

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Abundance in the Wilderness
Exodus 16:2 – 15

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The wilderness – it’s a hot, dusty, lonely, *maddening* place. It comes out of nowhere, and surprises you with a hot *blast* of tests. It’s the ultimate test of character. It’s the place where you come face-to-face with yourself and see what you’re made of – and what you really believe. It’s a place *no one* chooses, a place *everyone* would rather avoid. It’s the place where you come to the end of one chapter and await the next, and try as you might, you *cannot* speed it along. The wilderness is simply *there*, in that in-between, liminal space. And try as you might, you can never seem to fully *prepare* for that place.

When I first came to St. Timothy’s, one of the first and primary questions our pastoral staff asked was, “Where to next?” Many in the congregation had experienced 3DM huddles, various iterations of grow groups, and some had even become missional communities. But the evolution of our small group ministry had seemed to slow, so we evaluated curriculum and various models. As we discussed, debated, and tried different approaches on for size, it became clear that continually evaluating and challenging our small groups is important, and there *are* good and helpful models and curricula. But there is no *perfect* model for discipleship. One size *cannot* fit all. No model can *guarantee* spiritual growth. And no model can produce the fruit that seems to only come in the wilderness.

In Exodus 16, we find God’s people in the wilderness. God’s people were *freed*! They had been freed from the oppression of *400 years* of slavery, only to find themselves *stuck* in no man’s land, *stuck* in the wilderness! They had eaten what they had packed, and there was nothing

left. No food, no water, *nothing*. They began to wonder what the point was of being free, if you couldn't live another day to enjoy it? They thought back to their former lives, and started to misremember. They began to imagine that they had eaten like kings, with plenty of food to spare. Their thoughts quickly turned to complaints, and they wished to go back; they wished to go back to *slavery*.

Now, this seems like an *absurd* story. *Who* would prefer slavery to freedom?! Who wouldn't at least want the *opportunity* to experience the new reality of freedom, even if it was unsteady and unpredictable?

Of course it's easy to criticize, but this is our human condition. It is easier to remain with what we know than to take a risk and venture into the unknown. We even have a saying for it: Better the devil you know than the devil you don't. It's a pretty terrible saying, especially on a Sunday morning, don't you think?

The amazing thing is that Scripture is *honest*. It doesn't glorify God's people by recounting some tale of how they got it all right and never doubted. It tells us that almost *immediately after* they were freed, they complained and wanted to go *back* to *slavery*. They *did not* trust that God would provide and that they would survive the wilderness. They thought they were going to *die*. They didn't beg or plead to be saved; they wanted to go *back*.

So they grumbled and complained against their leaders, Moses and Aaron. Chances were slim that they actually *could* go back, that they *could* re-cross the Red Sea. And what would they do if they got back? Beg to be slaves again? They couldn't do that. They *couldn't* go back. But they didn't know how they could go forward. So they chose what made the most sense – they complained.

Maybe it felt good just to *do something*. Complaining might not *change* anything, but at least they could say they were doing *something*. Maybe Moses and Aaron could do something – or at least *sympathize* with them.

So, they complained. They were stuck, they didn't want to be there, and they didn't know how they would survive.

If we were God, we might wonder why we bothered to free our people in the *first* place! They were *clearly* undeserving and were *not* productive or forward thinkers. They were a pain in the neck!

But instead of expressing anger or leaving them to their own devices, God *abundantly* provided for them. The Lord told Moses, “Look, I'm going to *rain down* food from heaven for you. Each day the people can go out and pick up as much food as they need for that day. I will test them in this to see whether or not they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they will gather food, and when they prepare it, there will be twice as much as usual” (Ex 16:4 – 5).

God made a plan to give them just what they needed for each day – not too much and not too little. He would provide for them each and every day, and would even make a way so that they would have a sabbath each week. They would gather twice as much on the sixth day, so that no work would be done – or could be done – on the seventh day.

God provided *abundantly* to meet their needs. Not because they earned it or even because they asked for it, but because God has *decided* to provide.

