

“Beyond the Wilderness”
Rev. Jennifer R. Knutsen
Sunday, August 30, 2020
Exodus 3:1-15

As the story goes, Moses had wandered off course.
He had escaped Egypt as a man on the run.
He left to save his life after killing one of the overseers
who were mistreating his fellow Israelites
when they were enslaved in Egypt.
The Israelites were still in Egypt, held in bondage and oppressed.

But, now Moses was living among the Midianites —
distant relatives of the Israelites.
He had married a Midianite woman, Zipporah;
they had a child together;
and Moses was working as a shepherd for his father-in-law, Jethro,
making a respectable life for himself,
albeit maybe not the best fit for him.

On a seemingly regular day like so many others,
while tending a flock of sheep,
Moses’ life took a turn.
He wandered off, beyond the wilderness.
Beyond the wilderness,
he came to a mountain called Mount Horeb.

I do not know what Mount Horeb looked like.
although I was a little curious.
Sitting in front of my computer screen,
it occurred to me to look up a picture on the internet.
But my google search didn’t work out too well.

It turns out no one really knows where the biblical Mount Horeb was,
although most scholars agree that it is the same mountain
called Mount Sinai in other Bible stories.
They figure it was somewhere on the Sinai Peninsula —
a triangle-shaped swath of land
nestled between Egypt and Israel
and the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea.

There, red brown rocks rise up from the dusty, desert ground.
Some scraggly trees and scrubs dot the landscape.

I wondered what it looked like to Moses that day
as he approached the mountain.

I began to picture the mountains I know well.
That was a lot easier, since I grew up in the mountains—
the Rocky Mountains,
just like the children's story I shared.

My hometown, Boulder, Colorado,
is nested in a valley where the high desert plains meet the foothills,
and high snow capped peaks rise beyond that.

From many trips around the desert southwest —
in Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona—
I can picture the dusty red-brown earth
and the jagged rock forms like mighty mirages
rising up from the ground.

My own backyard began as dry, brown earth—
not a tree or shrub or blade of anything green or growing.
Although with a lot of careful planting—
fruit trees, a blue spruce,
and moss rock and flower gardens,
mixed with water and sweat
and 50 years of patience,
my parents turned it into something of an oasis.

Early one fall when I was about fourteen,
I remember a trip to the mountains
with the youth group from my church.
I do not know exactly where we were,
but I have a strong memory of that day.

At some point we were given time and space to wander.
Apart from the group,
in a place of our choosing,
we were given time just to be.

I found a spot and sat down on the forest floor
at the foot of an aspen tree.
Leaning against the tree trunk,
I looked straight up into its branches.
I discovered it aglow with golden leaves.

I was overwhelmed by the sight
of all those quaking leaves
shimmering in the bright sun.

Framing my view of brilliant yellow
was the dark green of a large pine tree,
and beyond that, the deep blue of a cloudless sky.

I sat there and soaked it in.
In my silence and solitude, I became acutely aware of myself,
and the profound depth and expanse of the world beyond me.
It made me feel sure and comforted
even though it was a new awareness.

I decided that I must be in the presence of God.
I left it at that.
I sat by the tree and hoped I would remember.

When Moses wandered off beyond the wilderness,
he came to a mountain,
and a bush aglow, blazing as if on fire, but not burning up,
and he became aware he was in the presence of God.

Through this experience,
Moses received a new direction for his life.
He came to see both his place and purpose in a new way.
In faith language, we talk about this as a “call.”
For Moses, the call touched many senses —
the feel of sacred ground underfoot,
the fiery sight of a burning bush,
the voice of God saying “Go”
the assurance of God saying “I will be with you.”

Moses was called by God to be with the people.
Theologian Walter Brueggeman has noticed that the call
comes first, not from God, but from the people who were suffering.
The verses just before the ones we heard this morning say:
“The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out,
and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God.
God heard their groaning and remembered God's covenant
with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.
So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.”

The Israelites call to God.
 Then God calls to Moses.
 The first call is a cry of lament—
 a cry to God to hear their suffering,
 to bring about justice and set them free.

God's response to their call of lament
 is to issue another call — a call to action.
 In a sense God is translating from human pain to human purpose.

“Go set my people free”
 is a way is connecting the pain and suffering of an enslaved people
 with the potential in Moses to mobilize a movement
 to bring about freedom for all the people.
 Through God the cry of lament and the call to action
 become one and the same!

It would have been easy for Moses to turn his back.
 He ran away where he thought he was safely out of touch—

literally where he could not be found,
 and figuratively where he could stay removed from
 the pain of his fellow humanity.
 But God's call turned him around
 to face what he thought he didn't want to see.

I wonder how God is calling us today?
 How is God connecting the call of lament
 and the call to action through us?

How is God trying to help us hear
 the ongoing cries of lament—
 of black and brown and indigenous people,
 of poor people
 of scarred lands
 of polluted water
 of disease running wild?

The cries of lament are all around us,
 and in response God is calling to us—
 through all of our senses
 to taste, and hear, and see, and feel
 and ultimately, like Moses, to get up and go.

Beyond the wilderness,
when Moses got to Mount Horeb,
God asks him to take off his shoes.
He is standing on holy ground.
Taking off his shoes positions him
at the intersection of hospitality and reverence.
We take our shoes off to be comfortable.
In ancient times, in the dusty desert,
an invitation to take off one's shoes
was a sign of hospitality and welcome.
At the same time,
it is also a way of showing reverence and respect.

Today we are in another place of
hospitality and reverence together.
We are simultaneously at home and at worship.
We are at the intersection of what is familiar and comforting
and what is sacred and holy.

So since we have this amazing opportunity,
I'm going to invite you to do something
we might not think to do in our usual sanctuary—
Go ahead and take off your shoes!

You might have them off already —
Maybe you have on slippers or socks,
so this can be a chance to try barefoot.
(You don't have to show us your feet!)

Once you get your shoes off, put your feet on the ground.
Take a moment to feel the ground under your feet.

At some point, Moses wandered off beyond the wilderness.
Sometimes these days I feel as though
I am living beyond the wilderness.
Even as Moses tried to "settle down" in his new life in Midian,
he called himself a foreigner in a foreign land.

How strange it has been these months
to visit virtually places that I can no longer go safely in person.
How strange to see familiar faces behind masks and shields.
How strange to eat and drink without touching or sitting too close together.

How strange to sing our songs in this foreign land.

Some days I feel sad for familiar things I miss,
 especially people I miss seeing in person.
 I would enjoy welcoming guests at our house—
 sometimes for a meal, sometimes as overnight guests.
 Karl's parents would visit from Minnesota,
 my parents from Colorado,
 sometimes exchange students from China.
 Looking at our guest room the other day,
 I realized it might be a long time
 until we will be able to host guests again here in that way.

A cry of lament wells up inside me.
 Sometimes I feel the cry of another's
 sorrow and suffering,
 and waves of lament crest over me.
 I wander a while feeling beyond the edge of my own wilderness.

My wandering takes me into solitude.
 I walk into the guest room and close the door.
 And it hits me.
 For all these weeks, here in our house,
 this guest room has been my place of worship.
 And you are my guests right here with me!

My feet are on the ground here,
 just as yours are on the ground where you are.
 And the ground where we are is sacred.

How strange, as we wander beyond the wilderness,
 perhaps feeling the stranger in a strange land,
 to come to find, wherever we are,
 we are at home in the heart of the Holy.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning penned it poetically:
 Surely "Earth's crammed with heaven
 and every common bush afire with God."

Take off your shoes and stay awhile.
 Savor some time and space to hear the call
 that draws you into the presence of God
 and back out into the world. Amen.