

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 3/27/2022, Joshua 5:9-12, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
(*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

In Lent we remember Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by the devil. That was our reading three weeks ago, and we also heard the story last Wednesday in our evening program. Lent is based on those forty days.

Today we get a bit of a liturgical respite from the forty days of Lent. Of course, every Sunday is a little Easter, so we've been getting a break every Sunday, but today we get the rose hangings and vestments that only come out twice a year during the more somber seasons of Lent and Advent for Rejoice Sunday. Today we rejoice and even get to have altar flowers before heading back to the desert.

Today we also hear from the book of Joshua, the book that takes place after the Israelites had finished their wandering in the wilderness for forty *years*. Forty years of walking and wandering and only being able to have enough to eat for the day, and it was always manna.

And then their time in the wilderness was over. Forty years of aching feet and calves. Forty years of tents, of breaking down and building back up over and over. Forty years of being unsettled. Forty years for a generation to die that included Moses. Forty years of not having a graveyard or a corner store or a favorite restaurant. Can you imagine forty *years* in the wilderness?

What happens when the wilderness wandering is over?

At the time of today's reading from the book of Joshua, they were still camping, but they had a plan to overtake the promised land. They sent spies and Rahab agreed to help them. Joshua is a disturbing and violent book of military memoir, which is probably why we don't hear from it much in church. Right before the events we hear about in today's reading, God had dried up the Jordan much like the Red Sea at the beginning of their journey, so that they had crossed into that Promised Land. They were now camping and observing the Passover, remembering the events of forty years before when Moses led them out of Egypt. They ate unleavened bread. And then, the manna stopped.

The manna stopped. The manna which had fed them every day for the past forty *years*. On that day, instead of manna, they ate unleavened cakes, parched grain, and the produce of the land. As my friend Heidi Haverkamp pointed out in one of her books,<sup>1</sup> their life once they were finally out of the wilderness did not necessarily mean that life was now easier. Now, instead of gathering manna given to them by God every morning, they had to take responsibility for their own food. Who knows, since they were not yet settled, how they got that grain and produce this time; but eventually they would finally be settled, and instead of wandering, they would have to work their land.

How does this translate for us today?

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<sup>1</sup> Haverkamp, Heidi, *Everyday Connections: Reflections and Practices of Year C*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021, 192.

Perhaps we have been in a wilderness the past couple of years. It has certainly felt that way to me. A year ago, I thought the world was finally starting to get back to normal, but then we had the delta variant, and the omicron variant, and normal seemed elusive. We were still in the wilderness. Would we ever get out of the wilderness? How would we recognize the end of the wilderness time?

In today's Old Testament reading, the Israelites were still camping. They weren't yet reaping their own produce. But the manna stopped. They were responsible for their own food. They were responsible for many things now.

The forty years that the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness often gets overlooked when we read from and talk about the Bible. Exodus studies often end at the Red Sea or the golden calf. We don't get a lot from Numbers and Deuteronomy and Leviticus in our Sunday scripture. Still, God refers to that wilderness time longingly in other parts of the Bible, such as Hosea. In the wilderness, God's people were aware of their dependence on God, on that daily manna. Now they would take responsibility for their food. And now that they were out of the wilderness, they would also seek kings so that they could be like other nations. Now they they had stopped wandering in the wilderness, they would be continually seduced by money and idols. Other gods.

Do you feel like we are emerging from a wilderness? If you do, do you see new challenges and responsibilities? Once we leave the wilderness for the Promised Land, the whole story isn't over. A new chapter starts instead.

In our gospel reading today, perhaps the younger son has been in the wilderness. During a famine in a distant country he was feeding pigs and coveted the pods those pigs ate, so he decided to return destitute to his father and ask to be treated like his hired hand.

We hear the story of the celebration: the fatted calf, the music and dancing. The conversation between the father and the elder son. But what happened after that? The father had been delighted to see his younger son again, because he had been like one who had died.

But what would happen the next day? The son had spent his inheritance. After the music and the dancing and the fatted calf, the younger son would have to figure out how to support himself so that he would not end up hungry in a pig stall again. After all, everything the father had was now the elder son's, as the father himself said. The younger son would now have to take responsibility for himself, after squandering everything that he had been given.

Have we been in a wilderness, and are we entering a promised land or returning home to a loving father? How will we gather food from God? How will we share the bread of life in our new chapter?