

Through the Wilderness

Ordinary Time

September 6-27, 2020

Week 1: Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Praises and Swords

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Week 2: Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Into the Sea

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Week 3: Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – What Is It?

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A tweet is floating around that simply says, “I missprecedented times.” How often do you hear that these are unprecedented times? Of course, like all broad statements of that kind, this is both true and untrue. It is true that most of us haven’t lived with a pandemic. The natural disasters and the political and racial unrest all roll together to create a miasma of despair unlike anything we’ve ever experienced.

Except we have. Maybe not exactly this, but we know the experience. We’ve been here before. We call it wilderness. It is a regular occurrence in the lives of followers of Jesus. One might say it is standard operating procedure. But familiarity doesn’t mean ease. Wandering through the wilderness is a difficult journey at the best of times. Other times, it can seem impossible. Our task in this series is to help us find our way through the wilderness of this time by allowing the first of God-wanderers in the book of Exodus to speak to us. The stories of the people of God, along with the hymns of the faith in the Psalms, become our guides through the wilderness today.

Week 1: Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Praises and Swords
September 6, 2020—[Exodus 12:1-14](#) and [Psalm 149](#)

INTRODUCTION

It’s Labor Day weekend. What does that mean in your setting, besides that there might be fewer in attendance on this day? Although, if you’re still online mostly, then the excuses for missing might be fewer this year. And how will you celebrate the work force with such high unemployment? Maybe by September, the employment situation will be better. But how much better? Who has been left behind in this pandemic year? What businesses have suffered in the unrest and the shifting of priorities? What provisions can your church community provide for those who are struggling financially? What word can you give for those whose livelihood has been affected? And how do we deal with the anger that still churns away underneath?

If there is an emotion that seems to resonate throughout the texts for this first week of our new series, it is anger. If there is an emotion that often will launch us

into a wilderness experience, it is also anger. So, this seems to be where we need to begin. Let's be clear, however, this isn't a call for an experience of worship that stokes anger in the participants. This isn't a rallying cry to tear down or rise up or strike out. No, this is an opportunity for us first to acknowledge that all of us get angry. And that if we don't acknowledge that, then the wilderness becomes that much more difficult to navigate. This isn't supposed to be a therapy session; however, but it can be the beginning of a healing process.

So, how might you deal with anger in worship this week? First of all, it might be worth recognizing that there are things worth getting angry about. The list of ongoing injustice in our world is certainly a call for some anger. We share in God's anger for what is broken and abusive in our society and in our communities. Perhaps expressing our anger might enable our action in our communities. Let our prayers stir us to get angry at what angers God.

An analysis of what makes us angry, however, might reveal how self-focused we are, rather than other focused. We might need a time of confession that our angers are often directed at our personal slights, or our inconveniences rather than on the injustices of a larger community. We might need some time in worship for humbling and offering up our sense of entitlement or desire for personal comforts.

In a previous time, we could write down the things that make us angry and burn them. But perhaps that doesn't fit our new requirements. But some way of acknowledging and then forgiving so that they disappear would be a powerful statement about the grace of God, strong enough to even forgive our angers. Consider having a prayer station for lighting candles, a time of silence with proper gestures of claiming and releasing enacted by the whole community of faith, online and in-person both.

What shall we sing? Are there songs of anger? Well, maybe, but songs should be songs of peace—particularly peace that comes from the Spirit of abundance, the Spirit of healing and unity and service. Remember, we are acknowledging anger, not celebrating it. Although our Psalm text calls to mind a people with “high praises in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands,” we are still the people who long for a time when swords are beaten into plowshares. The weapon that is our anger needs to be turned into a tool for service and transformation,

not one that divides and damages. Praying and singing for peace is the way we will come through the wilderness.

PREACHING NOTES

This series starts with a difficult word. There should be a warning label attached to this sermon—something that draws attention to the danger to our safe security and comfort of faith that doesn't demand much of us; that doesn't threaten us. The violence in both texts must be handled delicately, for both have been abused over the millennia to turn the faith into something it never should have been, and from which it still struggles to emerge. The crusader mentality, implicit in verses like "let the high praises of God be in their throats and the two-edged swords in their hands," still breathes through our church on too many levels and in too many corners.

So, why even bother? Why not leave these ideas and images in the dust of history and focus on the kinder and gentler aspects of the faith? Simply because our time calls for an urgency like what is in these texts and a passion that is necessary to drive the transformation needed in our church and in our world. That there are things worth killing, things that need to die for truth to live is a harsh reality that we cannot avoid. And some of those things are like firstborn children to those who hold on to them.

