

“Bread in the Wilderness”

by Rev. Nancy Landauer

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Exodus 16:2-15

I have a cousin; her name is Ruth. I think Ruth is about 75 now. A year ago she was quite concerned because she was on the edge of having diabetes. When I saw her she was on a very strict diet and she was very concerned that she loose weight and not have to go on diabetes medication. I saw her this past summer. She hadn't lost any weight and she had put on a little weight, if anything. She wasn't concerned about the diabetes anymore. She said she was borderline, and it was staying that way. Now, my cousin is quite a healthy person. She gets up at 6 am every morning and swims a mile in the lake. She still water- skis every summer. She teaches swimming at the YMCA during the winter. She is a really healthy woman.

Over the years Ruth has often told the story of how, when she and her sister and brother were very young, their parents were poor. Her father was a Methodist minister in New England. Young Methodist ministers did not make much money. At the end of the week, as a family treat, my uncle would go to the store and buy a half pint of ice cream. That half pint of ice cream had to be split between 5 people. Ruth loved ice cream and she never got enough. When we go to visit Ruth at the lake we always have ice cream, and not just one kind. Sometimes there are as many as 8 different pints of Ben and Jerry's or sometimes it is Dryers, whatever. It is really good ice cream, top of the line, all you can eat and any flavor you want. I guess it goes without saying that there is always chocolate sauce, and caramel sauce, and nuts and cherries, and whipped cream. Well, some years we skip the whipped cream. I have pictures if you don't believe me.

Sometimes we have experiences of lacking in our lives. Not having enough food is an injustice. A member of our congregation told me a story about how, when she was a small child, her parents thought they didn't have enough money to give her 5 cents for milk at school. She said yes, her parents were poor, but they could have given her 5 cents. She told me that the experience of not having milk when the other children did, shaped her life. First as a mother, and then as a grandmother, one of the powerful motivating forces of her life had been that her children and grandchildren would always have what they needed for good nutrition.

Today's text is about the Hebrew peoples' experience in the wilderness. Today we understand the metaphor of *wilderness* as a time in our lives when we are afraid or we know there is not enough to go around. We usually become aware of this as a young person or in our youth. Sometimes it is an experience of poverty, sometimes it is an experience of injustice. However it happens, most children or youth come to realize and understand that life isn't always fair and there isn't always enough to go around.

The first part of this story is a remembrance of protest. Israel remembers this time when they experienced hunger and poverty and injustice as a place of murmur, protest, and quarrelsome dissatisfaction. Israel says “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt

when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into the desert to kill all of us with hunger.” Israel was angry. They had chosen to leave Egypt, but they didn’t seem to understand what they had chosen. They couldn’t believe it was their destiny to live between the oasis of Egypt and the oasis of the Promised Land.

The second part of the story is God’s response to Israel’s complaining. When Israel thought God had forsaken them in the wilderness, God is there with a response. God says, “I will rain bread down from heaven for you.” God gives bread from heaven, not bread from Egypt. Israel learns that life-giving resources come from the God Yahweh in heaven; life does not come from the land of the oasis. Israel could experience in the wilderness what it thought was only available in Egypt. In the desert wilderness, bellies were filled, needs were supplied, and cries heard.

Interwoven into the first and second parts of the story is the theme of God’s glory in the wilderness. God was hidden in the wilderness. Verses 10 and 11 tell us that the Israelites looked toward the wilderness and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in a cloud. They were so surprised that they could see God’s glory in the desert wilderness. The announcement is, No Lack! No lack! In the land of Egypt there were managers and supervisors and overseers and laborers. The grain that grew up beside the fertile Nile was managed grain. There were irrigation ditches, and plowed land, and a set rate so that all the people could buy grain and grind it and make flour to bake their bread. In the desert there was unplanned, unmanaged bread. Just bread given and taken and received. Bread was given as a sacrament of God’s glory.

The wilderness stories remind us that when we feel like we are in the desert wilderness, God is still there. No one, however, is saying that being in the wilderness is a good thing. Being in the wilderness hurts. It hurts to go hungry. It hurts to go unloved; it hurts to be a victim of injustice. But Jesus reminds us each Easter day, each Sabbath, each day, that as the world becomes new again, we are given new liberation and a new promise. The bread and wine of the cross stand before us. Amen.