

Faith Walk! - Sermon Discussion

Date : 13 Jun 2021

Sermon Title : Lessons in the Wilderness

Speaker : Rev Chan Mei Ming

Text : Exodus 17:1-7

INTRODUCTION

Whether it is the drought ravaging California currently or the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel long ago, water is life. In Exodus 17:1-7, the people of God wandered in a seemingly waterless wilderness. They were thirsty, on the brink of exhaustion. What brought them to this desperate point?

Exodus 1-13 is a well known story of the children of Israel's flight from Egypt. God had heard the suffering of His people and He sent Moses to rescue them. 10 plagues later, Pharaoh finally relented. He released the Hebrew slaves only to change his mind later and chased them down with horses and chariots.

Exodus 14 recounts the inspiring episode where Yahweh parted the Red Sea allowing His people to walk through on dry ground. When Pharaoh's riders pursued them, God commanded Moses to close the sea up again. Every Egyptian pursuer drowned that day.

Exodus 15 then records the jubilant victory song of Moses and his sister Miriam. At the end of the chapter, God turned the bitter water in Marah into something sweet and drinkable after Moses threw a log into the water.

In Exodus 16, the people ate manna and quail, a miraculous provision by the hands of a loving God despite their disobedience.

Now in Exodus 17, the Israelites are leaving the Wilderness of Sin and were going from place to place and into the land of Canaan. While the cloud is not explicitly mentioned in the text today, we have been previously told that God led the nation of Israel by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. It was God who led the Israelites into Rephidim where there was no water and it is apparent that it was God's will for this to be their dilemma.

A. The Wilderness – A place of stripping (Exodus 17:1-3)

The Israelites previously grumbled and asked Moses what they were to drink. Now they were demanding that Moses gives them water to drink. Moses accused them of testing God in their quarrel with him. Since Moses' authority was God-given, to quarrel with Moses was ultimately to dispute with God. But Moses' rebuke fell on

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deaf ears. Moses named that place Massah which means 'testing' and Meribah which means 'quarrelling'. At Massah and Meribah, the hardness of man's heart was exposed.

God was testing the Israelites:

- When they were deprived of water, the sinful condition of their hearts was revealed. What surfaced was their wilfulness and their waywardness instead of faith.

Faith is the willingness to trust in God even when the result appears to be fatal. The Israelites should have learned by now that God had promised to deliver them, not to destroy them and He had always protected and provided for them, no matter how bleak things actually looked.

Deacon Pedro's reflections on what he referred to as the COVID Spring:

Spring has many positive connotations – new life, new beginnings, rebirth, hope. Spring also comes after winter. The grain of wheat has to die in order to bear fruit. The COVID Spring feels like a desert/wilderness or dark valley – a place where troubles may seem insurmountable, a place filled with many dangers, suffering, broken-heartedness and even death. Yet, it is also a time for extra solitude/contemplation, time for listening and being, and for trust in the midst of uncertainty, knowing that God always makes things new. It can also be a time for fasting from things that get in the way of one's relationship with God. While God can also speak in the earthquakes, the fires and thunder storms of life, it is in silence that we are best disposed to listen to God.

- The COVID Spring may be a time of temptation when we are tempted to waste away the extra God-given time or to fill the God-given silence with the meaningless noise/chatter from social media and other online distractions.
- For others, being 'locked in' at home with family members has brought to light difficulties or underlying conflicts which were easy to ignore before.

What is hidden rises to the surface and comes to light because all forms of distraction are now gone. The wilderness experience is thus an opportunity to resolve and find healing for some of these issues that we tried to avoid previously.

B. The Wilderness – A place of encounter (Exodus 17: 4-7)

For the Israelites, the wilderness also became a place of encounter. The Israelites doubted God's power and presence among them. 'Is the Lord among us or not?' they scoffed. (Exodus 17:7) Yet God had already evidenced His presence and power many times in their recent past – in the plagues, in the parting of the Red Sea, in the provision of food and water. God's presence had also been manifested in the cloud and fire. At Massah and Meribah, God again graciously provided His

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grumbling people with water in abundance, flowing out of a rock in Horeb. The rock at Massah and Meribah became a symbol of God's presence and power among His people. In fact, the apostle Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 10 that the pre-incarnate Christ was present with them.

