

**CORE NARRATIVE OF OUR FAITH III: THE PANDEMIC; EXODUS 17:1-7;  
SEPTEMBER 27, 2020; THOMAS H, YORTY; WESTMINSTER**

Many years ago a member of the congregation of blessed memory told me that he was scheduled for open heart surgery in the coming days. I asked him for the day and time of the surgery and on the appointed day I was able to get back to the pre-op area where he was waiting to be wheeled into the OR. I held his hand and said a prayer.

The surgery went well, he came home and recovered and he would never let me forget how much that brief visit and prayer meant to him. He was a bundle of nerves before I showed up. He was not expecting me because I did not tell him I would be there not knowing if it would be possible for me to get through the gauntlet of hospital protocol. But when I appeared, took his hand in mine and reassured him that he was in good hands to say nothing of being in God's hands, I could almost feel his blood pressure drop, the tension in his face recede and his breathing settle into a calm rhythm.

We can endure almost any pain, any unknown or fearful prospect looming before us if we know that we do not have to go it alone. From a child frightened of the dark who wants a parent to stay with them at bedtime to a nation trapped in the dark of a pandemic—knowing that we are not alone helps tap into the courage we need to face the worst.

There is an irony during this pandemic that the leader of our nation is a man incapable of compassion. As several distinguished psychologists and experts in personality disorders have said he is totally self-absorbed, a needy narcissist.

The present comforter in chief, as the occupant of that office has in times of national crisis been referred to, is not only unable to 'hold the hand' of the nation, that is, calm our anxiety and fears, but because he does not care about the human cost of the pandemic, he is incapable of providing leadership that would quell the spread of COVID, unify the nation and save lives.

I want to talk today about the pandemic in light of our fall theme, the core narrative of our faith—that God rescues and transforms Israel in the wilderness; just as God rescues Jesus from the tomb and raises him to life; and is a theme repeated every time God transforms us through our trials.

Two weeks ago, we heard how God liberated the people from slavery in Egypt when Pharaoh's army was engulfed by the sea even as the people walked to safety and dry land. Last week when the people, now no longer slaves but not yet free of their enslaved thinking, ran out of bread and meat God provided manna and quail.

Today when they run out of water, they blame Moses again for bringing them to this place. They have forgotten the two previous occasions on which God rescued them. Once more, God provides. What they are ever so slowly coming to learn is that they can rely upon a God who is with them and for them.

It takes time but they will emerge from this crisis, defeat the Amalekites and receive the Ten Commandments, the foundation for their daily living with reverence for all of life. Then after they make it to the promised land they will look back on the wilderness years as their coming-of-age as a people, their coming-into-their-faith-and-calling as a nation; and they will see clearly how God *was always* with them, shaping them through their trials into the nation God needed them to be.

Not unlike my friend with whom I visited before open heart surgery, when he looked back on that day from his recovery he was now aware that he was never alone, that God was with him even though he was too frightened then to realize it.

As far as my friend is concerned this new awareness completely changed his relationship to the church. For someone who was nominally connected to Westminster for his adult life he became deeply engaged. In fact, he became a one-man ministry center always on the lookout for those who, like him, believed they were alone facing some darkness and threat of death.

He gave gifts anonymously to bridge people over, to get them through to dry land, to safety, to show that they were not alone, that through this church and its benevolence enabled by him, God was and is with them.

Israel under her greatest king, David, looks back upon her journey from Egypt to a land promised to Abraham and Sarah and every generation since, a promise like a light that illumines the journey to the people when it seemed they were lost, when it seemed they were anything but a people, just scattered tribes struggling to survive.

Then under Moses they break free of slavery to the most powerful nation on earth; and like Jesus at the start of his ministry who enters the wilderness and is tempted to serve other gods, the people finally let go of Egypt's gods that they brought with them and re-discover Yahweh, the living God of their ancestors.

