

St. Luke's UMC
April 18, 2021

Out of the Wilderness
Overcoming Spiritual Distancing
Joshua 3:14-17

Waking up to the news of the mass shooting at the Fed Ex facility Friday morning I realized that much of what I planned to say in the sermon just wasn't going to be appropriate. It would sound tone deaf to what has happened and the way many of us feel. But then I did what any preacher should do and I turned to our scripture for today and I realized this is still a helpful word for us. For we are trying to come out of a wilderness in our world, but into what? What does it mean to come out of the wilderness if all we do is go back to life the way it was? Will we have really come out of the wilderness if nothing changes?

And that is where our story today is quite helpful because this is precisely what God wants to know about the Israelites who are coming out of the wilderness. How have they changed? What will be different about them?

What's interesting about the wilderness period is that it begins and ends with stories about people passing through waters parted by God. The difference is those who came out of the wilderness were not the same as those who went into the wilderness.

The Israelites who entered were sometimes reluctant to step turn to God. Whenever they felt distant from God, their faith diminished. When Moses went up the mountain to receive the 10 Commandments and was gone a long time, the people got tired of waiting and built a golden calf to worship. They turned away from God.

On other occasions when God didn't provide for them like they wanted, some were quick to say, "Let's go back to Egypt." They turned away from God.

But the final straw was when they were within sight of the Promised Land. It possessed blessing beyond their expectations. A land of milk and honey. But as Eric pointed out in last Sunday's sermon, the land was also inhabited by people who looked like giants to the Israelites. They voted down entering the Promised Land. They turned away from God once more.

It's easy to be critical of the Israelites, but are we all that different? We understand, don't we, how easy it is in a time when it feels God has become distant, to struggle in our faith?

We've become familiar this year with the expression "social distancing" as we've had to keep apart from each other. But many people have also experienced spiritual distancing, especially in a time when we couldn't be in church and feel God's presence in a familiar way. And when we don't feel close to God, it's easy to feel like our faith is weakening.

Recently I went to visit a woman in our church who was in the hospital. She had found out a short time before that she has leukemia. But she was in the heart hospital, because in treating the leukemia it was found that she had a heart issue. As we talked that day she was in a very low place. Her husband died not quite 5 years before. She shared some of the challenges of her life that went back to her childhood and basically being abandoned by her parents. Now dealing with these health woes, grief, and a year of isolation she felt so distant from God and wondered why. She said, "I feel like I am losing my faith."

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever experienced such a distance in your relationship with God it seems like your own faith is disappearing? It's hard not to feel that way after another week of senseless shootings and violence, especially here in Indianapolis Friday morning. Friday morning I read and watched this news and just felt like what has happened to our country? Where is God right now? Do you feel that way?

What do you do when you experience spiritual distancing?

Well, let's go back to the story in Joshua. This new generation of Israelites now stands on the edge of Promise. They can see this land in the distance that will be full of blessing, but they can't get there. A torrent of water stands in the way. And in that is an important lesson, that just because we arrive at a Promised Land doesn't mean our challenges go away. **Promised Land doesn't mean Easy Land.**

You can come out of a long wilderness of being single and finally meet Mr or Mrs Right, but that doesn't mean your challenges are over. You will still need God's help!

You can come out of a wilderness of unemployment and finally land a job, but that doesn't mean the challenges are over. You will still need God's help!

You can come out of a health wilderness, but guess, you will still face sickness. You will still need God's help!

There is no place of arrival in this life that is so abundant with blessing that you will not have to depend on God. Such a place does not exist in this life. So God is about to offer a powerful lesson to the people that if they remember it, will have a profound impact on how they live into their promises. That as they inhabit this land and are tempted to believe that because it's God's promise for them that life is going to be easy and simple, and then with every hardship they might be tempted to conclude like their ancestors that God had left them, they might recall this lesson and hold fast.

God directs Joshua to tell the people to follow the ark. That way they will know where to go. Don't just go by what you think. But now look at how the story is told from there: "**as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away...**"

When did the water part? When the priests' feet touched the water. They didn't start walking after the water parted. They had to get their feet wet first. As they stepped in the direction of their challenge with faith, they experienced God at work.

What an important lesson for the days ahead. Their challenges were not over. There would be more times when they faced obstacles, but as they stepped in the direction of faithfulness they experienced God's faithfulness.

An important scripture verse to me is Psalm 18:25. This is a good one to copy and keep handy. ***"To the faithful You show yourself faithful."*** Or, to put it in our parlance today, to those who step toward God, God steps toward them.

Getting to a better place begins with the steps we take. We often look at the problems of our world and ask God, "Why aren't you doing something?" But I believe God asks us the same question, "Why aren't you doing something?" There are steps we can take. And when we do what is in our power to do, we experience God doing what only God can do.

