

## **Dangers and Healing In the Wilderness**

**Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:11-16 by Patty Friesen (Aug.13/17)**

As I've shared in children's time, there is danger and healing in the wilderness, as there was for the children of Israel in their forty years in the wilderness in the Book of Numbers today. The title Numbers comes from Latin and refers to the numbering of the children of Israel, which takes place twice over a forty-year period. The first generation after the Exodus is counted in chapter one. A second generation is numbered in chapter 26, most likely in the fortieth year after the exodus. Another title for this book is called "In the Wilderness" comes from another ancient Hebrew title in which the books of Moses are named by their significant words in the first sentence. In this case, Numbers 1:1 The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness. It sounds a little like the beginning of Genesis, In the Beginning, which describes the beginning of creation. In Numbers we have "In the Wilderness" because that's where the people of God are forged and I daresay, where we ourselves are forged in our spiritual lives if we seek it.

The formation of faith at Mt. Sinai and the journey with God through the wilderness are intended to be a continuing model of how the people of God live out their faith in this world. It is a three-way drama of the setting in the wilderness, and the action with their hiking journey, and the characters themselves: children of Israel.

The children of Israel are camped in the Wilderness of Sinai, which is the desert between Egypt and Israel. It's the in-between place, a place of transition between slavery and settlement, between past and future, in-between homes. It is a place of waiting and testing and complaint. The wilderness is where community is organized, where

structures of leadership are defined, where their relationship to God is revealed, and where systems of worship and government are developed.

The wilderness can take on a more subversive theological meaning as a symbol outside of civilization and one that encourages one to see God outside its structures. Yahweh is a God of the desert in Israel's oldest poetry and not a God of the city, although it is in the wilderness that God establishes cities of refuge. Often biblical heroes like Hagar and Moses and Elijah and David flee oppressive structures of civilization to find relief and salvation in the wilderness. God chooses to live in a desert tabernacle, rather than the temple of a king and this is important for Israel to remember when they settle in the Promised Land.

The wilderness is also the location for God's continuing work in creation. God creates water out of nothing in the desert and provides food out of nothing. God's presence and provision is accentuated precisely because of the absence of anything that sustains. The wilderness is a place of depletion and dependence and oppressive heat and a place that quickly tests patience and tempers as the children of Israel's tempers quickly flare once again over food and water.

God responds by sending poisonous serpents. The translation poisonous comes from the Hebrew seraphim, which means to burn. These are flying serpents, which are active in the call of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 6. They are winged creatures of divine fire that purify the prophet and the children of Israel. These serpents most likely derive from Egyptian religion where the raised head of the cobra is often depicted on Pharaoh's crown as a protective goddess Wadjet. Her function was to spit fiery venom onto the enemies of Pharaoh. Thus in Egypt the cobra's function was twofold: to protect and to

destroy. Numbers 21 illustrates the twofold character of the seraphim as well, to purify and heal. The ancient church in Istanbul, built by Emperor Constantine, Hagia Sophia or Holy Wisdom hosts the four winged seraphim high in the corners of the sanctuary. They remind worshippers, Christian and Muslim alike of the holiness of God whom we look upon to heal us. They aren't gentle doves but are dangerous and life-changing creatures.

The serpent on the pole is the universal symbol of healthcare. I think it is fitting. Healthcare is dangerous and healing. Sometimes we have to have surgery before we have healing in our bodies and sometimes we have to have medication and counseling before we have healing in our brains. There is danger and healing both together in the wilderness of our physical and brain and spiritual and relational health.

I'll read a few excerpts from my wilderness journal about danger and healing.

Saturday, July 8, Eastend, Saskatchewan: Rough night of heat and a local party. Patrick said I could come home anytime but I told him that when we were kids and went to camp and didn't like it, we had to stick it out, dig in and find our coping strategies. Same applies here. No pain, no gain. Today I was chased by a hawk at Pine Cree Regional Park. I was just telling God I was open to whatever when a tremendous whoosh went by my ear and I looked up to see the white belly of a ferruginous hawk hovering over me and screaming. Terrified, I waved my hands over my head and shouted, "Shoo, shoo." She continued screaming and diving at me and chased me across the field until I hid in a bluff of trees in the coulee. I didn't know how I was going to make it back down the trail.

