



smyrna, Tennessee

St. Patrick's

Anglican Church

An Ancient Faith for Modern Times

Letters from the Wilderness

#6

Dear Saints,

When the Children of Israel were in the wilderness they had a number of experiences with God that formed their identity and prepared them to enter the Land of Promise. I have my doubts if they would have had these kinds of experiences if they had remained in Egypt. So after God took them out of Egypt, He used the time in the wilderness to take Egypt out of them. In this way He truly made them "the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand." We can only pray He will do the same for us. Let's look at some of their experiences with God.

First, by necessity they developed a unique sense of dependency upon the LORD. As bad as their captivity was, at least they were housed and fed. But they did not have even the assurance of a slave's portion while on their journey. Because of this they tested God and wondered aloud "*can God set a table in the wilderness?*" (Ps 78:19). The answer we know is that God can and did. When they hungered He sent them bread from heaven. When they thirsted He made water come from the rock. Though they were in

the middle of a wilderness God set a table of abundance and this is how they learned to trust Him, although it was a lesson that they forgot and relearned again and again.

We at St. Patrick's have been given a gift of being in a place of greater dependency upon God. We have applied to be received by an Anglican jurisdiction but at present we don't have a national church to give us an identity or a diocese to make us a part of the family. For now, that is a good thing, because we have witnessed first hand what institutionalism does to those who claim to be orthodox Christians. Blind loyalty ends up having people act in ways that are neither orthodox nor Christian. We are not immune to this disease and we would be foolish to make this journey only to replace an Episcopal idol with an Anglican idol. So let's use this season to repent from any and all institutionalism and to ensure, as the old hymn says that, *"our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."*

Second, being in the wilderness taught them a new way of worship. The priesthood was established under Aaron, God gave details for the construction of the tabernacle, and the worship of God was literally placed in the center of the community around which everything else revolved. Each time they moved, it was the job of the Levites to take it all down, and then when they stopped, the Levites set it all up again in the midst of the people.

This is not to imply that our style of worship needs change at St. Patrick's but it does suggest that our understanding of worship will deepen. We have already learned that a large theatre setting or a small chapel in the back of a house can be sacred spaces. What makes them sacred is the presence of the Holy Spirit as we gather in Jesus' Name. Thankfully God's presence is not dictated by architectural style. This is not to say that I don't miss the stained glass windows and the large altar but Jesus said that God is to be worshipped in Spirit *and* in Truth. Therefore having beautiful things is pointless if you have to abandon the truth to keep them. It is my hope and prayer that all of us will have a greater insight into place worship in our lives and make it the kind of priority that it was to the Israelites.

The third experience the Israelites had with God while in the wilderness was that of God speaking to them through the cloud (Ps 99:7). This resulted in a more intimate communion with the LORD which they did not have in Egypt, where they didn't even know His Name.

While I am not expecting a cloud at Morning Prayer any time soon, I do think that this image still applies to us. The Scriptures tell us that God longs to commune with His people. *"I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me"* (Isaiah 65:1). To meet that longing Jesus taught His disciples to pray and that is what the image of the cloud invokes for me. I suspect that we will all find ourselves praying more and praying more specifically while in the wilderness. The exciting thing is that there are so many more praying at this time in the life of St. Patrick's than typically are at the beginning of a new church and so we should expect the unexpected as God answers our prayers

One last point. The experiences in the wilderness were given to reveal a greater truth. The bread from heaven, the water from the rock, the tabernacle in the midst of the congregation, the cloud through which God spoke, all ultimately pointed to Jesus Christ. He is the Bread of Heaven (John 6:25-59), He is the Living Water (John 4:13, 14), He is God dwelling among us (John 1:14) and He, as the Word of God, is God's ultimate communication to humanity (Heb 1:1-3).

Perhaps God will be merciful to us and use our time in the wilderness to give us a fuller understanding of Jesus Christ. On our part, a greater sense of dependency, a deeper commitment to worship and more intimate communion through prayer will make a pretty good start. If after all of this is over, we are more fully committed followers of Jesus, we know, love and serve Him as never before, then it will all have been more than worth it.

Fr. Ray+