

## TOP 10 STORIES & THEMES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

### Week 4: "God's Wilderness School"

**SCRIPTURE: Exodus 16:1 - 17:7 and Exodus 20:1-21**

#### **NOTES ON THE THEME:**

This week we venture with the Israelites into the Wilderness. And let's not make light of the wilderness -- be it literal or metaphorical. This is not the majestic, pristine environment we saw in the PBS documentary on our National Parks. This is a desolate, scary and foreboding place where life is hard, and where struggle, suffering and death are the expected reality. It was so bad that the people of God said, "Please, Moses, lead us back to slavery in Egypt, where at least we had enough simple food and water and a predictable routine!" Can you imagine a place so bad, so scary, so confusing and full of suffering that would cause a free people to long for the "good old days" of Pharaoh's harsh and brutal slavery?

Wilderness times are a given in life. We can not avoid them. Someone once said, "Suffering is what happens when life interferes with our dreams and our plans." Catherine of Aragon once said, "No one gets to God but through trouble." None of us like to suffer. None of us plan to suffer. But still, no matter how we hope life goes, Suffering Happens. Our first reaction may be to ask "Why?" Why me, why now, why this? While some answers may be available, they are rarely sufficient enough to please us. And sometimes the "Why?" goes completely unanswerable. Another natural reaction is to get angry, bitter or apathetic. We can resign to the suffering, give up completely, or react in anger and bitterness. These ways, while natural, are not going to help us or anyone else around us in the long run. In the short term they are understandable, but before long, we can make ourselves and everyone around us more miserable.

These stories of God's Wilderness School show us that we have a choice when we encounter suffering. Once the complaints are expressed and the "Why's?" are asked, we have the choice to trust God more fully and say, "What next? Where do we go from here?" These stories seem to say that our suffering produces "teachable moments" like very few others in life. Seasons of suffering give us the opportunity to listen, discern, reflect... and to even expect God to teach, lead and guide us to new awareness and new possibilities.

#### **EXODUS 16 & 17... Food (and Drink) For Thought!**

Read this story about the Manna From The Sky (and if you wish, the similar story about the Water From The Rock that follows). Here we see God's Wilderness School in action, where God is helping his Partner People learn what it means to live as people who are free. Manna, by the way, literally means, "what is it?"

+ WHAT HAPPENED? The people complained of their hunger and thirst. God provided Manna each day (and water, too), the people gathered their manna each day, just enough for each day. Larger families and groups gathered larger amounts, and smaller groups and families gathered smaller amounts. No one had too much. No one had too little.

+ WHAT DID GOD'S PARTNER PEOPLE LEARN? Everything, including food and water, belong to God, not us. Our work -- doing work -- is the dignified and necessary activity of helping God meet the needs of all people. We can trust God to provide what we need. We don't need to hoard, but in fact, are free to experience the joy of generosity and sharing. If everyone uses just what they need, no one has too little and no one has too much.

+ WHAT HAPPENED NEXT? Some people took too much and hoarded the manna, trying to save it for another day. The excess manna they hoarded grew maggots and rotted, smelling foul.

+ WHAT DID GOD'S PARTNER PEOPLE LEARN? Hoarding Stinks! Pharaoh's way in Egypt of accumulation, excess and piling it up leads to decay, rot, illness and death.

+ WHAT HAPPENED NEXT? No manna fell on the 7th day of the week. They were told to collect enough for 2 days on the 6th day of the week. The manna stored for the 7th day did not rot.

+ WHAT DID GOD'S PARTNER PEOPLE LEARN? Humans are not designed to work every day or all the time. The time away from work -- called Sabbath in the Bible -- is a gift of rest, refreshment and renewal. It is time to take an intentional break from work, and focus on what matters most in life... Friendship with God, Friendship with God's Creation, Friendship with People.

This session of Wilderness School can be summarized as follows:

+ We own nothing. Everything is God's and everything is gift.

+ God provides enough for everything to be shared by everyone.

+ Hoarding stinks! It causes rot, decay and sickness.

