

Trinity United Methodist Church

September 20, 2020

“Time of Dependence”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Exodus 16:1-5, 11-21 (NIV)

1 The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. **2** In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. **3** The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.” **4** Then the LORD said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. **5** On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.”

11 The LORD said to Moses, **12** “I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.’” **13** That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. **14** When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. **15** When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. **16** This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Everyone is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.’” **17** The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. **18** And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed. **19** Then Moses said to them, “No one is to keep any of it until morning.” **20** However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them. **21** Each morning everyone gathered as much as they needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. 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.

We are in our third week of a sermon series on the wilderness and what the wilderness looks like, what our wildernesses look like, and what we can learn from the journey through the wilderness from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land in Canaan for the Israelites. Often when we think of the wilderness, we have described it in terms of words like “desolate” and “dry” and “barren,” “great hardship,” “trying,” and times when we might feel hurt and we might find ourselves hurting.

But did you know that the wilderness is not always a negative place? A wilderness experience is not always a bad experience, necessarily. For instance, I would submit to you that marriage is, at times, a wilderness experience. Especially, I would say, being newlyweds can be quite the wilderness experience. I will always remember my wedding night, looking in the mirror at myself and holding up my hand to show my ring finger and asking myself, “What in the world did I just do?”

We talked two weeks ago about how the wilderness is a time of learning, and there is much learning to be done after you get married. And we talked two weeks ago about the differences between the adaptive learning that we need to do and the technical learning that we need to do. The technical learning is when you move in together and you combine your budgets and you get the joint checking account, things like that. Those are technical changes and technical learnings that we do in married life. And the greater adaptive challenge is, how do we share life with somebody almost 24/7?

And in that sense, last week we talked about how the wilderness is a time of challenge. And let’s face it, marriage is a challenge. Amen? Amen.

I remember, and many have expressed the thought before, particularly perhaps those who have a fear of committing to marriage, that it’s the thought of waking up to or committing to the same person, the same scenario, *for the rest of your life*. Now, for me, it’s not like I was a player leading up until marriage. Quite the opposite, trying to date as a single pastor—yeah, that’s fun. But it was more like committing to getting used to someone else being all up in *my* space 24/7 from that day on. I remember my new bride wanted to cuddle in my recliner with me, and I’m like, “This is a single person chair. Get out! Get away!” It can be a wilderness time.

There is a Promised Land, and you’ll visit there from time to time, but it is a wilderness time. And we think, when we enter into something like marriage, that *love will get us through. Love will get us through anything. We’ll have nothing but “Oh, we love*

each other. We're going to have nothing but really good and really high times together. It's going to be like that forever and always and every day." Friends, let me tell you—that is the biggest lie ever. Amen?

The truth of it is, we might love each other, but as we say in our household, we might love each other, but we don't always *like* each other. What do we do on the days when we haven't had sweaty palms in years? When we don't feel like looking at each other, much less talking with each other? Much less any kind of physical touch? When all the really good and high times are long-distant memories? What do we do then?

The Israelites weren't even three months into their new relationship stage with God, from being slaves in Egypt, becoming God's people, headed into the Promised Land. They're not even three months out into their new relationship when evidently the honeymoon has already worn off, as we witness in this story in the wilderness. The Israelites cry out, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt!" This is a theme you might be picking up on. A common complaint. "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted. But you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

Well, what about the ten plagues that they witnessed, that God inflicted on the Egyptians but not on them? What about the Passover? What about the Red Sea? What about these high, huge spiritual moments of the Lord providing for them just a short time ago? Now they don't even trust Him enough to provide food to eat.

But again, we see time and time again in the wilderness that in spite of their lack of trust, God provides. "The LORD said to Moses, 'I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them at twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.'" You see, God provides so that they will know who God is, that God *can* be trusted. That God still provides, even in the everyday.

Yet in this provision, there's a test. Just how much *do* they trust God in the day-to-day matters? Their instructions are to gather the manna in the morning, to take as much as they need by families. So some took a little, some took a lot, but only to take enough to last you a day, and two days on Friday, so that you don't have to work on the Sabbath.

Well, based on what we already know of these people, I probably don't have to tell you that they failed the test. We read today that some of them kept part of it until morning, and it rotted and became full of maggots. Later in the part of the chapter that we didn't read, some of them went out on the Sabbath looking for it. Double fail.

They failed to learn an important, two-fold lesson of the wilderness: That the wilderness is a time of learning, it's a time of challenge. But the wilderness is also a time of dependence. For there is much in the wilderness that is out of our control. There is much that is beyond our grasp. There is much that is outside our skill set. And that no matter how hard we try on our own to overcome these challenges, we sometimes make it worse. We hit a point where, as younger adults and kids say today, we "just can't even," and often our own efforts turn rotten.

So the first part of the lesson is that the wilderness is a time of dependence, but the second part is, dependence on who? On each other, yes, for we will get through this together. But at some point, at some level in the wilderness, we'll fail each other. And we'll look at another story soon of how they failed each other. Of course, the lesson is that, in the wilderness especially, it is a time of dependence on God. On God, who we have to know in the ordinary day-to-day times, even more so than the high, extraordinary, parting-the-seas moments.

