

LOST IN THE WILDERNESS

Exodus 16: 2-15 & Matthew 20:1-16

09.20.26

Dean Feldmeyer

This week we continue our exploration of grace – the grace God gives to us and the grace we give to others.

The lectionary began this series two weeks ago with a sort of general discussion on the topic of grace as unconditional love. Last week we explored grace as forgiveness. This week we take a look at grace as generosity.

First, we'll turn to a story from the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament—about God's generosity to the children of Israel in the wilderness. Then we'll consider a parable of Jesus about a generous employer. Finally, we'll ask how the lessons of these texts, written 2,000 to 2,500 years ago, might speak to our lives today.

So, first, let's turn to the Old Testament lesson, shall we?

SIX WEEKS IN THE WILDERNESS

The first verse of this passage, omitted from the reading for brevity's sake, probably should have been retained. It tells us two things we need to know if we are to understand the story.

First, the story takes place in the hot, dry, unforgiving Wilderness of Sin—a brutally barren desert of rock and sand on the Sinai Peninsula. If you saw “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade,” you saw a landscape much like the one we're talking about near the end of the film, when the tank goes over the cliff.

Just six weeks into the wilderness, the people are already complaining. “We're hungry. We didn't bring enough to eat. The food is running out. Why did you bring us into the wilderness just to starve? We were better off as slaves in Egypt.”

God doesn't even wait for Moses to ask. “I hear them,” God says to Moses. “Here is what I am going to do: I will make food fall from the sky every morning and every evening—just enough for that day. On the sixth day, I will provide a double portion so they will not have to gather food on the Sabbath. Go and tell them what I have said.”

And, sure enough, that night quail fall out of the sky and the people eat their fill of protein.

The next morning is even more interesting. They wake up and the ground is covered with dew (in the desert!), and when the dew burns off, there's this white substance, about the consistency of frost, all over the ground. They see it and ask themselves and each other, “What is it?” which, in Hebrew, is “manna.”

Moses says to them, “It's the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.” (Carbohydrates)

Scholars have, for years, debated what this manna might have been. Some insist that it was a miraculous, unknown substance that God whipped up just for the Israelites and has never been seen since. They insist that to even speculate upon any other answer is to give up our right to call ourselves Christians. They never even try to explain why God hasn't whipped up some manna for other starving people in the past 3,500 years.

Many scholars who stubbornly insist on retaining their Christian identity, and some Jewish scholars as well, allow that maybe God used something that occurs in nature to create the manna. For instance:

Exodus says that manna tasted like a piece of bread dipped in honey. (16:31) The Book of Numbers gives this description: "Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium, a gum resin similar to myrrh that is exuded from some trees in the Middle East. The people went about and gathered it and ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, boiled it in pots, and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil." (Numbers 11: 7-8)

However, we interpret the details, the heart of the story is clear: God does not abandon God's people in the wilderness. God goes with them. And because our God is generous, God meets their needs—though not necessarily all their desires.

As those contemporary theologians, Rolling Stones, have said: "You can't always get what you want...But if you try sometimes, you just might find...You get what you need."

If you want to survive in the wilderness, it's a good idea to take along plenty of food, but it's an even better idea to take along the Lord our God, whose generosity is eternal and whose grace is from everlasting to everlasting.

THE GENEROUS EMPLOYER

Our second story is one of Jesus' parables, what I like to call the Parable of the Generous Employer.

Many faithful, churchgoing Christians struggle with this story because it cuts straight across our sense of fairness. But listen carefully: the parable contains a couple of surprises we may have missed.

A landowner—rich, by definition—goes into town to hire day laborers, people who live literally from hand to mouth. If they work, they eat; if not, they and their families may go hungry. They usually gather early in the morning around the town well.

He hires some for his vineyard, probably to pick grapes, and agrees to pay them the going rate. Later—about coffee-break time—he sees more men by the well and sends them too, promising to pay what is right.

The same thing happens at noon and again at three.

Then, at five o'clock, just an hour before quitting time, he finds still more men standing there and asks, "Why are you standing here idle ALL DAY?" All day! Did you hear that?

They are not there because they are lazy or because they slept until noon, as we sometimes assume. They have been there all day, hoping someone would hire them, but no one has. The landowner's question is not a scolding. It sounds more like this: "Are you still here? You have been waiting all day, and no one has hired you?"

They say yes, and he says, "Then go out to my vineyard and do what you can."

At dusk, he has his foreman call everyone in so he can pay the day laborers, as Jewish law required. He lines them up with the latecomers first, then the rest, according to how long they had worked.

The ones who worked only an hour receive a full day's wage, and so do the others who worked less than a day. Watching this, the early workers' expectations rise: "If they got a full day's pay, just wait till we see what we get."

But when their turn comes, they receive the same full day's wage they had agreed to.

And they complain: "You paid them the same as us, but they just got here. We worked in the sun all day. That's not fair!"

And he answers, "You're right. It isn't fair—but this isn't about fairness. It is about grace. I gave them what they needed, not what they earned. Are you angry because I am generous?"

WELCOME TO THE WILDERNESS

Together, this morning's stories place two biblical truths before us.

