

WRESTLING IN THE WILDERNESS

(Exodus 15:22-27; 16:2-4, 9-16)

It is well known in our Lake Edge faith community that I have been working on lessening my anxiety around the whole “going to the woods” thing. Going camping in the woods is a big thing here in Wisconsin, I know, and I’m trying to get with it. (My thanks to Mary and Jeff Meicher for easing me into more comfortable territory with it—because Chef Jeff and his more than able partner Mary make life in the woods EASY!)

Those of you who camp *probably* haven’t noticed this, but when you go camping in the woods, ain’t a lot of black folk around! That’s not only because there aren’t a lot of black folk in Wisconsin to begin with. It’s also because the white supremacist system and overlay that has been in place since white people began to steal the land that makes up most of this country, has used the woods as a *torture chamber* and *burial ground* for people of color in general, and for black people in particular.

Ever since 1619, when the first Africans were brought to this country, when you found black people in the woods, they were either *being worked to death*; or *trying to escape* the inhumanities of slavery; or *being tortured or threatened*; or *being lynched from a tree*. Those things were not recreational activities for black folk! Those things were no picnic or a “relaxing experience with nature” for black folk! It often WAS a picnic for WHITE folk, however, as there are historic pictures of smiling and happy white people literally making a picnic—with the family and the neighbors mind you—around the abused, tortured, burned and lynched bodies of black folk. And since the current occupant of the White House is giving all kinds of permission and blowing all kinds of dog whistles to white supremacists, the woods could very easily become once again a torture chamber and burial ground for more people of color.

That’s MY trip about being wary of the woods. Aside from the mosquitos . . . and the bears!

There is one more thing you could find black folk doing in the woods during the early history of this country, and that's worshipping God! Black folk would sneak away from the master's plantation and go to a specified place, deep in the woods, in covered-up spaces, to emotionally sing and shout praises, and cry and moan for deliverance and freedom, from the Supreme God that they knew, by whatever name they called their Supreme God.

That is just where we find Moses and the freshly-freed, newly-released-from-bondage-in-Egypt Israelites this morning—shouting praises, and meeting their God in the wilderness.

II.

Our printed scripture today is from ch. 16 of Exodus, but I want to take us back a bit to the end of ch. 15, *right after* the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had parted the sea for the Israelites, and then brought those same sea waters crashing down upon Pharaoh's army. The prophetess Miriam, sister of Moses, took up a tambourine, and led all the Israelite

women in a praise song to the Lord! Free at last, free at last! (That's why I keep a tambourine handy in worship—because I never know when I'm gonna break out in praise! Because God is good all the time! . . .)

Right after that, in v.22, the scriptures say Moses led the people from the shores of the Red Sea into the *wilderness*.

Let's keep our finger right there as we talk about the *wilderness* for a moment. My research yields that the kind of land that is talked about as *wilderness* in scripture includes different types of terrain. So-called wilderness regions included arid and semiarid territory, as well as sandy desert, rocky plateaus, pasture lands, and desolate mountain terrain. Physically traveling through wilderness territory could be a tough, long, rugged journey. The kind of journey that, once you get to a certain point, it all begins to seem insurmountable . . . like driving through Texas!

The wilderness has always been described as a dark and scary place, a place of unpredictability, a place where it is hard to find your way or your bearings, a place that conjures up the fear of the unknown. For the Israelites the wilderness was a real place that they had to deal with and journey through. For many people of color the wilderness was a real experience of fear, torture and death.

For some of you under the sound of my voice this morning, you also could be experiencing what must feel like a wilderness moment in a part of your OWN life. You could very well be in a mental, emotional, physical, or spiritual space or place of transition, or fear, or aloneness, or loss, or confusion, or questioning, or in a place or situation or condition that you have not experienced before, so you feel lost in it, not able to find your way through it—or maybe even wrestling with God about the ways you are being led.

Just like there are different types of land that make up the wilderness terrain, there are also different types of situations in life that can make

us FEEL as though we are IN the wilderness; and we can get *afraid* sometimes, because the wilderness is *no joke!* We all know people who have *gotten lost or turned around* in the wilderness; or have *gotten waylaid or sidelined* in the wilderness; or have *gotten seduced or sucked in* by some of the more less-forgiving spirits of the wilderness; or have even ended up dead—literally and metaphorically—in the wilderness. Because the wilderness is no joke. The wilderness is able to swallow you whole!

III.

I'd like to remind us this morning that, despite how we have been describing it for the past few minutes, the wilderness is also known as a place of *transformative encounter with God*. There is a motif in parts of scripture of the wilderness—or the desert—being a prime place of encounter with God; a place where God is extending an invitation to deeper relationship. In Genesis 12, Abram begins his sojourn in the wilderness, where he has multiple encounters with God. In Genesis 16

and 21, Hagar encounters God in the wilderness. In Genesis 28 and 32, Jacob, Abraham's grandson, also has multiple encounters with God in the wilderness. And Moses first meets God in the wilderness of Sinai.

