

**“In the Wilderness of Sin”**  
**Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
**Sunday, September 21, 2014**

In the United Church of Christ, we periodically have slogans that we lift up. One of our older slogans that we used to put on bumper stickers went something like this: “To believe is to care. To care is to do”. It was a call to service as a part of our faith.

More recently, we have been lifting up and celebrating the phrase, “God is still speaking”. That has been a wonderfully successful campaign for church growth in our denomination, but another slogan that is part of that campaign, which is not lifted up quite as often but is a wonderful slogan, goes something like this: “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here”. It is a slogan of invitation, a slogan about inclusion, that no matter who we are, no matter where we are, no matter where we come from, in the United Church of Christ you are welcome here. So, it is a slogan about journey, about life as a journey and about a faith journey.

Next Sunday, we are going to hear two particular faith journeys shared as part of our worship. We will hear from Dale Benshoff, who will speak about his journey of faith, and we will also hear from Sherri Klutz. Both of these journeys of faith are powerful stories and will hopefully encourage us to not only appreciate their stories but to think about our own journeys of faith.

We, in the United Church of Christ, try to honor the idea of journey and that we are all individually and collectively on a journey of faith. We are all at different places in that journey. Some of us are sort of firm and steadfast and clear about our journeys. Others of us, perhaps, are kind of wondering around a little bit in our journey.

I know I prefer the wilderness, apparently, from the clear path. What is good about that reality is that most of us, at least at some time in our lives, are in the wilderness in our journeys. Our forefathers and fore-ancestors, were in the wilderness all the time or at least for most of their journeys.

Exodus 16 is about journeying into the wilderness. It is ironic that this wilderness is called “the wilderness of sin”. It is not really meant as a label for doing wrong. It is just a location—a wilderness of sin, but it has echoes of just the journey and how the journey can be bumpy.

What I want to pull from this story this morning are a couple of realities about journeying that we don’t often think about. We like to talk about our journeys of faith being beautiful journeys, thinking that God is always with us in our journeys, that it is always God’s love, God’s presence and God’s comfort. His presence with us is a good feeling, but I think the reality is sometimes a little different and that story from Exodus lifts up some of those realities.

The first reality about journeying, about the walk with God, is that sometimes the walk with God is rough. Sometimes walking with God is not easy. It can be painful. It can even be scary. As we find the Israelites this morning in Exodus, we find them between bondage and well being. They have escaped Egypt. They have come through the waters. They are no longer slaves, but they have yet to arrive at a place of well being. They are not at the Promised Land yet and they are basically in “no man’s land”. They are not really sure about this journey. They are glad, perhaps, to be free, but freedom is scary, so they lived (as we heard in the readings this morning) with not only physical hunger, but they lived with fear, and they lived with

anxiety. That is the truth of our faith journeys. Our faith journeys are riddled with fear and anxiety about the freedom that God offers us.

It is so ironic that what the Israelites call out for in their journey is to go back to Egypt. “Why can’t we go back? You are going to bring us here, O God, to starve us in the wilderness when, back in Egypt, even though we were in slavery we had 3 pots and a cot. We knew where our means came from. Yes, we had long days of slavery and hard work, but at least back there we knew what to expect.” They longed to go back to their misery. It is an amazing revelation about the human soul, that sometimes we will opt for misery rather than change our lives and claim the freedom and joy of life that God intends for us. At least in misery we know what to expect. These Israelites were all about that at this time. They were panicking and they were saying that it wasn’t that bad back in Egypt was it?

In a previous ministry, I would have a person who would come and talk to me from time to time. This person would come about every week for 10 weeks, and this person has struggles in their life. This person would come to talk to me always at the point of pain, when they could barely stand their life anymore for the situation that it had become. I would always end our discussions by saying “What do you want to do about this?” This person would always say without fear and without exception, “Well, just pray. Just pray for me”, so one day after this person said “Just pray for me” I said “I want to know what you want me to pray for. What is the change that you want me to pray for or that you want God to help get you through?”

Sometimes we choose misery because we are so frightened of what changing our lives will mean. This is how the Israelites were struggling. They were being offered an entirely new life of freedom and they were terrified. Change is hard but what the story says is that God is with us when we make those changes.

