

Life with God Through the Wilderness

Three Messages for Reflection: Manhattan Church of Christ

What We're Up Against

Amy Henegar, September 13, 2020

I've lost count. The list of what we're up against is long and just keeps on growing. We like to say that it's 2020, but maybe 2020 is just showing us who we really are. What we're really up against.

Illness and death
and violence and bloodshed
and hurricanes and fires
and hatred, division, accusations and blame!

It's overwhelming really. We're stuck in the muck and the mire. Pressed in on all sides. Overwhelmed.

Israel at the Red Sea (Exodus 14)

The Israelites have just been freed from bondage. They are resting on the shore by the Red Sea, just beginning to take deeper breaths. They're daring to believe that their suffering just might truly be over. And over the hill they hear the sound of horses, galloping at full speed. A cloud of dust begins to rise and the chariots appear off in the distance.

Traumatized and terrified they surround Moses:

Exodus 14:11-12

"What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?" ...

"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" ...

"It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die here in the middle of nowhere."

Traumatized by years of enslavement, domination and violence!

Terrified as their oppressors return!

They frantically shout accusations and condemnations, all while the angry army closes in. They are going to die. They know it! The sea is no longer a beautiful backdrop to freedom's campsite. It's now an uncrossable barrier and they are trapped.

We're There with Israel Today.

We can imagine the chaos. We can imagine it because we know it. We've been there in one way or another. In some ways we are there right now.

It doesn't take much imagination to see how we have our own enemies that are huge - strong and powerful and dead set on our destruction. And like the Israelites we blame and accuse, and alternate between frantically grasping at ways to save ourselves and crying out in terror.

Utter chaos. That's how it feels. Chaos spreading and over taking the people, the place. Chaos from without and chaos from within.

But God ...

But the God of Israel brings order out of chaos. This is the God who spoke the world into existence. "The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep" and "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" and God created light (Gen 1:1-3).

Exodus 14:11-14

"What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?" ...

"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" ...

"It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die here in the middle of nowhere."

But Moses said to the people,

"Do not be afraid."

“Stand firm.”

“See the salvation that the Lord will accomplish for you today.” ...

“The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be still.”

Traumatized and terrified! Moses doesn't condemn the people.

He doesn't criticize them for complaining.

He doesn't chastise them for their lack of faith.

But he doesn't match their anxiety either.

Rather, he proclaims the gospel.

This is the good news.

You don't have to be afraid.

Stand firm. Right there. Feet on the ground. You don't have to run and you don't have to hide. Stand firm.

And you will see the salvation of the Lord.

The Lord will fight for you. You don't have to fight. You don't have to defend yourself. Put down your sticks and your stones. They are no match against their weapons anyway.

The Lord will save you.

Yahweh — the one who brought order out of chaos in the beginning will bring order out of this chaos now. Today. In your presence. In your viewing.

Stand firm and see the salvation the Lord will accomplish for you today.

Stand firm. And be still.

And sure enough, the Lord moved heaven and earth that day to protect the Lord's own beloved children. A tower of clouds surrounded the Israelites, a physical hedge of protection. And the waters of the Red Sea were split open that day by God's power and the courageous, faithful leadership of Moses. The

Israelites walked on dry ground all the way to the other side. Safe from those who sought to destroy them.

Reflecting on Israel's Story and Our Story

How is this your story today? What are you up against?

And where in your own life do you need to hear the words of good news?

"Do not be afraid."

"Stand firm."

"See the salvation that the Lord will accomplish for you today."

"The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still."

We are going to conclude with a time of reflection and sharing. Consider this sentence:

"God is calling me to BE STILL in the face of _____."

And as you are comfortable, I'd like to invite you to write those word in the chat box as we share our struggles with one other.

Into the Wilderness

Thomas Robinson, September 20, 2020

On Eagle's Wings, I Brought You to Myself

Last Sunday morning, Amy took us through a beautiful reflection on “What We’re Up Against” – focusing on the time when the Israelites were on the verge on their deliverance from Egypt but had an uncrossable sea in front of them, Pharaoh’s chariots behind them, and an unknown and threatening wilderness, a desert, all around them.