When we are in the wilderness, it's easy to look around at the endless hard-packed dirt and wonder how long we'll be stuck out here. Will it be forever? We see the rolling tumbleweeds, the vultures circling overhead, and we feel abandoned. It's dry and desolate out here. If we yell, will anyone hear us? Is anyone out there? It feels like some bad accident or a

form of cruel punishment. Have we been forgotten? Can we expect anything but frustration and pain out here? How can something purposeful or *good* come out of the wilderness?

No one likes the wilderness. *No one*, not even *Jesus*, chooses the wilderness. But in Scripture, we discover that the wilderness is *purposeful*. It is *not* an accident. The wilderness for the Hebrews was the *necessary* place before entering the Promised Land. It was the place they experienced the *presence* and *abundant provision* of God. It was the place they were tested. The wilderness was where Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit, or, according to the Gospel of Mark, it was where he was *thrown out* into, before beginning his ministry. Jesus was sent to the wilderness to be tested by the devil and to clarify beyond a *shadow of a doubt* what his ministry would be all about. For Jesus the wilderness lasted 40 days, and for the Hebrews, it lasted 40 *years!*

The wilderness is where all supports are washed away and where we have no other choice but to ask the hard question. *Do I really believe God? Do I trust that He will provide for me in this wilderness? Will He meet me in this time of need? Will He meet us in this time of need?*

As we ask these questions, it's important to recognize our expectations. What are we looking for, to prove God's provision? What are you looking for, to prove God's provision for you?

When I was a young adult, I read a devotion by Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest*, which I thought was *profound*. He wrote that sometimes, we are bitter or have hardened our hearts against God, because of something He has failed to do for us, which He never promised.

I can't tell you how many times I have thought back to these words, recognizing times when I've harbored anger toward God because of something that I hoped for, but that He never actually promised to me. The first time I recognized this was when I was a young adult. I was angry that I was single and had no prospects that I could think of. I had been angry, and I didn't even realize it. And then I asked myself whether or not God had actually promised me a spouse. I realized that that was a promise that God had never made with me. This realization has continued to happen throughout my life.

The demand for God's provision exactly *when* and *how* we want reaches its boiling point in the wilderness. When the Hebrews were stuck in the wilderness, God did not meet their expectation. Whatever it was, He didn't meet it. Because they grumbled and complained, and then when He miraculously provided for them, they asked, "What is it?" Which in Hebrew is, "Manna?" The bread that God rained down from heaven looked nothing like they had ever seen or tasted before, so they called it, "What is it?"

And then of course, the *timeliness* of when He sent it wasn't what they expected. However much each person and family gathered, it was just enough. If they kept it overnight, it would spoil, *except* if they kept it from the sixth day into the seventh. They actually were *supposed* to keep it from the sixth day to the seventh, because God would not send manna on the seventh day. He wanted them to rest.

He provided in this particular way, because He wanted to test their obedience. Would they trust Him to provide for them, just as He promised? Would they demonstrate their trust by collecting food exactly as He told them?

As the story goes, some were obedient, and others weren't. And after a while, they complained, not because they were hungry, but because they were bored with eating the same food, day in and day out.

Despite their complaints and their disobedience, God remained true to His promise, and eventually brought them out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land. And it took 40 years to get there.

What you are looking for in this time in the wilderness may *not* be what God wants to provide for you. Not because God is uncaring or because He likes to see you suffer. That is not the character of God. As Psalm 86:15 says, He is a God of "compassion and mercy, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness." When God does not provide for you in the way in which you expect, God, in His eternal wisdom and love, desires to accomplish something *different* in you.

The best comparison we have for this is a loving parent with their child. The child wants what they want, and they want it *now*, but the parent has a broader perspective. The parent knows that instead of having the child to stay awake longer, it really is better for the child to go to sleep. The parent knows that though the child wants to play *right now*, it really *is* better to change their diaper and avoid an explosion. There are countless examples that many of you have in your experience or can imagine.

God has a perspective and a will for us that you and I simply cannot comprehend in many moments in our lives. But you can trust that He is good, that He loves you, and that He *will* provide for you, even when you're in the wilderness.