One of the great things about this story, which Dale alluded to very clearly, is that the Israelites complained to God. It is faithful to bitch at God. You can yell at God. You can talk to God, tell God what you are upset about, complain loudly, and what the story tells us is that God heard their complaints and responded to their complaints. It is not to say that God will hear every little complaint we have. It is not to say that God will respond the way we want God to respond, but what our narrative says is that we need to be in dialogue with God, letting God know what is bothering us, and in this wonderful tale, they complained to God and God was responsive. He said “I heard your complaints”. I am not sure that God was particularly pleased about this but, nonetheless, God responded and how did God respond? God responded by raining down bread and quails—bread and meat—to these hungry people and said “This will be a test. I’m going to give you all the food you need and you are going to do what I tell you. This will be the test of faith”.

Listen to the dialogue going on here. This is such an active relationship with God that it causes us to think. Can we really petition God for this kind of thing when God responds and gives us what we need but then God says that this is going to be a test? Sometimes I think we pray to God when we are not even sure that there is someone at the other end of the prayer, yet in this story it is about really getting it on with God, talking to God, telling God what we are upset about and what we need and waiting for God to respond. I believe what God responds with is what we need—not what we want, but what we need in life and that, if we are listening for the response, God provides what we need. I love this idea that we can complain to God, that God is that present in our lives, that God can hear what we are most upset about.

Now, when God sends this bread down, it is called “Manna”. In Hebrew it is “Man Hu” which means “What is it?” They didn’t know what this was. They weren’t sure what to do with this Manna from heaven. They couldn’t tell. “Do we eat this? What do we do with this stuff?” What I hear in that question of “What is it?” is that sometimes we don’t even recognize

God's gifts. Sometimes we just miss God's gifts that God gives to us in our lives. So, the Israelites learned to be perceptive, to pay close attention because they find out that God is extremely proactive in their lives—raining down bread, raining down quail, raining down water out of a rock, so they don't want to miss the gifts of God. That is the challenge for us. Where is God gifting us in life? Where and with what does God reveal God's self and God's spirit and God's graciousness in our lives? My sense is that, when we are really alert, it is happening all around us. We just sometimes miss it. What is interesting is that God says, here's the gift, here is what you need. Don't hoard it. Don't take too much of the Manna. Only take enough for each day and, on that sixth day, take enough to get you through the Sabbath because you can't even pick up Manna off the ground on the Sabbath. You've got to have enough and God will give you enough to get you through the Sabbath, so there are sort of restraints in the gifts of God. You are going to get the gifts of God. Don't hoard it. Don't be greedy. Just be blessed and thankful to God.

In this story, which is an ancient tale, there are a bunch of things going on, but there are three major things that the narrative tries to point out. One is that God hears the complaints of Israel. I think how that takes place in our lives is that God hears and knows the longings of our hearts. We can run from it, we can deny it, but God knows what we really long for. This story is about the God who hears what we need and what we have to have, and the Israelites will know through the revelation of bread and quails and water that God is, indeed, with them.

Most of my days are spent sort of quietly wondering is God in the building with me today, is God in the car with me today, is God out there in the world with me today. I am not totally sure all the time, but there are those moments when we are sure, when we know that God is present in our lives.

Probably, in my life, at this moment the most powerful times when God is present is when I am running in the woods. It is like a thin space where God sort of breaks into my consciousness. It is almost like I am enveloped in God's love as I run, as I read, as I take in the air, as I am surrounded by the wilderness and trees...and snakes, lots of snakes where I run, but God is there.

God sees us. God hears us. God reveals God's self to us. So, this story in Exodus is a wonderful way to understand how it is that we talk to God, that God can handle our grievances, that God is a responsive God. He does not give us everything that we want, but He gives us what we need. He gives us what we need to get through each day. He gives us a faith that can grow so that we can truly be the people of gifts and miracles. So we give thanks today for the gifts of God, for God's presence in our lives, for God's ability to hear us and to know what we need. We thank God in the name of Christ. Amen.