Reasons Israel and Christians today doubt God's presence

- We look at external appearances
- We look for power in a person – things like how successful and popular he is, whether his life is free from struggles and suffering.
- We look at external factors to determine if God's presence and power are in a church – factors like the size of the church, the staff, the budget, whether there is a mood of excitement in members and whether their needs are met.

We find it hard to believe that:

- God can actually lead His people or His church into times of difficulty and that He is present when things are not going well.

Bob Deffinbaugh (a church pastor): "God often reveals His presence through circumstances in which He appears to be absent." In fact God uses those times in which we suppose He is absent to show us just how real and present He is.

Jane Marczewski (America's Got Talent participant): "When it comes to pain, God isn't often in the business of taking it away. Instead He adds to it. He is more a giver than a taker. He doesn't take away my darkness but He adds light. He doesn't spare me of thirst but He brings me water." Jane had been diagnosed with terminal cancer before the age of 30 and also went through a divorce that wracked her soul. In her despair she testified that while God did not take away her pain and suffering, He cared and was with her bringing her light and comfort in dark times.

Henri Nouwen: "The wisdom of the wilderness is that the confrontation with our own frightening nothingness forces us to surrender ourselves totally and unconditionally to the Lord Jesus Christ." When we do, we find the place of our conversion, where the old self dies and the new self is born, the place where emerges the new man and the new woman, the place where brokenness is made whole – that place is found in Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes God leads us to a wilderness experience to strip us of things that get in the way of our relationship with Him or to reveal difficulties/hurts that were previously hidden. It gives us an opportunity to listen to God more and to seek His healing for hurts/difficulties previously ignored. This wilderness experience is also a place where we encounter the reality and power of God's presence, provision and protection over us.

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As a group, spend some time to share your success and struggle in fulfilling what you/your group had committed to do at the previous meeting.

A. Review Sermon Content

Purpose: Reflect on one key takeaway.

Appoint someone to read Exodus 17:1-7 twice, slowly.

1. At the end of the reading, the reader will say, ‘This is the Word of the Lord.’

All to respond, “Thanks be to God.” Our response reminds us that this is the Word of the Lord. Just as God had spoken to His people in the past, He is still speaking to us even today, right now.”

- a. As God's word was read, which verse speaks to you the most?

- b.
 - (i) What is the key takeaway for you from the sermon “Lessons in the Wilderness”?
 - (ii) How will you align the way you live to your key takeaway?

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B. Relate Sermon Content

Purpose: Relate with the Truth and Resolve for Transformation.

- 2a. (i) Why did God lead the Israelites to Rephidim where there was no water for them to drink?
- (ii) If you were in a similar situation as the Israelites, what would your response be?
- 2b. How has knowing that times of difficulty can be a place of encountering God impact your view of pain and suffering in your life?
- 3a. (i) Are you currently in a COVID Spring or other “wilderness” situation?
- (ii) What has surfaced that God would like to strip away?
- 3b. What is one thing you can do to encounter God and trust His presence and provision in this “wilderness” you are going through?
- 3c. How can your group members encourage or help you achieve 3b above, so you can listen to God more and seek His healing for difficulties/hurt previously ignored and encounter the reality and power of God’s presence, provision and protection over you for the following week(s) till your next meeting?

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C. Testimonies and Prayer

Purpose: Give glory to God and seek Him.

4. Share your testimony on how God used a wilderness experience in your life to strip away your old self and a new self is born; where your brokenness is made whole

OR

Give thanks for how God journeyed with you, comforting, healing, protecting and providing for you when you went through pain or suffering.

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5. With a prayer partner, take time to pray for the concerns in 3 (a) and (b) above, asking Him to comfort, sustain and provide for you in this wilderness situation.

Take time to pray for your group members who are currently struggling through a difficult season in their lives where there is pain, a sense of isolation and loneliness, betrayal or a change in their financial situation. Pray that they may have an encounter with the living God in the midst of their struggles and experience His presence, provision and protection upon them.

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