

You Don't Have to Pack a Lunch

Ray Friesen – July 25, 2021

In 2014 I was camping at the Landing while Sylvia and our younger daughter, Rachelle, were in Manitoba visiting our older daughter, Larissa, and assorted other extended family members and friends. I was scheduled to join them later in the week for a gathering of our national denomination. Each morning I would sit by the fire, drink coffee, and read a book. Toward noon or so I would go for a hike. Some trails I had hiked on previous camping excursions; others I had not seen before. On one particular day I decided on a new trail, one I had not known existed until that summer. As I got out of the camper and walked over to start the hike, I had my first clue that this might not be as easy as I had expected. This was a loop trail so both the beginning and the end points were off the parking lot. The one point had a recognizable trail leading away from it. The other had nothing but grass. I had no idea, if that was the end, how I would get there. If that was the beginning, there was no indication of what direction to walk, though south was a good bet. However, once I went south, how would I know where to turn?

I decided to start where I could see the trail. From there, sometimes the trail was well marked, sometimes I had no idea if I was still on the trail or even close to it. It was a clear, sunny, hot day and there was little shade where I was walking. This was in southwest Saskatchewan, after all. We are not known for our shade trees, not even in provincial parks. At one point, I encountered the skeleton of an antelope or deer—there was death along this trail. One stretch seemed only long grass, the odd shrub, and not a trail post in sight. I had to make it up as I went along. It was hot and by then I had run out of water.

Often, our life pilgrimages are like this. Life is a wilderness and we are wandering, mainly lost, and death seems to be in the area. Certainly mine is. We find ourselves in a stretch where skeletons litter and even small clues, to say nothing of trail posts, seem impossible to find. Death stalks the land and we are lost. The sun is hot and unrelenting, our water bottles are empty, our lips are cracked, our throats are parched. We begin to doubt that we can find our way and then we come upon another skeleton. From this we know that others did lose their way and never found water or the end of the trail. They died of thirst or the thousands of things that can bring death—spiritually, emotionally, and/or physically.¹

Wilderness Wandering is one of the Ancient Writings' primary themes and metaphors. It is there as early as immediately after the "In the Beginning" stories. Abraham is the first Wilderness Wanderer. At the end of Genesis 11, Abraham's father, Terah, pulls up tent stakes and leaves Ur to go to Canaan with his family, including Abraham and Sarah. However, when they get to Haran, things look so good and seem so nice that they decide to settle there. Who needs Wilderness Wandering?

Some years later, Abraham—still known as Abram at the time—came to Sarah at the cooking fire one morning and said, after pouring a cup of coffee, helping himself to piece of barbecued goat, and grabbing a fresh pita, "Honey, I should probably tell you: We are moving."

"We are what?"

"We are moving." Oh, boy. As if Ur to Haran hadn't been enough and just after they finally felt like they were part of the community. But Abram was the man and, with Terah dead, the head of the family. So, if he said move, they would have to move.

"Where to?"

"I don't know."

"You don't what?!"

¹ Adapted from Ray Friesen, *Wandering the Wilderness: A Guide for Weary Wanderers and Searching Skeptics*, (Swift Current, SK: JumpintotheStory Media, 2020), 1. Used by permission.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?!”

“I don’t know. You know, I. Don’t. Know.”

“You don’t know?”

“That’s what I said. I don’t know. Here, sit down. Let me explain.”

“This better be good.”

“Last night, God came to me and said we are to move, to a land God will show us. God did not say where this land is. God only said head west and then a little bit south and I’ll get you there. So, we are moving. End of discussion.” So they pulled up tent stakes again and headed west. As the Ancient Storyteller says: “Abraham said yes to God’s call to travel to an unknown place that would become his home. When he left, he had no idea where he was going.”² Wilderness Wanderers.

It is Abraham and Sarah’s story that is used by the anonymous interpreter of Jesus and Christian spirituality in a book published in English as *Hebrews*. In describing the life of faith in our world, this first-century theologian says: “These people of faith died not yet having in hand what was promised, but still believing. How did they do it? They saw it way off in the distance, waved their greeting, and accepted the fact that they were transients in this world.”³ The NLT calls them “nomads.” Wilderness Wanderers.

