

Community and Change-Wandering in the Wilderness Exodus 13: 17-22

(January 19, 2020-2nd Sunday after Epiphany)

I hope you like self-deprecating humour. How many church members does it take to change a light bulb? The answer—“Change!? We don’t change!” Individual change is hard enough but institutional change that involves so many people with different personalities, values and agendas can be daunting, rife with misunderstanding and hurt feelings. Today I am starting a sermon series called “Community and Change” that explores how we can manage change faithfully.

We all want change to be smooth and straightforward. If change is necessary, we want simply to move from one comfortable situation into another. It never happens that way though. With every change, there comes a time when we find ourselves caught between what has been and what will be. So, we are wandering in the wilderness, unsure of where we are or where we are headed.

Israel was no stranger to change, to time spent in the wilderness. The scripture we heard today and the entire story of the escape from Egypt, of Moses, of the wandering in the wilderness came together during the Babylonian exile, during the 700’s B.C.E. after the sacking of Jerusalem and the forced expulsion of the Jewish people into modern day Iraq. Before that time, it’s believed that the story of the escape from Egypt was largely shared orally from generation to generation. But, with the community scattered there was great fear these stories would be lost. In ancient cultures times of great crisis usually precipitated writing things down. The story of the escape from Egypt and the wandering in the wilderness became an important one for this people dealing with imposed change, suffering incredible loss and unable to see where it might all end.¹ The story became a basis for hope. They remembered that it was there in the wilderness that they were transformed from being slaves to being a nation. They held onto the hope that in this new wilderness they would once again be formed into the people they needed to become in order to be free once again.

What have been the wilderness times in your life, times when you left the past behind but didn’t know the future? Wilderness times can be forced on us—a loved one dies, a divorce or unemployment. Wilderness times can also come about because of a choice—a new career, a new relationship, a move, having children. The grace of wandering in the wilderness is that it forms us into the people we need to become in order to thrive in a new situation.

In the wilderness the Jewish people grumbled and complained about not having food or water, they questioned God’s presence, they longed for the good old days in Egypt, they worshipped idols, they fought, and they attacked Moses and Aaron’s leadership. There was so much unknown for the Jewish people, so much anxiety; they were no longer

¹ Walter Breuggeman, *Reverberations of Faith*, p. 232.

slaves but they did not who they were becoming. But, It is in the process of wilderness vulnerability that they develop a new relationship with God in which they learned dependence on God even for their food. They remember their identity as God's chosen and they develop a new way of organizing themselves with a set of commandments and a new way of making decisions as a community. They went into the wilderness as slaves and came out as a nation looking for a promised home where they could live independently.²

If we look at our own lives, we know that wilderness times are painful but crucial times in the process of change and becoming. Whether it is the grief of losing a loved one, the turmoil of divorce, the excitement and anxiety of moving out of the house for the first time or the angst of moving out of the house for the last time into a retirement or nursing home. Wilderness times are times of letting go of old identities and forging new ones. About discovering who you are in a new situation. About learning new behaviours and attitudes and letting go of old ones that no longer serve us well. About discovering strengths that will help us and becoming aware of weaknesses that might derail us. About seeking and finding the support we need.

That is where we are as a church—in the wilderness. The days when being part of a church community was as natural as breathing are long gone, as are the days of stay at home moms who ran Sunday schools and joined women's groups who did so much of the behind scenes work for the church. Gone are the days when businesses and recreation activities shut down on Sunday mornings. Older donors, who grew up in an era where the church was the first and sometimes the only priority for donations are dying and younger donor's givings are spread out across many organizations. The rapid pace of technological advancement, the climate crisis and the rise of xenophobia are challenging us to remain relevant as a unifying, justice seeking and moral voice.

Just like the Israelites, who when confronted with the hardships of the desert wilderness were tempted to turn back and forsake the promise of freedom for the security of slavery back in Egypt, we too can let the fear and anxiety of wilderness times forsake the new path God is leading us down for the false security of nostalgia or denial. We focus on the way things used to be, longing for the good old days of 500 kids in the Sunday school or we simply deny by our actions that anything has changed around us by doing things as we always have. Christian spiritual writer and preacher, Sarah Bessey says if we want to cooperate with God in bringing forth new life the best way to do that is not to run from the pain but to "lean into it"... (<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/lean-into-it>).

What keeps us from escaping the anxiety of the wilderness into the false security of nostalgia or denial is the faith that we wander not in vain, that on the other side of the wilderness there is release, a new birth awaits, the faith that God is active and present in the wilderness with us. In our faith story God goes ahead of the people as a pillar of

² Gilbert Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation*, pp. 98-99.

cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night and the story goes on to say that neither the pillar of cloud nor the pillar of fire left its place in front of the people.³ The writer E.L. Doctorow once said, “Writing a novel is like driving at night, you can only see as far as the headlights, but you can make the whole journey that way.” In the wilderness of change, we are called to make the whole journey that way, but you know that, don’t you. You look back at the wilderness times in your own life and you had no idea how things would turn out, you just put one foot in front of the other in faith. You were lead, little by little to a new place. That is the promise for us as a church, to be lead in faith, little by little through the wilderness to a new place. Next week, “Bread for the Journey. How to sustain ourselves in the wilderness.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

³ Exodus 13: 21-22