+ Work is helping God distribute "manna" (God's resources of creation) for the good of all.

+ God gives rest so humans can practice "full time" what life is really all about: FRIENDSHIP - with God, Others and Creation.

+ God wants us to eat to live, not live to eat. In our world we might say, "Work to live, don't live to work," or "Consume to live, don't live to consume."

Q: How have you experienced your own days or seasons in "Wilderness School"?

Q: What has suffering taught you? How has God helped you use suffering in your life, or someone close to you, to help you learn valuable life lessons?

(Note: Martin Luther and our Lutheran tradition is very clear about suffering... God does not, and never, causes it. But God can help us use it to make us better instead of bitter.)

Q: Where do you see hoarding taking place in the world, and what are some of the consequences? Why do people hoard in the first place? How or what are you tempted to hoard?

Q: Where do you see generosity and sharing taking place in the world? What are the consequences? How do you benefit from sharing and generosity?

### **EXODUS 20:1-21... Living the Blessings of Freedom and Community**

Read this story about God giving the people what we typically call "The Ten Commandments". Notice the progression in these guidelines for life. The first commandments deal with relationship with God, then relationship with family, then relationship with others and creation. Life in community works best when we agree to be mutually accountable. This is not just about being accountable to God, but to one another. This covenant relationship helps us live as God desires, AND, helps us trust one another and know that we are living together "for the good of all." Everyone benefits.

Sometimes we see this Community Covenant purely as a list of rules, and specifically as a list of "OUGHTS & DON'TS". Parents recognize that often, if you tell a child "You ought to..." or "Don't you..." do something, its like telling them to do the opposite of your advice. And as we look at history, it has played out much the same for the relationship between God, the heavenly parent, and God's children. Why is that? (Read the apostle Paul's struggle with this in Romans 7:14-25. Quite humbling, indeed!)

But what if we looked at this Covenant with God in another way? What if, instead of fearing a God who casts lightning bolts when we sin and a God who sits in judgement just waiting for us to screw up and blast us for it... what if we saw a loving fatherly and motherly parent, playfully holding us with a smile and telling us a story about the dreams this parenting God has for our lives when we "grow up"? God is smiling, bouncing us on God's knee, and sharing wisdom about how we can be the best we can be, and enjoy life to the fullest... because that's what God wants for ALL God's children, more than anything. And if we live this way, God is convinced that life will be good for you, me and everyone.

When we teach confirmation and other groups of youth and adults about the 10 C's, there's a trick or two that helps everyone see these guidelines differently. We ask people to take each of the ones that say "You shall not" or "Do not" and we ask, "How would you re-word this commandment as something positive?" How can you word this rule in a positive expression, as something you GET to do, instead of something NOT to do, or that you've GOT to do? Try this. Go through each commandment and make a positive statement of blessing and opportunity.

Martin Luther must have seen this also, because he expands on many of the commandments, and instead of just dwelling on what NOT to do, he often expresses (in the Small Catechism) what we are asked and invited to do as a result of these commandments, and how doing so will bless our lives and the lives of others around us. For example, for "You shall not steal," Luther says not only should we not steal from our neighbors, but be fair and honest with them, and help them protect and care for their property and their income. Why? Because what goes around comes around! It builds trust, fosters friendship, and serves the whole community.

Q: Read the commandments again. How would you summarize each in your own words?

Q: What positive wording could you come up with for each commandment? What are the opportunities and the blessings that each commandment speaks of?

Q: How did Jesus summarize the commandments? Why do you think he said it this way? (See Mark 12:28-34, Matthew 22:34-40)

Q: Read another encounter between Jesus and an inquisitor in which the commandments are mentioned (Luke 18:18-30).

Based on this, what might you say are the purposes of the commandments? And why do you think that just the mere fulfillment of the commandments may not be enough for someone to understand what it means to be a disciple-follower of Jesus?

Blessings on your week as we journey with the Israelites in the Wilderness School!

-- Pastors Jay and Charlie