The Exodus text is about the establishment of a ritual, a call to a life of worship. But it is also a call to transformation: from slavery to freedom, from oppression to liberation. It is a call to risk a new life and to embrace change. All this is in the ritual and the words and ideas that the Passover has come to represent.

Notice, for example, the meal itself. There is the sacrificial lamb, whose blood brings redemption and whose body provides sustenance. But there are the bitter herbs, reminders of the suffering already endured and the suffering yet to come. This transformation will not be pain free and will not be blood free. This is a part we tend to forget, or we want to forget. Without suffering, there is no transformation.

Look, too, at how the meal is to be eaten. First there is the call to be ready to move, the first fast-food meal described. Eat it with your shoes on; eat it with your coats buttoned up; eat it with your car keys in your hand, ready to go at a

moment's notice. Yes, this isn't an every-man-for-himself kind of proposition, not every woman on her own. There is a sense of unity, of family. And if one family is too small, or too poor, then gather with others; be the bigger family; be joined together. Even in this crisis moment, there is a call to care for one another, to look out for those who might be on the margins. Come together to prepare yourselves for this moment, this flight toward freedom.

But what do we fight? What do we stand against? Who is the enemy here? This text (we'll get to the Psalm later) isn't about fighting. It is about preparing to run, about going from this place of slavery to a new place of freedom. It is about acknowledging the suffering endured and preparing for more suffering to come; the road to freedom isn't an easy or a quick one. It calls for preparation and unity, and it calls for setting some things aside.

Some argue that the call for unleavened bread is a time issue. There isn't time for the bread to rise, so eat it flat. Certainly, time is of the essence here. But there is something more. Fermentation, yeast rising, has a reputation of something wrong, something spoiling, something going bad. There are habits and attitudes and behaviors that must be set aside for the journey to be made.

This is more than finding and vanquishing enemies. Pay attention to the text; there is what appears to be classic hyperbole when the Lord passes through Egypt. First the text says, "I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals." Really, animals? Bearing the weight of the sins of the nation, now the animals have to suffer? It seems over the top. The text doesn't end there, however: "on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord!"

What if a literal reading of this text isn't the best way to read it? What if what needs to be destroyed are the closely held beliefs in supremacy, racial superiority, and religious bigotry? What if the sacrifice that is demanded here is a worldview that oppresses and dehumanizes? These are the firstborn of a people of oppression and as hard to surrender as our own children. Look at the faces of those shouting at Ruby Bridges as she became the first African American student in an all-white elementary school in Louisiana. The photos from that time reveal a people who want to cling to their racism as if it were their firstborn child. What gods did the Egyptians worship? What gods did the people outside the steps of

William Franz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1960 cling to? What gods do we worship today? What gods that we are holding as sacrosanct, as precious to our self-identity, does our God want to execute judgement upon?

This is not to claim that there was no shedding of blood on this night the Hebrew people remember as Passover. Such an event might have occurred, as we have come to understand it traditionally. But how does that serve us today? We who have sheltered under the blood of the Lamb, are we protected from the Spirit of death that will lay waste to our enemies' children, human and animal alike? Or is there something else we ought to be looking for?

Psalms 149 begins like many of the praise psalms with which we are familiar. We sing new songs of praise again and again; we praise with music and dance; we praise with joy from our couches – who doesn't like that? Not only that, but God takes pleasure in us. The first five verses of this psalm could begin any act of joyous worship.

Then it all changes in verse six. That's where the praises in our throats and swords in our hands come in. Double edged swords, no less. And it seems to go downhill from there. Vengeance, which is normally left up to God, and punishment and binding in fetters and chains, executing justice. This is glory for all God's faithful ones. We'd feel better if there was a question mark at the end of that sentence.

Here again, there is great danger in the literal interpretation of these verses. The psalm seems to call for a crusading mentality that vanquishes foes, no matter how high they might be in the political system. What if the two-edged sword is not a literal sword, however, but the Word of the Lord as described in the Letter to the Hebrews, or in Paul's armor of God image in Ephesians? Psalm 149 doesn't need to be a call to violence. In fact, to hear it as such goes against Christian understanding from the beginning of the faith. It does, however, call us to not cower before rulers who contravene the ordinances of God. We "attack" with righteousness and with a passion for God's truth, and we persist until God's glory is revealed in the world in which we live, not just the one we hope for.

