A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*Beyond the Wilderness*

Exodus 3:1-15

August 30, 2020

In our Old Testament reading this morning, we find a man a long way from the places people seek God. He’s nowhere near a sanctuary or a community of people or the beauty of nature—all the places people experience God’s presence. And he’s not looking for God. He’s hiding. From God, from himself, from people who want to hurt him. This is a lonely place and a lonely person. And is just exactly where we meet God.

The first word of the chapter sends us out a long way from anywhere: *Moses*. Moses, remember, was, in his former life, the son of Hebrew slaves in Egypt, sent floating in a wicker basket by his mother who feared for his life because Pharaoh had ordered the murder of all Hebrew baby boys. Irony of ironies, the floating basket was discovered by Pharaoh’s own daughter who brought the baby into the family. The son of Hebrew slaves grew up as a Prince of Egypt in the house of Pharaoh. Like many important people in the Bible, Moses carried two passports.

Whatever conflict of identity he may have had as a Hebrew in the house of Pharaoh, it came to a crisis when he struck and killed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. Fearing for his life, Moses fled away, left behind Pharaoh’s house with its privileges, left behind Egypt’s gods with their temples, the Hebrew slaves with their claim on his conscience; he left behind everything he knew and knew of himself. He ran. Never to return. He ran, to begin a new life. He ran away into the desert wilderness.

Out there, way out there, Moses happens upon a family of goat herders and meets and marries one of the daughters. And so, we find him, alone, keeping the flock of his father-in law. It’s hard to believe we found him. He’s not easy to find way out here. This is wilderness. In the ancient view of the world, the world is divided into three kinds of places. The Land: which is where we live and which is governed by our sovereign God. There’s foreign land, which is where other people live and is governed by their gods. And there’s wilderness. Wilderness, or desert, is beyond land. It’s unclaimed, unsettled, untamed; it’s an “un”-land, an unplace. It’s where dragons are--and the devil. Wilderness is beyond God’s sovereign rule. Yes, you may have a doctrine that God created all the earth, but God has all but abandoned wilderness. That’s how they saw the world. And you understand if you have been to Death Valley in the US or been in the middle east and looked out upon the vast impossible ocean of dry, arid, desert land why they thought that way.

Our children learned in their Godly Play Lesson: "The desert is a dangerous place.  There is no food. There is no water. People die without food and water. Nothing grows there, so when the wind blows, the shape of the desert changes. People lose their way. The desert is a dangerous place. People do not go there unless they have to. It takes courage to go to the desert." (T*he Complete Guide to Godly Play: Volume 2).*

The narrator of this story doesn’t just find Moses in the wilderness. He’s so far into the wilderness that he’s beyond the wilderness. That introduces a fourth kind of place—Land, Foreign Land, Wilderness, and, apparently, Beyond the Wilderness. Some translations say the backside of the wilderness. Usually in the bible, the word is After. After the wilderness….

After the wilderness is the solar system is out beyond the orbit of Pluto, which is hardly even a planet; Beyond the Wilderness is off the map, way past the grid, out beyond ideas and hope of return and memory of yourself. In human experience, beyond the Wilderness is the home of shame, despair, regret, and grief. It’s when the tears won’t come anymore but the heartache still burns as a hot sun. When the hope of goodness is gone, but the pain of injustice cracks open the earth. It’s the last hope for the job in your field is awarded to someone else; it’s walking through the door of a payday predatory lender because you think you have nowhere else to go. It’s the morning after the high, the day after the regret. You don’t go looking for beyond the wilderness. If you’re looking for it, you’ll never find it. You find yourself there alone and wonder, “How did I get here, and how do I ever get back?”

Because we know what’s about to come in this story, we know that Beyond the Wilderness isn’t beyond God, but it’s easy to forget. It feels like it to those who are there. Yes, beyond the wilderness you feel like you’re out of the reach of God.

