

Trinity United Methodist Church

September 6, 2020

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-20 (NIV)

1 And God spoke all these words: **2** “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. **3** You shall have no other gods before me. **4** You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. **5** You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, **6** but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. **7** You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. **8** Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. **9** Six days you shall labor and do all your work, **10** but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. **11** For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. **12** Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. **13** You shall not murder. **14** You shall not commit adultery. **15** You shall not steal. **16** You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. **17** You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

18 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance **19** and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.” **20** Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

When I was a youth, I got to go with one of my best friends in youth group to Lake Junaluska, which is our Southeast jurisdiction retreat center in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. It's not far from Asheville, North Carolina, a beautiful area of the country. And during this retreat time, they took us kids white water rafting. It was my first time—now that I think about it, I think my only time—white water rafting. It was a good experience aside from the time that my raft got stuck on a rock and we had to jump out into other peoples' rafts to get on down the river. We got to the end, almost to where we were supposed to be picked up and get out of the river, and there was a fork there. The whole time, if you've ever been white water rafting before, you've got a guide who's in the back of the raft who's telling you the different angles to row and things of that nature so that you can steer down these rapids. So he starts realizing that we're supposed to go right of the fork, and the current starts pulling us left of the fork. And he's saying, "Backpaddle! Backpaddle!" And to no avail. The current took our raft and another raft to the left of the fork. Well, the rapids calmed down and the one guide looks at the other and says, "Hey! Do you know where we are?" And the other one shouts back, "No. Do you?"

That's kind of the situation that we're in these days. Do you know where we are? No, not really. We've not been in times like these before. Do you? No, not exactly. We're in a time of wilderness. In this sermon series, we're going to be looking at the Israelites' journey through the wilderness and what lessons we might be able to learn through their journey through the wilderness as we make our own journeys through various wildernesses which we face.

So Pastor Greg preached about the story of Joseph and Joseph's family, and if you remember, by the end of that story, all 12 brothers were then residing in Egypt by the end of the book of Genesis. That developed into the 12 tribes of Israel. And as those generations, you figure 12 kids had a bunch more kids, who had a bunch more kids over at least a couple hundred years if not 400 more years, depending on which Biblical account you go with. So by the time Exodus chapter 1 opens, the Israelites have grown. The minority in the country has grown into a very significant group of people, and the powers that be don't like that. We read in the first chapter of Exodus that "there arose a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph." That's the way I remember learning that story in Sunday School growing up. A Pharaoh who had no clue what Joseph, the leader of these Israelites, had once done for their country. So he began to be alarmed. Wait a minute—these people who are different from us, they want to take over. And if we get attacked, they'll side with our enemies, and they'll overthrow us, and that will be bad. So let's start to oppress them. And eventually the Israelites wound up in slavery.

And then cue the great movie, *The Prince of Egypt*, right? Or *Ben Hur*, or *The Ten Commandments*, or whatever the case might be. (Maybe not *Ben Hur*, but definitely

The Ten Commandments.) And so we've got the Israelites crying out to God. They are enslaved. God calls up Moses to go and set the people free. There is the whole little song and dance number called The Ten Plagues, and then finally at the Passover and the death of the firstborn in Egypt, Pharaoh has had enough. He allows for Moses and Aaron to lead the people out of Egypt. They get to the Red Sea. They're stuck between a rock and a wet place, and Pharaoh's army is nipping at their heels, and God makes a way through the Red Sea, and then they're on their way into the wilderness.

And soon enough they come to Mount Sinai, and there we pick up for today. But as they journey into the wilderness, keep in mind this is Exodus 20. Already by this point we actually skipped over the part where they started to grumble and complain against Moses, nearly as soon as the journey toward this Promised Land, this journey out of slavery, started. They started to complain because they realized that they don't have as much to eat any more. They're on the move and they've got to pare down and so forth, and so they start complaining. "What, did you drag us out of Egypt just so we could die of starvation? Just so we could die of thirst? Oh, if we had the pots of meat that we used to eat back in Egypt? If only we could go back to Egypt!"

You might have heard me say before, I've heard a seminary professor say that every church has a "Back to Egypt" Committee somewhere in the life of the church. All of us have a bit of that "Back to Egypt" tendency. Never mind that they were slaves in Egypt, that it was literal hell for them. It was what they knew, and it was comfortable because it was what they knew. Now that they were out into the great unknown, and all they had was this pillar of smoke or fire to guide them—"Nah. We'll take what we know. Thanks very much."

These times of wilderness that we encounter in our lives, we describe them with words like "unexpectedness," right? Or what's probably the most overused word in these times? *Unprecedented*. Right? We use terms like "weariness" and "thirst" and "hunger." But these times of wilderness can also be very rich times, as well. Because these are times in which we can dive deeper in our walk with God, as God called the Israelites to do as well. One of the ways we can do so is when we can think of these wilderness times as a time of learning.