True to the adage that we live our faith forward and understand it backward they see that the wilderness was the crucible where they were tested and purified; they see the wilderness made them strong for the mission God called Abraham to long ago: to be a light to the nations and blessed to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

If that was your story, if you found yourself in some barren land where everything you thought was important was stripped away and what was left was the only really important thing, the thing you trusted in your heart when all the chips were down, you might sing the praises of whatever it was, whoever it was that came to your rescue.

Like David in Psalm 119: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path... Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your ways... Teach me to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end; give me understanding and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart."

We are fickle creatures, we make mistakes, we get lured into raw deals and get rich quick schemes; we like the limelight; we'd love to just stay in our comfort zone. But then an excellent teacher or fine coach or wise parent or loving God prods us to go deeper, to use the gifts we've been given, to reach for our best selves, to enter not run from some wilderness.

Here's what I'm saying: we are, as a congregation, as a nation in a wilderness; we are in the midst of a pandemic that will reach a pace this fall more deadly than the spring; we are in it if not for forty years, then for the long haul.

The White House counters at every step the guidance given by the infectious disease scientists and experts; unbelievably the pandemic is being politicized for the presidential election and weaponized for our on-going culture war.

We are also in a period of sweeping racial injustice and upheaval; profound and irreversible climate change; galloping hunger, unemployment and suffering from COVID among the poor, especially people of color.

Our wilderness is made more fierce because the nation is polarized. It seems we live not in the United but the *Divided States of America*. Anything blue from cities and states to policies that work are a target. Compromise, bi-partisanship, recognition of the larger good are things of the past. Rancor, aggression and draconian power plays the norm.

In this isolated, distanced from one another living, social graces weaken, compassion erodes and we have what feels like a society on edge.

Most predictions of the future look grim.

But let me stay closer to home, let me suggest that Westminster is a little Israel facing our own wilderness. Our elders met Wednesday night. The pandemic was ever present in the report of the budget and finance committee—rising costs, market volatility affecting our invested funds, plateaued annual giving all point to budget cuts for next year that would dramatically redefine the mission and ministry of this church—like a house without a roof or car without wheels.

But the elders struggled with that. They also said they believe that it might be possible to raise more funds to avoid the cuts, to keep the wonderful things that are happening intact. To preserve what we have heard our call to be: a progressive, social justice congregation, a center of education for all ages, known for glorious worship and music not found elsewhere in Western New York.

Then one elder asked are we going to pull back, to close down the programs and outreach at a time when the city and region, when the world is suffering so much? Will we be half a church when this community needs a full and robust church? It was a wilderness question, it was a question that cut to the heart of 166 years of ministry here on Delaware Ave., it was a question unless I miss my guess that cut to the heart of every elder on that conference call.

They say a pandemic is not a series of waves but more like a California wildfire that burns as long as there is wood. Who knows what November 3 will bring and the next administration which ever one it is? Coronavirus will still be here. And racial upheaval—we had a response to our post on our Facebook page recently in which we quoted the PCUSA mantra, “The Presbyterian Church delights in black lives” the angry post from an anonymous source asked, “Does that mean it doesn’t delight in white lives?”

Aggression and rancor. Was there ever a time when followers of Jesus were more needed? When kindness and generosity in short supply were called for? When the willingness to reach out to the neighbor more critical? Yet, can you remember when you were tempted as much as you might be now to stay in the cocoon of self-isolation and let this crazy world go by?

This is a certified wilderness friends. We couldn’t have imagined it even six months ago. But what we are called to imagine and trust is God with us, God transforming our depression and fear into bold and resilient faith.

The question our elder raised the other night *is the question*—how shall we then live? Will we let fear and complaint silence us or reduce this church to irrelevance?

Moses’ answer when Israel was poised leave the wilderness and enter the promised land was this, “Do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live.” That’s all the advice we need, even in a pandemic. Just as my friend discovered after his surgery, God is with us and for us. Amen.