Moses is beyond the wilderness, thinking to himself, “How did I, Prince of Egypt, get here?” Or maybe he’s even past that question, just absent-minded following the goats around the bend in the rock. The narrator handles the details of the story very carefully. The dimensions are sparse. At the heart of the text is only a man and a shrub bush. But the sparse details are offset by the intensity of the story.

The lonely man is shaken from his thoughts by the strange sight of fire; a bush burning but not consumed. When he approaches to take a closer look, he hears his name. “Moses, Moses, come no closer, take off your shoes, for the place *where you are standing* is holy ground.”

How could anything beyond the wilderness be holy ground? The narrator tells us that he’s at the base of Mt. Horeb. Later, much later in the story, Moses, with all the freed Hebrew slaves in tow, will ascend this same mountain and receive, the tablets of the 10 commandments. (It’s bewildering how far we will go, and how much is yet to change in this story.) Perhaps Moses has inadvertently stumbled on a sacred place. I’ve felt something similar when out backpacking and come around a bend to an unanticipated view of a river valley gorge or a mountain peak. Discovery is a wonderful experience. By happy accident or by divine sovereign guidance, Moses has found himself just exactly where he was supposed to be to meet God and discover his place in the world. Sometimes life like feels just exactly like that.

*The place where you are standing is holy ground*.

But there’s another layer of meaning. If a patch of dirt out beyond the wilderness can be holy ground, then everywhere can be holy ground. If God can find him beyond the wilderness, God can find anyone, anywhere. If God can call and use Moses to deliver his people from bondage, God can use anyone, anytime, for any purpose. At DaySpring, we hold this belief fiercely about each person. Every footprint you leave has a drop of grace.

Nowhere is beyond God’s presence.

Nothing is beyond God’s grace.

No one is beyond God’s purpose.

Moses is in the most unlikely place and he is the most unlikely person for what our children sometimes call a God-sighting. There’s no sanctuary, no community of friends, no beauty. None of the ways we seek to find God. It’s just a person beyond his wilderness, who is found by God. He meets God in the burning bush and his heart is set on fire. When that happens, it’s not so that you just have a personal spiritual experience. It’s so that you are empowered to change the world. From there, Moses is sent back from the wilderness to the foreign land to bring liberation to God’s children and lead them through the wilderness into their promised land.

It kind of gives new meaning to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem:

*Earth’s crammed with heaven,*

*And every common bush afire with God.*

People of faith have always loved and found inspiration in this story. At the base of Mt. Sinai, St. Catherine’s monastery has kept vigil for 1500 years, supposedly right at the place where the bush burned but was not consumed. In the wilderness, where there was once no sanctuary, community, or beauty for Moses, now there is a sanctuary, a community of people, and beauty in art. In early Christian icons at St. Catherine’s and throughout the world, Mary holding baby Jesus is sometimes depicted within a flame of fire with barefoot Moses off to the side. Like the bush that was burnt but not consumed, Mary gave birth to the Incarnate God without being harmed.

The writings of the early church fathers loved this idea of seeing Moses and the burning bush prefigure the virgin birth of Christ. They associated the angel of the Lord speaking to Moses as the voice of Christ himself. In their way of reading the story, Christ commissioned him as an agent of God’s liberating ministry, the same ministry he will embody incarnate as a child of the nation that Moses will set free from bondage in Egypt. *Go set my people free*. It’s the ministry of Jesus: “I have seen their suffering, I have seen their misery, I have heard their cry. I know their sufferings and I come down to deliver them.” Christians have not been shy about seeing Gospel images in this Old Testament story and hearing the very mission of Jesus in the words from the burning bush.

If God can call Moses out of a shrub bush on the backside of the wilderness, no one, nowhere, no time, no past, no distance, no despair, no pain, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Even when you feel like you’re far, far gone in the spiritual wilderness, keep your eyes open, you never know how God is waiting for you right around the next bend.

Thanks be to God.

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