What is also obvious from the harsh language of our texts for this week is that this is not an easy or safe calling. This is not about keeping silent and hoping for the best. This is about rising up and being ready to move toward the transformation of self and society until the kin-dom of God is evident in us and around us. That

word *until* is a wilderness word. It is a reminder that we are on the way and that there will be times when it seems as if we are moving farther from God's kin-dom instead of drawing nearer. There will be times when the wilderness seems to be winning the day and that God and God's people are lost, merely whistling in the darkness. That is where faith carries us through. We have come this far by faith, as the gospel song proclaims, and there is still a way to go. But we go, with staff in hand and coats buttoned up, with high praise in our throats and the sword of the Word in our hand, we go. Through the wilderness, we go.

Week 2: Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Into the Sea

September 13, 2020 – [Exodus 14:19-31](#) and [Exodus 15:1b - 11 & 20-21](#)

INTRODUCTION

There is an irony in the selection of texts for this week. We are two days past 9/11, a date when we mourn the loss of life in such large numbers in the terrorist attack on New York and Washington DC and Pennsylvania. And we read a story of a miraculous rescue through an impossible barrier and the subsequent loss of lives of the pursuing nation, while a song is sung in praise of the victory. We remember the false reports of Muslims in this country singing and dancing with joy at the devastation on 9/11. We were outraged that such a celebration should occur. Those lies were exposed, but some still cling to that image. So, how do we as the people of God celebrate the destruction of the Egyptian enemy in the sea with dancing and singing and feel good about ourselves? There is a rabbinic teaching that says that when the Israelites crossed the sea and were safe, a cheer broke out in heaven. Then when the sea crashed down on the pursuing Egyptian army, another cheer went up in heaven. But God turned to the angels and said, "Why do you rejoice when my children have drowned in the sea?"

We cannot resolve all these issues in one act of worship this month, any more than we can "explain" how the sea parted and the people were set free. But we can be aware of the implications of our celebrations and our praise. We can be aware that praying for freedom is threatening to the status quo and unsettling for many; some will be hurt in the struggle for liberation; blood will be shed. It is

happening around us all the time. We cannot ask for an easy road; we cannot ask for painless transformation.

But we can, and we should, indeed we must, ask for God to go with us. That is the focus of our worship today—not a celebration over enemies, but a recognition that in the difficult times, and in the comfortable ones, God is with us. God goes before and God follows behind. So, like the people of God on the shores of the Sea of Reeds, let us rejoice that God is with us; when there seemed to be no way, God makes a way. When there seems to be no hope, God is our hope. And God continues to be our hope, the hope we live out in our moving forward, even when lying down and giving up seems like the logical thing to do.

There are stories in your congregation of going ahead when there seemed to be no way to go; stories of those who persevered when giving up made more sense. How can you cultivate those stories and give folks a chance to share them? Get someone to record their stories of perseverance (maybe of deliverance, if that has happened) and use those to give hope to the whole body of faith. For those stories that haven't ended yet, just the continuation is worth sharing. Exodus tells us there was a wall of water beside the people who walked across the dry seabed. How harrowing must that have been, but still they walked—one foot in front of another, as they made their way across. Who is making their way across, trying not to stare at the wall of water and all that could go wrong, but instead keeping their eyes on the hope that lies before them? The body needs to hear those stories.

Our songs are songs of assurance of the presence. It may not be a cloud that leads or an angel that follows, but it is the confidence and support of the community of faith. Let's hear songs of faith and confidence. We may not yet be able to sing as a congregation, but we can lean into the faith of our songwriters and be reminded that we are not alone.

Images could be reminders of a difficult time in the history of the church, the building burned, perhaps, or a tornado struck. But the church rebuilt; the community found a way through. Most congregations treasure those stories, and they have become an active part of the oral history. As you play a song of God's presence, make a slideshow of the broken structure and the rebuilding that took place, but feature the people who worked. It's not the building that really

matters; it is a symbol of the resilience of the people who know they walk with God.

If you are worshiping in person, maybe create a space in the sanctuary that looks like a wall of water. You could even use it to help with social distancing. Consider using blue streamers or rolls of paper that remind us we walk through difficult times. But God's got us; that's where the celebration comes in—that confidence, that faith, even when we don't yet see the other side.

Remember, we are in the wilderness. The people standing on the shore, amazed at what God had accomplished, were not done with their journey. They had only just begun. We are on a journey too, making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And we have only just begun. We are still wandering, no matter how focused our mission and our goals might be, we are still wandering in the wilderness.