Sitting in the coulee, I took pictures of the hills above me and thought of Psalm 121: I to the hills lift up my eyes, from whence cometh my help. It struck me that the psalmist must have been down in a coulee like this to be looking up at the hills for help.

It gave me a new perspective on the psalm to be down and desperate. I breathed deeply and calmed down and put my shirt over my head and ran for it all the way back down the trail like a frightened prairie chicken, the hawk screaming behind me.

I hate this place. It is so hot and oppressive. Its' open spaces are opening things up in me like fear and grief. I wept off and on all day. The hawk shook me up. Why couldn't I have the Holy Spirit descend on me like a dove instead of a hawk? This seems to be God's cruel joke.

Sunday, July 9, 2017 I was greeted to the Old Man On His Back Nature Conservancy by a burrowing owl in the middle of the road. She literally stopped me in my tracks. I've waited 10 years since moving here to see one. I was going to go for a walk along the road but Alan, the Center's interpreter told me to walk straight out onto the prairie. "Where's the trail?" I asked but he laughed and said, "No need for one. You can see where you are going towards that rock. You won't get lost." In all these weeks of hiking, I've always followed a trail with markers and maps.

Hiking on the prairie wilderness is scary and involves keeping your eyes on rocks and bushes in the distance, not on a prescribed path. There's an apt metaphor for the spiritual life. How open are we to God doing new things in our souls? If we are ready and hungry for a new thing – it will take some venturing forth in prayer and seeking through reading scripture, walks in nature and meeting new people. Hiking towards a destination instead of a prescribed path is an apt metaphor for the future church as well.

We are changing as the church – we have women in ministry, we have divorced members who are remarried and gay children who want to marry their partners, we have members who want to belong to two churches and children who desire communion but

are not yet baptized. We may be getting off a prescribed path Anabaptists have been on for five hundred years but our Anabaptist ancestors got off the prescribed path of the Catholic Church before them. They had no clue where the Reformation of the Church would take them but reformed in trust and the faithfulness they believed they were shown by the Holy Spirit.

Hopefully in the spirit of the early Anabaptists, we too are hiking towards Jesus the Rock on the horizon. Do women in ministry help us grow in our relationship with Jesus? Do second marriages help divorced people grow in their relationship with Jesus? Do marriages of gay people help them grow in their relationship with Jesus? Do children taking communion help them grow in their relationship with Jesus? This is my first sabbatical revelation: following a destination that is Spirit led instead of a prescribed path of tradition is scary and takes faith and trust in the Spirit's guidance within tradition.

My second sabbatical revelation is my need to know more about our aboriginal history. I had no clue about First Nations perspectives until Winona Wheeler came to teach us that evening at OMC last year. I feel like I'm being led to learn more and then share what I experience in this journey.

My third sabbatical revelation is that we need wilderness more than ever as a place of contemplation and connection with God. How can we detach from technology and get back into nature? How can we build deeper relationships not only with nature and our Creator but with each other in nature? If wilderness truly changes us, as Sharon Butala says, how will it change me? Will it make me more peaceful and calm and open or will it make me even more unpredictable and wild? There are copies of my wilderness sabbatical journal in the church library for entertaining summer reading!

John's Gospel of course, makes the parallel between the healing serpent lifted up and Christ's own body lifted up as a source of healing. There is danger and healing with Jesus as well. Jesus is a bit dangerous and life changing, like the seraphim. We don't dare ask him to enter our lives for healing unless we are open to some life changes. As CS Lewis says of the Christ figure Aslan, he isn't safe but he is good. All our problems and fears don't disappear when we turn our lives over and try to follow Christ. In fact, sometimes they seem to become more intense but we have a Companion and Savior on the trail with us, leading us and we also have the trail companions of the community of Christ with us: people who have gone through hardships, illnesses, grief, divorce and unemployment and have found a slow way through.

Many of us are in a dangerous place right now, bitten by tough circumstances. Let us gather our prayers for healing this morning in the ritual of anointing. The Book of James says, "are any in need of prayer and healing? Let church pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of Christ." Michelle will sing and please come forward for a bit of oil. It's not magic, it's hope and trustful intention.

Let us pray...Healing Saviour, all blessings stream from you. Send forth, through your Holy Spirit, your healing mercy, to revive our vulnerable spirits, to heal our bruised bodies. You are our strength, the rock on which we come to rest, when our burdens are formidable. Oh, Comforter in prayer, hear the longings of your people this day and bless them, in your holy name. Amen.