Moses wanted them to begin to learn to trust the God who was delivering them. He urged them, *“Don’t be afraid, stand firm and see the salvation that the LORD will accomplish ... Yahweh will fight for you. You have only to **be still.**”* (Exodus 14:13-14)

You know the story of the Red Sea.
Only God could open the threatening waves of the Sea.
Only God could render Pharaoh’s war-chariots powerless.
Only God could finally break the grip of slavery and oppression that had engulfed Israel’s every thought and action and hope and possibility for generations.
They had left their old reality behind. They were on the brink of a wilderness that they must pass through.

Amy’s message was the first of a 3-week series leading to our “congregational retreat” – this year our “QuaranTreat” that we’ll share at the beginning of October. Our title for reflection is **“Life with God through the Wilderness.”**

We’re reflecting on the importance of experiences in the wilderness in scriptures – especially Israel’s journey through the wilderness – in order to think about our situation now – as Amy called it, “What we’re up against.”

Into a Wilderness

Each one of us – You or I personally – we’re the experts on what we’re going through. So, each of us has a role in the larger need to think clearly and with

wisdom and with God about the impact of our experiences – on us and on the people we care for around us.

But we don't want to focus just on the destructive side of the present time. In a sense that loss is hard to get our minds around, and we can feel the push into despair. We want to focus also on where we find nourishment and life in the wilderness, where God meets us and calls us to see more clearly who we are, and to experience God's care in new ways.

What's a wilderness? So many of us are stuck at home or in a very restricted circle of movement. It's almost the opposite of a wilderness, especially in NYC. But we're not talking about the great outdoors, an inviting nature wilderness. I'd just love to be out in the wilderness in that sense. Unless of course it's in the middle of the west coast devastating fires or the flooding across the south.

It's as though a wilderness has sprung up all around us even sitting on a couch in a NYC apartment.

It's the ongoing vulnerability to an unseen, death-dealing virus. 200,000 people dead! 200,000 families with grief and loss. Fathers, mothers, granddads, grandmothers, young people, friends, co-workers. It's realizing that most of them might still be with us if only we as a nation had been able to honestly and intensely face the virus when it was first hitting us.

That's led to the economic stress of lost jobs, businesses closed, lost insurance, dreams deferred or destroyed.

We're dealing with things we weren't prepared for. Teaching kids at home. Stressing out over school opening. Hours on zoom. Worrying about how to pay the rent and the prospect of eviction. Unemployment.

It's the impact of seeing – with time to take notice and get involved –so many violent manifestations of injustice and racism in society. The challenge of finding ways to embody the fact that "Black lives matter," and to create hope and justice in our society.

It's the intensely divided, broken politics of our nation. So much manipulation! So many lies!

It's watching the growing impact of climate change. Those increasing fires! The storms and floods! "Once in a century" disasters now hit several times a year.

It's the loss of leaders, like Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, a wise leader for so many years on so many issues. I love the quote: *"Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception."*

We find ourselves traveling through a wilderness that has seized our lives, our reality. There are lot's more things we could list but we want to focus on the journey and finding life on that journey.

"On Eagle's Wings, I Brought You to Myself"

Our text this morning starts from Exodus 19, at the end of Israel's first stage of travel through the wilderness, when Moses and Israel come to the wilderness of Mt. Sinai, just about 2 ½ months after the Red Sea.

Exodus 19:1-6

¹ On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ² They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, ³ while Moses went up to God.

Yahweh called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel:

⁴ You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt,
and how I bore you on eagles' wings
and brought you to myself.

⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed hear my voice
and keep my covenant,
you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples,
for all the earth is mine;

⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests
and a holy nation.

These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

If you take your Bibles and read the section from Exodus 14 and Moses' assurance: *"Yahweh will fight for you, and you have only to be still."* To this passage in chap 19, I think you'll agree with me that one of the most beautiful lines in our text is also one of the most surprising.

It's when God says to Israel:

Exodus 19:4

⁴ You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt,
and how I bore you on eagles' wings
and brought you to myself.

