

# HOME FROM THE WILDERNESS



*Scripture:*

**Exodus 16: 2-4: 9-16**

## *The Lord Provides*

2. And the whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness,
3. and said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."
4. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law or not.
- ...
9. And Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, 'Come near before the Lord, for he has heard your murmurings.'"
10. And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.
11. And the Lord said to Moses,
12. "I have heard the murmurings of the people of Israel; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"
13. In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning dew lay round about the camp.
14. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as hoarfrost on the ground.
15. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat.
16. This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather of it, every man of you, as much as he can eat; you shall take one measure apiece, according to the number of the persons whom each of you has in his tent.'"

**Luke 4**

## *Into the Wilderness*

1. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert,
2. where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.
3. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."
4. Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'"
5. The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.
6. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.
7. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."
8. Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"
9. The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here.
10. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;
11. they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"
12. Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"
13. When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.
14. Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.
15. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.
16. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read.
17. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed,
19. to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."
20. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him,
21. and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."



### BOB NEWHART

Do you remember when Bob Newhart portrayed a mild mannered psychologist in a television sit com?

In Atlanta, I saw an episode in which a frustrated woman unfolded a long list of problems in her life as Bob Newhart listened to her from behind his desk. She said, "I am afraid of being buried alive in a box. I can't go through tunnels. I'm claustrophobic." She talked for a long time, about self-destructive relationships with men, and about other compulsive behaviors, until she finally had talked herself out, and there was a long quiet spell.

Bob Newhart then said, "Are you finished?"

She said that for now she was finished telling him about all the self-destructive behaviors in her life, and her worrying about so many things.

So he said, "I have two words for you."

"Will I need to write them down? Shall I get a pen and paper?"

He said, "No, I think you will remember them. Most people can remember two words."

"What are they," she asked.

Newhart looked straight into her eyes, and said, "Stop it!"

"What?"

"Shall I say it again? Stop it. Stop doing foolish things; stop complaining, stop being such a whiner. Shall I say the words again?"

The woman got angry, and said, "I don't like this kind of therapy. You're supposed to listen to all my problems."

The woman was visibly shaken as she left the office. "You mean I can quit worrying about what my mother said, and about what my horoscope says?"

Stop it, he said again. Don't go there. Take hold of your life. You're a lot stronger than you think.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhQGzeiYS\\_Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhQGzeiYS_Q)

### DIFFICULT LESSONS FROM THE WILDERNESS

People of honor are identified by struggles in the wilderness. One of the great truths of the Bible is that when God wanted to create great leaders and great congregations, he did not make life easy for them. The road to the kingdom of God is more difficult than the road to power and fame. God did not give the faithful easy solutions to easy problems; instead God gave them worthy problems in order that, in finding the solution, they might discover who they really were.

That was the way Jesus emerged from the wilderness and began his Galilean ministry.

That was the way the Hebrews emerged from the Sinai desert.

And that is the life that the Lord has set before me as well.

How about you?

**One of the surprises of those who seek to follow the spiritual life is that this choice does not make their lives easier; it makes their lives more difficult. In the process, their lives have been examined, enriched, and animated. When you go to bed at night, your prayer should be, "Lord God, give me worthy problems to solve."**

In the Bible, the wilderness symbolizes the place where we discover who we are. If you are reading the popular book *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, the wilderness is Italy, India, and Bali.

The wilderness teaches interdependence. When people become frustrated by the quest for community in difficult times, they seek an exit to fall away and look for a quick promise of an easy life. The Hebrews said they preferred a return to slavery rather than following Moses to the Promised Land. Moses became a great leader because he urged the people to follow their principles, honor their faith traditions, and look toward the future, and not pine for the past.

### THE DISCOVERY OF OUR COMMUNITY

The Promised Land itself was never the destination. The destination was the discovery of life when the people encountered challenges to what they thought they believed.

When all the challenges of life are behind you, you realize that you have come to the end of the trail. When great challenges lie in front of you, then abundant life awaits.

I'll bet by now you thought you'd have it all figured out. Do you?

If you don't, then welcome to the rest of your life. If you have discovered all the answers, then you have discovered all the answers.

Your life is never going to be easier than it is today. And faith teaches you, that life will never be more difficult than you can bear.

Great leaders and great institutions know that the best years were those in which there were enough problems to keep people reasonably engaged in the discovery of God, and enough pauses to allow people to catch their breath.

### **WHEN WILL IT GET EASIER?**

Do you ever ask, “Is it ever going to get easier for me?”

As a congregation, do we ask, “Is it ever going to get less complicated for us?”

Pray that the answer is no.

**We will never be a great church because of anything we do, or any program we present, or any Bible study that satisfies every student. But we will become a great church every time we visit a dying man in the hospital, look for ways to spread love, not buckle under the pressure of prejudice, and seek education, not intolerance.**

### **MOSES IN THE DESERT**

So let me take you with Moses to the desert this morning. In a few weeks, I will take you to the wilderness with Jesus.

Escaping from Pharaoh’s army as they fled from Egypt, the Hebrews entered the great and terrible Sinai desert. There are three possible routes they could have taken to Israel.

