

Year A – Proper 21    *“The Wilderness of Sin”*

*“From the Wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages . . . .”*  
(Exodus 17:1)

We’ve been following the story of the Israelites from the beginning of the birth of Moses in Chapter 1 through their deliverance from slavery under Pharaoh with all that that entailed, through the Red Sea and into the wilderness of the Sinai.

These people are complainers. Last week we heard about their hunger and how could they be brought out into this desolation where there was no food. And we heard how God provided them enough food for each day – all that they really needed to keep moving along.

Today we hear about their thirst. Now you’d think since the food had been provided that they would trust in God to provide the water, too. But there is little trust - only blaming of Moses for the predicament.

Notice that this time God involves more people in the solution. He tells Moses to take some of the leaders of the community with him. Leadership is a shared ministry and their witness is needed to build trust and encourage the people. It is another step along the way of building up and strengthening the spiritual life of the Israelites. Not only must they learn to trust in God but they have to learn to trust in each other as instruments of the living God.

The metaphor of wilderness is a powerful one that can be applied to all kinds of experience. Many of us can look at our lives and see times when we have wandered in a kind of wilderness of sin. Those times can be bewildering but also necessary as a part of shaping us as human beings. If God’s mission is “to reconcile all people to God and each other in Christ”, then first we have to discover that we need reconciliation. The wilderness is the place for that discovery.

The tradition is that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Can you imagine that? Forty years ago I was still in college. Where were you? That’s a good chunk of time in a person’s life. Obviously some people who were a part of your life then have died. Others have been born. Life goes on.

We are shaped by our wilderness times. They form how we look at the world and how we engage with each other and God.

In some ways you could say that this parish has had its journey in the wilderness, and that various aspects of it have involved sin. Prior to my coming, people blamed the pastoral leader for all kinds of things. They sometimes said nasty things to each other. There was a kind of “scrappiness” in the air between individuals and groups. There was a general lack of trust in the church.

Since I’ve arrived I have really focused on working with your leadership. Together, I’ve insisted, we listen to God’s invitation to mission. Together we engage in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation, blessing and love. Together, we knock on the rocks, knowing that the water of baptism will flow and renew us each time we engage in it.

As a diverse community of leaders we've worked hard at honoring one another and generally we've refused to engage the voices of criticism that may come our way. It's not that criticism may not be warranted. It's that complaining accomplishes very little and we've asked folks to talk directly to the person concerned about their concerns, so communication can be honest and direct and not third hand. And issues can be resolved with love and affection.

[Some of you will remember that when I arrived I published what I call "Spiritual rules for Respect". We live by those.]

This summer your Vestry interviewed more than 30 people/couples about their perspectives on how we're doing in our ministry together. We are grateful to everyone who willingly gave their time to answer our questions and talk about their hopes for our life together. Your response was overwhelmingly positive and supportive and you were able to point out some new ways in which we can continue to journey together.

Your conversations have resulted in some new areas of ministry that we will be working on. They include improved communication from the Vestry to the parish; a focus on some intentional forms for engaging in pastoral care; planning more social events throughout the year; and communicating more widely to the community about our involvement and contributions. Each of these areas has particular plans and you will be hearing more from the Vestry about the details.

My point is that we are still in the wilderness. We are still building trust. We are still being shaped together. We do not yet know where we will end up or how the shape of this parish will change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But, like the Israelites, we will keep moving forward. Some will complain and we'll bring them along just for some spice in the conversation and because they are blessed children of the Living One and we need them, because as Pogo would say, "they are us!"

But your leadership will keep looking forward, listening to Christ's work among us while looking for the new life that Christ is encouraging around us.

In today's Gospel we hear what I would call a kind of "well duh" parable from Jesus. In response to questions about authority on both sides from the officials from the temple and from Jesus himself, there is no direct answer about Jesus' authority. Instead, he tells a parable. Which of the two sons – the one who says "no" but then goes ahead and does the work, or the one who says "yes" but does not do it, is following the will of the father? The answer is easy. The first, of course.

Jesus' parables can be looked at in many ways but one is to see them as either a window into the reality of God, or as a mirror that is held up to us to see ourselves. This parable is a mirror.

As we look into it, we can see that each of us has at times said "yes" to God and gone our own way anyway. And sometimes, we have said, "no" but we will end up engaged in the mission of reconciliation and love as we do our life.

When we say "yes", the heart and intention may be willing but the flesh is weak. When we say "no", we are blinded in our sin, but we have more potential for seeing that we are lost and for reaching out for help. That is why the prostitutes and tax collectors had a leg up on the chief priests and scribes. They

might actually come to their senses and see that the life they are living is destructive. The chief priests and scribes have it all together and don't need to be intentional about love.

Of course, where we really want to be is among those who say "yes" and actually engage in God's loving purpose.

That's the kind of people that God shapes in the wilderness. We're on our way and, in each other, we have wonderful company!

In the words of Nancy Gibbs Richard, a poet from the Pacific Northwest:

*There is a God-space between us  
that holds a truth  
larger than any our own.  
It is a challenge to be open  
to that possibility,  
to trust the Great Mystery  
of the in-between-place  
that can move us towards  
forgiveness, reconciliation, home.<sup>1</sup>*

Let the journey continue. Amen.

Patricia Rome Robertson+  
St. Mary's by-the-Sea  
Northeast Harbor, Maine  
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<sup>1</sup> "A Small Steadying Sail of Love" by Nancy Gibbs Richard, Angela Center Press, 2007, p.35