If you want to understand what it means to live human life with God through the wilderness, listen to that statement in the light of the events that have led to it.

Yes, God brought them to himself. But that "location" is at the foot of a mountain they've never seen before in the midst of the vast Sinai wilderness.

And take the statement, *"You yourselves saw ... how I bore you on eagles' wings ..."* and let that be defined by the stories that intervene in chaps 14-18. They let us know that the wilderness is real and that being *"born on eagles' wings"* can be a very challenging experience. Still it is the process of God's deliverance.

In **chap 14**, Just as soon as Moses tells the people to be still, Exodus says,

Exodus 14: 15-16

¹⁵ Then Yahweh said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶ But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground."

Yes, they're to be still, in the sense that they don't turn and fight the Egyptians with the Egyptians own violence. But being still with God means going forward into places they never imagined they could go. It means seeing their situation with an understanding of reality that includes far more than just the desert, the sea, and the Egyptians. Being still means trusting the reality of God and putting one foot in front of another into the midst of an impossibly divided sea.

Chap 15 tells of the great victory celebration of Miriam and Moses on the other side of that impossible crossing. But then Exodus says, just 3 days later in

the wilderness of Shur, when they encounter bitter water, they already start to grumble against Moses. God solves their problem with fresh water.

But just a bit later in **chap 16**, they're in the Wilderness of Sin – I love these names: the wilderness of "Sin" and the wilderness of "Shur," sure! They've traveled a month, and food is about gone. They grumble:

Exodus 16: 3

"We wish that Yahweh's hand had killed us in the land of Egypt while we were still sitting by the meat pots and ate bread to the full. You've brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

What?! Don't they remember a month ago? Don't they remember their enslavement?

God helps them. He calls them to look out into the wilderness and there his glory appears before them (Exo 16:10). But that glory then shows up day by day as food – manna, a sweet and nourishing daily bread, along with quail for meat. God also begins teaching them about time and Sabbath and "being still."

In **chap 17**, it's the water problem again at Rephidim near Mt. Sinai. The people's grumbling is overwhelming for Moses. God leads Moses to strike a rock and a torrent of water provides for the whole people.

But the trouble of the wilderness isn't over. A desert tribal people called Amalek attacks them. But God uses Moses and Joshua to deliver them from death.

All the while Moses is overwhelmed with the task of bringing justice to a people who, as slaves, have never known it. In **chap. 18**, He receives advice from his father-in-law about organizing structures of justice for the people even before they come to Mt. Sinai and the giving of God's Torah.

In 2 ½ months it's been a distressing, challenging journey with danger and discouragement all around – plenty to grumble about. But at the same time the people have seen the power and life of God given to them in hard and unexpected places. Moses was having to learn like everyone else.

That's what it means when God says, *"I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."*

Being brought to God's own self, brought into true reality, as we've learned in our studies of 1 John, means being brought into the wilderness.

It means facing real, perplexing difficulties that explode in grumbling.

It means trusting God for life that doesn't seem possible in the wilderness.

It means coming to trust the reality of God and God's love and life and grace, even when the harshness of the wilderness seems the only true reality.

The Gift of Our New Identity

It's never easy, but the trek through the wilderness is the only way to break the grip of the wilderness. It's the only way to learn our identity – an identity not determined by our enslavement (like the Israelites in Egypt), not controlled by circumstances (like the Israelites in the desert).

God says to them:

Exodus 19:5-6

⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed hear my voice
and keep my covenant,
you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples,
for all the earth is mine;
⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests
and a holy nation.

In 1 Peter 2:9, Peter echoes these words to mark the calling of all believers:

1 Peter 2:9

⁹ *But you are a chosen family, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

This is my father's world: "all the earth is mine" he says.

I live treasured by God, in his covenant love and justice, part of the kingdom of the

God who encompasses all the wildernesses that threaten death but even more encompasses life that conquers all death.

Learning from the Wilderness Trek

For Israel, as you know, getting through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai was only the beginning of the people's journey. But it brought them to the place where the far greater journey could begin, as they learned and failed and tried again and again to live with the presence of Yahweh, God of all the universe, among them.

Sinai was the first of those great places that became a sign of God's realm intersecting with our world, where heaven and earth meet.

It became a marker for Israel for all the times to come:

As Isaiah says more than 800 years later:

Isaiah 64:1-3

¹ O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence – ² ... so that the nations might tremble at your presence! ³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

Israel was a people badly broken by slavery and oppression. But all their problems and failures did not change the power of the reality of God who brought them through the wilderness to new life. In similar ways we're challenged to see something, anything beyond, greater than the wilderness we're in, to know that even at its worst, every wilderness is limited, encompassed in the far greater life of God.

So also, Isaiah looked through and beyond the harsh exile that Israel suffered under Babylon to a new future. He did it by recalling the journey.

Isaiah 43:18-21

¹⁸ "Don't remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. ¹⁹ Behold, I'm doing a new thing; now it springs forth, don't you perceive it? I'll make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰ The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the

desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.

The wilderness is awful and bereft, but it's precisely there that we can begin not to depend on our own powers, but actually perceive God, trust God, realize God's love and nurture, taste God's sweetness.

Good News that Starts from the Wilderness

When Mark begins to write the Gospel, the announcement of Good News of Jesus, God's Anointed King, God's Son, he doesn't start the narrative in a palace or temple or even in a home. He starts in the wilderness.

The call of the prophets takes John the Baptist out into the wilderness. There Jesus meets him. There God tears open the heavens (as Isaiah said) and a new place, a new person where heaven and earth meet shines forth. Here God's Spirit breaks into the world in a new way, ready to empower people from every nation to live in the life of God.

Mark 1:1-13

¹ The beginning of the Announcement of Good News of Jesus, Anointed King, Son of God.

² As it's written in Isaiah the prophet,
*"Look, I'm sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will make your way ready."* [Mal 3:1]

³ *"A voice of one crying in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the LORD,
make his pathways straight.'"* [Isa 40:3]

⁴ John came as one baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And they were going out to him – all the Judean country and all the Jerusalemites – and they were being plunged by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁶ Now John wore clothing made with camel's hair and wore 'a leather belt around his waist' and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he began proclaiming saying, "One who's stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not worthy to stoop

down and untie the strap of his sandals. ⁸ I plunged you in water, but he'll plunge you in Holy Spirit."

⁹ And it happened in those days, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was plunged in the Jordan by John. ¹⁰ And straight as he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

¹¹ And a voice came from the heavens:

"You're my beloved Son; in you I am well-pleased."

¹² And directly the Spirit cast him out into the wilderness. ¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tested by the Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

We never in this world can escape the wilderness. In a sense the wilderness is this world as we within it reject, ignore, push out the life-giving reality of this world's creator and sustainer. The wilderness by itself doesn't provide us with enough resources to escape its dominance, its pain, its death. We trudge on.

What Do We See?

But here a voice cries in the wilderness. There is something more. You are something more. Plunge in. Change your way of thinking. Open your eyes! What can you see?

John is wearing rough clothes and eating bugs and honey. Can you see Elijah? Can you see with John's eyes the one who can plunge you in God's Holy Spirit?

Can you see God's glory in the desert? Can you see the heavens ripped open and the beginning of God's kingdom breaking anew into the world.

Can you see the great Accuser of humanity defeated? Can you see Jesus? Can you see the whole of God's creation united from the beasts to the angels?

The journey through the wilderness started at the Red Sea and continues till today.

Only you are the expert on your own experience. You and God. Think about those challenging experiences and where you've found opening to the

life of God. Where you've been especially tested to the limit of your strength. Where you've realized God was breaking through.

Learn, like Israel had to learn, that this story is ultimately God's story. Stop fighting the Egyptians with their weapons. Be Still and in that stillness go forward into the impossible future that you and God create together.

Hear my voice, God says to Israel. As you stand with Jesus, you hear the Voice:

"You are my beloved child; in you I am well pleased!"

Amen.

Bread of Life in a Desert

Thomas Robinson, September 27, 2020

The Overwhelming Reality of a Desert Situation

The theme for our congregational *QuaranTreat* is “*Life with God through the Wilderness.*” The Wilderness or Desert is an image that comes from Israel’s journey through the Desert Wilderness of Sinai after their Exodus from Egypt by God’s deliverance and before reaching a new reality of life in the “Promised Land.”

It was a time when everything about them as individuals and as a people was tested and challenged. As they looked back on it, across their history reflected in the scriptures, they knew and asserted emphatically that they had not done well in the wilderness. In fact, Israel’s scriptures emphasize their repeated failures in the wilderness. But they nevertheless believed that the experience had molded and shaped them as a people, as a people delivered by God from oppressing slavery but now in a wilderness, as a people learning to live with a Living God who is not simply their assistant but the God of the whole cosmos, including the present desert wilderness, and all their past and future.

God was very challenging to them every step of the way through the desert, from the shores of the Red Sea to the vast expanses without food or water to the dangerous desert tribes that threatened violence, death, or new enslavement.

But that challenging God was also a God of mercy and grace and life who fed them and led them and protected them and created a way to be in their midst all through the journey through the desert that surrounded them and even more through the desert wilderness that arose within them, in their minds and hearts as they faced so many difficulties and uncertainties as a people.

All through Israel’s history, continuing right on into the New Testament, they retold and reflected on this shaping, testing, learning period as they continued their journey of life. They were always reprocessing it, as we are, as they journeyed through life:

life in ever-emerging wildernesses that tested them in new ways,
life with a Living God who delivers and gives life,
life with a Living God who also challenges and leads through, not around, the
wilderness, and
life with a Living God who opens our eyes to see possibilities we had never seen.

I think that one of the most important things that the whole narrative of Israel's "Life with God through the wilderness" showed both to Israel and to all of us later generations is how the dangers and troubles of the wilderness take over our whole field of view, everything that we can see as we look around. That's what happened to Israel.

It's what happens to us. It's all we can see:

the uncertainties, the dangers, the things we can't grasp,
the vulnerabilities we face, the injustices that threaten us,
the sense of things out of control, the losses, the potential losses,
the overwhelming tasks, our sense that we don't deserve this,
our longing for almost any kind of security, just an end to it all!

These become the whole of reality. They're the things that we can see everywhere, that invade every conversation.

But more, they invade our hearts, our vision of reality from within. They sap our strength from within, they lead us into despair and a sense of powerlessness.

From all we can see, there's no way out, no resources to help. We're in a wilderness. There's nothing to do but fight each other for scarce resources and diminishing, corrupted power.

"Be Still and Know that I am God!"

One scripture that we're focusing on in our retreat is Psalm 46. It's a song of great reassurance, but set within the experience of a wilderness of uncertainty:

Psalm 46 [NRSV]

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. *Selah*

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the City of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ Yahweh of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

⁸ Come, behold the works of Yahweh;
see what he destroys in the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth."

¹¹ Yahweh of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

The psalm expresses the fundamental challenge we face again and again.

The wilderness and its chaotic dangers are real and really dangerous:

Yes, even the earth can change, and mountains shake in the heart of the sea; its waters roar and foam and the mountains tremble with its tumult. The nations may be in an uproar and kingdoms can totter! Violence, weapons, and wars can threaten.

There's no doubt that we humans are vulnerable to all kinds of troubles. But can we see more? Does our danger become our whole reality or can we perceive the far larger true reality of God:

Psalm 46:1-2

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea!

Faith is opening our eyes wider. Looking up and down. Not minimizing the troubles and dangers and injustices. Not settling for deceptions and falsehoods.

But realizing that all of our human experiences and vulnerabilities are within the vast reality of God.

Learning to let that reality of God be present within us.

Learning to let it shape our perception and response to the wilderness around.

Psalm 46:4-5

- ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the City of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved.

The more clearly you see and know that God, the more clearly you can see the challenge of our wilderness and begin perceiving how to live actively in it.

The psalmist could see the uproar of nations but could also see the God who...

Psalm 46:9

- ⁹ ... makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

This is what God is doing, and for the psalmist it is a call to share in that work of God. We can help. Break the bows, shatter the spears, make all our various wars cease to the end of the earth.

No, we can't! Our bows and spears and wars are all we've got! They're how we get ahead in the wilderness, how we stave off our vulnerability, how we show that we're in control. We work harder, get more. We strengthen our group against

other groups. We get the scarce resources for our use. If we don't, we'll fall behind; we'll die.

The psalmist says, we're blind to true reality, to the reality of the God who creates and encompasses all of us on all sides of our blinkered battles.

Psalm 46:10

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth."

Manna in the Desert

Margaret and Scott read to us the account in Exodus 16:1-5 of God giving Israel manna in the desert, bread to keep them alive, bread of life.

Notice how much emphasis the narrative gives to the grumbling of the people who had only a month earlier been saved from slavery in Egypt by being saved from death in the Passover of the last plague and been saved from slaughter by the parting of the Sea to defeat the violence of Pharaoh.

They're like all us humans, the troubles of the present situation fill their entire vision so they can see nothing else. A month ago is too long ago to remember. The future will never come. There's no way out. It's unfair. We're hungry. We're suffering. We're going to die!

Exodus 16:1-5

³ And the people of Israel said to Moses and Aaron, "We wish that Yahweh's hand had killed us in the land of Egypt while we were still sitting by the meat pots and ate bread to the full. You've brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

It's easy to condemn the grumblers, of course, but in a very real sense, their complaints are very understandable. These are freed slaves who've always been vulnerable to the people and situations of injustice and violence around them. We can excuse them.

This is Israel tell their own story, of course. And what the narrative teaches us emphatically is that their grasp of reality was not true reality. It was only a limited sliver of the whole. The troubles of their circumstances overwhelmed them, blocked their memory, shriveled their hope, withered any growing faith.

The God of surprise, of creation, of the future, of hope broke in. “Look,” God said to Moses, “I’m about to rain for you bread from heaven.”

This was the manna, a bread of life so remarkable that it got the name “manna” meaning “What is it?” It began to teach the people that the real world that includes God has more resources than the desert sands. It started shaping anew their experience of time and Sabbath, as the text tells us.

The Meaning of Manna for Life

At the end of their journey through the wilderness, Moses speaking to the people in Deuteronomy reflected on its meaning:

Deuteronomy 8:2-3

² Remember the long way that Yahweh your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to teach you humility, training you in order to know what’s in your heart, whether you’d keep his commandments. ³ He taught you humility and let you experience hunger, and he fed you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known, in order you may know that the human being will not gain life by bread alone, but the human will gain life by everything that comes from the mouth of Yahweh.

What did the manna mean? It meant that all of us humans are not going to gain real life by the bread we have, all the stuff that we have in our control. Yes, our stuff, our bread is important to us, but it’s a tiny part of the great reality in which we live: “the human will gain life by everything that comes from the mouth of God.”

Remember that Jesus quoted from this very passage when he was in the wilderness being put to the test at the very beginning of his ministry.

Matthew 4:3

³ And when the Tester approached, he said to Jesus, “If you’re God’s Son, tell these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴ But Jesus answered, “It’s written, ‘The human being will not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from God’s mouth.’”

The challenge is to see the visible in all its own reality and potential danger and to take the threat seriously, but not let it blind us to the reality of God – far greater and more challenging and gracious to us than all the surrounding circumstances and threats.

The challenge is learning to live day by day in that all-encompassing reality of God.

Psalm 78, for example, helped Israel to reflect on the meaning of their own narrow perception and what they had learned:

Psalm 78:18-19, 22-25

¹⁸ They tested God in their heart
by demanding the food they desired.
¹⁹ They spoke against God, saying,
“Can God spread a table in the wilderness?”
²² ... They had no faith in God, ...
and did not trust his power to deliver.
²³ Yet he commanded the clouds above,
and opened the doors of heaven;
²⁴ he rained down on them manna to eat,
and gave them the grain of heaven.
²⁵ Humans ate of the bread of angels;
he sent them food in abundance.

God was not far away. God was with them in their trouble. They couldn’t imagine God’s resources, but they were there. The manna came, “the grain of heaven” the Psalmist says, “the bread of angels,” “food in abundance,” bread of life.

Jesus feeds the People in the Wilderness

Margaret and Scott also read for us the first part of John 6:1-15, the account of Jesus feeding the 5000 in the countryside far from towns around the Sea of Galilee. This feeding sets off a powerful and disturbing set of dialogues that flow through most of the long 6th chapter and link the event to God's gift of manna in the wilderness back in Exodus and to the nature of the true bread of life.

Perhaps people were thinking about Exodus because it was, as John tells us, just before Passover time, the "great feast" that Passover had become.

The situation is defined by the overwhelming needs of the people who followed, who chased after Jesus, wherever he went. Jesus healed sick people. Nobody else could do that, not even the physicians of that time, since there was very little grasp of the nature of sickness.

If you were sick, or you had someone dear who was sick, and you heard about it, it was a ray of hope. You had to get to Jesus. Not to hear his teachings. Not to understand his announcement of God's kingdom. Yes, you were impressed by reports of his power, but you didn't ask larger questions, you just got to the crowds, got in line. You had something you wanted, needed now. Healing.

Jesus crossed and recrossed the Sea of Galilee, seeking a moment alone, some time with his disciples. But scouts always spotted him and the throngs pursued him even up into the hills and mountains.

At this Passover time Jesus is up in those hills with his disciples, likely teaching them. John tells us,

John 6:5

⁵ So it happened, when Jesus raised his eyes and observed that a great crowd was coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where should we buy loaves of bread so that these people may eat?"

Put yourself in Philip's place. We're up in the hills sitting with Jesus? The throngs keep coming. How did I get the assignment to find somehow to buy bread for this crowd. Just look at them. Sick, needy, all wanting something. It's hopeless.

John 6:7

⁷ Philip answered him, “Loaves costing two hundred denarii aren’t enough so that each one could get a little.”

A denarius was a day’s wage for a laborer. 200 denarii, that’s about 8 months wages. I’m sorry. I don’t have it on me. And that would only get then a small snack. It’s impossible, isn’t it.

The disciples have heard Jesus and as the crowd comes on, they get busy. John tells us that Andrew, Peter’s brother, did find a young boy whose parents, perhaps, had maybe given him some food for the day. 5 barley loaves (rolls) and two small fish – maybe tilapia from the lake.

Andrew dutifully brought them to Jesus, but only to emphasize how hopeless the circumstances were:

John 6:9

⁹ “... But what are they for so many people.”

Seeing Ourselves in the Story

We, of course, know the end of the story and so we can feel superior to these disciples. But they’re just us humans in the wilderness. Our troubles, our circumstances limit what we can see, what we can imagine.

What would you have done? When I think about my best self in that circumstance, I think I would have had an idea. If one kid has a lunch, probably other may too. Let’s have them all raise a hand if they have some food with them. Then we’ll gather it all up from them and make them share it so that, as we send the people away, they’ll at least have a bite to give them strength to climb back down the hills and go home.

Not bad, huh. Fair ... sort of. I think about that boy wondering what was going on, as he handed over his lunch. Is Jesus just going to eat it? Well, maybe at least it makes the best of what we have.

But that's the question. What do we have?
When we look out at that crowd, what do we see?

Philip and Andrew and I, we see trouble, a problem, hungry demanding people, no resources. Trying our best to make do.

That's the difference about Jesus! That difference is what Jesus was wanting his disciples to learn, what Israel long ago needed to learn, what John is wanting us to see.

Jesus sees, Jesus lives a far larger reality. He lives the reality of God encompassing every trouble, every lack of resources, every need, every hope. He sees the resources of God's creative power and generosity and grace: The true reality, the resources of the Creator God of love. The grace of God is beyond anything you imagine when you just look at the possibilities of the wilderness around you. And God is real. You really are living in God's world full of life-giving bread.

