

SERMON – Wandering in the Wilderness, Readings and Sermon
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Today I want to talk about *Wandering in the Wilderness*. The *Wandering* that we experience from time to time—wandering that is dislocating, disconcerting, emotionally difficult, and confounds our need to be, to do, and to connect.

The reference, of course, is from the Hebrew bible, and the story of the Israelites being released from slavery in Egypt, fleeing as fast as they are able, coming up to the Red Sea/// and realizing they can't cross over and the Egyptian soldiers are not far behind them—the Pharaoh has changed his mind and wants the Israelites brought back.

At that terrifying moment their leader, Moses (and I'll talk more about him later) Moses steps into the water of the Red Sea, the waters part, the Israelites pass through the walls of water to the other side. Then the water closes in on the Egyptian soldiers, allowing the Israelites to escape.

Relieved, exhausted, but thrilled to be free, they celebrate their God who has brought them out of Egypt.

If you get anything from this sermon today it is the reminder that after the Israelites are saved by Moses' courage (this is not explicitly in the biblical story but has worked its way into the telling) The Israelites are saved by Moses' courage and the miraculous parting of the waters, but is not the end of the wandering. It is the beginning. **HOLD THAT THOUGHT.**

I want to tell you about my wilderness. It's partly confessional, partly to make this point another way.

After I retired, I didn't know what to say when people said, "Laurel, now that you're retired, what are you doing?" I didn't want to

give the impression that I was aimlessly wandering from thing to thing without direction or shape to my life—even though at times it was how I felt-- without a title, without a role, without a designated purpose.

So after a while I structured an answer.

- (1) I Skype with each of my Austrian Grandchildren once a week
- (2) I've been doing family genealogy
- (3) I knit
- (4) I practice on my keyboard, trying to resuscitate some pieces I used to play.
- (5) AND I'm writing a Spiritual Memoir.

It was satisfying, being able to name activities and projects. It was all true. Except for the last. I wasn't getting much traction in my writing. I was having a hard time making the shift from sermon writing to writing a memoir. I had said I wanted to write a Spiritual Memoir. I was writing every day, but not anything that satisfied.

One day, during Zoom Coffee hour, I said as much, admitting to my frustration.

Nannette Oldenbourg, leaned forward, in her square on my computer, and said, "Laurel, have you heard of Grub Street?" "No, I said."

"It's a writing center in Boston. Look it up."

I went to the Grub Street website and discovered a wealth of courses, all remote, on every genre of writing, including Memoir. (Not "Spiritual Memoir", "Memoir".) I was like a kid in a candy store. That was Fall of 2020. I took courses at Grub Street until June of 2021.

That's when I realized that like the Israelites, I had made it through the walls of water to the other side, and I was grateful. But the Promised Land wasn't on the horizon. I was filling up three-ring-binders with stories of my life and learning the craft of Memoir, but not engaging what I know as the "You of life" in a substantive way.

And when I tried harder, like Denise Levertov, my mind became “like a minnow—darting here and there, into the shadows. Not for one second still, wandering anywhere, everywhere it can turn. “

I hope Denise Levertov and I are not the only ones here who have had that experience.

“It is not You,” (she capitalizes the “You”) She says, “It is I who am absent.”

She says, “How can I focus my flickering,
perceive at the fountain’s heart
the sapphire I know is there?”

Ironically, the more focused I become the harder it is to receive what I need. As much as I dislike how it feels, the more I can acknowledge the wilderness I am in, and that I am going to wander, probably for a while, the more likely it is that I will find my own Promised Land.

Let me tell you about an experience I had long before I knew what it meant.

On one of my sabbaticals during my ministry, I went to Plum Village in Bordeaux, France where Thich Nhat Hanh lived in exile. Thich Nhat Hanh brought Mindfulness to the western world during and after the Vietnam war. You may have seen that he died this year, in January.

One day, it was announced at lunch that Thich Nhat Hanh would be leading a walk that afternoon “going somewhere with nowhere to go”.

Zen Buddhism is full of such conundrums. But this one was especially intriguing. I showed up at the announced time and fell in behind Thich Nhat Hanh and the children who were walking with him, matching slow step by slow step. I like slow walking in silence. I can slow down externally and internally. Especially in a group with no one talking.

But going somewhere with nowhere with to go began to intrude on my sense of peace.

It turns out, I don't like "going somewhere with nowhere to go". Without focus, or objective, without goal or a list of things to check off as the day goes on.

That day we stopped by a plum orchard (it was Plum Village after all) and the group disbursed into the orchard and picked plums. Of course we hadn't brought bags in preparation, so we could only pick a few before regathering on the path holding what we could in our hands. Then after more slow walking we sat down in a meadow in silence. Someone began a chant. Others joined in. Most of us chanted for a time, and then stopped. And we sat.

I won't go on. . . You get the idea.

There was no goal. Internal or external. We were wandering. Admittedly it wasn't a wilderness. It was Bordeaux, France after all. But our slow walk was aimless and I didn't like it.

It was a long time before I realized that the slow walk "Going somewhere with nowhere to go" was an experience of the gift of life. A time of simply receiving, together.

William Stafford says, "It's a country where you already are, bringing where you have been." "It's a place where you compost where you've been and how people and weather treated you

He says, "Time offers this gift in its millions of ways,
Turning the world, moving the air,
Calling every morning, "Here, take it, it's yours."

So we get up one morning and discover that our world is shutting down.