Now it seems that the entire people of Israel are being taken from bondage in Egypt and led into the wilderness for an extended encounter with God; a long-term encounter that is meant to plant the seeds of Israel in the soil of an utter dependence on their God!

All of these encounters in the wilderness are God's invitation to a deeper relationship. And I want to suggest to you today that it is the same with our *own* wilderness experiences: *they are an opportunity and invitation to a deeper relationship with God.* Because the wilderness is the place where you and God *wrestle*. And when you wrestle with something or somebody, you have to *get close* to each other; you have to *engage* each other; *hold on* to each other; *grab and press against* each other; get each other's sweat all over each other;

you have to get so close to each other when you wrestle, that it's like you're both trying to occupy the *same space!*

And sometimes it's called *wrestling in the wilderness! With God!* And it is meant to deepen our relationship with the One who created the heavens and the earth, and who guides us from one life to the next.

IV.

Let's check on the wrestling match God is having with the Israelites this morning:

Back in Exodus 15:22, the scriptures say the Israelites followed Moses into the wilderness, and they went three days without finding any water. When they finally found water, they couldn't drink it because it was bitter. And Moses and the people cried and moaned and murmured, wondering what kind of God would lead them to water when they were thirsty that they couldn't drink! God showed Moses a piece of wood that Moses was able to throw into the water to make the water drinkable. So God provided the remedy, then gave the Israelites

something to wrestle with: *obedience, and growing trust in God; and also, I would add, a sense of God's humor!* (You should read ch. 15 of Genesis when you get home). What kind of God would lead them to water that they couldn't drink? The kind of God who could always fix it up for them! The kind of God who was always able to make a way out of no way for them! The kind of God who could show them that nothing was impossible with that God!

So, a few weeks after that the Israelites are on their journey through the wilderness again; but the wilderness, as we have talked about, is a tough place, and the people are losing hope, and begin to have what *seems* to be described as a "pity party." That's where we encounter them in our printed lesson this morning, *mad and irritable* because they are hungry and thirsty, and *suspicious* of Moses and Aaron for leading them into the wilderness in the first place!

So, God tells Moses and Aaron the plan, and Moses announces to the Israelites that "the Lord has heard your *complaining*"—or *murmuring*,

which is how the Hebrew word used for that action (*rib*) could ALSO be translated. That word in Hebrew for “murmuring” has a *legal context* that speaks to the pursuit of what one is *legally due*; which means that there is something about the people “murmuring” that was supposed to speak to GOD’S obligations of provision and presence to Israel.

This wasn’t the first time—nor the last time—that the people would murmur. “Murmuring” is a way of approaching God that is part of many African religious traditions—including the wailing and moaning of the spirituals. According to Judy Fentress-Williams, Prof. of Hebrew Bible at Virginia Union University, “the centrality of music to the people of the African continent makes for a tradition that embraces the practice of *corporate murmuring*. The community cries out, moans, and laments when there is a need, with the full expectation that God will answer. . . . The people cry to God because they understand that there is no greater power and no greater love.”

How did they know that? Because God *told* them so, and God *showed* them so! So God's people feel they have *every right* to call on the presence and power of the Lord—to be a rock in their weary land, a shelter in their time of storm, a way when there doesn't seem to be another way for them (like at the Red Sea).

And what did God do for them? Gave them everything they needed, in a way that not only fed the people, but which also manifested God's glory. Because relationship has obligations—from both sides.

Murmuring is a way of wrestling with God *right back*, a way of engaging with God which is ultimately meant to let us know that God is real!

Especially when we feel that we are somehow in the wilderness, and need God's hand to feed us and lead us out of the wilderness the right way.

Jesus says this morning that *"the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."* For some that bread of God was manna. For others of us, that bread of God is the cross of

Jesus. It may have been the hate and injustice of the world that nailed Jesus to the cross of Calvary; but it was the love and power of God that met Jesus in the midst of that wilderness; that heard him and covered him when he began to murmur, and moan, and shout, and scream, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

But even though it seemed like God DID, God DIDN'T! In the midst of our own wilderness wanderings; in the midst of our own fear, doubt and confusion; in the midst of our own wrestling, and murmuring, and crying, and praying; and even in the midst of our not knowing—God knows. And God is right there. Even when it doesn't feel like it.

And just like God raised Jesus from death, and blazed a path of new life; so God can also raise us from our wilderness, our weariness, our worry-ness, and our waiting, unto paths of new life. And God can do it in ways that shine God's unexpected glory and unconditional love in our lives, in ways that reach deeper and deeper into our very souls.

Because the wilderness can be an invitation *from* God for a deeper relationship *with* God.

Amen.

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