

**Myers Park Presbyterian Church**

**October 26, 2014**

**Dr. Steven P. Eason**

*Wilderness*

**Exodus 16:1-3**

During 2014, the other clergy and I are preaching on 52 words from the Bible. A word a week. These are foundational words for our journey of discipleship. Today the word is *wilderness*.

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*The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. <sup>2</sup>The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."*

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Sometimes you end up in the *wilderness*. It's not only a place but it can also be a state of mind. The wilderness is a place of deprivation, limited vision and at times, hopelessness. It's difficult to get your bearings in a *wilderness*. It can be an unending landscape of despair.

If you want to sell Christianity to somebody, leave the wilderness out of it. No one wants to go to the *wilderness*. And some versions of Christianity do leave it out proclaiming, "*Come to Jesus and everything will get fixed!*" That's attractive, it's just not accurate. *Wilderness* is a part of our story. If you were to take it out of the Book, out of

our story, you would lose a significant part of God's activity in the world, along with clarity as to who we are in it.

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So what is our *wilderness theology*? "Theo-" means "God," and "-ology" means "study of," so theology is the study of God. What do we learn about who God is in the *wilderness*?

The most obvious is that **God allows us to go there**. None of us are immune from the *wilderness*. None of us has a "Get-Out-of-the-Wilderness-Card." Even Jesus went to the *wilderness* and was tempted there. Any Christianity that offers immunity from the *wilderness* is not being truthful or honest. God allows us to experience the *wilderness*. Sometimes it's a consequence of our behavior. Other times it's the consequence of someone else's behavior. It may be because of an accident or an illness or an act of nature that sends us to the *wilderness*. Whatever it is, God allows us to go there.

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What do we learn about who God is in the *wilderness*? What is our *wilderness theology*? **In the wilderness we do not always know how God's presence is with us.** Israel felt abandoned in the *wilderness* even though they were not. Our five senses do not always give us the truth. God's hand is at work in the world even though we may not be able to see or touch it. That's either wishful thinking or it is the truth. If it's not

the truth, then the world is lost and all that is in it. We are a people of the resurrection, we don't believe the world is lost.

God showed up in the *wilderness* for Israel, but not in the ways in which they would have planned for it. Our plans are not God's plans. Our ways are not God's ways. We could be looking in the wrong places for God's activity in our lives. Divine intervention always seems to be a surprise. It's not earned, nor is it merited; neither can it be controlled, manipulated or predicted. The God of the *wilderness* is elusive, yet always present.

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What do we learn in the wilderness? What is our *wilderness theology*? **You don't order steak and baked potatoes in the *wilderness*!** It's a time of scarcity, perhaps by design. If God allows us to go to the *wilderness*, God also allows us to experience deprivation. That's hard theology. People don't like to see God in that way.

The *wilderness* is about scarcity. There's very little out there. It's not like you have a plethora of choices. There's no menu! God sustained Israel in the *wilderness*. You might be hungry. You may not be in a place of abundance. People do suffer. This may be a time in your life where you're struggling, you don't have a lot of resources – but God does sustain us in the wilderness, even if we do not always know how, or when.

*More wilderness theology; In most cases, there is no quick fix in the wilderness.*

Sometimes you don't even know what to say to somebody who is in the *wilderness*.

Anything you say comes out sounding thin and cliché. It's not always a problem to be solved. It's not just a target to be hit. It's not a goal to be reached. The *wilderness* is not about quotas, or any standard of measurement. It's not solved with human principles.

It's a journey, sometimes a long journey. It's more like this;

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will  
fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort  
me. (Psalm 23:4)*

That's raw *wilderness theology*.

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**Prayer becomes your best friend in the *wilderness*.** Not the kind of polite prayer we often pray but intense, real prayer. You want to talk to God when you are in the *wilderness*. You want to know that God is listening to you when you are in the *wilderness*. You want to hear God say something to you when you're in the *wilderness*. Prayer becomes your best friend. You pray all the time, day and night.

But that's the point of the *wilderness*, **it can intensify everything.** You have the opportunity to realize what life is really all about. You are invited to see how foolish you have been and how out of whack your priorities are. You may gain a new sense of value for your family and the people who love you. You get the chance to see what's important and what's not when you're in the *wilderness*. The *wilderness* can strip you of

all pretenses, take off your mask and give you the gift of finding your true self. The *wilderness* is that place of transition between your slavery and your Promised Land.

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You can either die out there or you can learn something, it's always up to you. There are some folks who crumble, others who cope and there's another group who actually grow and come out of the *wilderness* stronger than the person they were when they went into it. The *wilderness* can teach you something about real life, about who you are and who God is. Sometimes it takes a crisis to awaken someone's faith. The nation Israel was shaped on the anvil of the *wilderness*. They forever went back and remembered the lessons they learned out there. They remembered the love of God that will not let you go no matter how barren your *wilderness* might be.

Fifty-two weeks/52 words that are foundational for discipleship. You wouldn't want to take the word *wilderness* out of it, or you would lose too much theology, too much knowledge of the love of God for a world that from time to time finds itself in the *wilderness*.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Congregation: **Amen**