

Nourishment and Grace for Our Journey

Exodus 3:17, Isaiah 2:4, 35: select verses, 43:19, Ephesians 4:2-3, Colossians 3:14 & Jeremiah 29:11

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God is with us sustaining us with nourishment and grace on all our journeys. Covid-19 has pushed us all into the wilderness. Professor Aisha Ahmad is a faithful companion on this increasingly exhausting COVID journey. Last week she wrote, “The six-month mark in any sustained crisis is always difficult. We have all adjusted to this “new normal,” but might now feel like we are running out of steam. Yet, at best, we are only one third of the way through this marathon. How can we keep going? First, in my experience, this is a very normal time to struggle or slump. I “always” hit a wall six months into a tough assignment. The desire to “get away” or “make it stop” is intense. I have done this many times, and at six months, it is like clockwork. This time, our crisis is global and there is nowhere to run. That is OK. I have had to power through that six-month hump before and there is life on the other side. Right now, it feels like we are looking ahead at a long, dark wintery tunnel. But it is not going to be like that. Rather, this is our next major adaptation phase. We have already re-learned how to do groceries, host meetings, and even teach classes. And we have found new ways to be happy and have fun. But as the days get shorter and colder, we need to be ready to innovate again.

This is my first pandemic, but not my first six-month wall. So, what can I share to help you? First, the wall is real and normal. And frankly, it is not productive to try to ram your head through it. It will break naturally in about four-to-six weeks if you ride it out. Of course, there are things we must do. Work. Teach. Cook. Exercise. But just do not expect to be sparkingly happy or wildly creative in the middle of your wall. Right now, if you can meet your obligations and be kind to your loved ones, you get an A+. Sometimes, it seems, you need for oneself the advice you have given to scores of others along this journey. That we can adapt. That the pain and loss we are experiencing now will subside. That there is in fact joy in change and in the new. That we have the ability to develop new ways to survive and thrive. Also, do not be afraid that your happiness & creativity are gone for the rest of this marathon. Not true. I assure you that it will soon break & you will hit a new stride. Take heart. We have navigated a harrowing global disaster for six months, with resourcefulness & courage. We have already found new ways to live, love, and be happy under these rough conditions. A miracle & a marvel. This is hard proof that we have what it takes to keep going. So, dear friends, do not despair of the six-month wall. It is not permanent, nor will it define you in this period of adversity. Take a breath & a pause. You will be on the other side in no time.”

After our Executive Presbytery Jeff read those words he wrote, “I guess I always knew I wasn’t alone in my desire for normalcy. To get back into the church. To a favorite restaurant. A sporting event or concert or reception. But especially church. To embrace a friend. To comfort a neighbor. To work the way, I know how to work. And how hard those days are when everything seems off. We have all experienced that. But to read, right there that we have all experienced this—it reminded me that I am part of a wider community, and we are all walking this road together.”

We have many things in common with the Israelites when they journeyed through the wilderness. We are leaving the normal, the old way of life, behind and are adjusting, adapting, wandering, journeying to a new way of life in the Promise Land.

God promises the grandeur of the Promise Land. God said. **Exodus 3:17 “I have promised to rescue you from your oppression in Egypt. I will lead you to a land flowing with milk and honey.”** This is part of the covenant made with Sarah and Abraham to guide all people to a way of life where all people bless each other and live in harmony with each other. The prophets proclaim that the Promise Land is a way of life where all people enjoy abundant life, including the strangers, foreigners, native people, and immigrants. The Promise Land is a way of life where each person is loved, valued, and appreciated, where debts are forgiven, and all are free.

Scripture describes the Promise Land way of life as: **Isaiah 35: Select phrases “Even the wilderness will be glad in those days. The wasteland will rejoice and blossom with an abundance of flowers and singing and joy! The deserts will become as green as the mountains. There the Lord will display God’s glory, the splendor of our God. With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands, and encourage those who have weak knees. God will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing for joy! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness. The parched ground will become a pool of water that will satisfy the thirsty land. A great road will go through that once deserted land. It will be named the Highway of Holiness. Isaiah 2:4 “The Lord will mediate between nations and will settle**

international disputes. They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore.

