

Lec 18B- August 4, 2024

Psalm 78:23-28, Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

St Paul Newark- Barbara Melosh

The story in Exodus is a story of wilderness wandering, when the adventure has worn off. It's a story about people who are on a long journey they can't see the end of, people who are sick of traveling, tired and hungry—so they start blaming and complaining. And it's a story about God—the God who hears our complaints, and gives us what we need.

At this point in the story of the people of God, the Israelites find themselves in a bit of a lull after their dramatic escape from Egypt. They have been out of Egypt for about six weeks—fleeing from Pharaoh, leaving in such a hurry that they could not even wait for their bread to rise. God has led them this far, showing them the way with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night; even parting the waters of the Red Sea when Pharaoh's armies had them cornered. But now, they are back to wilderness wandering—the tedium and discomfort of daily journeying in the desert.

And so, they look for somebody to blame, and they turn on their leaders, Moses and Aaron. They raise up a great wail of lament: “ ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh-pots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’ ”

Only six weeks out of Egypt, and somehow it's looking good to them in the rear view mirror? Have these people already forgotten they were *slaves* in Egypt?

Set free, but now they are feeling the bite of hunger, the weariness of the journey, the fear about what lies ahead. Better to be slaves, who someone else feeds, than a free people, fending for themselves in the wilderness. Better to die in the place you know—even if you are a slave—than to die far from home, out in the wilderness.

The wilderness is a lonely place, a dangerous place, a place of testing and temptation. The wilderness, a place in between—the remembered past be-

hind you; the present, an alien and untracked land; the future—always unknown, of course, but there are times when we feel more sharply aware of that uncertainty. When you find yourself in the wilderness of in-between, you sometimes want to run right back to Egypt—no matter how bad it was, at least you knew where you stood, and who you were.

You have left a relationship you had to get out of—your happiness, your sanity, maybe even your safety depended on it—but then you are free of that, and alone again; in the wilderness between your old life and what you hope will be your new one.

Or maybe you have finally been set free from alcohol or drugs, but then you meet yourself face to face for the first time in years, maybe ever. Even your own family isn't sure if they can trust you. And you don't trust yourself, not yet. You're in the wilderness—on a long uncertain journey toward a whole new life.

Or, you've finally said it, told a few people what you've come to understand about yourself and who you really are. But what will it be like to live into that identity fully, and where will you find yourself and your people in the alphabet of LBGQTQIA+?

In the wilderness, and wondering what life will look like on the other side—whatever, wherever that is.

Maybe that's a blessing, the not-knowing. In today's story, the people of God have been in the wilderness for six weeks—six long weeks, from their point of view. The thrill of flight has worn off; their food has run out. They're hungry and scared and angry at their leaders. They have no idea how long they're going to be there, but we know they're going to be in the wilderness for forty years.

Forty years. Their elders will die there in the rocky desert, and the rest of them will have to bury them and leave their graves behind. New babies will be born, and they'll be parents themselves, before the promised land ever comes into view. Moses, their brave and faithful leader, will get a glimpse of that land of milk and honey, but he'll die without ever feeling the rich soil of it under his feet.

Most of us don't go willingly into the wilderness. Sometimes we find ourselves there for no reason that we know, except that ours is a wilderness world, where sooner or later, each one of us will have our security and our safe havens taken away. And sometimes we are sent there, because the wilderness stands between Egypt and the promised land, between the life you've left and the new life that awaits, and the only way out is through.

In the wilderness, we're driven to our knees. Hungry and afraid, we come to know our need for God.

God hears the complaints of the Israelites in the wilderness. God doesn't give them safe passage back to Egypt, or an express lane to the promised land. God doesn't promise they will never be angry or cold or lonely or afraid. Instead, God gives them what they need for that day—bread in the morning and meat at night.

Their bread is manna, which appears like dew on the ground in the morning. God tells them to gather what they need for the day and no more. God adds, "In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not." (Exodus 16:4). Naturally not everybody does follow directions, and we hear what happens then in the verses left out of our reading today. God evens it up. The ones who gather more don't get more than they need; and the ones who gather less don't lack for anything. They all get what they need.

And of course some people try to gather more than a day's worth, to save it against scarcity—who wouldn't? Sometimes there's no other way, but no one wants to live paycheck to paycheck! If there's a little extra right in front of you, who wouldn't save it for the next time you need it? But when the people in this story try to store some provisions for another day, the manna spoils—except on the sabbath, when it's okay to have an extra day's supply so you don't have to gather it on that day.

It's gospel abundance. They have all they need, but nothing left over. Just enough. It's a story that calls us to take the measure of our own anxious striving, our scarcity thinking, our need to hold on to what we have and keep trying to grasp more—whether we have a lot or a little.

Day by day, in the wilderness, they eat the bread of heaven and learn to trust God—the God who stays with them in the wilderness, and gives them what they need for that day. And the next. And the next, for all the days of their lives.

We hear that promise again in John, as Jesus talks with the crowd about the story of the manna. Bread from heaven—it is from God for the life of world. And we say with that crowd, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Day by day, we pray, “Give us *this* day, our daily bread.”

And we stand in that crowd, as Jesus declares, “I am the bread of life.”

So come with open hands to receive that bread. Take and eat, the body of Christ, the bread of heaven. Eat and be filled with Christ, the bread of life.