PREACHING NOTES

If you haven't read the introductory notes, please go back and read them before proceeding here. We will return to the issue addressed there in a moment. But it will be good to have the overview presented there in terms of worship as a whole before digging deeper into the text itself.

As with any miracle story, there is a tendency to want to explain it. In part, we're hoping that it might become more believable if we can grasp something about how it might have happened. The crossing of the sea story has been de-mythologized until it is hardly worth hearing any more. The wind blew from the east, the text says, and some say that means it revealed to the clever Israelites that the "*yam suf*" or Sea of Reeds, was really pretty shallow and the people could cross on foot without a problem, and the Egyptians in their heavy chariots got stuck in the mud. Right? Well, maybe. But it removes the core of the event. And no, the core of the event isn't a miracle of Cecil B. DeMille scale; it isn't the miracle in and of itself at all. Rather the core is that this people on their own were sunk (OK, pun intended), but with the help of God, freedom is a possibility.

To spend too much time on the walking through the sea event, whether to say it didn't happen like it says or it definitely did, is a distraction from the good news

that is to be proclaimed here: that God is with us when we face insurmountable barriers to hope or the daily impossibilities of living in this world. God is with us when we can feel that hand at our back, and when we can't. God is with us when it seems that every step is through deep and clinging mud, or when we dance across dry ground.

Our text begins with the note that the angel, which looked like a pillar of cloud, moves from the front of the pack to the back. The second verse says that it was to provide a buffer between the Israelites and the pursuing Egyptians. But maybe it was there to push. Sometimes leading doesn't achieve the desired results. Sometimes you've got to get behind and push. Which is worse, an army running after you or an angelic tornado at your back? No wonder the text says when all this is done, that the people feared the Lord.

Here's a secondary theme, second only to the power and presence of God in the midst of the journey through the wilderness: Moses stretched out his hand. Did you get that? Even with an angelic tornado, even with walls of water on either side, even with a dry seabed under the feet, effort is required. God rarely says, "Sit back, I've got this." No, go back to the beginning of this story: Moses on the mountain talking to a bush that burned, and he hears a voice saying, "I will save my people. You go." God works through the effort of God's people.

What are you willing to stretch out so that God can work with you and from you? Stretch out your hand, sure, but stretch out your resources? Stretch out your security? Stretch out your worldview, your belief that only people who look like you and sound like you and believe like you can be followers of God? What are you willing to stretch out so that God can bless your effort with transformation, that just might be your own transformation instead of those folk out there?

Did Moses know what was going to happen when he stretched out his hand? It's hard to tell; the text isn't clear. But he did it. And God made a way where there was no way. Because Moses trusted enough to stretch out. The result was no doubt more than he had ever imagined, which is often what happens when we stretch out, when we take a risk.

We might even become conquerors. A word like that conjures all sort of images. Similar sorts of images that arise when contemplating both the story of drowning Egyptians and the song of joy sung by Moses and Miriam on the shore of the Sea

of Reeds. As a story, cheering the demise of the enemy, particularly one as obstreperous as the pharaoh and his army as presented in the earlier part of the book of Exodus, is the expected response. We cheer when the bad guy gets it in the end. No one is supposed to feel sorry for Hans Gruber as he finally falls off the Nakatomi Tower in the first (and best) *Die Hard* movie. We can dance and sing to the tambourine with the freed formerly enslaved Israelites — as a story. The problem becomes when story leaks into reality. Because reality is never as clean and neat, and the good guys are often confused with the bad guys and the bad guys are people too.

In the book of Revelation, in the Letters to the Seven Churches, each one ends with a specific phrase: “to everyone who conquers...” Maybe here we can understand better what conquering means. In those letters, the conqueror isn’t the one who vanquishes the foe, whoever the foe might be, but rather the one who holds on to faith to the end; the one who holds on to faith through trial; holds on to faith through suffering; holds on to faith until the light begins to shine once more. It isn’t about who is defeated, but who endures.

It is certainly true that the song that Moses sings and then Miriam takes up the chorus and dances revels in those who were wiped out. The horse and rider are thrown into the sea. It is the dead washing up on the water that brings about this response. But looking carefully at the song that Moses sings, it is more about God and what God has done for God’s people than about how awful the enemy is. Maybe that should be our focus too. It is clear that the rabbis were uncomfortable with this story, which is why the teaching on this event includes a story of heaven’s sadness at the death of the Egyptians.

That the struggle is a life and death one cannot be denied. That there will be suffering, that there will be blood spilled is also a hard truth. But humility in the face of victory is something worth cultivating in the real world in which we live. Such humility embraces the truth that we are all still wandering through the wilderness.

