

## Wandering the Wilderness

*Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16; Genesis 12:4–9*

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In late June, early July, 2014 Sylvia and Rachelle went to Manitoba to visit family and friends while I stayed home.<sup>1</sup> I was going to join them a few days later and Sylvia and I would be attending the annual Mennonite Church Canada Assembly in Winnipeg. I decided to go camping at the Landing during the few days I had to myself.

Each morning I would sit by the fire, drink coffee, and read. 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, a few clicks west of the Goodwin House. The trailhead was well marked.<sup>2</sup> 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. 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.

The Ancient Anonymous Philosopher Theologian who left us the book of *Hebrews* uses this imagery when he discusses life and life's journey. After listing several Ancient Characters, the Ancient Sage writes:

By an act of faith, 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. By an act of faith he lived in the country promised him, lived as a stranger camping in tents. Isaac and Jacob did the same, living under the same promise. Abraham did it by keeping his eye on an unseen city with real, eternal foundations—the City designed and built by God.<sup>3</sup>

The Ancient Author continues: “Each one of 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,

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<sup>1</sup> I am borrowing this story & ideas that follow from the introduction and “At the Trailhead” in my book, *Wandering the Wilderness*.

<sup>2</sup> Those of you who have read the intro to my book will wonder why the story has changed. It's because my memory has changed, in part because I hike part of the trail again this summer.

<sup>3</sup> Heb 11:8–10. *The Message*.

waved their greeting, and accepted the fact that they were [strangers & foreigners] in this world.”<sup>4</sup>

The Ancient Wise One is more specific than just using any hike as the metaphor for life. He uses the Abraham story, the story of a man who, together with his wife, hired hands, and animals truly wandered the wilderness. It’s a story not often told yet one I think is a fascinating one. It teaches us a few lessons. This morning we want to see what it teaches us about wandering our wildernesses.

We read the story earlier. One night, so the Storyteller tells us, God visited Abraham and told him to pull up tent pegs, gather his hired hands and animals, and together with Sarah, his wife, head out. “Where to?” Abraham asked and God replied, “You don’t have to know. Start by going west and we’ll see.” And so Abraham and Sarah headed out, their only GPS a God who sometimes spoke and sometimes could be very silent. It is when they got to an area of the world known as Canaan that the Storyteller gives us a few tidbits of info that are, I believe, of crucial importance to our wandering the wilderness.

1. ***“The Canaanites were in the land.”*** There is a short sentence in the story that is easy to miss and/or ignore. I certainly did for many years. I no longer remember when or how it suddenly caught my attention and brought me up short. The line is: “The Canaanites were in the land.” Yeah? So? Big deal. Except hold it. Why does the Storyteller think it necessary to tell us this? Abraham and Sarah were in Canaan, after all. Who else would be in the land?

Imagine with me for a moment a couple of young adults from Europe deciding to explore the Canadian Prairies. They land in Regina and phone home to assure their parents they have arrived safely. And then, just before disconnecting, they say, really quite excited: “Guess what?! Mom and Dad. There are Canadians living here!” Mom and Dad look at each other. “These are our kids? This is the best we could do? They arrive in Canada and are surprised there are Canadians in Canada?”

So why does the storyteller make the obvious point: “The Canaanites were in the land”? Although on the Storyteller’s time line the Abraham story happened 13+ centuries before Jesus, the story and the collection within which it sits were not written and edited into their current form till the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE when the Jews were in Babylon, trying to figure out their faith, using the stories from their history. By then they knew that the biggest threat to faithfulness to Yahweh, their God, the One who had brought them out of Egypt, was the Canaanites. Time and again as we read the 600-year story of the people of Israel, we read that they were tempted by the culture, faith, and rituals of the Canaanites. There was something about the Canaanite narrative, the Canaanite story, that seemed so much more attractive than their own story, bound as it was by rules and calls to faithfulness that got in the way of how they wanted to live.

That, the Ancients tell us, is our situation in life, even in Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Canaanites are still living in the land with their very attractive stories. In our wanderings we are invited, like Abraham and all people of faith who have preceded us, to make the Ancient Story our true narrative. We are constantly tempted by the stories around us, stories of wanting and consumerism, stories creating divisive politics, stories that edit out God and write in a new set of values, more suitable to a lifestyle focused on ourselves. That has always been and will always be the situation, the tension we live in. We are, as the Ancient Theologian put it, “strangers and

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<sup>4</sup> Heb 11:L13. *The Message*.

foreigners” in this land, this world, this society. We must daily choose which Story will shape us, the Story of God or the Story of Consumerism, Greed, Division, and Self-Centeredness.

2. “[He] pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east.” However, the Canaanite in the land is not the only important piece in the Abraham story. The Storyteller tells us that when Abraham settled down, he “pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai in the east.” This is another example of reading later history into the earlier story to make a point.

Ai became famous when Joshua led the escaping Hebrew slaves into the Promised Land. At Jericho they won this great victory by marching around the city, giving chase and killing the inhabitants and then burning all the booty as an offering to God. With bold confidence they marched on to the next city, Ai. To their surprise their army was trounced and sent fleeing. Why? What had they got wrong?

They discovered the problem. One man, Achan, had decided that helping himself to some of the booty would surely not be noticed by anyone. He took it and buried it under his tent floor. The problem at Ai? The Canaanite story that said take what you want for yourself had won the day. That is why they were defeated at Ai. As a result, Ai became a symbol of unfaithfulness, of ignoring God and what God asked of them. To be camped in Ai’s neighbourhood was to be camped where the Canaanite stories were strong and could, if you weren’t careful, win you over to follow your own selfish ways.

Bethel did not get its name till two generations later when Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, spent a night there. It’s where Jacob had his dream of a stair case to heaven and angels going up and down the stairs. From the top of the stairs, God spoke to Jacob. When he awoke he called the place Bethel, House of God. That is the other neighbourhood in which we live. Yes, the Canaanite might be in the land and Ai might cast its shadow over us but the House of God and its invitation to faithfulness is also in the land. It is the tug of war between Ai and Bethel that shapes our lives and our wandering in the wilderness. We seem never quite sure who will win. Ai is our threat; Bethel is our hope.

The question that seems necessary to ask as we live between Ai and Bethel is: Is there anything we can do to help the tug of war to move in one direction rather than the other? The Storyteller says: Absolutely. There is one more tidbit of info to notice.

3. “*He built an altar to the Lord and he invoked the name of the Lord.*” Every time Abraham pitched his tent he also built an altar. Sometimes he talked to God; sometimes God talked to him. It was that altar-building and the conversations with God that helped him live faithfully, courageously, and hopefully while wandering the wilderness.

It is building altars that will help us as we wander our wilderness, living between Ai and Bethel with the Canaanites all around us. We build our altars when we join for worship as we have done this morning, in this building or by joining on line. We build our altars when we meet for coffee, a glass of wine, or a mug of beer with our friends and talk about our wanderings, the tough times and the good times, and encourage each other. We build our altars when we sit by ourselves and meditate on the Ancient Stories, Poems, and Other Writings and allow writings that have spoken to and for God’s people for centuries, speak to and for God for us. Listen to music. Read a good book. Sit quietly, in your happy place at home, by a camp fire, or overlooking the lake and in the Silence, in the Sound of the Silence, hear God speak. It is at these

altars that we remember who we are, we remember God, and we gain the wisdom, strength, and courage to keep on wandering as we search for that city whose builder and architect is God.

It is as we build those altars that we will make sure Ai never wins the tug of war with Bethel and the Canaanite Story, no matter how attractive, does not lose out to the God Story.

May it be so.