The first is this: From time to time, each of us will enter a wilderness—harsh, uncomfortable, mysterious, and perhaps even dangerous.

Downtown Blanchester is going through a kind of wilderness right now, as businesses close and buildings are boarded up, and no one seems to know what to do about it.

Some members of our own families have been cast into wildernesses of illness, injury, and age. They have never walked this way before, and it can be a frightening, intimidating place. Members of my own family are learning to navigate physical limitations after years of living in strong, healthy bodies that have begun to weaken with age.

A few years ago, I sat across the kitchen table and talked with two parents whose teenage son was diagnosed with schizophrenia and obsessive-compulsive disorder. They wept with frustration, sadness, and yes, a healthy dose of anger, that their son should have to suffer as he does and that they should have to watch him suffer, unable to help him. And even the United States of America is walking through a kind of wilderness. The prices of oil, food, and nearly every other necessity in our lives are increasing exponentially and our

leaders seem to be clueless as to what to do about it, focusing instead on a war that seems to have no end in sight and building programs that solve none of our national problems.

We have had 290 mass shootings with four or more victims, not including the shooter, this year, and they don't even make headlines anymore. Everyone seems to have just accepted it as the way life is in America. The number one cause of personal bankruptcy in America is medical expenses, but our politicians seem to be more worried about insurance companies making a profit. Our laws are being enforced by armed, masked men who arrest people because they speak with an accent or their skin is too dark, and we all just shrug our shoulders. What can you do, right? That's America in 2026.

Our arms have grown weary from waving the flag. Our throats are hoarse from shouting hooray. Our nerves are shot from the fear and the loathing. And we long for a peace that lasts more than a day.

Welcome to the wilderness, the wasteland:

The land of the hunter, the stalker, and the skinner
Where you're either the diner or the dinner
And the line between man and beast keeps getting thinner
In the wasteland
In the wasteland, the land laid waste
Fruit of knowledge has a bitter taste
But the bliss of ignorance can never be replaced
It's lost in the wilderness¹

A GENEROUS GOD

But do not surrender to despair, because there is a second truth: Our God is loving and generous, and God never departs from us, no matter how dark or forbidding the wilderness may be.

Our God is the same God who gave to the children of Israel manna and quail to sustain them in their journey through the wilderness. Our God is the same God who led them with a cloud in the daytime and comforted them with a pillar of fire in the dark of night.

Our God parted the Red Sea when they were in danger and closed it again behind them, and our God produced water from a stone when they were thirsty.

They had to cross through the wilderness, and it was a long and painful march, a 40-year march, but he never abandoned them no matter how much they deserved to be abandoned. Even when they forsook him and worshipped a calf of gold made by their own hands, he did not abandon them.

Our God is the God who gives us food – physical food, but spiritual and mental and emotional food -- to feed ourselves and our families no matter how long or how little we have worked in the vineyard.

¹ "The Wasteland" from the musical, *Children of Eden*. Music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz. Book by John Caird.

Our God is a God of grace and generosity, a God who never departs from us, a God whose love and welcome know no bounds. God will accompany us through whatever wilderness we find ourselves wandering. All God asks is that we invite God to come along.

PACKING FOR THE WILDERNESS

About 30 years ago, a man in our church invited me to help take eight senior high boys on a weeklong canoeing and fishing trip into the Boundary Waters of Ontario. The outfitters would provide everything but our clothing and fishing gear, packed according to their instructions. I'd never been there, so I jumped at the chance.

We had a wonderful week: fish at every meal, swims in crystal-clear lakes, beaver and deer and moose and bald eagles and loons all around us, and morning devotions around the campfire because the mosquitoes were too thick at night. It was an idyllic time in the wilderness.

Then came the last day: rain, sleet, and high winds. We had to canoe about five miles across open water, straight into the wind. The waves rocked the canoes; the wind kept turning us around and threatening to capsize us. We stopped on an island for coffee and fried hush puppies—the only fishless meal of the week—and then climbed back into the canoes as the weather continued to worsen.

I was about to ask Jim if we should pitch the tents and ride out the storm on the island when he started rearranging our gear and called us down to the water's edge.

He told us to layer our clothing, pile the gear in the middle, and sit on the bottom of the canoe to lower our center of gravity. Then he told us something none of us would have imagined in a thousand years: Paddle backward. That way, even if the wind turned us around, we could still move in the direction we needed to go.

It worked. It took a while, and we were exhausted, cold, wet, and hungry, but we made it.

On the 12-hour drive home, we all agreed that even the storm had already become the stuff of story, myth, and legend. And we also agreed that our enjoyment—and our survival—depended largely on what we had taken with us. Thanks to the outfitters, we had exactly the right stuff in exactly the right amounts.

But it wasn't just what we took along; it was who. Without Jim's knowledge and experience, we had no doubt we would still be out there, paddling against the wind.

And that is the key to surviving any wilderness, isn't it? It is not only what we take with us, but whom we take with us.

God will not force a way into our wilderness experiences, whether joyful or painful. But if we invite God, God will go with us—and God's grace will be enough for the journey.

AMEN