Week 3: Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – What Is It?

September 20, 2020 – [Exodus 16:2-15](#), [Psalm 105:1-6 & 37-45](#)

INTRODUCTION

Manna, that's what we're celebrating today. Manna in the wilderness, sustenance for the journey. But also a question. "Manna" in Hebrew translates as, "What is it?" The perfect question for this odd stuff that just appeared in the wilderness every morning. You can picture the dining table, when the teenagers come down from their loft in the tent, and they stare at the stuff mom has served up, and they wrinkle their noses and look at each other, and then look at mom and ask the inevitable question: "What is it?" And mom nods and says "Yes."

A perfect drama for the worship service. But how do we celebrate a question? There are many approaches one could take to this text. Perhaps the most obvious would be the sustenance question. "The Lord will provide." It could be a harvest celebration of sorts, here in the middle of September, a way of being thankful to God for the growing and harvesting seasons. Built into the way the world works is the means for caring for our most basic needs. We give God thanks for the food we take for granted each day.

Of course, our gratitude should expand to include all of those who have something to do with the food that we eat, the food that for many of us is easily accessible. Does this sound like a Thanksgiving service? Perhaps, but is thanksgiving something that can only be done on the fourth Thursday of November?

Also, how do we give attention to those who don't have enough, who aren't sustained by the easy access to abundant food available? How does our gratitude spill over into service? Perhaps this week you could plan for or announce a "manna gathering" that would then be shared with the increasingly overburdened food pantries in your neighborhood. But don't root around in your pantry for the items you found inedible and pass them off, causing those who have a need to ask, "What is it?"

That's another avenue for worship, inquiring of God. Perhaps this worship experience should be one of contemplation, having the worshipers asking what God is doing in their midst. What is the providence that God is offering that we overlook because we don't recognize it? There might be a difficult situation in our lives that causes us to ask, "What is it?" in a way that allows God's grace to blow through that moment.

What are the surprising things that God is doing in the community of faith as a whole? How do we train ourselves, condition ourselves to ask what is it that God is doing in this moment, in this event, in this opportunity or crisis? Our prayers could be prayers of openness to the Spirit of God at work in the mundane things of our lives. We can pray for the faith that says God is acting in our lives each and every day, even when we don't understand, or fail to recognize the divine presence.

Images should be of God's abundance, whether that be food as it grows and is served, or the joy of the community at work (safely) together. Music can remind us of how God provides and that we can trust in that, even as we work alongside to help everyone experience the abundance of God.

One of the realities of the wilderness is that not everyone can see God at work, not everyone can participate in the abundance of God. Distribution is always an issue, even when it comes to the grace of God. So, part of the purpose of the community of faith is to help others see God's hand at work and often to be that hand by how we share the abundance we have experienced. Those who serve know of the joy of hearing someone ask in wonder, "What is it?" so that we can respond, "It is the grace of God." Even in the wilderness, there is grace enough for all.

PREACHING NOTES

What are you hungry for when you don't know what you are hungry for? It was a commercial many years ago, for a snack cracker, and the line was spoken by Matlock. No wait, by, um, what was his name? You know. Andy Griffith. That's the guy. He's the one asking the question. And the best part was, he gave us the answer. What are you hungry for when you don't know what you're hungry for? Something on a cracker.

Umm. No. Doesn't really do it. All due deference to crackers with stuff on them. But, except in a momentary superficial kind of way, that won't satisfy the hunger. Not the real hunger. The hunger that even us overfed modern-day pilgrims lost in the wilderness have. Because when we stop to think about it, we're hungry too.

And we can't help grumbling about it a little bit. We don't want to make a scene. But we feel like we've been shortchanged somewhere along the line. We thought this faith thing was supposed to bring us satisfaction. And yet, when we admit it to ourselves, our stomachs are still rumbling out here in the wilderness. And our secret fear is that this is all there is. We were brought out here in this wilderness to die, hungry and hurting, lost and alone.

Kind of makes you sympathetic for the Children of Israel, doesn't it? Oh sure, we preachers make fun of these folks wandering there in the wilderness, complaining at the drop of a hat. Even Moses gets fed up with them, let alone God. We shake our heads at their blindness. We roll our eyes at their wandering ways. "What a bunch of losers," we can't help thinking. If we were there, it would have been different. I mean the divided sea thing was pretty impressive. The pillar of fire and covering cloud must have been significant. Surely we would have paid more attention. Surely we would have trusted. Surely we wouldn't have complained. At least until our stomachs rumbled again.

