

EXILE: Finding Your Way Home.

Jeremiah 31:1-9; Luke 7:36-50 Trinity United Methodist Church

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THE WILDERNESS.

The Bible talks –especially the prophets in the Old Testament– a lot about the wilderness.

When life was hard, when the Hebrew people found themselves in a place they didn't want to be, when everything looked like it was going wrong, the Jews used the word “wilderness” to talk about what they were going through.

Many of the Jews had been carried into exile by the Babylonians. Forcibly resettled in the pagan metropolis of Babylon. Nearly seven hundred miles to the east of Jerusalem. God's people found themselves living in a strange place. Among strange people. Who had strange ways of speaking and dressing and thinking about God.

There are all kinds of wilderness.

You may be in a wilderness place in your marriage, your relationship with a friend, your work life. Our nation is in a wilderness that people call “the Great Recession.” It's not just an economic thing but there is something more going on.

I'm old enough to remember when the Miles Corporation was a going business. Now, I drive by the site of that pharmaceutical company and feel so sad about what's been lost. That place was a world-class operation! It was buzzing with activity. You could fly into and out of Elkhart on scheduled airline service. I want that world back. I want things to be the way they were “back then.” Sometimes, when you see what we've lost, it feels like a wilderness.

We were walking in Island Park the other day. There was a father there with his young son, and his son was riding a Big Wheel. Do you know that distinctive sound the plastic wheels of a Big Wheel make as they roll over the dirt and grit on a sidewalk? I heard that sound and immediately thought of those times when our young sons were riding their Big Wheels in our driveway on East Jackson, and I wanted those times back. I wanted things back.

Wilderness times.

Different Kinds of Wilderness.

Maybe the wilderness you're in is a spiritual wilderness.

Maybe you and God have stopped talking.

Maybe, for all practical purposes, you are doing life on your own. God just really isn't in the picture anymore.

For some of us that happened not because there was any great crisis. We got busy. We stopped investing in the relationship. We got bored. We got turned off by some of the nonsense in the church. So we drifted away from God. It's almost like our relationship with God is something we **misplaced**.

A year ago I was up in Chicago at the Container Store. I wandered around for thirty minutes and do you know what I ended up buying? Two little plastic containers I could put shampoo and conditioner in. So I could carry my favorite kind of shampoo and conditioner with me when I went to the Y. *(Okay...I know some of you are thinking to yourselves, “Why do*

you even need shampoo and conditioner? That's like buying grass seed and fertilizer when you have a yard of dirt and stone in Albuquerque, New Mexico!")

I was pleased with myself. (Sad, huh?) I used those little containers for about six months. And then I misplaced them. I have no idea where I put them. I remember pulling them out of my gym bag when I went away for a few days, and used my gym bag as a cheap and easy suitcase. Every now and then I wonder where they are. I don't even know where to look.

For some of us the spiritual wilderness we're in is all about a relationship with God we've misplaced. There was no great crisis. We just stopped talking. We've ended up doing life on our own.

There are others who entered a spiritual wilderness because of a **great crisis**...a great loss. I hear about those. There is the 41 year old mother whose teenage daughter died of cancer. The mom thought God should stop the disease. The mom prayed for God to stop the disease and save her daughter's life. The woman had been faithful -done her best, at least-all her life. She sang in the church choir and played the piano in worship at her church. She helped out in the nursery when she could. So God should hear her prayers, right? Her daughter died and the heartbroken woman said, "I'll never play the piano again. I'll never sing again for God because God didn't save my daughter's life."

Sometimes we just wander into the wilderness. Nothing big happens. We just lose sight of God...and do life on our own.

Sometimes there is a great crisis...a loss, a death, and we're shoved out into a desolate place where faith and hope and healing and joy are strangers. We're shoved out into a wilderness where we're sure God isn't.

And sometimes we try **life on our own terms**. We sin. We make a mess of things. We break relationships and hurt people and disappoint God because we insist on doing what we want, having our way in all things. As we sit in the middle of the wreckage our sin has caused, we are so ashamed...so convinced we are permanently damaged goods...that we do everything we can to avoid God.

A buddy of mine had a successful career in the financial investment industry. In his mid 40's he announced that he was leaving his wife of twenty-plus years, and his three teenage children, his job, and moving to a state three hundred miles away to move in with a woman he had known as a friend in his early 20's.

I knew he had been overloaded for a long time. He was one of those guys people in town would go to if they wanted to get something done. He was smart and he cared and he did what he said he would do. But he was overloaded. He had been over the red line, in terms of over commitment, for a long, long time. And I knew there were some things in his marriage he needed to address, but Larry didn't want to hurt his wife's feelings by bringing up some tough subjects. So instead of backing off, instead of saying "no" and finding a healthier life balance, instead of working some things through with his wife, he decided to leave town. Leave the marriage. Leave his kids. Leave his job.

Larry came by the church to explain what he was doing. Said he had thought it through. Said it made sense even though people in his family and Sunday school didn't get it. Said it was going to work out right. Larry and I were friends and he just wanted me to know.

