

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

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Provision in the Wilderness

Well good morning, my dear friends, and welcome again to this service of worship. It is good to be with y'all on this Communion Sunday. I pray that you all are well. That you are healthy. That you are feeling supported and loved and cared for. This has been a really, really hard season for so many reasons, and I just hope that in the midst of it, of this wilderness which we are in, that you feel God's presence, God's love, God's care all around you.

I've been thinking a lot about food. No more than usual, I'd say. I really do think a lot about food. When I'm going to eat. What I'm going to eat. Sometimes I can't even go to sleep before I think through my plan for eating the following day. Mostly because I have to eat the moment I wake up. Oftentimes the motivating factor of getting out of bed is my hunger.

And my whole day is really planned around when I am going to eat. Not just three square meals, but also snacks. I make meal plans before going to the grocery store. Planning out what I am going to eat throughout the week. Making sure that I have enough food, enough meals to get me through. And I do all of this because it actually allows me to think less about what and when I am going to eat.

It's when I don't have a plan, that I spend all kinds of time worrying about it. But once I have a plan, then I can just go about my business. Now that I have a garden though, and the food that I eat depends on what has ripened that day, my relationship to this need for a plan has shifted a little bit.

Rather than anxiety and stress, there is a sense of joy and anticipation. What is going to be there today?!

This is probably more than you really care to know about my food habits, but I share it because I think it extends to not just how I relate to my food schedule, but to how a lot of us relate to our lives in general.

Many of us like at least some semblance of a plan. We like to set our expectations. To know generally what we're going to do and when. What kind of resources we will have and what we'll be able to do with them.

We like budgets. We like calendars. We like plans. For ourselves, our families, our church. Because it gives us a sense of stability and security. We don't have to worry as much, because we have made a plan. We know what we are going to do and when we are going to do it.

But here's the thing, life rarely works out this way. Especially when we are living in times of transition, or what we biblical people like to call times of "wilderness wandering." We try to make plans and set expectations, but there are simply too many unknowns. The terrain too unfamiliar and unpredictable.

The wilderness is a hard place to be because it's a liminal space, an in-between space where nothing is certain, nothing is a given, and though we long for the other side, it can sometimes feel too distant, too unrealistic. And we can be moved to despair, moved to retreat back to what we knew. Even if it was painful, at least it was predictable.

For the Israelites, the wilderness was the liminal space between Egyptian captivity and the Promised Land. It was the in-between, full of unknowns, anxieties, and dangers. They lacked a stable source of water and food. Their physical shelters were what they could carry. And their emotional, spiritual shelters were often confusing and scary. The LORD regularly hung out in a wandering cloud. Moses would go away for many moons, leaving them to their own devices.

They were promised another side to this wilderness, but it's hard to imagine it, to believe in its existence, when the uncertainty of the wilderness overwhelms all your senses, all your energy, and takes over all your plans.

"If only we'd died in the land of Egypt," cries the Israelites, "where at least we ate well." I feel that. Deep in my being, I feel that. I know a thing or two about being hangry and thus overdramatic.

But I think for the people, it's not just the food hunger, it's the uncertainty and the anxiety and the hunger for security that comes with wandering in the wilderness.

They had a deep physical need for food and for water, and also, they had deep spiritual and emotional and communal needs. They had a deep, profound hunger to feel and know God's faithfulness and God's intentions for them.

Had God taken them all the way out there, just to abandon them?

The short answer is no. Of course not. But you have to have compassion for the Israelites, right? I know I know. Wandering the wilderness is hard. It is draining,

never ending work. We have collectively been in a pretty severe wilderness this past year and a half. There are so many unknowns, so many looming dangers, and things to worry about.

In the beginning we thought, we'll be back to normal soon. Then we began to realize that "normal" probably wasn't real, so we started talking about the nebulous "new normal," that hopefully we would enter into soon. At this point, I avoid all conversations and ruminations about "normal." There was before, there is now—which I would liken to the wilderness—and there is after, which I hope and I pray will be some kind of Promised Land.

But I know that anytime people face adversity in the wilderness, we are drawn, tempted to go back to what we knew. For the Israelites, this was Egyptian captivity. It was grueling, demeaning, and horrific. It was bad, but it was predictable. It was the evil they knew.

For us, this is life before the first shutdown. Endless, restless movement. Overbooked calendars. Overconsumption of every resource imaginable. Disconnect between peoples. Division and suspicion. And in so many ways, in those first few months, we experienced a true pause from all of this.

We marveled at the dolphins in the canals of Venice, not the first sightings, which turned out to be a hoax, but the second sighting was real. I think. At any rate, we saw cleaner water and cleaner air from the decline in travel.

We saw people applauding first responders every day during shift change.

We saw people make sacrifices. From the essentials workers who went out and kept us going every single day. To those who stayed home, canceled trips, and missed celebrations for significant milestones.

All to keep one another safe.

But as we've wandered deeper and deeper into this wilderness, it has gotten harder to sustain our hope, our patience, our commitment to moving into a Promised Land on the other side.

In so many ways, as a society, we have reverted back. What was before was bad, but it was the evil we knew.

The grace for us this day is twofold. First, that we are not alone in our desire to go back. In one of the oldest stories we have of God with God's people, we see the

difficulty of the wilderness and the grumbings and the longings that arise in the midst of it. We see the very human temptation to just go back.

But we also see the unwavering faithfulness of God.

Now it may be a bit unexpected, the way God responds to our hunger, but it is the food that we need. The food that we will keep us going. The food that will help us move through the wilderness to what is waiting on the other side, rather than be tempted by the food of captivity that beckons us back.

When the bread first rained down from heaven, the people said, “ugh, what is this?” And in other accounts of this story, the people didn’t just recall the real bread and meat of Egypt. They also recalled the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the figs and pomegranates and vine.

In the midst of the wilderness, it’s tempting to romanticize and long for the comforts that one had in captivity.

But God shows up and offers us food that sustains our bodies, and comforts our souls. Provision that contains within it not only the physical fuel we need to keep going, but also the promise that day after day, God will be faithful to us and provide for us. God will give us our daily bread. Forgive us. Care for us. Lead us through this wilderness to a land full of life and love and wholeness.

For us this day, it is this bread and wine, and whatever elements we’ve gathered in our homes.

The provision is not just the food but the spirit in which we imbibe it. It is in the gathering of the body, all of us eating as one. It is in the hope we proclaim—the resurrection and the promise of new life for all of us.

The provision in this wilderness, my friends, is that our God is with us. And we may not be able to plan our days with the certainty we enjoy, but maybe that’s good for us. Maybe there is goodness and joy in the anticipation of where our journey will take us and what our God will do next to bring us through this wilderness and into the Promised Land.

Let it be so. In the name of the Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.