It's hard to be faithful when you are hungry. Maybe we ought to listen again with a little more sympathy. Maybe we ought to listen for our own voices in this story.

What are you hungry for when you don't know what you're hungry for? They were six weeks in and pretty hungry. OK, six weeks into a forty-year journey doesn't sound like much. But six weeks eating what you brought with you and what you could find along the way is a long time. They were hungry. And they weren't sure where the next meal was coming from. And they didn't have a clue where they were going. Sure, pillars of fire and clouds are great, but a good GPS or Google maps itinerary with points of interest highlighted in color would have come in handy. A good pecan roll from Stuckeys would have gone down as a treat. (Do they still have those? Or just the signs?)

But nothing was on the horizon. At least what they could see clearly. So they raised a ruckus. Probably the worst part of their complaint was that where they had been was starting to look better than where they were.

Ah, the good old days. How we long for them when the wilderness seems too dark and too scary, even though at least a part of us knows that the good old days were anything but good. In our memories, they seem so much better than what we have today. They were looking longingly back on slavery and oppression; and

suddenly, because they were hungry, it began to look good. They seemed to remember it like it was some sort of resort. (“We sat by pots of meat and piles of bread,” they said, conveniently forgetting that they weren’t lounging by some pool dining on overlaid buffets, but were slaves, living by the whims of the powers that be.)

Their faulty memories almost caused them to want to settle—not settle as in live there in the wilderness, but settle as in settle for less; less than what was in store for them; less than what God had intended for them. Their hunger almost caused them to settle for less, to go back to live as slaves because there at least they could eat, instead of living in this freedom that is too scary, too wild, too dangerous.

That seems to be the option open to us - slavery or wilderness. Giving in or being uncertain. Giving up or struggling every day. Wow, isn’t there a third option? Well, no and yes. No, because we are living in a cloud, living in difficult times, living with too many choices and no clear direction as to which to choose. So, we give up and live enslaved by the sin and despair that always seems within reach. Or we keep searching, keep marching through the wilderness, trusting that there is a pillar of fire somewhere in the darkness.

And to keep us moving forward, to keep us fed on our journey, we have the manna, which we are told in our passage today is really a question. “What is it?” in Hebrew is *man hu*. Manna in the wilderness. What is it? So, we are to be sustained by a question? Hardly seems adequate, don’t you think? Unless it is the right question. “What is it that God is doing in our midst?” Now that’s a question that can keep us moving.

What is it that God is doing in your wilderness? We think we are hungry for answers. But just maybe we are hungry for the right question. While the psalm text doesn’t ask us a question, it gives us a challenge and there is an inherent question there, “What is the Lord doing among us?”

When we are invited to give thanks to the Lord; we know how to do that. Our worship is often built around thanksgiving to God. But when the invitation goes on to say, “make known [God’s] deeds among the peoples,” we often stumble. The usual question we ask is, “How do we do that?” How do we tell the peoples around us what the deeds of God are? Notice it is peoples around us, not

ourselves. We're supposed to be letting the people who don't yet know God know what God is doing. So, it is logical that the question would be a *how* one. How do we do that.

What if that is the wrong question, or at least the wrong time to ask that question? We can't ask the *how* question until we have an answer to the *what* question. What is God doing among us? OK, sure, deeds can be historical. We can go and read the Bible to people around us. "See," we can say, "this is what God has done in the past. Aren't you impressed?" Maybe some will be. But most will follow up with the usual societal question: "But what has God done lately?" That's what people want to know. Not what did God do centuries or millennia ago. But what is God doing now?

That's the question the manna in the desert compels us to ask and answer. What is it that God is doing? Right here, in this particular part of our wilderness, at this particular time of our wandering. Yes, we need to pay attention to what God has done in the past. In the second part of the psalm text, we see a recitation of God's actions with God's people. It is good for us to review what God has done. The primary reason, however, for that review is to recognize God's action among us today. What is it that God is doing now? With you? In you? These are the questions that will sustain us in the journey through the wilderness and give us something worth proclaiming to the peoples around us.

Week 4: Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Strike the Rock
September 27, 2020 – [Exodus 17:1-7](#), [Psalm 78:1-4, & 12-16](#)

INTRODUCTION

Last week manna, this week water. Same song, second verse. Could be, but it doesn't have to be. There are two threads that are more fully explored in the preaching notes that could be a guide for the conduct of worship in this final week of our wilderness series: One is that of storytelling; the other is of faith that brings fullness and joy.

