes a promise to Moses: Take some of the elders, and go on ahead of the people ... I will be standing before you on the rock at Horeb. So Moses heeds this command. And there — at the very site where Moses first encountered God in the Burning Bush — the leaders of Israel glimpse God's mercies anew. Moses strikes the rock, as the Lord instructed. And water flows ... a life-giving stream gushing from parched land, enough water to quench the most desperate thirst.

With this act, the people know that God is there among them — as certain as the water that flows from the rock. And in this moment, the Holy One satisfies their spiritual thirst, just as the water soothes their parched lips.

Manna from Heaven. Water from the rock. With these gifts of grace, the God who delivered these people from death to life acts to sustain life in the wilderness.

It's no surprise that the Holy One would use such ordinary stuff as reminders of divine promise and provision. Bread that satisfies hunger. Water that quenches thirst. These simple gifts become the signs of God's faithfulness — the assurance that the Holy One really is among them as they wander in the wilderness.

It's no surprise, because we've seen this before. We see this today. And every time we gather around the table of our Lord. Jesus stands ready to welcome us to the feast of grace, just as God stood on that rock at Horeb. And as

the Holy One became known in water flowing from the rock, Christ becomes known in broken bread and wine poured out, in a community of people gathered to receive God's mercies anew.

It's hard to grasp, this mystery we proclaim — that Jesus stands among us at this table, as real to us as the bread we break. To borrow the words of John Calvin (one of the fathers of our tradition): It's as if Christ "were himself set before our eyes and touched by our hands ..."¹

But this is good news for weary pilgrims, longing for assurance of God's presence among us: By the power of the Holy Spirit, God draws near to us, and we to God, through bread that sustains life and a cup that quenches thirst. It is good news for the people of God — whether or not we are wandering in the wilderness and desperate for a sign of God's faithfulness. It's good news because we *all* — no matter where we are on our journeys of faith — crave some assurance that God is here among us.

Last September I returned to the wilderness ... the physical one, that is. I was helping to facilitate a retreat for our denomination's Young Adult Volunteer program — for participants who had just returned from a year of service at sites throughout the country, and around the world. These young adults were wandering in the wilderness ... They had just said 'goodbye' to communities that had challenged and shaped them. Many had come home transformed, and were trying to find their way in a world that should have felt familiar, but now seemed foreign. Some were struggling to discern where God was calling them next. So, during this wilderness time, we all gathered together in the physical wilderness — at Ghost Ranch, in the high desert of New Mexico. Set against a backdrop of red rocks that jutted out of the dusty desert floor, this retreat center was the perfect setting for these young adults' wilderness wandering.

On our last morning together, we concluded the retreat with worship and communion. And as the presiding minister invited us to the table, he invited us to step outside ... to leave the chapel and gather on the patio, with the multicolored cliffs and desert grasses as our backdrop. As we stood in the wilderness, we shared the feast and remembered that this meal — this bread and this cup — would sustain us for the journey ahead, just as manna and water sustained our ancestors. Then — once our hunger had been satisfied and our thirst quenched — the minister sent us out with a reminder that God would be there among us as we returned to the wilderness.

And at that moment — at that very moment — as we stood poised to rise from the table and continue on our journeys, a hummingbird flew in and hovered over the gathered community. And as quickly as she came, she shot out into the desert, as if guiding us on our way.

I am convinced that that day, the Holy Spirit was not a dove or a tongue of flame ... That day the Holy Spirit was a hummingbird, drawing near to us as we rose from that table, drawing near to us to assure us of God's presence among us.

No matter where you are on our journeys of faith — whether you are wandering in the wilderness, or just seeking some assurance of God's faithfulness — the Holy One is here among us, offering us grace through ordinary, extraordinary gifts. In manna from heaven and water from the rock, in broken bread and wine poured out ... in a feast that satisfies our hunger, and quenches our thirst. That is the promise of this table — that the God who sustains life is here among us, in ways that we can taste and see and touch.

The table is set. The bread and cup are ready. And God is here among us. So come, let us share the feast.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter XVII, Section 3.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, as we prepare to share the bread of life and cup of forgiveness, we give thanks for the ties that bind us together in our church family as brothers and sisters who truly care for one another. We are grateful for times to pray and sing and ponder your word together, for the promise to hold each other up when life turns harsh, for the determination to battle demons that shred the fabric of our communities, and for the faithful commitment to join together in sharing your love with a hurting world.

Spirit of Healing and Hope, our hearts are heavy for the people of Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, South Florida, Houston, and all those recovering from the deadly winds and flooding of the recent hurricanes. Also, we pray for the people of Mexico who lost loved ones and homes in the devastating earthquake that rocked their nation. We pray that governments, relief agencies and religious institutions will soon meet the emergency needs of the people, and will help survivors rebuild their lives materially and spiritually.

Loving God, living in an age when some seek to accentuate differences and to create friction between people, we recall the words of Scripture that each person is created in your image – even the ones with whom we disagree – and that we are to love others as ourselves.

Remind us that differences can divide us, but differences can prompt us to grow. Differences can spur suspicion, but differences can also expand our horizon. Differences can narrow our field of vision, but differences can also broaden our understanding of our purpose and what brings true satisfaction.

Gracious God, on this special day when Christians around the globe celebrate this sacrament, we remember our sisters and brothers from above and below the equator and from every time zone around the globe. We are grateful for all people of the planet who overcome darkness with light, who pry open the floodgates of justice, and who are driven by your vision of a day when we will be able to pound weapons into farming tools.

Everlasting God, as we break bread with one another – a variety of breads that reminds us of different cultures, colors, and customs – remind us that we are one human family, and that you command us to strive for the values that generate opportunities for all to thrive, and the ideals that enhance the common good.

From A New Zealand prayer book

**Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:
The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom
sustain our hope and come on earth.
With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.
For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,
now and for ever. Amen.**