

“From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?”

It is noteworthy that the problem of providing food for the people in this question is framed in terms of where the company was located. Had they been in a settlement or village, perhaps they would have imagined finding food. But this was not the case; they were in the wilderness where no food was to be found. And the idea of the wilderness is much more significant biblically than just a place where it is difficult to find food, and so it behooves us to explore the concept behind this location identified.

First, let us understand that the idea of wilderness expressed in the Bible is much different than how we moderns might understand it. We tend to think of unspoiled and yet pristine nature when talking of the wilderness. I remember doing a lot of backpacking in the past in places like “The Marble Mountain Wilderness” or “The Caribou Wilderness.” These large areas have been set aside by our government to remain undeveloped, and are only accessible by hiking trails. Indeed food was difficult to come by in these areas, but that was part of the challenge and part of the glory – you would prepare by packing your food with you. You could even bring a fishing pole and attempt to catch a trout or two for dinner at some of the many lakes. These wilderness areas allowed a respite from the intrusions of modern life, so in this sense, the wilderness is a place of spiritual retreat and refreshment. Leave the cell phone at the trailhead, there is no reception where you're headed.

Biblically, however, the wilderness isn't a place of refreshment. It is a place of hardship. It is a place of danger. It is a place of exile. And it is a place of trials, both physical and spiritual. Think more of the Mojave Desert rather than simply undeveloped and pristine land. The concept first unfolds through the creation story. Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden to tend it and to nurture it. Genesis 1:28 is known as the dominion mandate or the cultural mandate and it reads, “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” The idea that humans were to replenish and subdue the earth suggests that the earth was barren outside of the Garden of Eden and that the man and woman were to expand the Garden beyond its current bounds into the wilderness, which was desolate and barren. This is where the idea of “wilderness” first takes shape in our Biblical imagination.

Of course, because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, God expelled them from the Garden. The exact words that God speaks to Adam are found in Genesis 3:17-19.

And unto Adam (God) said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it:

cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;
Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

What the wilderness was like before this curse is a merely a matter for speculation. But here we see that humanity is exiled from paradise and cast out into the wilderness which grows thorns and thistles, and which will yield bread only through great effort - "By the sweat of thy face."

The wilderness concept continues development in the story of the Exodus – when Israel defeats Egypt through the mighty hand of God, crosses the Red Sea where Pharaoh's army is destroyed, and then begins its trek through the wilderness to the Promised land. The first stop of The Hebrews is Mt. Sinai, where they meet with God. Egypt is portrayed as a land of plenty, but also of slowly intensifying enslavement, until the people are delivered from their slavery by God through the ten plagues. Sinai, far from what small comforts remained in Egypt, is where they first meet God, become his covenant people, and then are tested to see if they will truly follow God through the barren desert, through the howling wilderness. We know the story, how in their pilgrimage they continually disobeyed and how God proved Himself faithful to them over and over again. Finally, however, after God had provided manna and quail, bread and meat, after He provided water, and victory over their enemies, and on reaching the border of the promised land, the Hebrew people refused to obey God by going in and possessing the land which He had promise them. For their disobedience, God sent them to wander in the wilderness for forty years until all of that disobedient generation had died off and were replaced by a new generation that would be faithful to God.

In this story, we see that the wilderness is the place where one learns dependence upon God and learns to trust God. When one becomes enslaved through either sin or through the comforts of life, when one is called out from a life of ignorance of God or of forgetting about God, one then must pass through the wilderness where dangers abound and where food is scarce. But in the direst of times, God provides for us. The depth of one's love of God and the extent of one's ability to trust in Him, is directly proportional to the wilderness through which one has passed. The wilderness is where love and trust and openness to God's provision is developed.

Of course, there are many other old testament stories that inform our understanding of the Wilderness. During Elijah's time, there was a drought in the promised land because of the

people's idolatry. In a sense, the land, the gift of God to His covenant people, was devolving from a garden paradise into the wilderness. Elijah himself, after a victory over the pagan cult of Baal, fled to the wilderness where He met with God and was fed by God. So even such a great man of faith and obedience as Elijah learned to trust God more in the Wilderness.

And let us not forget Israel's punishment for her idolatry culminating in her exile to Babylon. In this exile, this passing through the wilderness, she finally remembered her God and learned again to have faith in Him. And having learned her lessons, God was faithful to restore His covenant people to the land in due time.

Finally, let us not forget the wilderness testing of Jesus. Our Lord was compelled by the Father to go into the wilderness, not so much to learn obedience, but to be tested in His obedience. He did not go there to meet with God, but instead was confronted with the wild animals, the brutal sun, and the lack of food. The most significant trial during this time was Christ's temptation by the Accuser, by Satan. Notice that the pattern between Christ and Israel is the same. First baptism – in the Jordan or the Red Sea. Second, covenantal affirmation – This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased, or cutting the covenant at Mt. Sinai. And finally, there is testing in the wilderness. Israel failed in its wilderness trials, but Jesus, the new Israel, succeeded. And in the wake of His victory over the Accuser, as the gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark state, the angels came and ministered to Him. No doubt they provided Jesus with bread and wine, heavenly refreshment for the trying days of His ministry to come. Israel too, after Sinai was also provided with heavenly food to sustain them in the days ahead.

