



First United Church of Christ
300 Union Street
Northfield, MN 55057
507-645-7532
church@firstucc.org

Wilderness Mantra
Deuteronomy 26: 1-11
Lent 1, 2013

When I was a child, every summer our family would make a trip to Williston, ND, to visit my Grandpa Jim and Grandma Buelah. We'd pile into the car in the early morning ready to make the twelve-hour trip. Those were character-building car rides. We'd drive north from Sioux Falls to Fargo, then we'd turn left and drive all the way across the beautiful state of North Dakota on interstate 94. There were landmarks along the way- a giant buffalo in Jamestown and a giant Holstein cow in New Salem, ND. Once we passed the Holstein we were almost ready to drive north. We'd turn right and wind our way through the North Dakota badlands, and travel through dormant oil fields - now resurrected, and then we would see the Williston water tower that had this clever little beanie painted on the top.

I'm sure I would have been ready to love anyone after traveling twelve hours by car to see them, but I dearly loved my Grandma Buelah and Grandpa Jim. I picked raspberries with Grandma so she could send us raspberry jelly in the mail. And I'd play croquet with Grandpa Jim and listen to his stories about buffalo and the time that he fought off rattlesnakes on the side of the road. He'd get his walking stick out and wave it around like Zorro, it was very entertaining. I rode with Grandpa Jim in the car to Kentucky Fried Chicken - Grandpa loved KFC. Grandpa Jim wasn't a very good driver. I don't know who thought it was a good idea to

allow him to drive around the country in a motor home. He would slam on the accelerator of his light blue Mercury Cougar and then slam on the brakes at every stop sign. I sat on my knees so I could see over the dashboard, this was as close as I would get to Nascar – and if the end was coming I wanted to be able to see it. Then we'd parallel park in front of KFC and he'd bump into the car in front and then slam into the car behind and we'd push the other cars out of the way until we were parked.

When I was a Sophomore in high school, Grandpa Jim needed a heart procedure and he passed away as the procedure was taking place. We traveled to Williston for the funeral. We walked in as a family as the funeral began and the congregation started singing "How Great Thou Art." I remember the congregation singing loudly, like they really meant it. My parents always sang loudly, and they were singing away. I loved to sing, but I couldn't sing that day. I was too sad. I remember looking around at my family and at these perfect strangers and thinking that it hadn't occurred to me to be singing praises to God at a time when I was sad and life was hard. And I could tell in the way that the hymn was being sung that there was a deep trust in God that the congregation was drawing on that day. Deep gratitude for God's gifts, and a fervent hope in a love that will never let go of us. I couldn't sing that day to this love or about this love, so the congregation sang for me.

As I've served in pastoral ministry I've heard people say many times, "What do people do in a time of crisis without some sort of faith? And then they talk about two things that are helpful. They talk about how helpful it is to have a church, a community, surrounding them and helping them through crisis, and then they talk about a deep trust in God that they draw on in crisis. A trust that tells them that with God it's going to be ok, they will make it through.

How people articulate this always varies, but the basic idea is always there, that with God it's going to be ok. Not easy, not painless, but eventually, ok.

This is the first Sunday in the season of Lent and we'll be talking about wilderness stories during the season of Lent. So by wilderness we mean those times in our lives that are dry and barren and hard as a rock. This may be why I've been thinking about car trips across North Dakota. Jesus is in the wilderness, which is interesting. It's always helpful to remember Jesus having dry, barren, hard-as-rock times in his life. But ultimately he handles it just fine, because he's Jesus. But if you are not Jesus and you find that you are in a wilderness sort of place, a place of sadness, or crisis, or wandering, we might want to know what to do. What can we draw on? Where can we turn? Perhaps this passage from Deuteronomy 26 will be of use.

Deuteronomy 26 is about religious practice. It starts with the tithe. When you have entered the promised land and you are given a harvest, take some of the first fruits of the harvest and bring it to the priest. What's interesting here is the response that the worshippers are to make. It's like a creed, or it that word gives you hives, a faith statement. It's telling Israel's story and rehearsing whom God has been and who God is.

You bring the first fruits of your harvest to the priest and these are the words you will say: you say more or less "A landless guy, Jacob, was my ancestor, and he went to Egypt, was a foreigner but became a great nation. There we were enslaved as a people and forced into harsh labor." Here's the faith statement: "We cried to God, and God heard our cries and God brought us out of Egypt. God brought us into this place and gave us this land."

This creed rehearses what God has done. The people of Israel had two problems. They were landless and they were enslaved. God hears them and God delivers them. Of course there are already people in the promised land, so we may disagree with Israel about whether

that part was really God's activity, but that's ok. Despite the promised land baggage, it's important to hear Israel's faith statement, and then to notice what they do with it. Israel is saying, "God hears our cries, and God delivers us." "God hears us in the wilderness and helps us find our way out." And then Deuteronomy instructs the people to practice this story. It's not enough to know this story. You have to practice it too.

What I think is most fascinating is that this passage was written at a time when Israel was facing the loss of its land. The writer of Deuteronomy is looking backward, compiling Israel's history, but what's happening at the time is that neighboring empires are threatening to take Israel's land. Everyone knows that Israel will be conquered and all will be lost. Life is hard as a rock for Israel when this is being written, they are walking through the wilderness. And so, they are instructed to practice their story. "God hears our cries, and God delivers us." "God hears our cries in the wilderness and helps us find our way out." The writer gives the people a mantra for the wilderness. Come together, don't stay by yourself, come together, in worship, and then repeat this over and over. That way you'll remember what God has done and together we'll be able to trust that God will deliver us again, that somehow with God it will be ok.

As a youth I spent most of my life practicing - too much time practicing but that's a different sermon. God only knows how many times I practiced running the fast break in basketball - take the outlet pass, dribble to the center of the floor, jump stop at the free throw line and pass it to the wing. Before every baseball game we took infield, we practiced all the throws. Base hit to centerfield, you throw to second base, if there's a runner on first, you throw to third, a runner on second, you throw home. In choir and in band we especially rehearsed the

sections of the pieces that were most difficult. We practice in so many parts of our lives, so that when the pressure is on, we know what to do.

This is also true with religious practice, with spiritual practice. Life comes with wilderness times – it's part of the deal. It's like there's terms and conditions from we have to sign before we're born – there will be wilderness times, click "accept." And our ancestors tell us what to do to make it through. Come together in community, and practice your story of what God has done, and what God can do. Together you will begin to trust that God will do this again.

So we practice. We come together as a community and we practice our story of what God has done, trusting that this is what God does and what God can do again when life is hard. We practice. God hears our cries and delivers. God hears us in the wilderness and helps us find our way out. God is with us in those three long days after crucifixion and waits with us until resurrection breaks through. Sometimes the wilderness will be too much and we won't be able to say these words or sing these words, and we'll find that God is with us in the community that surrounds us and holds us and sings the story for us. And sometimes, in the wilderness, when the pressure is on, we will find ourselves drawing on a deep trust that "Somehow with God, it will be ok. I am held in a love that will not let me go." And we will live with hope, even in the wilderness.