

The Wilderness; it is not a vacation destination. It is not somewhere that you plan on going. No one looks toward their future and says, “I would like to go and wander in the wilderness awhile and then eventually find my way.” The wilderness is not something that we seek. Yet the wilderness has been an important place for God’s people through the ages. It has been in the wilderness that God_ people time and time again have learned who they are. It has been in the wilderness that the identity of God_ people has been forged.

They leave Egypt where they knew who they were. They were slaves; they were workers in Pharaoh’s brickyard. They knew their daily routine. It was not a great life. It was a very difficult life, but they knew their place on the totem pole. They knew they had to work from sun up to sun down. They knew they had to scrape to get by. You could bank money on what each day would be like guaranteed.

Then their salvation comes. Every first born son in Egypt is wiped out in the final plague. Pharaoh lets the Israelites go. They cross the waters of the Sea of Reeds. The Egyptian army drowns and Israel is now free. Everything changes – nothing is now the same; they are free but they have to rely on Moses to know where they are going. They have to rely on God for the manna that falls from heaven to feed them and water to drink.

They struggle. They question God. They question Moses. They question the decisions that are made, but through all that wandering around, they become a people, God’s people. By the end of their time in the wilderness, they know who they are. They know where they are going – the promised land. They know what God wants for them. They have learned what is important: their relationship with their God.

In our first lesson for today you could contend that Israel had been living in the wilderness for over 50 years. They had been drug away from their homeland into exile in Babylon. There they had to relearn what it meant to be God’s people. In a society dominated by a whole slew of Babylonian divinities, the people of Israel had to rediscover their faith in and loyalty to the God who had claimed them and called them

his own. When the comforting words of Isaiah come to them, they learn that they will soon be on their way home. They will travel this wilderness road again, but this time the valleys shall be lifted up, the rough places smoothed out so that God's children can eventually dwell with him in Jerusalem again. They will cross the river Jordan, enter the land of Canaan, and come home. They will be his people and he will be their God.

In the wilderness, over 500 hundred years later, John the Baptist appears pleading with Israel to touch the water one more time. John asks them to wade into the waters of the Jordan and commit themselves to the ways of God. He asks them to change their lives around. He is trying to prepare them for the change that is coming.

The Messiah of Israel is about to be revealed. When they finally recognize how Jesus the Messiah will save Israel, their lives and their daily routines will be changed forever. No longer will they be offering sacrifices in the temple to atone for their sins. They will be baptized in the name of Jesus and proclaim him as God's Son. Through Jesus' defeat of death and his rising from the grave, they will acknowledge Jesus' power to forgive sins and the new life that they now have in him.

The wilderness is not something foreign to us who live as God's people today almost 2000 years later. The wilderness is not a foreign concept to the people of Good Shepherd. Ask anyone who served on our Worship Study team over the last year and they can give you a full description of what it is like. Laura Prill, Doug Austin, Ken Anthony, Roxanne Deter Alicia Kerins Jane Lovelace Carol Henderson Pastor David.

They were entrusted with the task of examining our current worship schedule and discerning where God was leading us next. There were more different opinions of worship on this team than there were even people serving on it. And this is how they describe what their 12 months of journeying in the wilderness looked like. They describe it in this map as their individual and collective pain as they wrestled with how we could faithfully worship our Lord as a community. Ask anyone on this team what the turning point was and they will answer the same.

It was when they full-heartedly agreed that the main value that would drive their decision would be our community's commitment to live out our Baptismal covenant. Please turn in your ELWs to page 228 in the baptismal service. You will find there in the middle of the page the covenant we agree to when we baptize our children or reaffirm our baptism in Christ.

When the worship study team agreed that our Sunday morning schedule should strengthen our ability to bring people to the word of God and the holy supper, to teach people the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the 10 commandments, and to nurture our people in faith and prayer then the decision of us moving from 3 worship services with a concurrent Sunday School time to 2 worship services with an Education time in between became much clearer. They waded into the waters of Baptism and decided that our community would do everything we possibly can to help children, youth and adults learn how to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice & peace in every way we know how. When it comes down to it, if we are not trying to find a way of doing these things, then we seriously have to question why we are here.

As we move ahead with our decisions today & announce to the congregation what the 8:15 and 10:45 service will each look like, I realize that we, as a community, will be heading into the wilderness. We very likely will go on a journey that mimics what this worship study team has already experienced. People's Sunday morning routines will not be the same. People will be coming to worship possibly at different times than they have before. Children and some youth who have only attended Sunday Morning Education will be encouraged to join the entire community in worship. Some adults who may have never gone to a bible study or a class on prayer, will be encouraged to take that brave step, come as you are and start growing in your relationship with God.

Will this transition all go smoothly? Probably not. It is going to take time to get used to the change and frankly it is going to take time to even digest what this change will mean for each of you. It is going to take our entire

community, our ministry teams, our leaders, everyone working together and talking through this to move into this new schedule and make the change.

Is the change worth it? Without a bit of hesitation, I answer you with an emphatic “yes.” And let me tell you a story that explains why.

I lead the Vespers worship service over at the Health Center at Springmoor on occasion. While there, I usually talk to the residents as they are assembling for worship. A number of them at the Health Center cannot carry on a conversation with me, not even a simple “Hi. How are you?” Kind of dialog.

But when we get to the part of the worship where we say the Lord’s Prayer, many of them suddenly are speaking it along with me word for word.

They have known the Lord’s Prayer all their lives. They know it so well that it has become a part of them. And so, even though they cannot remember pertinent details of their lives or carry on a conversation with me, they still know how to pray. Right now in our community we have had 4th graders who have participated in our Communion Instruction who do not know how to pray the Lord’s Prayer.

They have not been in worship regularly and that key tenet of our faith has not become a part of them yet.

As God’s people today, I feel we have to wade into those baptismal waters with our brother, John the Baptist. We have to seek ways to live out our baptismal covenant. And we have to bravely enter the wilderness that this schedule change is going to bring to each of us.

We enter this wilderness trusting that our Lord God is leading us.

And just like the people of God who have traveled that wilderness journey before us, we can count on God transforming us through the process.

We will come to the other side of the wilderness with an even stronger identity and knowledge of who we are as baptized children of God.

We will arrive on that other side stronger in faith, more united as a worshiping community and more deeply in love with our Lord Jesus

who has saved us all. Over these next few months may we journey together and look for our Lord to lead us just as he led Israel with the pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Our Lord is with us each step of the way and has so much in store for us as we move into our next 25 years.

May God strengthen our identity as his people and give us the courage to journey in the wilderness with him.