

Tensions in the Wilderness

September 21 • 2008

Focus Scripture

Exodus 16:2–15

Additional Scriptures

Psalm 105:1–6, 37–45

Philippians 1:21–30

Matthew 20:1–16

Most compassionate God, we have been to the wilderness. We have known unfamiliar territory. We have hungered and despaired. But, in the wilderness you meet us and feed us the bread of life. Refreshed and strengthened, we confess that you are our God. Amen.

God listens and responds, providing through nature, other people, and communities. After the Hebrew people fled from Egypt, they were tested by unfamiliar territory, hunger, and lack of knowledge. In the midst of such tension, God provided for their needs. In Matthew, Jesus responds to a time of tension with a parable about God's care and generosity.

Focus Scripture: Exodus 16:2–15

Today's story follows songs of praise and thanksgiving for God's deliverance in Exodus 15. After crossing the sea and escaping from the Egyptians, the Hebrews entered the Wilderness of Sin, known today as the Sinai Desert. Their journey was not along the main trade routes. The region was arid. Food sources were unfamiliar. Their secure supply of food in Egypt was replaced by the need to hunt and gather food in unfamiliar territory.

The hardship the Hebrews faced in the wilderness was the result of struggling to find food and water in an unfamiliar place. However, the wilderness was also a place of experiencing God's abundance and a time of self-discovery. This wandering time reoriented the Hebrews from life in Egypt to life with God. God was present with them in captivity, in freedom, and in the wilderness.

The people's complaint was against God's creation. God's provision came in an image of creation – bread from heaven. The name for the bread, *man-uh*, is from the Hebrew question: "What is it?" Each time the Hebrews spoke the name of this bread, they recalled their own question, and remembered who had supplied the food. Man-uh was probably a sticky, protein-rich substance excreted by insects. God also supplied quail, a small ground bird of the region. All creation is good, as God is present in it.

Moses and Aaron received the people's complaint. God responded to Moses, who played a priestly role as mediator for the people. Moses and Aaron expand upon God's instructions. Aaron called for hope and belief. The voice from within the cloud was a powerful reminder of God's presence. The people understood that the God who delivered them also provided.

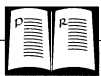
When the Hebrew people complained about the lack of food, the complaint was against God. Would their memories of food and water in Egypt shake their belief in God? It seems the Hebrews had left Egypt, but Egypt had not left them. Until they had truly left Egypt behind, it would not be possible for them to accept God's covenant, to be given in the law at Sinai (Exodus 19–20). Accepting God's provision of food was part of getting ready to accept a new kind of relationship with God. Moses and Aaron helped the people to move on from Egypt, and get ready for God to give the law.

There is completeness in this story. The entire company complained, then received God's response, and knew of God's presence and care. Such glory of God's saving presence also was celebrated in the Passover feast. Long after these events, those who recorded the stories in Exodus included detailed instructions in these stories to make sure that the Sabbath continued to be observed. As noted by the psalmist in **Psalm 105**, each generation has a role to play in passing on these great stories of faith.

God is generous with the community of God's people. Paul writes, in **Philippians 1:21–30**, that the struggle to claim and sustain our identity in Christ is worthy of great effort. Jesus' story in **Matthew 20:1–16** about the wilderness of unemployment and the landowner who acts in surprising ways reminds us that God's generosity does not follow human reasoning. God's generosity is unlimited. In such generosity, God's justice is seen.

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God listens and responds. Sometimes we are part of God's response. When have you sensed God's presence in your own times of tension or wilderness struggles? In what ways are you and your church agents of God's abundant generosity for others?



Replacement biblical background page for Lutheran, Episcopal, and Anglican congregations using the paired reading stream of the Revised Common Lectionary is on the Congregational Life Paired Reading CD.

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access *Spirit Sightings* for connections between current events and the focus passage.

