

“Water in the Wilderness”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
March 12, 2023 - Third Sunday in Lent

[Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42](#)

Here at the First Congregational Church in Stoneham, like many other churches in this country, we follow the Revised Common Lectionary, which provides for us a set of scripture readings to use in our worship services each Sunday. The lectionary provides three years of readings, with Year A, in which we find ourselves now, focusing on the gospel of Matthew; Year B looking at the gospel of Mark; and Year C following the gospel of Luke. Readings from the gospel of John, such as today’s lesson, are sprinkled here and there throughout the three-year cycle.

I remember very well the last time preached on today’s readings from John and Exodus on this Third Sunday of Lent in Year A, which was on March 15, 2020, the day that Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker shut down our schools due to the then rapidly spreading Covid-19 pandemic. This church also closed its doors that week. At the time, I was at the First Church of Nashua, New Hampshire, and like this church, we also closed our doors that week, many of us thinking that it might be maybe for two or three weeks that we would have to worship online before we could return to gathering in the sanctuary. However, as we remember well from that difficult year, that’s not the way things worked out in Nashua or Stoneham. Our doors remained closed for several months before we were able to meet together again in person, and then only in a limited fashion.

Those were dark, difficult days. They were lonely days. They were days when we experienced too many losses as beloved family members and friends and fellow members of our congregations lost their lives to Covid-19. We lived with uncertainty and fear and faced shortages of everything and difficulties of all kinds in those then unprecedented early pandemic times. Those anxiety-filled days certainly were for all of us days of wilderness wandering.

Because we experienced that difficult, dry season, and surely each of us have had our own personal moments of wilderness wandering before and since then, moments when we’ve been tested by uncertainty, scarcity, anxiety, and loss, we

can relate to the characters of today's readings as they experienced their own moments of wilderness wandering.

We can relate some to the children of Israel, who we read about in our lesson from Exodus, as they dealt with unknowns and scarcity as they wandered through the wilderness sometime after fleeing from Egypt, where they had been enslaved but had plenty of water to drink and food to eat. A parallel account of this story in Exodus is found in book of Numbers, which places the episode at the end of the people's 40 years of wilderness wandering. For 40 years, they had been free from bondage, but had to trust in God for the provision of food and water as they wandered in a desolate and dry land. And for 40 years, they complained about their lot in life, longing to return to Egypt, where they were enslaved, but least had enough to drink and eat. And they came to wonder if God had lead them out into the desert to kill them with thirst and hunger. Although God provided for them every step of the way, they even wondered if God remained with them.

Our gospel reading from John also tells of a person who was wandering through a wilderness and living with scarcity and anxiety. The Samaritan woman who met Jesus at Jacob's well was not literally wandering through an arid land as were the Israelites led by Moses, but she knew all about wandering through a wasteland of the spirit. Her social location was far from lofty, such as the status of the character in last Sunday's gospel reading, Nicodemus, named by Jesus as the Teacher of Israel, who was likely elevated to rock-star status among his own people. No, the woman at Jacob's well was a Samaritan, looked down upon by many of the Jewish people of that day just for being different -- not quite totally other, but not quite Jewish, an unloved, unwanted distant cousin. And as a woman, she had little agency or esteem among the more powerful men around her, Jewish or Samaritan; the author of John doesn't even give her a name. And she was an outcast even among the women of her own town. Having been unlucky in love, married (and either divorced or widowed) five times and then living out of wedlock with her current beau, she would have been considered by her peers as an immoral floozy to be avoided. This is probably why she practiced the social distancing of coming to the well by herself in the heat of the day at high noon, when no one else would have been drawing water, rather than early in the morning, when the town's women would customarily be there, filling their jars

together. She was the lowly of those considered lowly and wandered through the wilderness of being a broken outcast.

And from our readings, we find that Jesus and Moses also each had wilderness experiences. For Jesus, just being in Samaria was a wilderness experience. The gospel, just prior to the passage read today, says that he “*had* to go through Samaria” as he was traveling from Judea in the south towards Galilee in the north. But he really didn’t *have* to go through Samaria to get from Point A to Point B. In fact, most Jewish travelers at that time would have taken great pains to avoid Samaria, taking one of the much longer routes that went around that region rather than the routes that went through it. But Jesus *had* to go there, because his mission called him there. He had to go to that place where he would be uncomfortable and unwelcome, the place where he didn’t know who would provide for his own thirst, just so that he could meet a person who was also uncomfortable, unwelcome, and thirsting for more from life. And it was only because of his thirst for water and her thirst for life, that they met and she went away to the people of her town, carrying the good news that The Well of living water was among them. Through the wilderness wandering of Jesus and the woman at the well, a whole city of people found faith and life.

And consider Moses. He could have ignored the calling of a flaming shrub, which told him to leave everything and venture into the wilderness. But he didn’t. He went forth in faith into the wilderness, and a whole nation was blessed because of his faithfulness. Sure, this nation of people grumbled and groaned as they wandered in the wilderness, but they as a people found new life and were graciously sustained in it because of Moses’ faithful action.

All of these stories of wilderness wanderings are important for us today as we remember our own times of wilderness wandering and still face the scary unknowns of life. Some of us are still not gathering with us here in person as many among us still fear for our health. We worry about climate change, war in other places in the world, violence here in our own nation, our widening political divisions, attacks on the dignity and rights of minority groups of all kinds, and a rising sense of despair, especially among our youth. And God calls us to go to those wilderness places where people face difficulties so that we can do the work that God has given to us to do to provide water for the thirsty, food for the

hungry, companionship for the friendless, direction for the wayward, and a hopeful word for the hopeless.

This Lent, as we wander into the scary wilderness, individually and together, may we go, like Moses and Jesus, with boldness and faith, and may we, like the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, find as we go, God's living water welling up within us, bringing healing, wholeness, abundant life, and peace. Amen.