The prophet Ezekiel describes the wilderness as a time of life that diminishes our hope making our daily life arduous and saps our strength. We become like dry bones, stuck in a wilderness valley. God's Holy Spirit will put flesh on our bones, rejuvenate us, guide us to the Promise Land way of life where we dance, sing, rejoice and love extravagantly.

Today we celebrate Worldwide Communion a hope that we will all get to the Promise Land way of life when all people feast with each other and God. Each person, all people, belong and are united in peace, joy, and love. The Apostle Paul encourages us that to get there strive to **Ephesians 4:2-3 "Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. Colossians 3:14 "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.**

Today all of us are in the wildernesses of Covid-19, messy politics and discord between people. Most of us are in additional personal wildernesses. I am in the wilderness of grief, journeying to understand who am I now that Leslie and I are the oldest generation in our family. I am in the wilderness of health as I treat my sleep apnea and prepare for my anterior hip replacement surgery. No matter how small it may seem, it is helpful for you to name all your wildernesses. What does the Promise Land way of life look like for you?

The prophets declare. **Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Isaiah 43:19 "For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness."**

The Israelites have numerous insights to help us on our journey. There is no going back to normal. Many of the Israelites grumbled and complained that the old way of life was better as they longed to go back. Moses kept reminding them that there is no going back, we must go forward. Humanity has "normalcy bias" our instincts tells us to go back to the way things once were. We tend to forget about the negatives of the old days and exaggerate the positive. We tend to reflect on the past only from our perspective instead of considering how the old days were difficult for others. Many experience anxiety when life is uncertain, and they are being drawn into a life that is different and unknown. Some get stuck in consistency, routine, afraid to venture into freedom. Sometimes one will stay working an unfulfilling job for fear of uncertainty of the next job. Some are reluctant to try something new, to veer off into uncharted territory, to stray from their comfort zone. The Holy Spirit unites us together and enables us to encourage one another to take the next step on our journeys.

If we fail to learn, grow, and adapt the journey through the wilderness becomes long. The Israelites could have traveled from Egypt to the Promise Land in mere days, however it took them 40 years because they were a suborn, rebellious, stiffed neck people, who were slow to embrace change, transformation and their new way of life.

Make the best of your wilderness journeys. Live life to the fullest in the present. Many of the Israelites did not live long enough to make it to the Promise Land. While it is likely that most of us will live long enough to enjoy a future when Covid-19 is not as widespread, it is doubtful that we will live long enough to enjoy harmony with all people. There is plenty of goodness to savor, enjoy and celebrate on every step of our journeys. Reframe your thinking from what is lacking, to all you have, from your weaknesses, to your strengths.

Stick together, do not leave anyone behind. Change and journeying is difficult. Some people need help to overcome their fear. Other people are unable to see the disfunction, oppression and slavery that we are striving to leave behind. Some of the Israelites complained and were dragged along on the journey kicking and screaming. These people believed that slavery was not so bad. One of the reasons it took 40 years was it took that long for some people to listen to others, to omit that slavery is bad that they all needed to change and journey to freedom. Some people today are in denial over the inequality, oppression, racism, and injustice that is hurting people. We need to not give up on them, to bring them along on the journey, to love them, to share stories, to keep proclaiming the glory of the promise land way of life, that there is plenty for everyone if we all share. Other people are ambivalent about the moment to freedom. Their life is good right now, so they have mixed feelings about changing to a society where righteousness and justice flows like a might river for all. For some it takes time to realize that the wellbeing of others does not diminish their wellbeing. Some people are overwhelmed with the costs of a society where all are free, educated, employed, housed, have health care and creation is protected. Together we can discover the savings, bounty and glory of all people and creation flourishing.