The psalm text for this week invites us to remember what God has done and is doing in our midst. And it especially encourages the people of God to teach what

God has done and is doing to the children and to teach the children so that the children can teach their children. It's time to be taught by the children this week. What can we learn from our children about how we are to live as the people of God in the world today? What have they learned from us, and what would they pass on to the next generations?

For online worship, get an interview crew to go and talk to children. Ask them what matters; ask them how we show love; ask them to tell us what Jesus told them about living. And then string together some of the children telling the simple truths of life and living. Ask them about Jesus and who Jesus is, and just listen to what they say. It can be enlightening; it can be inspirational. Let the children teach. Even for in-person worship, a video would help with the flow so much better than trying to get reluctant little ones to respond on command. But find a way to hear from the children. It will bless you, and even inspire you to make sure you are doing right by children in how you tell the story.

The Exodus text is another one of miraculous provision; water again takes the stage. But this time it isn't water we pass through; it is water we drink. Maybe some reference to the necessity of water would be appropriate. It might also be enlightening to talk about clean water and water as a resource. There are those who argue that soon wars will be fought over water just like wars had been fought over oil. Water is a resource that will become increasingly scarce. Maybe there could be an ecological approach to water and water bottles. How can we continue to protect our planet and throw away millions of single-use plastic bottles? There are many approaches one could take to water as the central theme of this service.

But, as discussed in the preaching notes, maybe water isn't what this text is all about. Maybe it is about the life of faith, or about faith in a God who is present and who provides. In our text, we begin with a whine, and we shift to a threat, which then becomes a complaint. And while the people get what they need, there is no sense that they enjoy the gift. They are remembered not for the miracle of water from a rock, but for their complaining. The place is named testing and quarreling. How's that for a legacy?

This isn't a call to single out the complainers in the congregation, but to provide an alternative. How do we embrace with joy this life of faith? How do we lean into

what God has given and trust that there will be enough as we go forward? Even in the wilderness. Not that there isn't hardship, not that there isn't lack, but as a community, we can embrace the possibilities rather than the scarcity.

What if the theme for the week, "Strike the Rock," becomes a call for deeper living? "Strike the rock" means lean on God, trust in Jesus. Strike the rock means find the joy even in difficult moments, even in the wilderness. Striking the rock is trusting that there is a way forward even when it seems like there is no way. Striking the rock is a declaration of faith, even when it seems like giving up makes more sense. When we gather week by week, in person or online, with our worshipping community, we are striking the rock. Of all the things I could be doing today, I chose to be here, chose to be present with this group, lifting up our hearts in worship of the God who provides, the God who is present. I'm striking the rock.

Find a rock to strike: the foundation of the church, or church walls if you are together. But invite the online worshippers to find a rock to represent the church, something to strike; and invoke the Spirit to be a part of our worship. Instead of ringing the bell this week, strike a rock.

The prayers are prayers of faith and not complaining—faith that we will get through even messy situations, that a way will be found through the brokenness of our society, the division between the races, between cultures. We acknowledge a need, but we strike the rock, believing that God will bring us through this portion of the wilderness.

PREACHING NOTES

The heading on the psalm chosen as one of our texts for this week's worship says "A Maskil." Well, it actually says "*A Maskil of Asaph.*" Many biblical scholars understand "Asaph" to be referring to temple singers; *Asaphites*, they were called. So this set of psalms (which includes Psalm 50 and 73 to 83) represent that group. Or, possibly they are psalms in the style of the *Asaphites*. Or maybe even written by the leader of the group who was called Asaph. In other words, we don't know for sure.

So, let's go to the other descriptor of this psalm. A *maskil*, it says. Most of the time, we just bleep over that and get on to the verse. How many times have you seen that word and never really bothered to figure out what it means? Well, lots. And the truth is we get tired of the "we don't really know" kind of response that biblical scholars give all the time. So, we usually ignore it, and probably should this week too.

Except a little digging brought forth this fruit: "a *maskil* is a member or adherent of the *haskalah*." Helpful. Don't you just love dictionaries? *Haskalah* is a European Jewish intellectual movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wait. What? A word that appears in the Hebrew scriptures is a reference to eighteenth century Judaism? Call Tim LaHaye; there's a book coming on.

Dig a little deeper, and you discover that the "*maskilim*" (the plural form of *maskil*) chose that descriptor because of the references it held in Jewish tradition. The *Haskalah* movement was designed to reclaim the Jewish culture and tradition, but not so much in terms of artifacts or even of rituals, but in philosophy or theology. It was an intellectual movement, remember. It was a way of thinking, and thinking deeply about what it meant to be Jewish, to be a part of the chosen people, the beloved of God.