In fact, it's because these people can't see and trust God in the everyday, in the ordinary, that sets them up to not be able to see and trust God later in the extraordinary that God wants to do in the future. We, too, long for and pray for an extraordinary experience of God. We've been praying for God to take away this plague that is upon us, for God to heal the racial divisions. And it would be amazing if God just snapped his fingers like Thanos in the Infinity War movies—but in a good way, like Iron Man snapped his fingers. And it would be awesome if God snapped and took care of it all. But God, more often than not, doesn't do that. In fact, God is most found in the everyday, in the ordinary, in people like you and me.

Basing our walk of faith on jumping from spiritual high to spiritual high to spiritual high is not sustainable. I've been there, I've done that, I've got the T-shirt. Because at some point, that leap will be just a little too far for us. At some point the pain of life will reach up and grab us mid-air and pull us down. So thank God His Word says, "Though I walk through the Valley, You, God, are with me."

You see, friends, if we want to see God in the extraordinary, then we must see God and trust God in the ordinary day-to-day of our existence. And so how do we do that? *If we want to see God in the extraordinary, we have to see God in the ordinary.*

One of the ways to do that is in a book that I cannot recommend enough called, *The Attentive Life* by Leighton Ford. In *The Attentive Life* he talks about paying attention to what God is doing in the ordinary. He says that paying attention is not a way by which we make something happen, but a way to see what is already given to us. That to be fully alive is to pay attention to what he calls Kairos encounters—what we might call in the more everyday vernacular, "God moments." To see things more than just

coincidences, but to see them as truly God at work. Leighton Ford says, “The more noise that surrounds us, the more we absorb, the more likely we are to be distractable, our attention readily diverted and restless, and the more vulnerable we become to all the distractions around.” But he says “it is just because of the depth of God’s love for us and the eternal longing He has created in us that God calls us to be attentive to the many-colored splendor of graces that He lavishes on us. Attentiveness is much more than our attempt to see and understand. It is a species of faith, an open and receptive trust that God has much to reveal to us when we pay attention.”

The problem is when you’re ADD like me. And the truth is, I believe that, as Leighton points out in his book, we all have a degree of especially spiritual ADD. Where the noise distracts us and we’re easily distracted from seeing God at work in the moment-by-moment, day-by-day.

One of the tools that really helps me is an ancient church practice called praying the daily office. I’ve mentioned it before because it is such a wonderful tool, and it’s not praying the Michael Scott and Dwight Schrute and etc. “Office.” It’s praying at set times of the day, like you would have office hours where you’re expected to be there, to show up with God at set times of the day. Currently I try to practice a morning time, a mid-day time and an evening time. There are all kinds of apps that you can use; the one that I use is called Common Prayer. There is a book that you can use as well for it, if that’s more your speed. It’s prayers of the church, prayers that are written out so you don’t even have to come up with words if you don’t have them. There are prayers like the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, that you pray day by day.

And I’ll be honest with you, most of the time I go through it and it takes at most five minutes and I go, “Okay. I prayed it.” And I’ll go back to what I was doing. But even still, there’s always something that resets inside of me. Whatever is going on in the rush of the day to day, it recenters when I just take a moment to go, “Oh yeah. Let me pay attention to God, what God is doing and how God is providing, especially in this day.”

You know, when it comes to making these big commitments, it’s easy to think, to ask in something like marriage, “This is what I’m doing *every day* for the rest of my life?” And there are high moments that we’ll experience. But what gets us to those high moments is taking time for the daily moments. Spend time together in prayer. Take time with each other. Whatever the relationship is—marriage, parenting, friendship, whatever the case might be. Pay attention to the daily and the moment by moment, and trust that if we focus on the day, tomorrow will take care of its own.

In fact, Jesus had something to say about that. He said “don’t worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow’s got enough troubles. Focus on today.”

I'm always reminded of Bishop Pennell's testimony when I was going into ministry and he was doing a Q&A with a bunch of us who were going into ministry. He said that at one point he was doing a similar Q&A at a summer camp, and one of the kids asked him, "When did you decide to follow Jesus? And his response was, "Well, which time? The first time, or the most recent time?" They said, "Well, both." He said, "Well, the first time was at a camp very much like this, in the summer time, when I was (whatever) years of age, as a young person. But the most recent time was this morning when I got up and made the choice that I make every morning, to choose to follow Jesus."

When we look around at the world around us, when we look around at whatever wilderness we face, we wonder how long. Will we have to wear these masks for the rest of our lives? It sort of seems that way some days. Is this the way it's going to be forever? It can be overwhelming. How about for today? Let's choose to be people of faith for today, and we'll worry about tomorrow, tomorrow. After all, we pray each week together, when we pray, give us this day our—yearly bread? No. Monthly? We pray, "Give us our *daily* bread. Let it be enough, Lord, that we might continue to depend on You. Thanks be to God. Amen.