One of the e-mail lists that once made the rounds a number of years ago listed significant things children have learned about life. Here are just a few of them. Maybe you know some of these to be true:

- You can't trust dogs to watch your food for you.

- Don't sneeze when somebody is cutting your hair.
- You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk.
- When your mom is mad at your dad, don't let her brush your hair.
- No matter how hard you try, you cannot baptize a cat.

These are the kinds of learning experiences we would call “learning the hard way.” And so it is with times of wilderness lessons as well. We often learn things the hard way in these times. The wilderness can be a time of accelerated learning about priorities, and we see that to be true now as well. To be learning about what really matters in our lives.

Patrick Morley, in the book *The Man in the Mirror*, relates not having a clear sense of purpose with going to the grocery store while you're hungry and you don't have a list. And everything looks delicious as you go up and down the aisles, and then you get to the register and you've got a cart full of junk, and the price tag is high and you look with surprise at the cashier as that number comes up higher than you expected. And then you get the surprised look on your spouse's face when you come home with bags full of junk—not that it's ever happened at our house—and maybe three meals' worth actually in there to get you through the week.

Life presents us with many options and myriad ways to use our resources, our time, our abilities, our influence. But without a clear sense of what's important, we can spend it all and at the end of the day, find that we have not taken care of what matters most.

And so when it comes to how we learn during these times, Gil Rendle, who is a church consultant, applies the business leadership concept of technical versus adaptive challenge to the church. Did you know that the United Methodist Church as a whole has been in decline ever since we formed the United Methodist Church as we now know it in 1968? From day one, the United Methodist Church (in America, I should clarify) has been in decline. Couple that with, in the last 20 years or so, the meteoric rise of the “Nones.” No, not Roman Catholic women—the N-O-N-E-S, the ones who on censuses and such and on surveys, when asked, “What religion are you?” they check, forget even atheist—they check “None.” The church is reaching smaller and smaller segments of

younger generations. And you might say we've been in our own wilderness, especially in the United Methodist Church, for over 40 years.

And so the technical challenge: Technical challenges and changes are all about making tweaks here and there. Making some small changes. It might be learning a new skill. Whatever it is, it's all about the quick fix. "This will save us. This will get us turned around." You might see the example in the public school system, not just in Isle of Wight County, but all around. Public school systems are looking for technical changes. How can we take regular school and put it online? And that's basically what they're trying to do, but that's a technical change.

In the church, we often do it by, "Let's add a contemporary service." And we've got a great contemporary service here. But if you've looked in there lately, I think I might still actually be one of the younger ones that are in that service.

The adaptive challenges mean digging deeper into fundamental questions, like "Should we even be doing this any more? What does success look like now?" And no, there are no easy answers. And there is the possibility of multiple failures along the way until we figure out what works.

The example with public school, instead of just trying to take regular school and slap it online—who's asking, "Is this really the best way for children to learn in this time?" When it comes to the church, how does the church become truly as relevant and indispensable to the lives of younger generations as it has been to us?

Now, technical change is not always bad. We've got a fantastic contemporary service. But technical change isn't as effective without wrestling with those deeper adaptive questions.

In that *Moneyball* clip, the Oakland Athletics General Manager Billy Bean had to be replace some star players in the offseason on a very limited budget. And the scouts, if you watch the whole movie—it's not exactly a family-friendly movie language-wise—the scouts were proposing their usual methods of recruiting players, for their looks, for their pretty swing, and things such as that. Then Peter Brand, the guy talking in that clip, an economist, suggests a different way. And often when we suggest those deeper, different adaptive ways, people look at us, as he said: "I raise these things and I'm a pariah." And it's often that way when we think of these adaptive learnings as well.

As God's people began their journey in the wilderness, it seems harsh to them. Never mind that they left a country where they were totally slaves. Again, it's what they knew. Remember last week when I said that in times of stress we will always default to what we know. Slavery was all that they knew. It was hell, but it was comfortable compared to this new experience.

At the beginning of the pandemic I saw a friend on Facebook from Northern Virginia. She commented how she and her family had once lived and died by their very multicolor-coded family calendar on their kitchen wall. That all of a sudden, almost overnight, it had gone empty. And I commented on her post how at that point in time, one of my hopes for this time was that we might begin to realize how we don't need to live that kind of a rat-race life, where we live or die by a chock-full calendar. How we need space and unplanned leisure. How we need Sabbath in our lives.

And yet, the longer this thing goes on, there are some times that even I and those in my life are itching for *something to do*. We're *bored!* Right? You remember the other day when the internet was out all over the area? That was *hell!* It was strangely peaceful. We took the kids to the pool. The pool was full. All kinds of laughter, children and everything. All of us were itching to hop back online, to get back to what we were missing. *I want my internet back!*

In the Exodus story, as they were entering the wilderness, it was a time to learn. So would they learn technically, or would they learn adaptively?

