

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/2/2009, Pentecost 9B
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15, John 6:24-35
God in the Wilderness

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward *the wilderness*, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. (Exodus 16:10, NRSV)

I reckon that over the course of a lifetime I have read the story of the Exodus many times, going back to when I was a little boy in Sunday School. But never before now have I been so moved by the plight of the Israelites on this yonder side of the Red Sea. All the drama is on the far side of the Sea, back in Egypt. There we have the plagues of Egypt -- wild, terrible, and strange things: the frogs, the locusts, the hail, the darkness, the death of the first-borns, and so on. We have the foolishness of Pharaoh, who alternately says he will let the people of Israel go, but then refuses to free them. Most wondrous of all, we have the Exodus itself, in which the agony of escaping slaves caught between a rock and hard place, with Pharaoh's armies bearing down on them from behind and a sea in front of them, gives way to the parting of those waters, so that the people can cross over dry shod. And then we have the ecstatic song of Miriam celebrating the Exodus:

²⁰And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. ²¹And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. (Exodus 15:20-21, KJV)

But now we have the Israelites encamped in the desert. They are not in heaven. They are not in the Promised Land. They are in what is called "the desert of Sin." It is a melancholy location. I traced their travels on the map in the back of my Bible, and then I took a look at that location on that fantastic computer program called "Google Earth." You can draw closer and closer to the earth, looking on from satellites overhead. Using that program I can see that the wilderness of Sin is indeed a wilderness. Sometimes people say, "Be careful what you wish for. You might just get it." So it is the Israelites in today's Bible story. They longed for freedom. They pursued it courageously, against the mighty forces of the empire. They enjoyed the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. But now they have landed in the desert and they are having second thoughts.

Our text says something very wonderful: It says that Aaron and the Israelites "looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud."

When they looked ahead, they saw wilderness. But if they looked carefully, they also saw the Lord there in the wilderness.

To celebrate and develop this point, I want to mention four things:

- 1) A desert is indeed a place of hardship. It is not a bed of roses.
- 2) Compared to a desert, old Egypt looked pretty good.
- 3) But the Lord is ahead of them, not behind them. He is in the desert, beckoning them onwards. And he needs them there in the wilderness.
- 4) There is Bread in the wilderness for us.

In recent years, I have become a little bit acquainted with deserts -- the California desert and the Arizona desert. They have their beauty, of course. Especially the nighttime skies are spectacular. But suppose you were the father and mother of a family and you found yourself wandering in a desert. You would have every right to be fearful for the welfare of your family, for a desert is a place of hardship. Crossing the Red Sea had not landed the Israelites in heaven. It had not even landed them in the Promised Land. They still had forty years of wandering before they reached Canaan, and most of them did not make it. They are going to have to wait for the resurrection of the dead to reach that far shore.

It is the same with you and me when we were baptized. I wish I could testify that baptism lands you in heaven. It does, but not just yet. Till then, we are in various levels of a wilderness. I know this, I have sensed it in people in our parish. Young people are sometimes disoriented, wondering about jobs, careers, vocations, romance. Middle aged folk and the elderly are looking up and wondering "How in the world did that happen? That I am no longer young?" Any one of us can find ourselves in a desert.

Compared to the desert, Egypt looked good. The people exaggerated, certainly, when they recalled Egypt. They spoke of old Egypt as if it had been a good place, with plenty of food and peace, when in fact it had been a place of backbreaking slavery and a place where their children were murdered in the empire's attempt to curtail the Israelite population growth. They had been slaves back then. Slaves! How could they long to return to that? But they do.

Likewise, baptized Christians do backslide. They do return to Egypt. I do not know exactly why. We probably must go case by case. But I have the suspicion that their return to Egypt was not because they calmly compared their life of faith with their old life before baptism and judged the old life to be better. No, I bet that many of them went back to Egypt almost unaware of what they were doing. They stopped going to Church. They stopped thinking of spiritual things. They did this, they did that, and one day they looked up and found themselves back in Egypt. Beware of Egypt's pull on us.

But the LORD is not back there in the land of slavery, but in the desert. And if the Lord be there in the desert, that is where we belong too.

