

On this Homecoming Sunday as we launch into the new church program year, I'm beginning a series of sermons on the desert wilderness journey of the Hebrews after they left Egypt and before they were ready to enter the Promised Land.

In the Bible the wilderness is depicted as an in between place—between what you have to leave behind and what you will next receive from God. Our church is clearly in an in between place. So is our society that is experiencing changes at an amazingly rapid rate. And so are most of us in our own lives as we transition from one season of life to another, from a past that is known to a future that is mostly mystery. Along the way in these transitions, it often feels like we are slogging through a lonely desert road. Like the Hebrews we are unsure of where we are heading, anxious about the adequacy of our resources for the journey, and tempted to look over our shoulders at what was left behind. This is why the desert is always the place God leads us to discover faith.

Many of the people who were used by God in the biblical drama had to spend this transitional time in the desert before they were ready for their next calling. This includes Moses, Elijah, David, Paul, and even Jesus. It certainly includes the Hebrew people who may have been runaway slaves but had to be molded into a people of faith on the hard road before they were truly free.

In Exodus chapter 13 we are told that there were two possible ways to get to the Promised Land from Egypt. The first was “The Way of the Philistines,” which was a highway that ran along the Mediterranean Sea. It was a heavily traveled trade route with lots of water, food, and protection along the way. Had they taken that route, all of the people could have arrived in the Promised Land in a matter of weeks. But we're told God led the people south, “by the roundabout way of the wilderness,” where there were no roads, bridges, security, no water to drink, and where all they saw was the expansive Red Sea and a whole lot of lonely desert after that.

Most ancient people avoided the desert. There were no back to nature movements in their day. They preferred the cities and villages, because the desert was a wild place where you felt vulnerable and uncertain. So why does God always lead us onto the hard roundabout way through the wilderness? Why not easy street? Because the purpose of this journey, the purpose of the Gospel, the purpose of your life is to learn to walk with God in freedom. And you're never going to learn that by taking the Way of the Philistines.

The Philistines will tell you to take a short cut to get to your dreams. Buy something else, get another job or another degree, find a soul mate who'll take away your loneliness, or at least blame someone for your problems. Maybe then you'll be happy. The Philistines offer one well-worn road after another that claim to take you to paradise. But paradise, biblically speaking is lost. God doesn't promise to lead us back to paradise, but there is a new place that is promised—a future filled with hope. You can't get there, though, without being free.

Freedom isn't found by getting to your dreams so quickly. It's found from deep within you, discovered along the way on the hard road where you learn to stop clinging to things you will lose anyway. It's discovered when you learn life isn't about getting to the right place, but about knowing the God who journeys with you. And wherever you discover God is with you is always the right place.

The Hebrews' freedom story begins with them running away from Pharaoh. They don't get far on the journey, however, before they discover that Pharaoh and all of his chariots were coming for them from behind. And ahead of them is their first obstacle on the hard road, which is the Red Sea. They think they're trapped.

In this first test of their faith did anyone say, “I can't wait to see what God does now.”? No. The people complained against Moses and said, “Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians.” You want to get used to

seeing this phrase, “and the people complained.” It comes up a lot on the journey. They complained, we complain, not just because the journey is hard, but because we are afraid. Fear is usually the subtext beneath our complaints.

I don’t know what your Pharaoh is, but he has probably been chasing you for a long time. For most of us it involves the fear of change because that usually means a lot of loss. Have you had your life just right? All of the people you love are nearby, healthy and happy. You like your work. And it feels like you’re living in a Norman Rockwell painting. That’s usually when God blows a whistle and yells, “Everyone out of the pool.” The amazing thing is that even when life is not so wonderful and anything but a Norman Rockwell painting people still resist changing it. I’ve lost count of how many times someone has come to me as their pastor to complain about a job they hate but can’t afford to quit because they need it to afford a lifestyle they really don’t like either. That’s because they have settled into their life of serving the taskmasters.

A reoccurring pattern of our spiritual journey is the path from orientation to disorientation to reorientation. Life was securely oriented when the people were enslaved in Egypt. It was miserable, and it was slavery, but it was the life they knew. The only way to be reoriented as a people who could live free, was to pass through the disorientation of journeying through the wilderness. But whenever our lives are disoriented, we don’t look ahead to the future. Rather, like the Hebrews we yearn to return to the oriented life we used to have, even when it was not great. As they said, “Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians.”

That’s because people prefer the misery they know to the mystery they do not. That’s not logical. Logically, mystery beats misery any day. But people are not logical about their misery. In fact, they befriend it, and are afraid to lose it.

Moses responds not by servicing the people’s complaints, which is what I am tempted to do. When I hear complaints, I get busy doing things trying to make people happy and take away their anxiety, which often boils down to helping them get back to Egypt. Instead, Moses says, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.” Do not be afraid. Stand firm. Or as we taught our seminarians: “Don’t just do something. Stand there.” Stand in the midst of anxiety and see what God does.

Then the waters of the Red Sea parted to allow the Hebrews to walk away from Pharaoh’s chariots. But that was not because God is so moved by the people’s great faith. They have no faith, which is why God led them into this desert. At this point all they have is fear coping skills for their misery, and that is pretty much the opposite of faith. But out of sheer grace, God refuses to accept their comfortable misery and leads them, and us, onto the disorienting road until life is reoriented around faith and freedom.

On the other side of the Red Sea, after all the excitement of this miraculous victory was over, the people looked back at the waters and gave thanks for their salvation. Surely you can also look back in your history to see the ways God has been faithful. In fact, this is the only time we are called to look back—to see the faithfulness of God along the way so we are encouraged to keep moving toward the future.

After looking back and giving thanks, then they turned around and just saw miles and miles of empty desert calling them to keep moving with the God who journeys with them. Where? They do not know. How will they survive? They don’t have a clue. How long will it take? Longer than they want.

Why would they enter this road? Well, the grace is they don’t really have a choice. Neither do we. Not if we really want to be fully alive. Amen.