

The St. Andrew's Pulpit

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Manna in the Wilderness

God said to Moses, "I'm going to rain bread down from the skies for you."

– Exodus 16:1-5

The story of the Exodus is our story. It is the story of a group of people who find themselves in a wilderness where they do not know how to sustain themselves. And whenever we find ourselves in situations which are new and unexpected, situations for which we are unprepared, we will find ourselves with similar anxieties, similar fears, similar problems. At such times this story becomes our story and speaks to us with healing power.

This story is part of the story of how the Hebrews escaped from slavery and oppression in Egypt and made their way out into the wilderness of the Sinai. The Sinai was then, and still is today, one of the most desolate regions on earth. (The picture is of a wadi – a valley where water runs when it rains and nourishes a few plants. Much of the Sinai is much less) And once the initial euphoria over having escaped had passed, they must have started to wonder. Had they gone from the frying pan into the fire? Had they escaped slavery only to slowly starve to death in a wasteland? How will they survive?



The Hebrews are not Bedouin nomads, who are used to surviving in a desert, who know where to look for the plants and animals that can sustain them. They are used to the fertile country of Egypt, where the annual flooding of the Nile delta created a rich agricultural community. Even though they were slaves, overworked and oppressed, they at least knew how to find food and water, but here in this wilderness, how could they survive? What will they eat? What will they drink? Have they escaped oppression and the brutality of the Egyptians only to die of thirst or starve to death in an unforgiving wilderness? They find themselves longing for the security of slavery, for freedom seems unimportant when you have nothing to eat. And their fear and anxiety turned into anger at Moses who had led them to this place, and they say to him: "If only we had died in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Well-fed people often interpret this fear and anxiety as complaining, lack of trust. But it is important to note that the story does not criticize them for their fear or anxiety. Their worries are real. They are fears for real necessities, for food and water, for the things that we must have to feed ourselves and those we care about. Even though the situation they had left behind was terrible, there are real questions about how to adjust and survive in the new situation.

And just as this story is our story, these worries are our worries. For these are the kind of worries that all of us face whenever we encounter a new situation, one for which we are not prepared, when our life plans and expectations are suddenly upset. Many women, but not just women,

have these kinds of anxieties when they are experiencing a crisis in their marriages. They may be desperately unhappy in a marriage, they be suffering physical or emotional abuse, but be entirely dependent on their spouse for their food and shelter. And so they have precisely these kinds of anxieties. The situation at home may be intolerable, but will it be worse than living on welfare? Will it be worse than facing the rage of the spouse? Many men, but not just men, have these kinds of anxieties as they struggle with a challenging work environment. They might be desperately unhappy, working for an abusive employer or in a workplace that sucks the joy from their lives, but is it worse than being unemployed? Will it be worse than trying to survive on a drastically reduced pay cheque? Sometimes, in the face of such questions, the fleshpots of Egypt seem safe and secure, as oppressive as they may be.

Such anxieties, in various forms, arise for all of us at various points in our lives. They may be anxieties about very practical things, like food and clothing and housing and the well being of your children. Or they may have been more abstract things, like questions of meaning and purpose. Many of you can probably think of your own experiences of being in a wilderness of some kind. It may be when you were preparing to graduate and leave the security of school for whatever lay afterward. It may have been when you've lost a job, or had trouble finding one, or had a marriage break down, or a sickness or accident or aging has changed the way you think of yourself, or you've retired and find yourself at loose ends, or a loved one has died and left a gaping hole in your life. At such times you may find this story of the Hebrews in the wilderness touches your own experience. You may find yourself with similar anxieties, similar concerns. How are we to live in this new situation? How am I to sustain myself in this wilderness? Will I ever know happiness again?

In a book called Transitions, William Bridges explores how people make these kinds of journeys out of or away from something in search of something new. He suggests that there are three stages in a transition: An Ending, The Neutral Zone, and A New Beginning. It is the neutral zone that is evoked by the story of the Hebrews in the wilderness, because it is a time after something significant has ended, but before something new has really begun to take shape. We have a lot of trouble with transitions in our culture because we are used to instant everything, but transitions take time, and in particular they take wilderness time. The wilderness is an appropriate symbol for such times because they are times of barrenness, of emptiness, in which life seems dull and flat, in which joy seems impossible. They are often times of depression, of deep sadness, when we wonder if we've really botched our lives, if we can ever again feel happy, fulfilled, whole. We may long with a kind of wistful nostalgia for what we have left behind, only to remember again why we are no longer there. Wilderness times are not easy times, but they are important times. William Bridges says that the neutral zone, the wilderness is a time and a place of great psychological and spiritual opportunity. It is a time for asking what life is really about, for discovering new meanings and purposes and hopes and dreams, for leaving behind old, destructive patterns of life and discovering new ones. Other cultures have had special rituals for such times, initiation rites, vision quests, times of fasting and prayer. We have few such rituals, but many people find that keeping a journal, or expressing themselves artistically, or going fishing or walking alone, or finding some such way of honouring the need for personal exploration, is an important way of marking these times.