- One is along the coastline of the Mediterranean. It is highly fortified, and widely traveled. Pharaoh’s army would have caught them and devoured them.
- There is a middle route across easy sand and foothills, but there is no water.
- And the southern route leads to the ranges of mountain and passes, through heat and freezing, poisonous reptiles and dangerous landscape. Most scholars say that is the most probable route, because there is water and there is food to support life.

But you must learn the first lesson if you are to take the southern route. You will not be able to survive in the mountains alone. You either all win, or you all lose.

After three days on the southern route there was rebellion. “Turn back the clock,” they said. Better to be slaves in Egypt than have to die in the wilderness.

Remember they had left comfortable lives in Egypt. The slaves may not be free, but their basic necessities are cared for because the owner needs them healthy and strong to perform the labors for which the master purchased them.

### **SALVATION IS THE DESTINATION**

The land is not the destination. It is a poetic twist that it is a people who were born of the land. The Bible is a living story of love and hate, slavery and freedom, and above all the worship of one God. The people learned these values when they seemed to be most difficult to obtain.

### **COMPLAINTS ABOUT LIFE IN THE DESERT**

The sun is not the threat, it is the cold. It makes you feel isolated. The people who followed Moses complained bitterly. But Moses told them that God sent us into the wilderness to learn what is in our hearts.

After three days they experienced their first tests. No water. They complained to Moses. Moses asked the Lord, and he showed them a tree, and through the tree the water was made sweet. Then Moses led them to the spring of Moses, which is an oasis that exists to this day.

This was the first of many times that Moses has to implore the people to trust God, and not judge by their own standards.

Have you brought us into this wilderness to kill us? Then later, they encounter bread from heaven.

### **THIS CHURCH IS ON A HOLY QUEST AND IS EMERGING FROM A WILDERNESS**

Today is a celebration of the journey of our church. The first thing we need to do is embrace our history. What have we learned from the perseverance of the people who gave us the pews we sit in today, and what have we learned from the issues that divided people? What was important and what was trivial? How will we find new ways to reduce the anxiety, redesign the ministries, comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable in the name of our Lord?

### **TREASURES**

**Treasure our heritage; be part of the future.**

**We cannot survive in the wilderness divided.**

## **PUT YOUR HANDS TOGETHER WITH YOUR PALMS UP**

Please put your hands together and hold them in front of you. What is it you want God to place in your hands? What is worthy of God, and what is worthy of you? Is it money, health, power, wisdom, holiness, or something else – love, charity, hope?

Your life is filled with anxiety, things you cannot control, near misses, and a few direct hits. But it is also filled with days of sunshine and rain, days of health and days of healing, people looking to you for strength, and you looking to others for assurance. What will your hands and heart embrace? You can't control what flies overhead, but you can control what you catch and hold in your hands.

*Now, PLEASE, put your hands together in your lap.*

### **OH, ATLANTA!**

I've been on a wilderness journey of my own in the last week. In Atlanta I met with other pastors and talked about strategies for managing the anxieties of our churches, the infra-structure, characteristics of the changing congregations that will be part of our church in the future, and how a pastor needs to set his own boundaries and take care of himself as well as his people.

### **SECOND PHASE**

Since I returned, I have met with many of our church leaders about our hopes for the year ahead. You have gotten acquainted with Peter, Kate, Rit, Ted, Norman, Helen, Barbara, Althea and me. Now we are going to be moving into the second phase of our ministry together as we look ahead for new programs and new ways to do ministry together. You'll hear a lot more about that tonight.

We are experiencing a normal pattern of growth and replacement in our congregation. Our church has lost 70 of our members through death in the last four years. Lacking that number our additions of new members is right on schedule. I ask you to help us in spreading a good word about our church, and refocus with me upon why we are a church. The ministry of the Church of the Roses is not about me, and it is not about you. But it is about our perpetual journey through the wilderness toward knowledge and faith in Jesus Christ.

### **IT'S ABOUT JESUS CHRIST**

It's not about you.

It's not about me.

It is about Jesus Christ. That's a simple formula. That's why I went to seminary – to learn about Jesus.

And the reason that we struggle with that identity is so that we might have a future, not just a past. If we only have a past, then we have no future.

I am anxious about many things, but I am not anxious about God. God will place in your hands and mine, the things we need to discover God.

Now join your hands together like you did when your mother, father or teacher taught you to pray. Here is our prayer.

**Lord,**

- **Thank you for my problems. They are the keys to my future.**
- **Thank you for the great debates in our nation so that we can exercise the democracy of comparing where we are with where we want to be.**
- **Thank you for this day of future and forgiveness. Let us never let a day go by without being grateful for life, breath, reconciliation, and love. Amen.**

### **COME TO DINNER TONIGHT.**

Come and hear the voices of our choir. Come and hear the voices of our leaders.

You may pick up an annual report and a church directory after worship today. Read and enjoy the year that we have had together in our Lord.

But our meeting tonight is not about last year, it is about next year. If we have come to the point where we have only memories, then we know our journey is done. If we have come to the point where we have plans, then we have a future, even if we have to change our plans as life moves on.

We may be anxious about many things, but do not be anxious about God.

Thank you, God, for our problems, for they are our opportunities.



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