

# Trinity United Methodist Church

October 18, 2020

## “Through the Wilderness: Hearing the Stories”

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### Scripture: Joshua 3:1-5, 4:19-24, 5:1 (NIV)

**3:1** Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. **2** After three days the officers went throughout the camp, **3** giving orders to the people: “When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. **4** Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about two thousand cubits between you and the ark; do not go near it.” **5** Joshua told the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.”

**4:19** On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. **20** And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. **21** He said to the Israelites, “In the future when your descendants ask their parents, ‘What do these stones mean?’ **22** tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ **23** For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. **24** He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God.”

**5:1** Now when all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all the Canaanite kings along the coast heard how the LORD had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites until they had crossed over, their hearts melted in fear and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites.

### 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.

I can remember as a kid going to my grandparents' house. My great-grandmother lived with them, as well. And typically the evening would go where after dinner we would retire to Mema and Papa's den, and my parents and Mema and Papa and Nanny got to telling family stories. And these were stories that, as a kid, I'd heard over and over and over again, so I started to tune out. And it was amazing that no matter how many times they told those stories, time after time after time, they would always get into the arguments of, "No, no, no! It was so-and-so who told so-and-so and did this," and "No, it was so-and-so!" None of y'all's families are like that, right? Just mine? So I would just go in the corner and tune them out and build a blanket fort or whatever the case might be.

But these days I'm finding that I wish I'd paid a little bit more attention. In fact, now, as an adult, looking forward to Thanksgiving in a month (that's hard to believe, right?), I look forward to gathering at the Bishop's house for Thanksgiving dinner. Yes, I get to go to the Bishop's house—my mom's maiden name is Bishop. When I first put that on Facebook the first year, clergy friends were like, "*What?* How do I get that invite?"

But to go to my uncle's house and gather around the table, and especially to reminisce with my cousins, Carrie and Kevin, about our grandparents. And at the same time, wondering if my own kids are paying attention to these stories. The stories often began with, "Remember that time when..."

During the earlier stages of the pandemic, I convinced my parents, who have started doing some more advanced planning as they advance in years, to go through much of their closets and their enormous storage area in an extra bedroom, to purge—*please*. Because I'm an only child, and eventually all that *stuff* is going to come to me. Early on I used to say that when the time came, I was just going to back up a dumpster to the back window and just shove everything out the window. But I convinced them to sit down with me as they went through and they purged, but also to tell me and show me what they were holding on to for sentimental value, what was really a family heirloom, and in between.

There's an old beat-up wooden box that I likely would have thrown out, until Dad told me that it had been handmade by my great-grandfather and, as you open it up, it's lined with newspaper from the time, you can still read some of the articles, from the late 1800s.

I wouldn't throw this out, but there's a kimono that my grandfather brought back from when he served in the Army in occupational Japan just after the end of World War II. And of course, with that are letters that he wrote to my grandmother.

And then there's the times that we visit and my son begs to go through the closet in *my* old bedroom with all of *my* old junk that has been stored in there. And the first time we did so, we came across knick-knacks and toys and memorabilia that brought back a flood of memories for me, many of which I'd forgotten, and I got to telling the stories. "Oh yeah, I remember that time when..."

With almost every knick-knack or old kitchen device or family photo, there's a story that goes along with it. And sometimes they're insignificant, but many times they are significant. Maybe not to someone else, but certainly to me and to us. And sometimes they tell us a little bit about who we are.

And so imagine growing up in Biblical times, walking along the outskirts of town, particularly the town of Gilgal. And you're playing along as a child and you come upon this big pile of rocks. And maybe you know enough that these rocks are out of place, that nature didn't arrange them this way. Somebody put this big pile of rocks here. And furthermore, you might know enough about geology that you notice that these rocks are smoother, like they've been shaped by water. Not like the jagged rocks that lie around on the ground around them.

So you might go and ask your parents, your grandparents, one of the elders of the town: "What's the meaning of this? What's the story behind this big pile of random rocks?" And then the adults get this gleam in their eye. "Oh! That pile of rocks?" Then they look at each other and say, "Remember that time when we all crossed the Jordan on dry ground? Remember that story that Grandma or Grandpa used to tell over and over and over, how the ark of the covenant was carried into the river and God stopped the flow of water until we all crossed over? Remember how they told us how God did the same at the Red Sea for generations before us? Do you remember what God did? God made a way when there didn't seem to be a way."