Only then, remember, we thought it was just for a short time. We'd be back at our lives in a month or so. It took a while for it to sink in that we were entering a wilderness that would take on biblical proportions. Slowly we recognized we would be wandering for a long time.

The biblical story has some interesting turns worth noting as we consider what has happened, and still is happening. As an archetypal

story we can find ourselves as individuals, as a congregation, and as a nation right there in the middle of it.

Moses may have put his foot in the waters of the Red Sea, but he wasn't the Cecile B DeMille charismatic leader we might have imagined. Over and over he struggled with his ability to lead.

Moses was faced time and time again with the necessity of interpreting God's demands to a reluctant and restless people—he stammered, which didn't help. Each time the difficulty was resolved, whether it was hunger or thirst, or lack of direction, or the pursuit of enemies—each time the people and God proved faithful to one another, perhaps the person most surprised of all was Moses, who was continuously trotting back and forth in a kind of suitcase diplomacy between God and the people—stuttering before God and stammering before the people.

At the same time, the people complain. These nomads, after generations of slavery are constantly, it seems, comparing the present difficulty with their past (and their past seems to be looking better and better.)

Admittedly, it was a little odd for God to single them out for a land of milk and honey—make all kinds of promises, and seemingly follow through on most of them—releasing them from slavery, saving them from the pursuing soldiers, and then dumping them on the Wilderness of Shur for God only knew how long. What kind of freedom was that—they said?

They longed for structure, meaning, and purpose. Over and over again they looked to Moses to lead. And over and over again he packed off to a mountain top or off into the wilderness to find out what God wanted. Often when he was away, the people would organize themselves around some other god, seeking some organizing principle beyond the faith of Moses.

These are the chosen people.

Let me tell you about one more player in this dramatic story. It is "J". "J" is the scribe who gave us this story.

One scholar has even gone so far to say that while we will never know for sure, he thinks 'J' was a woman—if only because of the

difference in style in the 'J' source from all the other court writers around 900 BCE.

But whether male or female, this we know. 'J' had a great sense of irony. Her/his god was ironic. The chosen-ness of the people was ironic. Moses was perhaps the most ironic figure of all. It's as if 'J' set out to say, "You want chosen?" "I'll give you chosen." "I'll portray the most ragtag group of people you can imagine." "You want a story of faith?" "I'll give you a story of faith. It will be a story repeated over and over of doubt and faithlessness." "You want a God?" "I'll give you a God." "He will be capricious, punitive, and rather whiny himself, needing to be cajoled in to helping you."

"You want a story of structure and meaning?" "I'll give you a story of structure and meaning. It will be a story of wandering in the wilderness for forty years." "You want something to fix your eye on, a tangible object of faith and hope?" "I'll give you tangibility. It will be in the form of a cloud in the day and fire in the night."

It's the best you get because *that's how it is*.

What you get are insufficient leaders, and a ragtag group of friends who complain a lot and are as lost as you are. What you get is a God to be reckoned with—but beyond that you get mystery which moves with you, and for reasons no one, including 'J' has explained, evokes our attention and gratitude.

So, it seems for a brief time before COVID, we were dressed up and sure, articulate, our lives were ordered, and we might have been convinced at least for a time that we knew what we were doing, and we were in charge.

I knew it's hard to consider COVID as a gift—but in the way that the poet Stafford suggests—each day we are alive, life hands us this day as a gift and says, “Take it. It's yours.”

Whether you like it or not, that gift includes the days when you have lost your moorings, found yourself complaining, struggling to stay connected. Even then--if you have the capacity to receive whatever comes as yours, you are closer to freedom than you were. Trusting that the flame of truth by night and the cloud of unknowing by day will carry you, when all else seems capricious and demanding.

Last month I was talking with my Spiritual Director about my Spiritual Memoir woes. It wasn't the first time.

“Have I mentioned how long Moses wandered in the wilderness?” She said.

“Yes” I said, “40 years”.

“And you know that means “a long time” right?

“Yes” I said. Only slightly comforted.

It has been a long haul. COVID has actually given me more time to write. And to read other people's memoirs.

The last class I took at Grub Street was from a teacher I liked. His name is Judah. He attends the Arlington Street Unitarian Church. But he said one day, speaking honestly, “I can't help you with Spiritual Memoir.” I appreciated his candor.

I've found a Spiritual Memoir coach. If you Google "What is a spiritual memoir?" you will find a definition she has written. Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew. She's asking good questions. Without pushing the river, I think our conversations are helping. She is a gift.

It is unclear, still, how much out of the woods we are with COVID. "Out of an abundance of caution" is a phrase that has entered our lexicon. How much caution is a question we are living. It is part of the gift of these days.

The war in Ukraine is a travesty. Is it a gift? No. But take it. It is yours as part of the day you are given to live.

Just like Moses isn't who we imagined, and the Israelites aren't chosen in a way we might think, the Promised Land isn't what we expect either. It's where we are, with each other, living the time we have. It turns out that's all the blessing we need.

In the end--"It's a balance, this taking and passing along.

It's a country where you already are, bringing where you have been.

Time offers this gift in its millions of ways,
Turning the world, moving the air,
Calling every morning, "Here, take it, it's yours."
AMEN.

CLOSING WORDS

(If those of you here in the Meeting House will pause for a moment following the Extinguishing of the Chalice, Judy Andrade and I will go to the back of the sanctuary and greet you there.)

**We extinguish this flame
but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community,
or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
until we are together again.**