

Wilderness Wisdom – Stop Grumbling and Look Up©

Numbers 21:1-9; John 3:1-20

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How many of you were without power (and maybe still are) because of the windstorm last week? How did you feel, not having any electricity or heat, or perhaps no running water? How about not having Internet?

Is there a feeling of despair, of fear? What is the fear? That you might freeze with the weather getting so much colder? Or, that your pipes will freeze and burst and it will cost a fortune to get it all back to normal? Do you worry about your pets?

Kathryn Nicoli who owns Ethos Yoga posted on Facebook that she has decided she was not meant to be a frontier woman. “If this were the Oregon Trail,” she wrote” we’d have died of dysentery by now.”

My daughter, Annie and our two grandchildren – Andrew and Izabel – are with us this weekend because their power has been out. I think, for the kids, the lack of Internet is the biggest frustration. Andrew told me “I can put on warmer clothes and blankets to stay warm and I can light a candle so I can see in the dark. But I can’t do anything to bring on the Internet.

I suspect there are many adults who have the same feeling. I think, with so many people out of power, the uncertainty of how long it’s going to be before there is warmth and light – and internet – that is what causes anxiety and maybe a little fear about whether or not one can really survive the cold for that long. Most people have some place to go for warmth but, like I heard a couple a people say, they aren’t comfortable with leaving their pets.

So, in a small way, we might be able to relate a little to what the Israelite’s were feeling in the wilderness after they had been led out of Egypt by Moses; after they had been freed from the harsh slavery they had endured for so many years. There was so much uncertainty in their lives. But still, they had a lot to be thankful for – right? But were they?

It sounds like they were a bunch of ungrateful complainers – which they actually were. I mean, after all, God had done a lot of crazy bad things to the Egyptians to get Pharaohs attention so he would free God’s people. He made Moses put his staff in the river and the entire river turned into blood. And if that weren’t enough to do the trick, he sent ridiculous plagues to

Egypt – frogs and gnats, flies and death to their livestock, boils, hail, and locusts, not to mention darkness for three days so that no one could see anything or anyone around them.

God was so serious about getting his people out of dodge – or Egypt – that he did all that to convince Pharaoh. And when it didn't work, he had one last trick up his sleeve, so to speak, and he used it. He sent the angel of death that came upon all the Egyptians and killed the firstborn sons and even the firstborn of their cattle. (I guess those left from the other plague).

The Israelites were told to kill a lamb and roast it, share it, if need be, and smear the blood over their doors so the angel of death would pass over their houses. And when that all happened, finally they were set free and ready to go.

I mean, look at what God did for them. They had been worked to the bone. They were being whipped and beaten and killed. It was a hard, hard life and it was getting more and more harsh as the days went on. All because the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt was worried that there were so many of the Hebrew people (the Israelites) that they might rise up and over power the Egyptians.

And not only that but once they were in the wilderness, several times they were so thirsty, not knowing where they would get water and God provided by having Moses strike a rock so that fresh water flowed out. And when they found a place with bitter water, Moses threw in a branch and the water became sweet. All because of God's care.

And when they were hungry God provided manna – bread from heaven. It wasn't a feast but it was just enough to feed them and keep them alive and healthy.

To be fair, we can surely sort of relate to their feelings. I mean, we get frustrated and fearful when we don't have power for a few days. We humans really like what is comfortable – or at least what is familiar. We are used to our usual lives even if they are hard at times. And the Israelites surely were wondering if staying back in slavery would have been better. They didn't know how long they would wander in that wilderness, looking for food and water, for shelter. They didn't know if they had been freed from slavery just so they could die in the wilderness.

And yet, God continued to show them that he would take care of them. And he did. Over and over and over again he did. But it seemed they were particularly slow in learning the wilderness lesson God had for them. In fact, so slow, it took forty years before they were finally permitted to enter the Promised Land.

So what was the wilderness lesson? I think there were many lessons they learned along the way, but what was the over all lesson God wanted them to learn?