I told him what I thought.

I told him I loved him, I told him God loved him, and I told him there must be a lot of pain and desperation and frustration behind this decision. I told him it sure seemed he was running counter to what God would want him to do. I told him his life looked like it needed repairing, but that running off to another state to move in with a woman he didn't really know all that well was going to be a mess. Just a mess

Larry left town.

Eight weeks later he called his wife and said, "I want to come home. I don't know what I'm doing here."

Do you know how hard it is to face God, and the people who know you, when you go out and wreck your life in that kind of spectacular way?

Some of us are in a spiritual wilderness, our relationship with God has been lost, because we're embarrassed...we're doing our best to avoid God at all costs. We just don't want any kind of contact with God because we're embarrassed. We're ashamed. And we know a holy God would not want to deal with a rascal, a failure, like us.

It's tough finding your way home when you're in the wilderness.

WHAT JEREMIAH HAS TO SAY TO US.

After years have gone by the prophets are given a new word by God: God is going to bring the people back home. God is going to lead people out of exile, escort them home, and begin a new chapter with them. That's what today's reading from Jeremiah 31 is all about.

First, in the wilderness God doesn't turn away from us but comes to us. Sometimes we're so overwhelmed, so angry, so sad, or so scared that we close our eyes. We know the last place in the world we would ever find God is in the wilderness, but God says in verse 2, "*The people who survive the sword will find favor in the wilderness; I will come to give rest to Israel.*" We may be convinced God has abandoned us but God says there is favor in the wilderness...and God comes into the wilderness for us.

Second, God's love is everlasting. Jeremiah says (:3), "*The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.'*"

Maybe you've traveled out west and crossed river beds in Arizona or Nevada. As you approach a bridge the green sign by the edge of the highway tells you the name of a river. But you look down and all you see is an indentation in the earth with rocks and sand. There may be no water at all running under the bridge.

Sometimes there is water in the riverbed.

Sometimes there isn't.

It depends on the time of the year.

It's easy to think that God's love is like a river out in the desert southwest: sometimes it's there and sometime it's not.

Jeremiah says God loves us with an everlasting love.

The river of the Father's love never goes dry.

If you're in the wilderness, if things in our country seem broken and upside-down, it's worth remembering that the Father's love is everlasting.

Third, the way out of the wilderness involves making a decision to let God do the rebuilding.

Jeremiah 31:4 says: *"I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt. Again you will take up your timbrels and go out to dance with the joyful."* Then, two verses later, the prophet announces: *"There will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim, 'Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God.'"*

God is the designer of the rebuilding.

God is the architect of the new chapter...the new way of living.

Do you know the great danger you face when you consider coming out of the wilderness...returning home from the exile? It is that you'll go home and do life just the way you did before the crisis.

When the Babylonians invaded Judah, they tore Jerusalem down. They pulled down many of the buildings and the walls. Left it as a heap of rubble. Weeds grew up. Animals roamed the streets.

God, through the prophet, says He is going to rebuild the nation.

I've been thinking a lot about *our* nation. About who we will be and what we will do after we walk our way -I liked the way Mayor Moore of Elkhart said we are walking our way out of the recession- out of this current national crisis.

Will we come out of the wilderness, will we come out of the crisis as a nation, and go back to business as usual? Worshipping the same false gods? Making decisions based only on what is best for us?

There are rumblings that some of the same, risky, financial games that were being played on Wall Street before the Great Recession are beginning again. I'm not smart enough to understand whether that is true or not, but it worries me. Shouldn't we have learned something? Shouldn't we have learned something in the wilderness?

After the crisis, after the time in the wilderness, after we have tried to do relationships and work and life on our own, living by our own wisdom, will we let God be the architect? Will we let God guide us in the rebuilding?

Will we be God's people? Do life God's way?

Fourth, letting God lead us home, letting God bring us out of our wilderness places, can be scary, hard work. Think about the courage and faith it took for the Hebrews to, after seventy years in Babylon, after settling in and making their homes there in that prosperous, thriving world capital where the Jews enjoyed an amazing amount of freedom, to set off for Jerusalem. It was over six hundred miles to the west. The last they had heard the city of Jerusalem was in ruins.

Things there were going to be different.

Different than Babylon.

Different than what they were used to.

Different than the Judah, the Jerusalem, their grandparents remembered...told stories about.

It takes courage to risk a new thing. It takes courage to let God lead you into a new way of doing marriage. After years of keeping score of every wrong, after years of keeping track of who gives the most and gets their way the most often, after years of trying to control and change your partner, it takes courage to let God lead us towards a new way of doing marriage. Change is hard. Change requires courage.

It takes courage to risk a new thing. It takes courage to let God lead you into a drug free life after the stuff you've been using has helped you cope. It takes courage and work to face down your addiction and reach out to others...to get well.

