

Lent 4, Year B
Numbers 21: 4-9
Ephesians 2: 1-10

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California
March 22, 2009

Stories From the Wilderness:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Today, we hear yet another story of the Israelites stuck in the wilderness. It's fitting don't you think?

For today, we, that part of the Body of Christ we call Trinity Episcopal Church, find ourselves in a wilderness—a wild place, a place devoid of landmarks, a place we can't control or tame, much less understand. Our trust has been betrayed. Our bearings scrambled. Our assumptions challenged. Our certainties up in air.

No wonder we feel anxious. No wonder we feel afraid. No wonder we feel violated.

We're in the wilderness—that wild place devoid of landmarks, that place we can't control or tame, much less understand.

Do you feel a sense of kin with those ancient Israelites—thrust as they were into the wilderness? Can you understand their longing for the past? Their hunger and their thirst? Their impatience with it all?

After all, they, too, had lost their bearings. They, too, have found themselves in a place beyond control. Still wandering in the desert, they had not yet reached the promised land. Their diet had not changed in forty years. Each day the same old thing. Manna. No wonder they forgot it came from heaven.

This tale—this tale of struggles in the wilderness—is told time and again in the Hebrew Bible and in our own as well. We hear it the story of the Exodus and we hear it in the psalms. And today we hear echoes of it in the Gospel.

I find myself wondering why tell this tale time and again. Why is this the story Jews tell each year at Passover? What is there in this story of wanderings in the wilderness that speaks to the human heart? What is there in this tale that speaks to you and me and to our brothers and sisters who have gone before us? What in this tale speaks to the confusion, fear and loss we feel today?

I wonder. Could it be that this tale is told again and again because the wilderness experience is so much a part of human life?

Who among us has had a life devoid of wilderness times?

We know the pain, the fear, the feeling of the air sucked out of you. We've all been there. We've all spent time in the disorienting wilderness—that wild place where landmarks are obliterated by storms and sand blowing in the eye. We've stumbled around a desert or two in our own lives. We know the confusion and the chaos. We know the stuckness of it all.

But yet that's only half the story. When the Israelites are thirsty, God gives them water from a rock. When they are hungry, God sends them manna on the ground. When they say, "We have no meat to eat", God sends quail to fill their bellies. Throughout those forty years—both day and

night—God is with them on their journey. A cloud by day and a pillar of light throughout the night.

This week, this month, I've found myself recalling stories from the wilderness—stories from my life and stories I've heard others tell. Stories that, in one way or another, echo Jesus' story of being cast out into the wilderness, tempted by Satan, surrounded by wild beasts, being ministered to by angels, and then diving into his call to ministry, getting on with the work of healing the sick, welcoming the friendless, feeding the hungry, bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives.

Most all the stories begin with a sense of disorientation and some with a sense of loss. Then they take a turn. Folks tell of the calm at the center of the storm. The presence of God in the midst of suffering. A new certainty taking hold. Not of what will be but of what is—the presence of God in the center of the wilderness—whatever form the wilderness takes.

The story of a young father struggling to make ends meet who finds his wife hospitalized with a debilitating illness. He wonders how he will ever care for two children and do the work it takes to keep the business and family afloat. And then....and then the angels start their ministry—shirts ironed, meals cooked, children cared for. God providing manna in the wilderness.

The story of a middle-aged woman secure in her life as wife and mother until...until her husband dies and she's left bereft and adrift with no clear way out of her grief and her loss and her anger. And then....and then a pillar of light appears in the midst of her darkness and she finds herself building a new life on foundations laid buried for years.

But the wilderness story I know best is one I lived out. It happened the week my mother died. As many of you know, I went back to be with her, to get things arranged, to get things settled so that both of us could go on with our lives. She died the Saturday I was to return to California. I had to get on that flight—on Monday I had an interview for the grant that would fund my position for another year. No one else could make the case. On Thursday, I was to lead a workshop for parents on welcoming children of all faiths in an inter-faith Episcopal school. It was a high-stakes week. As I boarded the plane and settled into my seat, I wondered how I would ever make it through the next five days. I was empty in grief. My brain dried up. My heart split wide open. I knew I couldn't make it on my own. I had nothing left to give. I was deep in despair. Then a most amazing thing happened. I was carried through the week. A strength I had not known before came to bear. God present in a most immediate way. Giving me bread for the journey through the week.

My friends, we have been cast into the wilderness. Our moorings have been cut. But we are not alone. God is present with us—guiding us, providing what we need to live into God's promise and God's dream for us, nurturing us and sustaining us along the way. We will not always know the way ahead. There are serpents on the path. We may not always like the food we're fed, but we can be confident that "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us" is showering Trinity with his grace—this day and every day. Thanks be to God.