

Exodus 16:1-8

The Wilderness – Step #4 in the Stages of Faith

Sunday October 23, 2011

Rev. Susan Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

This week in my class at Andover Newton Theological School I heard a lecture on the way that faith deepens as children grow and mature. In the beginning of life children imitate us. So, if we bow our heads to say grace before a meal then they do the same. If we attend a summer service and go up front to light a candle, children want to come along. Then children own the custom; sometimes if we forget to say grace they will insist on it. Or they ask to light a candle at every summer service.

As children get older they enjoy the opportunity to identify with a larger community. That is true for their community of faith. They look forward to Sunday school and enjoy telling people that this is their church when they drive down Great Plain Avenue. They build friendships here at church and identify with church events like the Talent Show or the Haunted House.

Older youth question the faith of their earlier years. That is normal and part of the growth process. They are not abandoning religion, but refining their understanding. They are wrestling with the faith of their childhood and demanding more from it. This is the searching that leads to deeper adult faith. We can see faith change in the children of this community, but we sometimes we forget that faith is also growing in each of us too. Faith is a journey- not a destination; it changes and matures throughout our lives. There are periods of discovery, and times of doubt, years of contentment in a faith community; and times of personal struggle, even when we belong to a church.

During October we are looking at the Stages of Faith. We are shaping this series around the life of Moses. You may remember that this founder of our faith had his own journey with God. He was born to Hebrew slaves but he was adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter who raised him like a prince. He straddled

two worlds. but Moses never lost his curiosity about life and so he heard God calling him from a burning bush. In time he gained the courage to answer God's call and lead his Hebrew people to freedom. Using his story we have identified 3 stages of faith so far.

- Step #1 is Curiosity. You have to want more to seek faith. You might have all the material things this world can offer, or enough, but still be hungry for spiritual gifts. That is step #1.
- Step #2 is Hearing a Call. Heike had a cell phone call in the service that week, and talked to God. Most of us don't get God on our phones, but we can gain a sense of direction, and feel God challenging us, or drawing us to holy space.
- Step #3 is Taking a Journey Last week we said that faith involves action. Moses stepped out into the Dead Sea and then the waters parted. You need to start a journey and God will be right there with you.
- **Today we look at Step #4 – The wilderness.**

When Moses brought the people to the Dead Sea, they were terrified. The Pharaoh sent chariots and soldiers to get them back so they knew that they were being pursued. But Moses was inspired to step out into the waters of the Sea and God opened a new way forward. God made a path no one expected, so the Hebrews scurried across the dry land to safety. Safe on the distant shore, they looked back in amazement to see the chariot wheels stuck in the mud as the waters returned to decimate Pharaoh's forces.

The Hebrews were dancing on that distant shore. They wept with joy and astonishment. They blessed the Lord of life for their good fortune. That night they fell asleep secure for the first time in their lives. But the next day was different.

They woke to the realization that they headed into the desert – the wilderness lay ahead. Nobody really chooses the wilderness, but sometimes in life we discover that the wilderness has chosen us.

What can we learn from this story for our lives today?

In the first place, **The wilderness is the making of you.** When the Hebrews left Egypt they were a tribal group but they did not know anything about faith or the God who Called Moses. They had shared the experience of living in a ghetto together and making bricks, so the group was held together by their hatred of the Egyptians, but little else. Being a tribe of slaves shows you how to survive, but it does not make you a community of faith. It took the wilderness experience to transform this group of refugees into a nation of faithful followers.

It was in the wilderness that the Hebrews grew to trust in God. That was a huge step and only came slowly through trial and testing. It was not an easy path but here in the wilderness, the people learned to pray, and to listen for God's voice. Today's scripture lesson re-calls the first steps of their faith.

Once they got over the elation of the miracle of the parting of the waters, they had to begin anew. They had to assess their situation as they headed into the wilderness. As slaves their lives were hard, but they were used to having food. Pharaoh expected a lot but he fed them. They had lived in a ghetto, but they all had shelter, and now they were expected to find their way without food or shelter. They were confused and angry. In our passage today they complain to Moses. "What are we supposed to eat in this wilderness? We have no food supplies and now you expect us to walk miles each day without anything? Why have you brought us out here – to die of starvation? At least in Egypt we had kitchens and pots and food. Maybe we should have stayed put.