A way of thinking. We tend to separate thinking and doing into different categories of human existence, and that makes sense on some levels. But followers of God know that believing (which is a way of thinking) is effective only when the thinking comes out in living. We understand that to claim certain intellectual certainties without concurrent behavioral responses is to live an inauthentic life.

But since we are all prone to such living, to acting in ways that are often contrary to our beliefs, to living in ways that deny our commitment to our faith, we need reminders from time to time. We need an intellectual kick in the pants to get us back on track. A *maskil* psalm is just such a kick in the pants. It is a reminder that we live in certain ways. A psalm that teaches you something, is one definition. We could call it a psalm that reminds you of something. There may not be an "aha" moment in the reading for this week, but it is certainly an "oh, yeah, I knew that" moment.

So, what is the thinking and the doing, or the thinking and the living implied in this psalm? Teach your children. This is not the only place in the Hebrew Scriptures where we are told to teach the children, but it is a good reminder. This faith thing is something to be passed on. Often, we assume that they'll pick it up when they are ready. Like a habit, or a belief system. When in fact, it is a way of life. And it isn't really caught; it is taught. It is lived. It is taught by those who are living it. "So that they should set their hope in God." Because they were taught by those who have set their hope in God. They have seen it and they have heard it, so now they will step into the place too—in part by remembering the things that God has done.

The second section of the psalm text is a recitation of those things. We tell the story again and again and again. We can't fall back on, "Oh, they've heard it already." Maybe they have, but let them hear it again. The best family stories are the ones you keep repeating. "Tell it again!" You remember when ... We love those stories. No matter how many times you've heard it. When we gather again as the family, we tell those stories over and over again. For the children. But also for those adults who have forgotten, or never heard, or just need a reminder of what has already happened. "Do you remember the time water poured from a rock in the desert?"

The Exodus passage is a continuation of the God's care of the people as they wander through the wilderness. On the surface, it is a simple story of need recognized and then met. We can certainly celebrate the care of the people who are wandering in the wilderness by a God who knows their need and is willing to go to extraordinary means to satisfy them. Yet, this kind of surface exposure to the text turns God into a utilitarian satisfier of human thirsts when the "whine is right." This approach sounds good until it has to be laid alongside the many times when our human needs are not met, no matter how much we plead. There is a suspicious lack of miracles in our experience for those who base their faith on miracles.

So, let's dive a little deeper. What is this text really about? Yes, water from a rock, but look again. It is really about faith and unfaith. And about a people who say they will only believe in a God who satisfies their needs. Did you ever notice in the larger story how no one seems to come to Moses and say, "Can we talk?" There is

no assessment of needs, no petition to explore possibilities, no delegation to solve the problem. What there is, is whining. And complaining. And casting doubt on the leader. “Why did you bring us here to die?” Anyone else amazed that this current crisis (like previous crises) causes the pilgrims to remember slavery fondly? What they left behind looks better from this distance. This thirsty distance. Granted, the need for water is critical to survival. But there seems to be a quick rejection of the one who has brought them safe thus far.

Let’s be honest, it isn’t Moses’s finest moment either. First, he says that to complain to him is to test God. That’s a dangerous correlation to make. And then when he does go to God, he doesn’t bring the people’s need but his own fear. “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” And oh, by the way, they’re thirsty. Maybe he knows that God is already aware of the need; he just wants to save his own skin. Then, when God gave Moses the instructions, the narration simply says, “Moses did so.”

Yes, the people got water, or at least we can assume so, since God said they would if Moses struck the rock. But where is the celebration? Where is the worship? Where is the dancing before the rock spewing clean water for them to drink? When the transaction between God and God’s people becomes so utilitarian, what gets left out is joy, and gratitude, and worship, and life. What gets left out is everything that matters in a life worth living.

So, the question that Exodus 17 presents in a way is, “Do you want to survive, or do you want to live?” Go back to the beginning of these notes. A maskil is inviting us to not only get what we need from God, but to think about how we want to live as God’s people. We can strike the rock, do as little as possible. Or we can live into the moment and experience the fullness of God’s grace, the abundance of God’s providence, the joy of God’s salvation. Yes, all of that even in the wilderness. We don’t have to wait until we’ve reached the destination, until we’ve all been brought into the kin-dom of God. We can live that life; we can think that life right now. It makes going through the wilderness all that much more sweet.