Well, friends, I've got good news for you. This is the last sermon in the *Wilderness* sermon series. And there might be much cheering and rejoicing, maybe. In fact, someone came out Sunday before last and said that while they've felt the Lord speaking to them through this sermon series, "Yeah, Dan, it's time to move on." *I'm* tired of talking about the wilderness. But, again—that's kind of the point. Because the wilderness doesn't usually end on our timetable. The wilderness typically goes on much, much longer than we would like. But the good news is that it *will* come to an end. There *is* a Promised Land to which God is guiding us, and God *will* get us there.

In the meantime, what keeps us going? Stories. Testimonies of what God has done before that called to mind the possibilities of what God can and will do again.

This text isn't about, necessarily, the people of Israel or this particular event in their history. This text is about God. The story is about God and the nature of who God

is. If you go home and you read through the entirety of Joshua, chapters 3 through 5, we see that God is called “the living God” in this account. The phrase that is used to describe God only eight times in the entire Old Testament. “The living God.” Not some dead deity that we have to do a bunch of rituals to wake up from his slumber. Not some dead person with no power to act now or in the future. But God is the living God who is, who was, and who is to come.

We read in this text for today that the hand of the Lord is powerful. In verse 24, at the end of today’s reading, He did this, bringing them through dry ground, through the Jordan—“He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so you might always fear the Lord your God.”

And then we also read that the Lord is the Lord of all the earth, all of the physical earth. And so, therefore, God has authority to grant them this land in the Promised Land. But it also has deeper meaning for the Israelites. Most scholars agree that these accounts, and especially the first five books of the Bible, weren’t written down in their current forms as we have them today, until much later, after the events that took place. They were carried forward by those oral traditions. Those times of sitting around the campfire and reminiscing. “Remember that time when...?” And the thing of it is, by the point it all got written down, you might have a version of it, and you might have a version of it, and you might have a version of it, and we get into that, “No, no, it happened this way,” “No, it happened that way,” like our families tend to do when we tell our family stories.

So finally someone thought, “You know, we really ought to write these things down.” And that’s why we seemingly get different versions of the same stories. Why there’s two creation accounts. Why there’s various iterations of the flood. Did Noah take 2x2 animals, or did he take seven clean and two of unclean? Depends on who’s telling the story.

But the bottom line is that the scholars agree that these stories were written down during another wilderness time in Israel’s history, when they were in exile. After the Babylonians had come in and conquered Jerusalem, sacked Jerusalem, burned the temple to the ground, carried most everybody off up to Babylon thousands of miles away... And now they’re wondering, where’s God? God’s house, the temple, literally where God sat, is demolished, gone. Does that mean that God is gone? Where do we find God now? Where do we worship now?

To call God in this account, “The Lord of all the earth,” reminds them that if God is indeed the Lord of all the earth, then God is God in Jerusalem as well as in Babylon. That God can be found wherever we find ourselves, in times good or bad. In good

places physically, spiritually and emotionally, or not. That through it all, what gets us through, is telling these stories, these testimonies.

“Remember that time when we didn’t know which end was up, but God did, and He showed us? Remember that time when we didn’t have two pennies to rub together, but God provided for our every need? Remember that time when we heard that dreaded word from the doctor, but God gave us hope? Remember that time we thought love was completely lost, but God’s love saw us through? Remember that time when we didn’t know how we would make it through, but God made a way?”

Just this last week and a half, I have a testimony. Thursday before last I was driving on 295 outside of Richmond and my car up and died on me. I was going along, the RPMs shot up real high, it started losing power. I was able to pull off at 360 in Mechanicsville. And let me tell you, God has been all over this experience. I broke down in an area of Richmond that I was familiar with. I wasn’t far from my parents. I took my first Uber ride down to my mom’s office and it wasn’t that far, so it didn’t cost me an arm and a leg. God hooked me up with a tow truck driver who was a friendly character—he was a character, but he was a good guy. The towing to the first shop was covered by our insurance, so I didn’t have to pay; then the tow from that shop to the shop it’s currently at was covered by our warranty. And so far it’s looking like the warranty is going to replace our engine in our Kia. (Don’t buy Kias.)

Now, to an outsider, someone might say, “Hey, that’s some good planning. You’ve got good insurance and a good warranty.” First of all, let me tell you: No, uh-uh. You don’t know us. We usually don’t plan this well for stuff like this. But also, I’m a firm believer that God can work in the spur of the moment as well as work through good planning. God is all over this.