In the wilderness the Israelites had no laws, justice system or government. Coming from slavery, where every choice was made for them, they needed guidance on how to live together. God gave them the 10 Commandments. One of the commandments was to honor your mother and father. It is likely that some of the intent of this

commandment is lost in our English translation. Honor all people is likely closer to God's will for us. To honor is to value and respect others, to affirm their goodness, to be a loving, caring compassionate advocate for them. To honor is to give everyone freedom. To honor is to see and identify people who are dishonored, then help them and serve to change anything that dishonors anyone. To honor is to carry each other's burdens, to model and teach kindness, to discover the most excellent way of love for everyone.

The Hebrew word translate as honor does not mean obey. The Hebrew word can mean be heavy as in the sense to give weight to, so it means do not treat others lightly, rather give weight to their concerns, struggles and wrestlings. Perhaps this aspect of honor is best understood through a parable. A daughter and her mother were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The daughter said, "Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move this rock?" Her mother answered, "If you use all your strength, I am sure you can do it." The daughter began to push the rock. Exerting herself as much as she could, she pushed and pushed. The rock did not move. Discouraged, she said, "You were wrong, I can't do it." The mother placed her arm around her daughter's shoulder and said, "No you did not use all your strength — you did not ask me to help."

Today most of the intent of the 10 commandments are taught by religions and imbedded in our rules, laws, and regulations. If God were to give us a fresh set of 10 commandments for our journey through the wilderness today what would they be? I encourage you today to ponder this and make your own list for your particular journeys.

As of today, for this aspect of my journey here are the top 10 commandments I perceive God wants me to follow.

1. Enjoy God, savor goodness, celebrate love, delight in joy.
2. Strive to perceive God let go of control, burdens, and baggage, let come blessings.
3. Relax, rest, and enjoy God's embrace and companionship on the journey.
4. Listen for God in the love of others, in the beauty of creation and in the grace of transformation.
5. Worship God by seeking moments of awe, wonder and amazement.
6. Let go of worry, let come hope.
7. Let go of fear, let come extravagant love.
8. Let go of comparisons, let come grace.
9. Let go of binary thinking, let come appreciation for diversity.
10. Let go of constraining thinking, let come the unforced rhythms of grace.

Spend time this week formulating your top 10 list of God's will for your journeys.

A few days journey from Egypt to the Promised Land took the Israelites 40 years due to all they had to let go, learn, discover and let come. It took 40 years for them to grow, change, transform into a tribe of harmony capable of blessing all people. Their promise land way of life was fleeting for it was not long before some of them judged, hated, oppressed, enslaved, and killed one another, the natives and immigrants. To make themselves feel better about their horrible deeds, they blamed God and claimed that God told them to do horrible things, much the same way as we write history in ways that make ourselves feel better about our ugliness. God is pure love, peace, joy, and life. God's desire for all of humanity is for all of us to live together in love, peace, and joy.

God met the Israelites where they were and loved them enough to transform them, to guide them to the Promised Land. God meets each of us where we are at every moment of our lives and either enables us to take the next step, or carries us to the next step, of our journey. Camping, eating, celebrating, grieving together gave them space to debate and agree that journeying to the Promised Land is the way forward. The short, easy route often feels safe, however the long route full of surprises and learnings often transforms us. Moses helped the Israelites overcome crowd mentality that often justifies injustices and joins in destructive behavior. Every problem is solvable, every obstacle removable when we partner with God and each other. The way is not easy. The way is worth it. God gives us persistence to journey, to keep going when we are backtracking, to take the next step when weary. God always makes a way even when it appears there is no way.

We are all on a journey to the promise land way of life. The Israelites were sustained on their journey through the wilderness with hope as they celebrated Passover and manna to nourish them. Today we are sustained on our journeys through the wilderness with the hope of the coming kingdom of God and the nourishment of the Lord's Super. Amen

