

Transitions: Wilderness Wandering

Wilderness wandering

Third sermon in series entitled: Transitions

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Text: Numbers 13:25-33

Theme: The middle phase of all transitions is a place of wandering, searching, confusion, and being lost.

It is a necessary part of the journey so that we can find ourselves or can grow into the new person we need to be.

The professor of a Bible class asked one of her students to read from the Book of Numbers the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. She got to the part where the slaves were complaining about not having something to eat. The text said that the Lord heard the Israelites whine, "If only we had meat to eat," and responded by saying "I will give you meat. You will not eat it for one day, nor two days, nor five or ten or twenty days, but for months – until you loathe it." When the woman stopped reading and looked up she said, "Hey, isn't this the beginnings of the Atkins diet?"

Today's story also comes from the Book of Numbers but is much later – after years of wandering and probably years of loathing quail meat. Today's sermon is the third in this series on Transitions and the topic for today is "Wilderness wanderings." I said in my first sermon that William Bridges, an expert on change, came up with a three step process for transitions – endings, which I preached about last week, the neutral zone of chaos and emptiness, and finally new beginnings. Since this is a biblically based sermon I changed his designation from neutral zone to wilderness.

This middle phase of wilderness wandering is often dismissed in our fast paced, productivity-minded culture. Because we dismiss so quickly and so frequently many of us never discover the full treasure awaiting us in the transitions of our lives. Many of us race through change and end up repeating our mistakes, or jump back into old behaviors without taking the time for correction or reflection, or we don't pause to unlearn the habits of the past so we can have room to learn habits that will help us in the future.

Let's face it none of us likes that feeling of wandering in chaos and confusion and it often feels like unwelcomed punishment but it is often fertile, energized, and creative ground for self discovery. This morning I would like to explore that ground with you.

The Bible is full of wilderness journeys and experiences. Way back in the first stories of Genesis we remember the first couple being removed from the Garden and sent into the wilderness to reflect upon what they did. Then we have Abraham and Sarah who were peacefully moving into their golden years and God roused them and moved them on a journey into the unknown. It was a long extended wilderness trip that finally led them to the Promised Land.

Before Moses led his people out of captivity he spent time in the wilderness where he discovered the burning bush and his next assignment in life. Then he and the Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness, not because they needed the exercise but because they needed to transition from people with slave mentalities to a community of believers who could transform the world.

After Jesus was baptized he headed straight for the wilderness for 40 days where he wrestled with the changes in his life and ministry. Over the centuries church leaders of the past and present continue to go on retreats, pilgrimages, and times of fasting and solitude to wander and wonder about what God wants from their lives.

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Many non-Christian cultures have formalized times of wandering in what are called rites of passage. When Australian Aborigines search for meaning to change or loss they go on walkabouts. In Native American tribes when people go through major times of change they retreat to high places, ask for spirits to guide them, and then wait for a vision.

Wilderness wandering is not new; it is just less formalized in our goal-oriented, production-driven culture. In fact it is viewed as a waste of time or an opportunity for psychiatric intervention. Some of us have gone through major changes or times of loss and we try to ignore the need to take time and reflect. Even though we don't take the time our minds or bodies do it for us and they seem to unplug from the world for a period of time. Do you know what I mean? It is like we are sleepwalking through our roles and routines while our insides heal and adjust.¹

Bridges writes many of us view transition as some kind of street-crossing procedure and we are like the chicken who wants to get to the other side of the road as quickly as possible because we know that playing or dawdling in the middle of the road will get us killed. But that is not the way transition works. We do need to spend time in this in-between place of confusion.²

I discovered an interesting definition for confusion this week. "Confusion is a word we have invented for an order which is not yet understood."³

Bridges describes this confusing wilderness time as "a colorless streak of emptiness that spreads across your life, like a gray smear by a dirty eraser. It is a strange no-man's-land between one world and the next. It is a zone where you pick up mixed signals, some coming from the past and some from the future. Sometimes the signals jumble into noise, while at other times they cancel each other out, leaving only an eerie silence."⁴ No wonder we don't want to wander too long in the wilderness.

But wilderness wandering is not as frightening as it sounds; in fact it is the source of renewal, discovery, and excitement when properly explored. Let me share some insights and lessons about wilderness travel.

First, not all change leads to journeys into this confusing chaos. But there are major changes like getting married or getting divorced, like having children or learning that you cannot have children, like changing your job status (whether that be a promotion or a demotion) like losing a loved one, like a major change in your health, or a major change in a dream or vision you had for your life, that push us quickly into transition. These major change moments provide a platform for us to view our past and look into the future. They are like the gap between two chapters of a book and we the reader get to pause long enough to see if we understand what has happened before we begin reading again. We are given a chance to get in touch with our feelings, to assess the damage or the gain, and to make course corrections if needed in our lives.

Second, these wilderness moments really need intentional space and time. Most of us have a hard time being alone, or spending time in solitude, or going anywhere without our bundle of communication or entertainment gadgets. Wilderness wandering demands our full attention. So we come to these moments without an agenda, without noise-making devices, armed only with some deeply reflective questions like:

- What is it that is really changing? Does it mean that I am losing something old or gaining something new?
- What is the outward change or loss telling me about my inward change or loss?
- What do I have to unlearn from the last phase of my life so I can move healthily to the next phase?

