

“What We Need is Already Here”

Exodus 17:1-7

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Sermon by Rev. Caela Simmons Wood

First Congregational UCC of Manhattan, KS

A few weeks ago, as Lent was beginning, we sang a song in worship called “from the water to wilderness.”

Just before Jesus went into the wilderness, he was baptized in the waters of the Jordan. And so we brought together simple elements from nature: stones, branches, moss, sand. We brought little bits of the wilderness into our Sanctuary to remind us of our call to venture into the unknown places, the hard places, the wilderness way.

Little did we know, of course, that we’d be headed into what feels like an actual wilderness for so many of us.

Each day we keep waking up, checking on those we love, breathing deeply, washing our hands, stretching, saying our prayers....in the wilderness together.

Each day we are learning, growing, trying to figure out how to be human in this changing world.

I hope we are all being gentle with one another and ourselves....because it turns out that exactly NONE of us have ever been a parent, a teacher, a bank teller, an artist, a spouse, a friend during a pandemic before.

We’re all learning.

We’re all going to learn - promise.

And we will ALL make plenty of mistakes.

So as we learn and adjust and grow, let’s keep listening to this ancient advice from the Book of James:

let us be “quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger” as we move ahead together.

And let us be gentle, gentle, gentle in all that we do.

I don’t know about you, but whenever it feels like the world is shifting under my feet, I find my soul is filled by going back to the stories in our ancient texts.

This week is the third week in Lent and our lectionary text for the day is from the Book of Exodus. The people of Israel are on their long journey from slavery to freedom and, as you may already know, they spent a long time in the wilderness as they were making that journey.

In the wilderness, we become keenly aware of our physical needs and the Israelites were no different. They began to get very thirsty and felt panicked. Let's listen to the story from Exodus 17 ([read the Bible passage here](#)).

"Is the Lord among us or not?" What a question.

It's the question so many of us ask when we are pushed up against the hard places, the rough places, the places that make us feel like we will almost certainly break.

When we are pushed to our very edge we wonder, "God, are you here? Are you still here with us now?"

This ancient story is, at its most basic level, a story about humans being human and God being God. Humans have bodies. And our bodies have limitations. We get hungry. We get tired. We get sick. We need water. We need love. We need God and we need one another.

Moses must have been at one of those "pushed to the edge" places himself when this story happened.

We hear the impatience in his voice when he snaps, "Why are you quarreling with me? Why are you testing God?"

All of us have been pushed to a place where we aren't the leader we want to be, the friend we want to be, the spouse we want to be, the parent we want to be. Moses was probably as exhausted as the people were thirsty.

But there they were: exhausted and thirsty and overwhelmed and anxious together in the wilderness. And so Moses did what humans often do when we are pushed to the edge: he cried out to God in despair: "God, what do I do???"

And God - being God - knows just what to do.

God is faithful. Period. Full stop.

And God provides care. Because that's the nature of God.

Again and again in our sacred texts we hear about this faithful God who will not let us go. The arc of scripture shows us a God who loves us with reckless abandon.

A God who is always cheering for us - especially when we are knocked down.

Our God is always moving towards us, always pursuing us in love, always seeking our health and wholeness. We humans may find ourselves in the wilderness again and again but the nature of God does not change.

When Moses and the people cry out to God in the wilderness, God provides just what they need: water. One of the loveliest things I read about this text this past week was written by Professor Terrence Fretheim. He reminds us that "God doesn't create water for the people out of thin air." [1]

Instead, there is ALREADY WATER that exists in rock formations naturally. It's just a matter of FINDING the flowing water.

And so it's not that the water appears out of nowhere....it's that God and Moses work together to find the water that is already there to provide for the people.

In other words: it's not a miracle....at least not the way we often think of miracles. Instead, when Moses makes water appear in the desert, it's a story about God reminding the people in the wilderness:

what you need is already here.

What a word of comfort in our own time in the wilderness.

I said to my neighbor just yesterday, "It feels like the whole world is jumping off a cliff together and we can't even see the bottom yet."

This sacred story reminds us that no matter what comes: God is faithful and what we need is already here.

We simply need to be open to the movement of the Spirit in and among us to find the living water we all so desperately need.

There is a Wendell Berry poem that speaks to this very truth.

We're going to post a link to it in the comments so you can read it later, but in the poem Berry writes about a summer morning horseback ride. The rider opens up a persimmon seed and ponders the new life within - the tree that lies waiting inside.

Then then the rider looks up and notices the geese flying overhead.

Berry describes the geese and says they are:

“clear in the ancient faith:
what we need is here.”

“And we pray,” he writes, “not for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye, clear.

What we need is here.”

Friends, we are already seeing signs of this all over the world and in our own community.

The stories of goodness out there in the midst of this pandemic are everywhere! I know many of you probably already saw it, but if you didn't, we're going to post it in the comments....the beautiful videos of people in Italy singing with one another outside of their windows. The whole country is on lockdown and the humans of Italy are being so very human....they are finding new and creative ways to connect even in the midst of isolation. They are throwing open their windows and singing together even when they can't share space together. I cried tears of joy when I saw it.

What we need is already here.

And we don't have to look to Italy to see this, of course. It's right here in our own community.

It's all of you coming together this morning to say “we may have to learn to do this in new ways, but we are still going to worship together.”

It's the people who are working around the clock figuring out how to feed hungry kids while the schools are closed. It's the volunteers in our own congregation and others who have had to quickly pivot and find creative ways to continue to feed hungry people as Second Helping and other Common Table meals switch to carry-out meals.

It's landlords saying, “It's okay if you need to skip next month's rent” to people whose jobs are being affected. It's the person out there working hard to make sure the power stays on, the trash gets picked up, the grocery shelves are stocked.

It's every person who takes a little extra time to slow down and say thank you when they see someone out in a public cleaning our shared spaces.

It's every one of us that makes time to knock on the door of our neighbors and exchange phone numbers, share a joke, see what they might need.

It's people who aren't in that high-risk category asking others "hey, do you need anything?" before they run to the store.

It's every time we wash our hands, cover a cough, or choose to distance ourselves physically out of love and care for the most vulnerable among us.

What we need is already here.

And God is faithful through it all. Even in the wilderness.
ESPECIALLY in the wilderness.

Thanks be to God.

Notes:

[1] http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4404

[2] <https://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=2144>