They say the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing but expecting different results. We ask why we have all these killings by gun violence, but are we willing to take the steps to change things? Obviously mental illness is a part of this, and our society is living with a rising level of people dealing with emotional and mental stress. You don't go into the Fed Ex building and kill 8 people and wound numerous others and not be mentally ill.

But why wouldn't we want to make it more difficult for people to have access to weapons especially high capacity weapons? This is where the sermon gets political and so it's easier to avoid and say, "Let's just pray for the victims," and avoid talking about protecting future victims. In fact, it is expected of me as a United Methodist minister to talk about gun violence and promote what our church says about this issue. For instance, our *Book of Resolutions* asks United Methodist congregations:

"To advocate at the local and national level for laws that prevent or reduce gun violence. Some of these measures include:

- Universal background checks on all gun purchases
- Ensuring all guns are sold through licensed gun retailers
- Prohibiting gun purchases for those under restraining order due to threat of violence and those with serious mental illness who pose a danger to themselves and their communities
- Ensuring greater access to services for those with mental illness
- Establishing a minimum age of 21 years for a gun purchase or possession
- Banning large capacity ammunition magazines and weapons
- Promoting new technologies to aid law-enforcement agencies to trace crime guns and promote public safety

2016 Book of Resolutions #3428

What steps can we take? Maybe it is advocating for some of these principles. Maybe it is getting involved with mental health issues and volunteering at places.

Guns are involved in many suicides. Maybe you would take steps to serve in suicide prevention efforts.

This is not politics. It's faithful action, action that we must take. One day when we all stand before God I don't believe God will ask questions like, "What is your political affiliation?" I believe God will ask questions like, "What did you do to protect the lives of other people?"

That's what happened to the man who invented dynamite. He was French and when his brother died, the local paper accidentally reported it as if this man had died. He woke up one morning to read in the newspaper his own obituary. It was titled "The Merchant of Death is Dead," and began by saying that the man "who became rich by finding ways to kill people faster than ever before, died yesterday."

The man was Alfred Nobel. He was shaken by the article, because he reflected on its truth and realized that is not what he wants his life to stand for. So he devoted his wealth to rewarding and awarding efforts that furthered peace in the world.

He took steps to build a better world. That is certainly a lesson we can take from the scripture story this morning. The Israelites were coming out of the wilderness, and they were headed toward a better place, but getting there meant they had to take steps toward a better place. What steps can we take?

And then there's a second takeaway from this story...

As we step out in faith, we experience God's faithfulness.

Think again about the scene. The waters don't part until the priests feet touch the water. As they got their feet wet, as they walked in the direction of obedience, they experienced God's presence and power.

Go back to my story about the woman in the hospital. She feared she was losing her faith and simply wanted to feel joy in her life and she asked if could offer any answers. I thought, "I can witness to the work of God but I make a poor defense attorney for explaining why God allows the things God does." I told her that I really can't offer one good explanation that makes sense of the pain she has gone through. But I have found by watching people, that focusing on the pain has an immobilizing affect. It just leaves you with the questions. But as you focus on the things you can do, it opens up possibilities. So for instance, rather than focusing on the joy want, focus on the joy you can give. The next time a nurse or attendant walks in, consider ways you can give joy to them.

A few days later I called her. She was back home. She sounded totally different. She said she was doing much better. As I inquired what helped her, she said she thought about how helping others was something she always did anyway. That's was who she was and she just needed to get back to being her old self. And as she did, she started feeling better.

To those who step toward God, God steps toward them.

I find experience this truth over and over again in the lives of people who are honest about their discouragements and struggles in faith. They don't hide it, but they also don't let those feelings keep them from acting in faith and finding that as they do they experience God's help along the way.

Our first Sunday back in person, March 21, I made a point to thank our volunteers who did so much to help that day. As I walked out Door 6 headed to my car the folks who served coffee there were cleaning up. I thanked them and one of the women said, "Oh Rob you have no idea how much this did for me. You see my husband died from Covid 19 back in November. And as devastating as that was, to grieve in isolation felt unbearable. So when I heard we were returning to worship I knew I wanted to serve someplace. I called and volunteered and this has done wonders for me."

Here I went to thank her and she was thanking me.

"To the faithful You show yourself faithful."

Have you felt shut off from God lately? What step would God have you take today? What step of faithfulness can you make? Maybe to commit to habits of faith that you're your attention to God? Maybe it's a step toward a better world: serving or volunteering in some capacity. Advocating for efforts that further peace. Serving to help people struggling with mental illness or to help with suicide prevention. What step would God have you take today. It's not just others who get helped? As we step toward God, we find God stepping toward us?