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- If God the great Creator has used the medium of chaos before, then what is God creating out of the present chaos of my life?
- How is God directing my life? Is there a pattern to the changes in my life? Do I see God pushing me or wooing me in any particular direction? Am I consistently denying or resisting that pull? Why?
- What would be “unlived” if my life were to end right now? In other words, what is there that stirs within me that has not been expressed in the way that I have lived so far? What action needs to be acted upon, what relationship needs to be acted out, or what does this change now enable me to do that I couldn’t do before?

There are a lot more questions that could be asked but these represent a good starting point. Save them for the next wilderness time.

Bridges is convinced that we too often miss the opportunity to explore ourselves deeply when it comes to times of transition and that we look only at the outer change and we fail to grasp or reflect upon the inner message. When we can look beneath the outer and obvious change we often discover our inner hopes, fears, dreams, beliefs, and desires. When we wrestle with these inner attitudes we discover the treasure of transformation.⁵

Third, there are times in our wilderness wanderings that we need guides or at least companions. I know I just said we need to find times to be alone but when we return from those journeys of solitude we need to share our new understandings with someone we trust. Wilderness times can become lonely and disorienting unless there is someone who can help share the journey.

I am reminded of a true story of Former President Richard Nixon. A number of years ago, Newsweek magazine carried the story of the memorial service held for Hubert Humphrey, former vice-president of the United States. Hundreds of people came from all over the world to say good-bye to their old friend and colleague. But one person who came was shunned and ignored by virtually everyone there. Nobody would look at him much less speak to him. That person was former president Richard Nixon. Not long before, he had gone through the shame and infamy of Watergate. He was back in Washington for the first time since his resignation from the presidency.

Then a very special thing happened, perhaps the only thing that could have made a difference and broken the ice. President Jimmy Carter, who was in the White House at that time, came into the room. Before he was seated, he saw Nixon over against the wall, all by himself. He went over to [him] as though he were greeting a family member, stuck out his hand to the former president, and smiled broadly. To the surprise of everyone there, the two of them embraced each other, and Carter said, "Welcome home, Mr. President!

Welcome home!" One president to another, from different parties, they understood what they had in common, what burdens they had born in common, they were elected presidents. Commenting on that, Newsweek magazine asserted, "If there was a turning point in Nixon's long ordeal in the wilderness, it was that moment and that gesture of love and compassion."⁶

Finally too often we enter our wildernesses expecting to find clarity for the journey ahead. But there is no promise of that in anything we find in the Bible or in life. Often times when I leave my retreat or time of solitude I am more confused about the direction that I need to go BUT more able to trust in the One who will guide me into the future.

I am reminded of a story about John Kavanaugh, a world renowned ethicist who went to work for three months at "The House of the Dying" in Calcutta. He was seeking a clear answer as to how best to

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spend the rest of his life and he thought that he would consult a living saint – Mother Teresa. On the first morning there she asked, "And what can I do for you?"

Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him. "What do you want me to pray for?" she asked.

"Pray that I have clarity," he responded

She said firmly, "No, I will not do that."

When he asked her why, she said, "Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and the very thing you must let go of." When Kavanaugh commented that she always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, "I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God."⁷

Often when we crave clarity what we are really doing is attempting to eliminate the risk of trusting in God. As I look at the wilderness moments in the Bible the participants did not come away with crystal clear clarity but granite hard trust in God.

Let us return to the story of the Israelites as they are wandering in the wilderness. By this time they have been wandering for a long time and are getting tired. So God tells Moses to send out spies to do a little espionage work in the Promised Land. It was a test to see if the Israelites were ready to move into the new land. So Moses sent a leader from every one of the twelve tribes and off they sneak to the land of Canaan and after forty days they return with their report. Ten of the twelve report, "God was right. It is a land flowing with milk and honey, but the people who live there are strong, in fact they are descendants of giants and they would devour us if we set foot in their land. We were like grasshoppers compared to them."

We know that Joshua and Caleb filed a minority report and said that if Israel just believed in God and trusted they could easily invade and take over the Promised Land. Who do you think the folks listened to? Israel failed the test of transformation and trust and were sent back out to wander some more. They had not used the time in the wilderness to unlearn their slave habits or to rid themselves of slave mentalities so they could move on to be God's people of promise. They were still shackled with their limited view of what God could do in their lives and they could not trust in God's tomorrow. They returned to their old lives, wandering as many of us do, lost, and sleepwalking through our routines. Eventually that generation died off and a new generation emerged with new vision and new hope. It took a while – but wilderness wanderings never promise to be short, only transforming.

God was with them in their wanderings. God was providing and protecting and all the while hoping that they would lose their grasshopper vision and see the world as it was meant to be. That is what God hopes for all of us when we wander in the wilderness. God hopes we will no longer see like grasshoppers but trust in his transforming power.

Let us pray...

¹ Bridges, William, "Transitions: Making sense of Life's Changes" Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, MA 1980. p130.

² Bridges, p112

³ Quote by Henry Miller as contained in: Bridges, William "The Way of Transition," Da Capo Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001. p68

⁴ Bridges, William "The Way of Transition," Da Capo Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001. p155-6

⁵ Bridges, William "The Way of Transition," Da Capo Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001. p15

⁶ Steve Goodier, www.LifeSupportSystem.com

⁷ Excerpt from Brennan Manning's book "Ruthless Trust" found online on www.sermonnews.com