It takes courage to risk a new thing. Let God lead you out of the wilderness. It's easy to shrug your way through life without looking for God, hungering for God, being open to God. Honestly, when God gets involved with our lives things get complicated. Life isn't just about what is easiest, anymore. Life isn't just about what we want, anymore. Get close to the Nazarene, get close to Jesus, and you're going to get into trouble...shake things up...people may not like who you've become or what you're up to.

Notice what Jeremiah says in 31:9: the people are going to head home weeping and praying. Even as God leads them besides streams of water on a level path, moving from a place that is familiar -even if it is exile- to a new place is scary. Change is always scary...and uncertain.

I love how Shane Claiborne says when he met Jesus, Jesus wrecked his life.

It takes courage to let God lead you out of the wilderness. Home from the exile. To a new place...a new way of living.

You need to know this.

You may be in a painful place without God, a wilderness place, but heading for home with God, getting well with God, is going to take courage...and work...and time.

Fifth, the people God leads home, the people God brings out of the wilderness, are pretty helpless. They're not the people who have all the answers. They're not the people who have everything they need. They're not the movers and shakers. But they are a pretty helpless, weak bunch.

Look at Jeremiah 31:8: ⁸ *See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return.*

I know we like to sing hymns like *Onward, Christian Soldiers* but this is a pretty unimpressive column of folks God is leading home from the exile: the blind, the lame, the expectant mothers, and women in the middle of labor.

God is all about leading a column of the lame and the blind and expectant mothers home. People who need help. People who, without help, would be lost.

It's a rather unimpressive bunch God leads back towards Jerusalem...or wherever God wants us to be. It's a rather unimpressive bunch God leads out of the wilderness.

Which means there may be hope for you...for me.

And this God is a God who is a shepherd...who comes out and leads his lost people home. To a new place...a new kind of life.

I love the story in the 7th chapter of Luke. Jesus is in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Pharisees were middle class men who were on fire for God. They were like spiritual marines. People who were doing their best to live out their faith every day. At work. At home. Sleeping. Waking. Making money. Spending money.

So one of these middle class men invites Jesus over for dinner. A dinner is a big deal, you know? Especially in 1st century Jewish culture. When you broke bread with someone, when you went in and reclined on a couch around the serving table (which is the way meals were served in those days), you were affirming a very special kind of friendship.

Jesus is having dinner when an uninvited guest intrudes. Now, there were probably curious neighbors slipping into the room to get a glimpse of Jesus, to see what the fuss was all about, but this guest was different. This woman didn't just slip through the room or stand in a corner, away from the dinner guests, but she stands behind Jesus. Crying. She doesn't say a word: she just stands there weeping.

It's interesting how Luke identifies the woman in verse 37: she is a "woman in that town who lived a sinful life." That's all Luke says. He doesn't go into detail. All we're told is that she's a mess. Not that she messed up one time, or made a wrong decision during a tough chapter, but she has lived a sinful life. One bad decision has been followed by another.

You've lived in a small town, perhaps. You've gone to a school where someone is always in trouble. Always in trouble. People try to straighten them out, help them out, coach them into a better way, but they manage to make a mess of things. You know people like this, right? You just know they are going to make a mess of every opportunity.

She stands behind Jesus, weeping, and her tears fall on his feet. She bends down, wipes the feet of Jesus dry with her hair, kisses them and pours perfume on these feet that are soon enough to be split open by Roman nails.

Simon and the other proper people in the room are shocked. No man of God, no prophet, would let such a loser...such a sinner...touch him in this way.

Jesus senses Simon's disapproval. Jesus says he has something to tell Simon. Simon says, "Tell me, teacher." Which means he has an open heart. Which means he still appears teachable. Which means grace may not roll off him but somehow find its way deep into his heart and soul.

So Jesus tells a story about three men. One man owed a debt of \$5,000 and another owed the same lender \$500. Neither man had money enough to pay off their debts, Jesus says, so the lender forgave both debts. "Now which one of them will love him more?" Jesus asks.

Simon knows where the story is leading him. Even though this kind of grace irritates him. So he says, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

Then, Jesus turned towards the woman and pointed out to Simon how she had welcomed Jesus, greeted him with a kiss, and anointed him with perfume. "I tell you," Jesus says, "her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

Jesus looks at the woman and says, "Your sins are forgiven."

I love this story.

But I am confident we are only getting half the story. I'm convinced that Jesus and this woman have already met. There has been an encounter. Somewhere -and somehow- they have crossed paths.

When she tried to explain her wrecked life, her despair, her shame, her desperate longing for God, Jesus must have said something to her, or done something, that let her know she was one of the very people he had come into the world looking for. That she was more than welcome to join the column of people Jesus was leading home...out of the wilderness of sin and fear and loneliness and death.

I believe Jesus and this woman have met before that moment in the home of Simon the Pharisee. And what the woman saw in Jesus, heard in Jesus, was grace. Jeremiah would call it God's everlasting love.

When you come face to face with God's love in Jesus, you're almost home already.