

40 DAYS OF PRAYER

INTRODUCTION: Steve Shussett, Lehigh Presbytery:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...
Philippians 2:3-5

Over the next days, pray for a spirit of humility to fill the church, those with whom you agree, disagree, or sit in darkness, asking that the True Light would shine the way on all of us.

The Wilderness Time

So God led the people by the roundabout way in the wilderness. –Deuteronomy 13:18

The roundabout way! We tend to prefer the most direct route, unless we are enjoying a balmy spring day on a winding country road. Most of the time, we are on a schedule and, as we all know, schedules do not allow for roundabout ways. Yet that seems to be where God often leads us... on a roundabout way into the wilderness.

Whether we like it or not, the wilderness is a place where God likes to take us. It is the place where God helps us to deal with endings that we might be readied for new beginnings, not of our own making, but of God's heart and will. Another term for wilderness is "liminal space." As Ruth Haley Barton writes:

Liminal space, the place of waiting, is a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, you will run... anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing.

We are in a wilderness time: as a denomination, as a nation, as a world! Be it the national political arena, the world of finance, or the future of the church as we have known it, uncertainty abounds. The tenuousness of it all has led many to look for a quick fix, seeking certainty in any false god that will promise a way out of the desert—even if it means returning to bondage in Egypt. But as anyone who has read the Exodus story knows, there is no going back. There is only going forward, even if in a "roundabout way."

Much as we hate “in-between times”, they are crucial to our unlearning the ways that have enslaved us. It is the only way to live forward into God’s new. William Bridges in his classic, **Managing Transition**, talks about the difference between change and transition. Change, he notes, is situational: a ministry ends, another begins; a beloved parishioner dies; a long prayed for baby is born and baptized; the church as we have known it passes away, a new way of being begins to emerge. Transition, by contrast, is a process by which we come to terms with change.

All transitions begin with endings. The challenge is learning how to let go of what was. The question is will we hang on to the past or will we make a real ending, thereby opening the way to a new beginning? Letting go must precede taking hold. We must be willing to live in the liminality in-between spaces. And so, we must train ourselves to hold anxiety, to live with ambiguity, to entrust and wait... to enter into the cloud of unknowing. For such is the way to life.

For such a time as this, God has called us. And for such a time as this we are blessed.

Holy Habit: Living in the In-Between

Take some time to ponder the “wilderness” texts below:

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by states, as the Lord commanded. Exodus 17:1

Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp. At the command of the Lord the Israelites would set out and at the command of the Lord they would camp. Numbers 9:17-18

God led you through that he great and terrible wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of the hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. Deuteronomy 8:15-16

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Matthew 4:1

And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? Matthew 16:26, NLT

Then enter into a place of stillness with God. Take a few moments to breathe deeply and become aware of God’s presence within you and all around you. As you inhale, breathe in the life that God is giving you in this moment. As you exhale, release the distractions that keep you from being fully present to God in this moment.

As you feel ready, reflect on your own journey through the lens of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. What stage most resonates with you:

- the ending, the leaving of Egypt where you have felt enslaved yet safe;
- the wilderness, that place of wandering between two worlds: one dead, the other powerless to yet be born;
- the beginning again, the Promised Land, with its new identity, culture and mission?

Where you are on the journey? Go to that place and listen for what God wants to say to you about your place on the journey.

How is God calling you to hold onto anxiety, to live with ambiguity, to entrust and wait... to dwell in the cloud of unknowing?

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