So let us return now to the gospel story. In it, the people of Galilee came out to meet with God, being revealed to them in Christ. They had been with Him three days, supposedly without very much to eat. Was this not in itself a trial? Yet they were so compelled by Jesus that they endured with Him in the wilderness. His teaching and His presence was their food. And yet Christ knew, and they themselves by the hunger pains which they no doubt were suffering knew, that they would need bodily sustenance for their journeys back to their homes.

Once again we see the "Three day" theme, and so we can expect a theme of resurrection, of new life. And the people, suffering for three days, starving, dying, in a sense are about to be fed, resurrected as it were, with heavenly food. "From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?" A normal man could not have fed these four thousand men with additional women and children uncounted. But we know that Jesus was both divine and human. He was no mere man, but the One who was, and is, and is to be. "And he

took the seven loaves, and gave thanks, and brake, and gave to his disciples to set before them; and they did set them before the people. And they had a few small fishes: and he blessed, and commanded to set them also before them. So they did eat, and were filled: and they took up of the broken meat that was left seven baskets.”

In this story, we do not see a health and prosperity gospel. We see people so captivated by Jesus that they were willing to endure the wilderness for His sake. This is the journey of salvation, learning to follow God into danger and tribulation and suffering because in Jesus we find the answers to our deepest longings. And we learn of Jesus because we suffer. And in the wilderness, in each and every one of our personal wildernesses, Jesus provides what we need. He gives Himself to us to be our bread and our wine.

God provides us with what we need, but He does not provide us with wealth as the world sees it. Those who follow Jesus have turned their back on wealth because it is a distraction. Wealth makes us comfortable. Struggle makes us godly. God gives us what we need, not what we covet. And the provision of God may be a provision of spiritual plenty in the gift of hunger or persecution. God's provision defies our understanding. In fact the wilderness, symbolic of hardship, is itself a good gift of God. We cannot be deeply formed in any other way.

And that phrase previously mentioned, “our personal wilderness”, speaks to the reality of the desert within each person. We are naturally born exiled from God for we follow the footsteps of our original parents' rebellion. The spirit of Adam and Eve dominates every person until they meet God in their own wilderness, the wilderness of the soul which is dry, barren, and a place of thirst and hunger. And that journey, meeting and then trusting and then following Jesus, is inestimably hard, for Jesus takes us places we don't want to go. Many of you have heard me say that every person is on a pilgrimage. There are as many unique stories as there have been people in the world. And yet I tell you this morning, that the journey either ends in following Jesus into the wilderness, completely dependent upon His goodness and His mercy, or it ends in desolation, ravaged eternally by the wilderness that we have created for ourselves.

St. Paul in the epistle lesson this morning appeals to the pilgrimage that the Roman Christians themselves had undertaken. It is a short reading; please allow me to read it in its entirety:

I SPEAK after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness. For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those

things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Apostle states here – you all once were servants of sin. You committed iniquity for iniquity's sake. You bore no fruit of righteousness for you had no righteousness in you. You were a desolate wilderness. The Mojave desert filled your soul, where you were tormented by wild beasts and chased after every vain thing. But your hunger could not be satisfied in yourself. Your thirst could not be quenched.

But the soul of the righteous man is no longer a desert. It may not yet be a lush garden, overflowing with produce of every kind, but the soul of the man who follows Jesus begins to bear fruit, as Paul says, “unto holiness.” And the end of such a one as this is the free gift of God, everlasting life. The dominion mandate is still in effect. Adam was to go into the wilderness and make it a fruitful garden. We too are called to this. First, tend the soul so that it bears fruit, and in doing so, the wilderness of the world, our families, our communities, and Lord willing, our nation, will begin to bear the fruit of goodness and beauty, of justice and peace and godly order.

Now for us here this morning, I may be preaching to the choir. Yet let us not shy away from asking ourselves the questions, “Will I follow Jesus into the wilderness? Will I deny myself when called upon to do so? Will I desire that heavenly food, that body broken, that blood poured out for me, so that I may know Jesus more, so that my soul would be fed with that which only can satisfy, so that I may be used of Jesus to build His Kingdom in me and in my world?” I fear that most of us Christians, in the Western world as least, are pretty content. Life is relatively easy for most of us – clean water, grocery stores full of food, clothes on our bodies, roofs over our heads, convenient and reliable electricity (if Ben does his job anyways). All of these are quite luxurious compared to the standard of living of much of the world today and throughout history. But this luxury in itself is a type of slavery. Our outward wealth distracts us from our inward poverty. But be certain, we brought nothing into the world, and be assured we can take nothing out.

So the question we must ask ourselves is, “Will we remain in Egypt as comfortable slaves or will we follow Jesus into the wilderness?” In other words, how can we go deeper in our relationship with Christ? How can we bear more fruit in the wilderness of our souls? In the wilderness of the world? No doubt we know answers to these questions. We all know the things that we should do, but which we never seem to take seriously enough to do.

I will tell you that the scope of such things primarily consists 1) of participating more in the life of the church as found here at Christ The King, 2) of recommitting to personal spiritual disciplines, and 3) of better reaching out to the community in order to draw others into the blessed community of the Church. So today, what is Christ beckoning to you to do? Why are you hesitating at the border? Do not be distracted by the plenty that surrounds us. Today let us have ears to hear the call. Let us respond and do those things we ought to do. There is plenty of work to be done, and in His goodness, may God bless our faithful and dedicated efforts in the wilderness. He will provide what we need. He will feed you with the food of Heaven, He will send you away refreshed.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.