

The Roundabout Way – Exodus 13:17-22
Rev. Mike Sorrell
Oakland Ave. Presbyterian Church, Rock Hill, SC
11-27-05

Every time I read this passage, the same phrase reaches out and pulls me into the story: “So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness...” **The Roundabout Way**. The **indirect** way. And they didn’t just take a couple of extra turns or devote a couple of hours to taking the scenic route. They spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness.

And just the **word** *wilderness* carries with it a sense of ruggedness, of harsh terrain and harsh conditions. Even so, as scripture tells us, the Israelites went up out of Egypt prepared for battle. After 430 years of slavery and bondage in Egypt, they were free at last. They had a new lease on life, so to speak. They were ready for anything, weren’t they? At least that’s what they thought.

Of course, God thought differently. God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.” So in fact, they **were not** ready for anything. They certainly weren’t ready for a fight with the Philistines, not yet at least. In the mean time, God led them not by way of the land of the Philistines, but by the roundabout way of the wilderness. And their journey through the wilderness was a journey of preparation, to transform them into the people God wanted them to be.

Friends, today is the first Sunday in Advent...the first Sunday of the Christian year. We have a couple of different emphases during the season of Advent. First, we anticipate and prepare for Christmas, a time when we remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who was born in a stable in Bethlehem...who lived, died and was resurrected from the dead for the sins of the world – to reconcile us to God...and who became a pillar of light to the world.

We also anticipate and prepare for the **second** coming of Christ, the Day of the Lord, when we will see Christ face to face. And what a glorious day that will be, when our Judge and Redeemer sets the world right again, when the world is fully reconciled to God, and Christ reigns forever and ever with the peace and love of God.

Yet we live in the in-between time don’t we? The in-between time in which we remember the birth of Christ, await with eager longing his second coming, and walk life’s journey. And just as God led the Israelites on their journey, God leads us on our journey.

Of course, the journey is not easy. There is no easy road, even with God before us leading the way. Whether the Israelites had gone through the land of the Philistines or through the wilderness, either road, any road, would have presented its own set of struggles. But again, there are no easy roads. At some point or another, every person, rich or poor, black or white, finds himself or herself putting one foot in front of the other, sometimes walking, sometimes stumbling, through the wilderness.

Last Sunday, Dr. Pender commented on what it means to be imprisoned; that it means more than just being trapped behind bars. How right he is. There are many prisons that have no bars. There is the prison of an abusive relationship...the prison of addiction...the prison of poverty and homelessness...the prison of spiritual emptiness. Not only are these prisons of various sorts...they are some of the markers of life on the wilderness road.

And just as there are many different prisons, each person's life experience can be just that varied. And there are moments in our lives when we do indeed wander through the wilderness.

There have been times when I've been surrounded by friends and family, but have never felt so lonely. Like after each of my parents died or when, as an emergency nurse, despite our best efforts we would lose a patient, and I just couldn't leave work at work.

The Bible is filled with stories of wilderness moments. Jonah was thrown from a ship at sea during a storm. Noah, his household, and some of every species of creature on earth spent 40 days and 40 nights floating in an ark atop the floodwaters. And as the crucifixion of Jesus approached, he agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane about the task that lay before him.

Now think about those stories. Jonah's wilderness experience was the result of disobeying God. He tried to flee the presence of God, to ignore God's call on his life, and ended up in a real mess. For Noah and Jesus, it was the result of obedience to God's will. They had done exactly as God had commanded them to do. The bottom line is that no matter who you are or how obedient to God's will you manage to be, you will find yourself on the wilderness road. The question is "What do we do then?"

Maybe the first question we need to answer is "How did this journey begin for the Israelites?" For the Israelites it began with a gift of freedom, God's gift of freedom. After 430 years of bondage in Egypt, they received the freedom God had intended for them to have, the fundamental freedom necessary to obtain that which was promised to their forefathers...the land of Canaan...the land of milk and honey...the promised land.

Yet freedom was only the first step – necessary – but only the first step. They would need to learn how to place their complete faith and trust in God alone, not in themselves. So God led them through the wilderness, providing water when they were thirsty and manna when they were hungry, and keeping them together as a community of faith. God did not remove them from the wilderness. God gave them what they needed to journey through it and face those wilderness moments with confidence and with hope.

Friends, our journey begins with a similar gift, the gift of freedom we receive through faith in Christ. Through faith in Christ we obtain the gift provided through His life, death, and resurrection from the dead, the gift of being reconciled to God, the gift of salvation and eternal life. Sin and death no longer have the last word for us. And we are not only free **from** sin and death in the ultimate sense, we are free **for** life in Christ. And the freedom we have in Christ is not without purpose. We are free specifically to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength...and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

This advent journey, this journey of preparation, is meant to shape and mold us to live for God...that we might no longer be slaves to sin...but servants of Christ our Lord. And much like the ancient Israelites of the exodus, God does not remove us from the wilderness. He just provides the help we need along the way - Living Water and the true bread from heaven – that we might live in community with one another and do God’s work in the world.

So what does this journey look like for us?

- Well, we are part of the larger Body of Christ, a community of faith that spans the globe and includes all the saints who have gone before us.
- We are a people, much like the Israelites in today’s passage, who carry with us the bones of Joseph, so to speak, who carry with us the promise of the good news of God’s love in Christ Jesus.
- We are a people of the Word, a Word spoken by many voices in different times and places that boils down to the same story of hope.
- We are a people led by God’s Spirit, which dwells in and among us, and is ever-present before us.
- Finally, we are a people who sometimes think we are ready for anything, but are thankful in the end that God knows better.

So, in this season of Advent, as God leads this community of faith down the wilderness road, let us give thanks to God for the gift of Christ our Lord, who is the pillar of light to this community and to the world, and whose Spirit is ever before us until he comes again.

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.