And one last time, let me remind us that we’re all going through the wilderness of COVID-19. Of national unrest over race and politics. And yes, it might get worse before it gets better. That’s one of the themes of Revelation that we’re going to be starting together next week, and I cannot wait. It’s a book of hope.

So, friends, the wilderness is not a time to wallow in self-pity. The wilderness is a time of learning, of dependence, of challenge, of doubt, of conflict. And the wilderness is also a time of new beginnings.

In the midst of the exile, that later wilderness of the Israelites, God exclaimed through the prophet Isaiah, “See! I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up. Do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” What is the new thing that God might be doing in you during this time in the wilderness? In us as a church? In our community? In our nation? In our world? What is God doing new in you in the midst of your current wilderness? Such that you’ll look back when younger

generations come to you and say, “I found this tucked back in a drawer (holds up face mask). What’s this?” You might say, “I remember that time when... But God did something new.”

What are the stones that you might set up as a reminder? I’ve got a clergy friend out in southwest Virginia that they finally realized their retirement dreams of having some land and being able to retire on beautiful mountain property. And as a thanksgiving to God, she actually set up a pile of rocks up on top of their mountain. It’s what we sing about in the second verse of *Come Thou Font of Every Blessing*. “Here I raise my Ebenezer.” And because of Charles Dickens, a lot of our minds go to, “wait. Here I raise my Scrooge? What’s up with that?” It’s actually a term from 1 Samuel: “God of help.” *Here I raise my Ebenezer/ hither by Thy help I come / And I hope by Thy good pleasure / safely to arrive at home.*

In high school I participated in a mission choir called Voices of Youth. It was a conference mission choir. We’d go on trips, come back, tour around the conference. And the summer after my senior year of high school we went to Tallinn, Estonia. It was a time when the United Methodist Church there was experiencing a resurgence after Estonia had broken free from the Soviet bloc, when it collapsed. And they were finding that they were free to worship again. And typically when especially youth go on a mission trip, what do we do? We build stuff, right? Or we tear stuff down, or we fix stuff. We get dirty, we get sweaty, we get stinky. It’s what we equate with mission work. But on this trip we did just a little bit of that type of stuff. We helped clean up a soup kitchen, but even then they were scrounging to try to find something for us to do. Instead, we spent a lot of time with these people, hearing their stories of how they worshipped in secret. I always remember this one older woman telling the story of how they worshipped in her home in secret. How the authorities found out and the troops burst in in the middle of worship, confiscated all their Bibles and religious material, threw it out in the middle of the street and burned it. And yet they continued to worship there again the next week.

We continued to hear stories after stories like that, and we told them how amazed we were to hear these stories of how they continued in their faith in the face of such persecution. But in the meantime, we’re telling our adult leaders, “we feel like we’re not *doing* anything, because we’re *not* doing anything!” And the last closing worship service that we had with the people there, they got up and they shared with us, saying, “Thank you, thank you, thank you for what you’ve done.” We were like, “Really, that soup kitchen wasn’t really a big deal. We didn’t do anything.” They said, “You listened to our stories. And in the opportunity to tell the stories again and in your encouragement of us, we’re now encouraged. We thought our faith was lapsing because we now have all this freedom to choose, to worship or not worship. We thought that we were getting discouraged and lackadaisical in our faith. But because of you and your encouragement

and listening to our stories, we feel encouraged to go further forward in our faith instead.”

That’s the power of story. So what’s yours?

Even though we’re not supposed to, again the Spirit told me at the end of this sermon, there’s no way we can preach this without singing another hymn:

*I love to tell the story / for those who know it best /  
Seem hungering and thirsting / to hear it like the rest /  
And when in scenes of glory / I sing the new, new song /  
‘Twill be the old, old story / that I have loved so long /  
I love to tell the story / ‘twill be my theme in glory /  
To tell the old, old story / of Jesus and His love /  
Amen.*

### **Closing Prayer**

God, thank you for your story. It begins with you creating us in your image, breathing into us the breath of life. And for all the times that we have misstepped, that we have fallen away, that we have turned away from you and your love, you never, ever turn away from us. For the salvation we have in your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, for the guidance and power you give us by your Spirit. Help us to keep telling the story, your story in us, until that great and glorious day when in scenes of glory we will continue to tell the story that we have loved so long. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.