If you have ever come to our Easter Vigil liturgy here at Immanuel, you will surely remember Chris Schulze reading aloud for us the wonderful story of

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the burning fiery furnace. It's a great tradition here at Immanuel, to have Chris read that story for us. The conclusion of the story finds King Nebuchadnezzar peering into that fiery furnace¹. He is astonished, not only because he sees the three young men alive and well, but also because he sees a mysterious "fourth man." English translations are not quite settled on how to describe this fourth man. The King James Version speaks of one like "the Son of God":

²⁵[Nebuchadnezzar the king] answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God. (Daniel 3:25, KJV)

Other translations speak of this fourth man "like a son of the gods"(RSV) or with "the appearance of a god."(NRSV) The point is the same: Where one would expect to see fire and destruction, one instead sees God protecting his people.

So it is with today's story of the Israelites camped there in desert of the Sinai Peninsula. They gaze out into the desert, and, lo, they see God in that fearsome place:

¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward *the wilderness*, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. (Exodus 16:10, NRSV)

This is the most wondrous of comforts: that the way forward in life is simply to hasten on toward the Lord, even if that plunges you deeper and deeper into the desert, for the Lord is in the *desert*. He is not there as a desert illusion -- a mirage - - but he is really there. The wilderness, which seems to be our natural home till Christ comes again, is not a God-forsaken place.

And he wants you there too -- there in the wilderness. He needs you there. You do him no good as a slave back in Egypt. You do him no good enslaved to vice, to greed, to lust, to a thousand masters. No, he bids you come with him into the desert as a free man or woman of Christ, for this is where the poor people are - - the ones who need you.

Let me give you an example of someone who is conducting herself beautifully in the desert. There are probably ten thousand nice stories like this. I hope so. Her

¹ ²⁰And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. ²¹Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. ²²Therefore because the king's commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ²³And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. ²⁴Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king. ²⁵He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.

name is Mikayla Wong, and her story can be found in the recent Costco magazine.² (Costco is the store where we buy our coffee and so forth for coffee hour downstairs.) Here is the first paragraph from her story:

Mikayla Wong was just 7 when she sold her toys at a garage sale to raise money for Hurricane Katrina victims. She and her two older sisters were able to donate \$1,100 to the Red Cross. But Mikayla wasn't content with one act of kindness. She decided to fill up her piggy bank and use the money to help someone who wasn't going to get any Christmas presents. She saved up \$600, and with the help of a \$1,000 anonymous donation, she bought gifts for a family of eight who had lost everything in a house fire.

Mikayla turns in recyclables for money and saves what she can, and she goes on to this day with her beautiful record of charitable giving.

Now, you and I might be tempted to say, "She is just a child. She is protected by her family. She can afford to be charitable." But when it comes to goodness and to actually getting something done in the wilderness, I have come to think that the heart of the matter is that we should simply take Jesus at his word:

¹⁵Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God *as a little child*, he shall not enter therein. ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:15-16, KJV)

It is true that Mikayla is but a child. But is it any less true that you are a child, yea, a child of God! And just as Mikayla translates the protection of her family into benevolence for the poor, so you and I should strive to translate the protection of God into blessings for the poor and needy out here in the wilderness.

The wilderness! This is where God needs us to be. And this is where he meets us.

One of the desert temptations of Jesus was that he should convert a stone into bread. I bet he could have done that. And if he had done that, the crowds would have come running to him. But that would have left us slaves as before - slaves to bread. If we had come running to Jesus because we thought he would give us bread and let us rest in a rose garden, then we would have continued slaves to the flesh, pretty much as we were before. No, Jesus bids us to more bracing stuff.

Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; (John 6:27)

² *The Costco Connection*, July 2009, page 25.

And so it is: there is Bread for us in the wilderness. For now, we must fight our good fight of faith in the desert, where life can be hard and where the poor need us. Yet there is food and drink for us here, there is nourishment for us here in the Blessed Sacrament. Indeed, the wilderness has an air of holiness about it, and it is worth lingering in, for here in the wilderness we find our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.