

Pentecost 2 + June 18, 2017
“Wilderness People”
Exodus 19:2-8a

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This past week I was at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque for an intensive course in small town and rural ministry. One of the students was a young pastor named Philip Deng, who was originally from what is now South Sudan.

From his calm, gentle manner one would never know that Philip was one of the “Lost Boys of Sudan.” Named by aid workers for the “lost boys” in Peter Pan, these were more than 20,000 boys from the Nuer and Dinka ethnic groups who were orphaned and displaced during the long and gruesome Sudanese Civil war that began in the mid-1980s. Their homes destroyed and their parents brutally murdered, large groups of boys fled the war zones on foot, hoping to reach distant refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya.

They journeyed for thousands of miles, many shoeless, through isolated regions with few resources. Water was scarce to nonexistent. Philip told me they ate leaves and roots of trees until they came to one of the far-flung villages and could get some real food. They were vulnerable to extreme heat and disease. They were attacked by lions, snakes, and other wild animals. When they had to cross rivers they were attacked by crocodiles. They encountered bands of enemy soldiers who would randomly shoot at them. Roughly half the boys in these groups died along the way. Philip said they had no choice but to leave the bodies where they had fallen. Of those who survived, experts have said they were most badly war-traumatized children they had ever examined.

In Exodus we also have a gripping story of people wandering in the wilderness. To fully appreciate our reading today from Exodus 19 and how it is a watershed moment for the Israelites, we need to hear it in the context of the sweeping story that begins several chapters earlier, when the Egyptian Pharaoh finally lets the Israelites go after 430 years in captivity. You can picture it on the big screen: The Lord leads them out of Egypt in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He guides the people across the Red Sea, parting the waters so they can pass through and then closing them over the Egyptian pursuers. On the far edge Moses and Miriam sing jubilantly, just as we did in Psalm 100, as Miriam plays her tambourine: “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

The Israelites then enter the vast wilderness, and soon begin to complain ungratefully to Moses about the hardships they are enduring: “We wish we’d just died back in Egypt, where at least we enough to eat and drink!” they say. God then provides them with manna from heaven, but the people are still desperately thirsty. They are just about to stone Moses in their fury when he strikes the rock with his staff as God told him to do, and water gushes out.

In today’s reading the Israelites cross into the desert of Sinai, even more vast than the previous one. God tells Moses to say to them that, if they keep the commandments God is about to give them, they will be God’s treasured possession and a holy nation. Suddenly, somehow, the people let go of their anger and are able to trust God: “Everything that the Lord has spoken, we will do.”

Wilderness boys, wilderness people. We, too, are wilderness people. We have all been in the desert at one time or another, that place where water is scarce and no nourishment can be found, where we find ourselves without shade or protection, where we encounter the wild animals of fear,

anxiety, doubt, and despair, all of which tear at us, trying to destroy us. The comfortable relationship we had with God is changed. It feels as if God isn't there and may even abandoned us.

We don't know this while we're in the midst of it, but this spiritual desert is not a negative condition. In fact, God takes us there *for our protection*. In the midst of life crises that we can't control, God brings us there for a purpose. We cannot free ourselves from despair, and to try on our own can just hurt us more. So we are taken to a spiritual place where all our attachments to material things are stripped away and we are able to become acutely aware of God in Christ residing at the center of our soul. All that remains for us is to trust God, as the Israelites finally did, that God will lead us through. This is precisely the place the psalmist finds himself at the beginning of Psalm 63: "O God, you are my God, eagerly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water." From this trust, this vulnerability, we grow closer to God in mysterious ways that would not otherwise have been possible.

This spiritual growth is what Paul is talking about in the memorable sequence in Romans 5: Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, the conviction that God's promises are true.

Our world is suffering in the wilderness with terrorist attacks in France, England and elsewhere, in locations where we never imagined such things happening. Our nation is suffering in the wilderness from unthinkable acts of hatred and violence, mostly recently the attack on members of Congress during a baseball practice, and the killing of several UPS workers in San Francisco. But suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character: The resolve of the British people is strengthened as they continue to say "No" to fear. The Congressional baseball game was played as

scheduled Thursday night with new feelings of unity, hope, and common purpose springing up from both sides.

God has brought each of you through your wilderness experience, and from that has come a depth of character that enables you to comfort others in similar situations with the same hope that you came to know. As Jesus says in our Gospel reading today, “The one who endures to the end will be saved.” God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, loves each of you deeply and will go to the ends of the earth, or the farthest regions of heaven, to protect you and to draw you closer to him. How can we ever show our gratitude? We find one answer in today’s Gospel reading, where Jesus says to the disciples, “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near...for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.’”

In the words of the hymn we are about to sing, “tell to all the joyful gospel.” And know that God always has you in the palm of his hand.

Amen.