The ancient Hebrews had to go through the wilderness in order to get to the Promised Land. The wilderness was a place of transition, and they had to dwell there for a time. But it was not just a time to endure. It was a time to grow and heal. The wilderness was the place where they were able to identify that oppressor /slave pattern of life as one that they wanted to leave behind in Egypt, and to begin to imagine a new society of equality and freedom. It always scares me when

people leave a destructive relationship and then immediately get right into a new one, because they have not done that vital psychological and spiritual work of transition, they have not clearly identified what it was in them that contributed to that destructive relationship in the first place, and learned how to leave it behind. That is why, for example, some women will go from one abusive relationship to another without any understanding or self-awareness of why they are attracted to abusive men.

The wilderness is scary, but it is important. And God will sustain us in it and through it. The story of how God fed the Hebrews with manna and quail has provoked people for years. Was the manna the natural substance that travelers in the area find to this day, a resin from one of the trees that grow there or was it a supernatural phenomena for which there is no modern equivalent? We don't need to answer that question in order to appreciate the power of the story and to find its meaning for us. The important thing is that we need to know that while the wilderness does look forbidding and barren when we first enter it, there will be unexpected surprises along the way. God will sustain us through our wilderness times. And in the end, like the Hebrews, we will reach the Promised Land. The wilderness is not the end of the journey; we will not be there forever. It may not even be clear where it begins or ends, or how when we have crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. To use William Bridges terms, when we have passed beyond neutral zone into new beginnings may not be entirely clear. New beginnings may be insignificant at first, mere seeds of what they will become, but they will come, and grow.

One of the most famous cases in medical ethics is of an athletic young man, known as Donald C. who was severely burned in a propane gas explosion. He sustained second and third degree burns over 68% of his body. Both eyes were blinded by corneal damage, his ears were mostly destroyed, his fingers had to be amputated and his hands become useless stubs. His face, body and legs were horribly scarred. From the first day of the accident, Donald repeated stated that he did not want to live as a blind and crippled person. He wanted to be taken home, where he would certainly have died from infection. Donald's story is often used in courses of medical ethics to stimulate discussion of the ethical issue of whether a person should have the right to refuse life-saving treatment. But setting aside that question for this occasion, you might want to know the rest of the story. Donald sued to be allowed to die. His case dragged through court, and finally, he was given the right to refuse treatment. But when his life was back in his own hands, and he had the power to make his own decision, he changed his mind and agreed to further treatment. After months of hospital care, he was able to return home, where he has learned to care for himself, and became an enthusiastic ham radio operator. The last I heard, he had married and had a family. For him too, the wilderness, though unbearably difficult, seems to have come to an end, but it was vitally important that he take his thoughts and feelings about his situation seriously and that he be taken seriously by those around him. It was only through honouring the wilderness experience that he was able to come through it and make a commitment to life on the other side of his horrific accident.

Life is not easy. It is filled with struggle, change and pain. But if we go through that struggle with the sense that God will guide and strengthen us in it, we will find that we will emerge, enriched, on the far side of our own Jordan, in a better and happier place. AMEN.

Scripture Story: Exodus 16-17:

Do you remember? Do you remember the story of how the people of Israel escaped from Egypt and made their way through the Eastern desert? It is your story! It belongs to you! Do you remember how they were led by Moses, his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam? Do you remember how they were pursued by the Egyptian army, but how they were saved by God? Do you remember how they escaped through the sea, in which the Egyptians drowned? Do you remember hearing about the songs of praise and thanksgiving they sang on that day? Maybe you have heard the story before and maybe you haven't, but the story does not end there. The people of Israel were safe from the Egyptians, but they were not safe from the sun and the heat and the desert. They were in the Sinai, one of the most forbidding deserts on the earth, full of rugged barren mountains. (Show slide one)



It was a little over a month after the people of Israel had left Israel when things started to look pretty desperate. The people of Israel began to wonder if they would survive this journey. They began to wonder if slow starvation in the Sinai was even worse than slavery in Egypt. And so they complained to Moses and Aaron there in the wilderness. They cried, "Why didn't GOD let us die in comfort in Egypt where we had lamb stew and all the bread we could eat? You've brought us out into this wilderness to starve us to death, the whole company of Israel!" (show slide two)



They were not exaggerating. Things really were pretty desperate. And just when things were at their worst, God saved them again. GOD spoke to Moses, and said, "I'm going to rain meat and bread down from the skies for you. The people will go out every day, and gather enough for that day. No more, except on the sixth day. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they have gathered, it will turn out to be twice as much as their daily ration, so that they will have enough for the Sabbath.

Moses and Aaron told the People of Israel, "This evening you will know that it is GOD who brought you out of Egypt; and in the morning you will see the Glory of GOD. Yes, he's listened to your complaints against him. You haven't been complaining against us, you know, but against GOD."

That evening quail flew in and covered the camp and in the morning there was a layer of dew all over the camp. When the layer of dew had lifted, there on the wilderness ground was a fine flaky something, fine as frost on the ground. The Israelites took one look and said to one another, *man-hu* (What is it?). They had no idea what it was.

So Moses told them, "It's the bread GOD has given you to eat. And these are GOD's instructions: 'Gather enough for each person, about two quarts per person; gather enough for everyone in your tent.'"

The People of Israel went to work and started gathering, some more, some less, but when they measured out what they had gathered, those who gathered more had no extra and those who gathered less weren't short—each person had gathered as much as was needed. The Israelites named it manna (which means: "What is it?"). It looked like coriander seed, whitish. And it tasted like a cracker with honey.

The Israelites ate the manna for forty years until they arrived at the land where they would settle down. They ate manna until they reached the border into Canaan.