Moses shared their frustration, and went to God for help. These people cannot survive without provisions. What is the plan? Have you brought us out here to starve? And God listened to Moses, and

sent manna. Maybe there was manna there all along and the people found just when they needed it, but they all came to believe that God had heard them. God had listened to their prayers and answered. Then they asked for meat; bread in the morning was nice, but not enough sustenance. Again God heard the people and sent flocks of quail each night. Through the experience the Hebrews learned that they could rely on God. They learned - We can be honest about what we need. We can tell Moses what we are afraid of. God will listen to us. Together with God's help we will survive. God won't abandon us. We can trust God to stay by our side. The wilderness was the making of these people. It was here that they became a people of faith.

When Jesus began his ministry, he spent 40 days in the wilderness, to face the temptations and to learn to trust God. It was a time for him to test his faith. Without that experience, his words might ring hollow. In the wilderness he faced his demons, and solidified his commitment to God.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art has a Rembrandt Exhibit which is touring the US. {" The Halo Effect" by Richard Lacayo, Time August 15, 2011} in the review in Time Magazine the writer. During Rembrandt's long and tumultuous career something happened that changed the way he depicted Jesus. In his early work Rembrandt shows Jesus in sharp color contrasts and stark scenes. But later the Rembrandt genius in depicting Jesus evolved to show Christ in smaller grouping as an approachable figure who calls to you. The shift in the art can be traced to the time in life when Rembrandt experienced a series of losses that rocked him. He and his wife lost three children who died as infants, one after another. Only one of their four children survived. Then his wife died, and it was the wilderness of grief that rocked him, changed him, but eventually made him into a much greater artist. Out of his own suffering Rembrandt began to depict Christ Jesus – as someone you can approach.

No one chooses the wildernesses of grief or trial, illness or depression. No one wants to feel lost. We strain against it like the Hebrews. We would rather go back even to slavery. But so often it is the

times when we have been lost or alone, that we discover we could survive, and suddenly, we learn a kind of resilience no one could tell me about.

In the second place, the path through the wilderness is never straight. Moses really seemed to be lost once he got into the wilderness. They went north then south, then north again and then in a circle. They seemed to be totally clueless. Yet it was strange, some of the best parts of the trip happened when they seemed to be way off their path. The trip to the holy mountain where Moses got the 10 Commandments came when they seemed to be totally lost. It was a detour that changed everything for the people. It was the portion of the trip where they received God's best advice for how to live together-wisdom that lasted for centuries.

How often has that happened to you? You take a trip to a new place. When you look at your picture and reminisce, you have to acknowledge that some detours brought experiences that you would not have missed for anything. Those times when you felt lost provided the best laughs, the most poignant exchanges, the grace notes of the journey.

Karen Armstrong is a scholar of world religions. She has written prize-winning books about God, Jerusalem, Islam, and Fundamentalism. She started down a very different path. As a teenager she startled her parents by announcing to them at 17 that she wanted to enter a convent. It shocked them, but she was determined. For 7 years she endeavored to live by a monastic rule, until she knew it was all wrong for her, and left the convent. A student at Oxford, Armstrong half expected that once she left the convent she'd be fine. But while she felt free in many ways, her journey was not over. She spent another decade processing the experience, learning from it, healing the painful parts, and moving on. Her memoir is named the Spiral Staircase because her path to self-knowledge was circular.

Our faith journeys are never straight paths. They weave and dip. We go forward, and then re-trace our tracks. We lose our way, and re-find it. The trick is to keep on when you are circling round and round, to keep on striving.

Finally, you are not alone. I know what you are thinking. Just about now you expect me to say that God is with you when you go through the wilderness. But the essence of the wilderness experience is the knowledge that you are lost. You don't know where you are going. You don't know how to get out of the mess you are in. If you think – on top of everything, now the Church believes that this is where I should find God that can just make it worse.

There are two things here I want to make clear. Everyone I know has some wilderness times. The only people who avoid the wilderness, are those who remain stuck. They may not be slaves like the Hebrews, but they are slaves to a different set of constraints- prisoners of their own making. Everyone who grows puts in some time in the wilderness.

Secondly, you don't have to find God in the wilderness. All you have to do is admit to yourself that you need God's help, and then God will find you.

Let us pray: