

September 24, 2017 – Food in the Wilderness

Exodus 16:1-30

“It was the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left Egypt.” The Israelites had been travelling for six weeks. They had escaped Egypt, walked across the Sea of Reeds and now they were in the middle of the wilderness. It was hot (a quick Google search will tell us that the average temperature from May to October in the Sinai desert is about 32C)... it was hot. And it was dry (it was, after all, a desert. And after 45 days of travelling the Israelites were hungry. Yes they had animals with them... but we can only assume they were keeping them as breeding stock for their arrival in the Promised Land. Whatever the reason, they weren't using them for food. Their stomachs were empty, so they started to complain to Moses and his brother Aaron.

Well let's talk about journeys... we are all on one... it's called the journey of life. And we've all had wilderness times on that journey: times when things weren't going the way we expected; times of personal loss, times of financial hardship, times of illness, times of pain. Sometimes we enter the wilderness as a result of our own actions. Sometimes it just happens to us. Sometimes, like the Israelites, we are on our way to a new way of being, a new life, and the desert is just a step along the way.

I went through a wilderness time in my life about 25 years ago, after the woman, who I thought was the love of my life, ended our relationship. I was depressed. I

was lonely. I was angry. I was lost. I was able to function during work hours, but in the evening I came home and collapsed from emotional and spiritual exhaustion. This wilderness period went on for weeks, months, in some part even years. It felt like this painful time in my life would never end.

No matter what our own personal wilderness looks like, no matter how we happened to get there, once we are in that place all we know is how awful we feel. The discomfort that we experience may be physical, emotional, spiritual, mental or some combination of all these aspects of our being. No matter what is hurting, the pain is real and often debilitating.

The Israelites had already spent six weeks in the wilderness and their situation just seemed to be getting worse. They were hot, they were thirsty and now they were hungry. No wonder they were complaining.

Moses and Aaron said to them, "It is not to us that you are complaining – who are we? – but to YHWH." So how did their God respond? According to Moses, YHWH said, "In the evening you shall eat meat, and in the morning you will have your fill of bread." And, according to the story, quail arrived that evening and in the morning there were delicate flakes on the desert floor for them to gather and to eat.

It's interesting to note that quails still have a regular migration path through the Sinai desert. They show up in flocks at certain times of the year. And there are

insects in that region that feed on the sap of a local shrub, and then leave large deposits of honeydew that crystallize and fall to the ground. This flakey substance is not very tasty but it is rich in carbohydrates and sugars and if left on the ground is quickly harvested by ants. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manna>

Some people might interpret this manna from heaven as a kind of miracle – a time when God intervened to help the Israelites, when God manipulated Mother Nature so that the Israelites could be fed. But if the appearance of quails and honeydew were natural occurrences in the wilderness, then maybe all that was needed was for the Israelites to have their eyes opened to what was already there. When they finally noticed the manna on the desert floor, they didn't recognize that it was food. In fact the word manna means "what's it" or even "whatchamacallit." What they needed to ease their hunger pangs was right there in front of them so maybe God just worked through Moses and Aaron to change their perception, to change their way of seeing.

When we are in the wilderness parts of our journey, then we are often blinded by the pain that we are experiencing, sometimes that pain is so excruciating that we cannot even imagine a way out of our situation. It is then that we need to cry out for assistance. It is then that we need to ask someone else to help us find the way. Sometimes help comes in the form of a friend or a loved one or a health professional or a counsellor.

Sometimes God works through others and sometimes we go directly to God. We pray, we meditate, we journal and we wait for the answer to come, for our eyes to be opened. When I was grieving one of the key parts of my healing journey was guided meditation. Through this form of meditation I was able to connect to God's healing energy that sacred energy that permeates all of creation. All we have to do is open ourselves and allow the Holy Spirit into our bodies, our lives.

Of course, the other interesting thing about this manna was that no matter how much the Israelites harvested everyone always had, "just as much as they needed" for the day and if they tried to store it overnight it would spoil.

This is true of all the truly important things in our lives – like friends & family, health and well-being, peace and love. These are not things that we can hoard or store away for another time. These truly important things can only be appreciated in the moment. It is often in the wilderness times in our lives that we are able to identify and to name those things that we truly need.

If we open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit, if we trust in the promise of unconditional love, if we see with new eyes those gifts which God has already given us, then it is possible to get through the driest and the hottest wilderness times in the journey we call life.