We read in Numbers, in our Old Testament text today that finally God had reached his slow to anger limit. He was fed up with these grumbling grouches and so he sent poisonous snakes to bite these cranky ingrates and many of them died.

And you know what happened next. Suddenly they were really, really sorry; (poisonous snakes would do it for me!) they were very repentant, asking for forgiveness, begging for Moses to do something.

And so God gave Moses the word to put a bronze serpent on a pole and raise it up for the people to look at and when they looked up and saw that serpent on a pole they would live. And many people were saved from death because they looked up at the means of salvation God provided.

So, now let's let the wind blow us through the wilderness, over time and into the night when a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus. He is full of questions. He has heard and seen some things Jesus has done and he is curious but he doesn't want his peers to know he is talking to this teacher who has no credentials like they all have. But, even though he snuck around and came in the dark, still he came. We have to give him credit for that.

Nicodemus is asking if Jesus came from God because he believes no one could do the miracles Jesus is doing without the presence of God. His answers from Jesus were confusing, however. Jesus starts talking about being born again and being born of water and spirit. Nicodemus is baffled by this language. And who can blame him?

We too get confused by that language, don't we? What does it mean to be born again? To be born of water and Spirit? I'd love to hear what the men discussed about that.

We Presbyterians believe in baptizing our babies as well as people of all ages. And we believe that the water of baptism can be applied in many forms – that one doesn't have to be baptized by immersion only.

We don't wait to baptize until a person is of a certain age when they can make a decision to accept Christ into their lives – although we do expect that to happen at Confirmation when they are then asked to confirm the baptismal vows their parents made at their baptism.

But I do believe the image of baptism by immersion is a beautiful visual of being born again. We say that in baptism, we die with Christ – thus we are lowered down into the waters – into the grave, so to speak. And then we come up – we rise up into a new life – a life in Christ. We are a new creation. The old life has died, a new life has begun. We are born of water and Spirit because the Spirit of God is upon us.

It is the same Spirit that was there at creation. Genesis 1 *says In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was tuhu va vohu* – that's the Hebrew that means *a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters* and the King James Version says: *And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters*. Wind and Spirit are the same thing in these scripture passages.

This is the Wind Jesus is talking about with Nicodemus. *The wind blows where it chooses. You can hear it but you don't know where it comes from. So it is with all who are born of the Spirit.* So it is with the Son of God.

Jesus continues talking to Nicodemus, telling him how important it is to believe and how difficult it seems to be for some to believe. Jesus then refers to Moses and the serpent and how God provided the way for the people who were dying to be saved – by looking up at the serpent and believing.

And Jesus says that is how it will be with God's Son who will be lifted up on a cross. And all who believe will be saved from sin and death.

It wasn't the serpent that healed the Israelites, but the fact that they looked up and believed in God. In that moment they trusted God to save them. It wasn't the cross that healed us of our sin and death but it was God's love behind the cross that healed. It was our trust and belief in the Savior whom God sent to us.

What is the lesson from the wilderness that is so important for the Israelites; that was so important for Nicodemus and the disciples and all who knew Jesus in that day; what is the lesson that we too must learn?

Is it not that we can trust in God to save us? To provide for us? To always watch over us and guide us? Does that mean we won't have crisis or storms? Certainly not. But we can trust that God is in those storms with us, teaching and leading and helping and giving us his presence by the gift of that Wild, Holy Wind that blows where it chooses, that call us to follow; that lights our way so we can see the Word of God and believe, and have new life.

As we close I want to ask you to open your pew Bible to John 3:16. And I want all of us to say these words together. Not to say them from memory this time, but to experience the words of life from the book of life – the book we love. (Page 88)

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Like the Israelites, we too are so easily discouraged. We are so prone to grumbling and we forget to be grateful for all God has done for us. Trust in God. Stop grumbling and look up. God has already provided for us. In the cross that Jesus was lifted up on, we have been saved. We are born again. We have new life in Christ.

We have the wild, holy wind of the Holy Spirit moving in and with us wherever we go and whatever we do. There is nothing that can separate us from God's presence and love.

Amen.