Centuries later, so the Ancient Storyteller has it, the descendants of the Ancient Couple, escaped slavery in Egypt and headed for the Promised Land, with no idea where that was or how to get there. No map. Armies and snakes and water-less deserts and mountains in the way. All they had was a profound trust in God, though it wavered often enough, and a leader who told a fantastic story about the vision for freedom God had given him. The Ancient Numbers Storyteller, in retrospect, maps the journey in forty-two stages.⁴

These forty-two stages are used, another group of centuries later, by John of Patmos, in his fantasy novella published in English under a few different names but most commonly referred to as *Revelation*. In John’s novella, the forty-two stages become forty-two months,⁵ the three-and-a-half years that he uses as the metaphor for the entire trajectory of history from Christmas, 29 BCE, to that time to come known only as “the End.” Like the Ancient Runaway Slaves who developed their faith and spirituality in their forty-two-stage wilderness journey, so we develop ours within this forty-two-month trajectory of history. Faith and spirituality are best developed, maybe *only* developed, in the Wilderness. It is the time period when we as humans wander the wilderness and seek to find meaning and courage with the help of the story and reality of Jesus. It makes all of us Wilderness Wanderers.

This, the Ancient Writings tell us, is the model for the life of faith, the life of God’s people in this world. Wilderness Wanderers. It is here that we get lost and our true lostness haunts us. Sometimes, life throws things into turmoil and we wake up far away from any well-marked trail in the middle of a mapless wilderness with no clue where to from here. Heart attack, cancer & chemo, bankruptcy, family

² Heb 11:8. *The Message*.

³ Heb 11:13. *The Message*.

⁴ See Num 33:5–49 lists forty-one stages, forty-one places where the runaway slaves camped. The forty-second stage is the crossing of the Jordan and the entry into the Promised Land, the end of the wilderness journey.

⁵ John refers to this time period in three different ways: forty-two months (11:2 & 13:5), 1,260 days (12:6) and “time, times, and half a time” (12:14), “that is, three-and-a-half years” (González & González, *Revelation*, 83). Three-and-a-half years is forty-two months as is 1,260 days (1260/30 = 42).

chaos, death of a child or spouse—all these and many more can turn life into a wilderness in which we wander, far from home and lost.⁶

It is while we wander this wilderness called life that we get hungry and thirsty. Like the Ancient Runaway Slaves, we can't pack enough food for the trek and water bottles run dry. Like the Slaves, we need manna from heaven and someone to hit the rock to bring water. We need Jesus to feed us and we need a spring of water within.

Fortunately for us, the Jesus Stories have Jesus feeding the hungry people in the wilderness, miraculously, till all have enough and there are 12 baskets left over. This is not simply the telling of something that happened. It is the only feeding story and miracle story told by all for Good News Story Editors. It is, like the crucifixion and the resurrection, central to the story of Jesus and central to the faith and spirituality of all who centre that faith and spirituality in Jesus and have it be informed by the Bible. This story together with the story of the wine miracle at the Cana wedding is a promise from God that as we wander the wilderness, the bread will never get mouldy, the wine will never turn sour, and there will always be more than enough.

How do we access these loaves of bread and goblets of wine? In worship. By prayer. As we meditate. When we find our places in the Jesus stories.

1. In worship. Our gathering this morning is a gathering around a picnic basket that has both bread and wine. We recall the stories of God at work. We join together in setting our focus on God in prayer. We sing, for singing lifts the spirits, draws us together, and expresses faith, confidence, gratitude, and praise. We leave this picnic blanket assured that we have been fed and there will be enough to be found each of the next 6 days to get us through to next Sunday and another picnic.

2. Prayer needs no schedule though prayer by schedule like saying grace at meals can feed the spirit. We can pray anytime, begging for help, expressing gratitude for something that happened or we received, praising because of the sheer joy of being alive. At high noon or during the darkness of night. Recently I lay awake at 3:00 at night. After a while I prayed the prayer taught at AA: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." I can remember only 2 or 3 repetitions and my next memory is my alarm playing Charlie Pride's song: "I just want to be me."

3. Meditation I suggest there is no finer collection of poetry on which to meditate than Ancient Poetry, 150 songs for every mood and situation. From the darkest despair where your only friend is the darkness around you to the most exultant joy and everything in between. In addition some of the Ancient Folk Singers—prophets we tend to call them—have some great song lyrics and poems. No matter how often we go there to eat, there will always be 12 baskets of left overs.

4. Using your imagination, find your place in the stories of Jesus. Hear Jesus speak to you. Have him heal your eyes. Walk with him for a while along the wilderness path. Don't be afraid to be a doubting Thomas or a questioning Nathaniel. Sometimes be brave enough to be a scribe, lawyer, or Pharisee and challenge Jesus. Jesus will respect that and you may find just the food you need. Bask in Jesus' presence.

Wilderness wandering is not optional for us as humans. It is a given. Starving and/or dying of thirst is a choice. We have been promised there will always be a bakery just down the path and a winery around the next hill where we can eat and drink all we want. May that give us the confidence to journey ever onward, no matter where in the wilderness we find ourselves.

⁶ Adapted from Friesen, *Wandering the Wilderness*, 11–13.