Holding on and Letting Go

The little-noted hero of this story is the little boy, who let's go of his lunch, who gives it to Jesus. He could have said, no thank you, I'll eat my lunch. He would have had an adequate lunch. He lost control of his lunch. He gained a dinner far larger than he could eat.

We're like the boy in that we have some resources, good but limited. We have a lunch. We're often unlike the boy in that we don't let go of our lunch. We don't let Jesus take control. We decide to eat our own lunch.

Jesus hopes that his disciples and we have eyes to see.

Jesus simply says, "Have everybody recline on the grass." Recline like you do at a Passover feast.

There's no fanfare, no magic words, no suddenly appearing banquet. Like the manna that came when everyone was sleeping, Jesus simple gives thanks and starts distributing the loaves. Distributing the fish. And distributing and distributing.

They eat and eat, till they can't eat anymore. 12 baskets of "more than enough" were picked up.

I can't blame Philip and Andrew or Me for not seeing it all in advance. Who could have predicted? It's hard for us humans to see the true reality of God when we're blinkered by the wilderness troubles around us. It has always been hard.

But God has always been there! God's creative power, God's resources, God's love and grace. Grace ready, as Paul says, to be made perfect in our weakness.

What is it in your resources, in your needs? What's there that you can bring to Jesus, to learn to see them through his eyes, to see them within true reality?

The challenge is always to see through and beyond what our whole world tells us is the total of reality. Think about, that recreation of Passover and of Jesus feeding us in our need.

Lord's Supper: Bread we Share and Bread of Life

As the discussion of that feeding of 5000 unfolds in the rest of John 6, Jesus challenges his hearers to realize that he himself is the window through which to see into that true reality of God, that he himself embodies the life-giving nourishment of bread in the wilderness.

John 6:35, 47-51

³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. One who comes to me will never hunger, and one who believes in me will certainly never thirst."

⁴⁷ "Very truly I'm telling you, whoever believes possesses life of the age to come. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, in order that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats of this bread will live into the age to come; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the cosmos (the life of the world)."

And so here we gather to receive the bread that he gives us.

Bread is so ordinary and so remarkable. Every bit of bread combines grain and sun and soil and water. It brings together the earth and the power of the sun giving

its energy to life here. It combines the long process of humans discovering how to grow grain and make bread. It combines somebody doing all the work of grinding the wheat, somebody kneading it together, somebody baking it, someone whose been taught how to do it. It combines culture and history and stories reaching back all through the history of humanity.

The bread gives life by being broken. If I just leave it untouched on my counter it will just mold and rot. I have to break off a piece and take it into myself. But once that happens the whole body sets to work. It takes the bread in and begins taking it apart. It begins processing it so that all its elements can become nourishment for different parts of the body. The broken piece of bread becomes me.

How is Jesus the Bread of Life? How does he affect us, save us? He is a human like us who shares all the pains and brokenness of our humanity. He also shares all our good, our creativity, our nobility. He is all that we are. But he also brings into his reality the life of God. And that life of God united with our humanity creates a new expression of life, a new kind of life, an experience of that true reality that God has been pointing to all along.

But again, if it just stays outside, this bread of life doesn't nourish us. You have to take him into yourself. You have to let him permeate you, who you are, what you see, what you think, how you evaluate things, how you love, how you serve, how you seek justice, how you help others – all parts of you. This bread of life has to become you.

In the Lord's Supper, we've been given the gift of bread and wine by Jesus as a way of breaking down the barriers of our forgetfulness.

We bring ourselves, our pandemic. We bring the injustice of our times, our rage, our anxieties. We bring our over-work, our under-employment, our stress, stress, stress.

We bring our ideas, our creativity, our goodness, our service, our intelligent searching, our questions, our faith, our hopes, our love.

We hand them over. We don't really know what all he will do with them.

He holds out to us in this little Passover, a bit of bread, a drink of wine.
He says, "This is me. My body, My blood."

You give me you. I give you me. And with me, in me, I give you true reality, the life of God, the life of the age to come. In the midst of whatever wilderness you endure, I'll let you see beyond, I'll show you more. Nothing can separate you from my love. Be still, and know that I am God. Let's pray.