God brought them to Mount Sinai and God gave them instructions for Moses to come up on the mountain, and God gave the law beginning with these Ten Commandments. Just a few notes about the Ten Commandments: They were addressed singularly, but they were for the benefit of the community. We should pay attention not just to what's said, but also what's *not* said, but implied. Some of these commandments are issued in the negative, but they are to be lived out in the positive:

- Don't have any idols.
- Don't take the Lord's name in vain. The positive of that is: Only God is worthy. Yahweh is worthy to be praised, and praised appropriately.

The other commandments are issued in the positive, but to be lived out in the negative:

- Practice the Sabbath. Keep the Sabbath holy. The reverse of that is, don't work yourself to death. Right?
- Do not kill. Honor life.
- Don't covet. Be grateful for what you have.

And one of the things that has always struck me in these Ten Commandments is that, especially in a day and age of needing to get back to law and order: There is no means of enforcement given in these initial Ten Commandments, except for the phrase, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." That's relationship. And how do we learn best in relationship? With people we know and people we trust.

This was true adaptive learning for the Israelites. Re-learning. They had to un-learn how to be slaves and re-learn how to live into their identity as children of God. To live into much more than these Ten Commandments, to learn how to live as God's people.

But then what did the people do? Moses goes up on that mountain and he stays up there for 12 whole chapters of Exodus. Twelve whole chapters, and the people say, "Forget that. We're tired of Moses, and he's taking way too long up there with God." They want the quick fix. And so they tell Aaron, "Do something about it." And we get that little story about the golden calf. They wanted the technical—the quick fix.

As painful as wilderness experiences are, which do we yearn for the most? That adaptive, deep learning that we might do? Or do we just want that quick fix? Even if it's just a Band-Aid and a kiss on what we think is just a boo-boo? As painful as wilderness experiences can be, they can yield more spiritual growth for us than the good times.

As strange as worship is to us now, we might even be able to worship in an even more spiritual way than we've been able to previously if we learn those adaptive challenges. They can be times of learning about ourselves, about God, about what is most important, and about where life is headed. Without that time of taking stock and learning, whether we're in the wilderness or not, life can just go on without much thought, at least until something drives us into the wilderness, like the Holy Spirit did to Jesus after His baptism. Maybe God is in this pandemic.

Some good wilderness questions might be: What important relationships and friendships have I been putting off until some future time? What is God calling me to do with my life and with all the resources God has given me? What in my life right now do I take for granted?

And it's easy to point to COVID-19 and say, "That's our wilderness right now," right? But it dawned on me that there's a lot of talk right now and kind of all along about *comorbidities*. That with all the numbers, the real numbers, that most of the people who have died have had some other condition that contributed to their death. Heart disease, diabetes, whatever the case might be. And I think that's true spiritually as well. Maybe we have an interior heart disease—that's sin. Maybe it *is* a health matter. Maybe it's finances. Maybe it's dealing with grief over the loss we've endured in general with COVID and the loss of loved ones whom we've lost for various reasons during this time.

Through it all, the greatest learning and un-learning that we need to do is how to let go of what *was*, in whatever ways we need to do that, and how to continue to live evermore into the Kingdom. To commit and re-commit our lives to Jesus and His way. And friends, His way is *not* a quick fix.

On that whitewater rafting trip, we pulled off to the riverbank. We tied off the rafts. We scaled a pretty steep hill. We wound up in some random person's back yard—that must have been fun, to look out the back window and see a bunch of kids traipsing through their yard. We walked a good mile in soaking-wet water shoes back to where the buses were waiting for us. And the rest of the group that went: "Where have you been?" "Thanks, guys." Some adjustments were necessary when that current took us in a direction that we didn't know where we were. Those were mostly technical adjustments.

In the book *Canoeing the Mountains*, Tod Bolsinger talks about the voyage of Lewis and Clark. Their mission was to find the Northwest Passage through the Continental United States out to the Pacific Ocean. And the idea was if they just canoed up this river, eventually they'd hit a point where they would just be able to canoe right on down on the other side and out into the Pacific. But they got to the Rockies, and they went, "Shoot." Because they weren't prepared, and they had to canoe the mountains.

They had to ask themselves, "What's the mission? Do we just write back to Mr. Jefferson,"—I think he was President at that point—"and say, 'Sorry, can't do it,' or what?" No. They doubled down on the mission. They learned new ways. They learned

what needed to change. They took on new input from people who knew better than them, who they simply had to trust. Sacagawea.

And that's where we're at. We're in this time of wilderness. We're in this time of learning. And maybe it's time for all of us to go back to school. The school of learning from the Holy Spirit, in prayer and discernment.

Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit, teach us. Speak to us in these times of wilderness: On a global scale in the pandemic, on a national scale in times of division like never before. In our families, in our church, and especially as we each seek to follow You. Help us to be humble, that we might un-learn that which we think we know so well. Lead us into meeting the needs of those around us. As Your word tells us, oh God, not by might, not by power, but by Your Spirit. For these things and more we pray, in the name of Christ, Amen.