

## **SEEKING THE ROCK IN THE WILDERNESS**

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Exodus 17:1-7

Directed by GOD, the whole company of Israel moved on by stages from the Wilderness of Sin.

There is so much packed into that one verse; a wilderness, moving in stages and directed by God. Three truly profound concepts that speak to us today.

Very few people would argue with the fact that this is a wilderness time for all churches, not just St. Aidan's or the Episcopal Church, but for churches and religion in general. We are surrounded by a wilderness of sin in religion with radicals on all sides of all faiths hijacking the word of God for their own purposes. On the other hand we have people who have walked away from organized religion proclaiming they are spiritual not religious or have just become atheists. Add to that a 24/7 world where Sunday morning is just another work or sports day and we can feel somewhat under siege.

Now I am painting the wilderness as a negative place and many people consider wilderness time as negative. However a wilderness experience can also be one of great growth and development. That is ultimately what the 40 years of Israel's wander is all about. Out of this crucible the nation of Israel is formed.

We have forgotten that in a large part of the world a time in the wilderness is part of the process of growing up. American Indian males would be sent into the wilderness as adolescents to find themselves. They had a quest that often resulted in their finding their adult name, and claim their adult identity. We have lost that sense of quest in the wilderness in our modern world. As a result we do not know how to handle the wilderness experiences that confront us in our lives.

It is critical to remember Mount Sinai is placed directly in the middle of the Jewish wilderness experience. It is only in traveling through the wilderness that the people of Israel receive the greatest gift of the Hebrew Scriptures, the law. However they have not arrived there yet in today's reading. They can only remember how great the good old days in Egypt were as they sat by the fleshpots. However they have also forgotten that they were slaves. So they turn on Moses.

When the people challenge Moses to solve the problem he cannot and fears for his safety. Their faith in Moses is tested and I sometimes wonder if Moses' faith in himself is tested. This is a feeling that anyone who has served in a church leadership position understands. The solution only comes when he turns the problem over to God. We cannot solve the challenges of the wilderness on our own, we must involve God. God directs the way out of the desert. God will show us the way out of our wilderness.

However before we embark on the way out of the wilderness maybe what we need to examine is what is the gift for us that can only be found in our wilderness? Maybe some of our wilderness time, especially here at St. Aidan's is about the quest of that American Indian boy, looking to claim his name his grown up identity. We are almost at the 50 year point at St. Aidan's and this is often a time when a parish looks at their identity. What has it been and what will it be. The gift may just be the answer to that question.

Now the Israelites are grumbling because they were physically thirsty and literally needed water. The thirst we have is a spiritual one. The world is spiritually thirsty. What are you thirsty for? What are we as a congregation thirsty for? That is what our Vision Team has been working on this summer and will continue to work on this year. Ultimately we are seeking the living water that Christ promises to give us.

Now let me be clear, the vision team is not your Moses. I am not your Moses either. The vision team is more like the elders who go with Moses to find the rock. The vision team sees themselves like Sacagawea, the Indian guide for Lewis and Clark. Sacagawea did not know the way to the west coast but she did know how to read the signs in the forest to help guide them along the way. Our vision team is learning to read those signs.

One thing that we have learned is that many today are looking for solutions to new problems in old places. We wonder how much contemporary music should we put in the service when most of the contemporary music we are talking about was written before anybody under the age of 30 was born. Think about that! Our newest liturgies have been trial liturgies since 1997. Some people still refer to the new prayer book that was finished in 1976 which means it is 35 years old. Now tradition is wonderful and important but one challenge is we may be looking for the wrong rock or maybe heading down a path that does not lead to the rock we are seeking. The vision team is searching for the rock that will give us the living water for our thirst. We are actively seeking the rock that God is standing on.

Now the passage says that God was leading them out of the wilderness by stages. We are approaching a stage in our travel where you the members of the congregation will again become active participants. Over the summer the team has analyzed the data from last October's cottage meetings, looked at internal and external opportunities and challenges and determined what additional information we need. We are following an idea that senior warden Fred Parkinson mentioned last fall. We are looking back, looking around, looking inward and then looking ahead. Coming up in the next few weeks will be a looking back experience. We will have a Saturday night event which will be somewhat similar to the history night you did while in the search process, but the information gathered will be different because we are now different. There are many new faces here that were not here during the interim. Later we will engage in the looking inward and looking forward exercises and those will also involve all of you. We are seeking the water that will give us a vision for all of us.

We have learned that we must venture into the unknown to find the rock that will provide the water we are seeking today. The world has changed so radically that old answers simply will not help us. We must venture into the wilderness to find the way forward so

that 50 years from now when St. Aidan's is celebrating 100 years they will thank us for the water that we find which will quench the thirst of a new generation of members.

Finally, regardless of what we thirst for, we know that the source is God. The team is seeking to be led forward by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our Moses. The Holy Spirit will lead us to the rock. This is why all of the work the team does is soaked in scripture and bible study. This is why the work you will do with us will be soaked in scripture.

The question is do we trust that the pillar of flame and cloud will be there when we need it? Do we have the faith to truly believe and trust that God is leading us somewhere wonderful? I sure do. The vision team does and we ask that you also have that faith.

Wildernesses can be frightening places, but they are also places of great and wonderful discoveries. The question is how will we use this wilderness time. Will we wish for the good old days of slavery in Egypt and wish we could go back like the Israelites in today's passage? Or will we be willing to travel that wilderness to find the rock that God is standing on. Israel only became a nation because they made the journey and found the rock. God desires that we find that special rock for our special parish.