We are in a 12-part sermon series entitled, *A Word A Week*. Imagine you’re on a train moving through the Bible with key stops along the way. Our first stop was on the word “Good” in the creation story. Last week we stopped on the word “Covenant.” Today’s word is *Wilderness*.

God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah to make of them a great nation and to give them a land. They have a son, Issac. Issac has Jacob and Esau. Jacob is renamed “Israel” and has 12 sons. Due to a severe drought, they, and all their families, eventually end up in Egypt as slaves. (*It’s a fast train!*)

They are slaves for over 400 years, and then God sends Moses to set them free. They are headed to that land promised to Abraham, but they don’t get there right away. For 40 years they wander in the *wilderness*.

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*The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; (e’-lim) and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. 2 The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”*

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Some would say our nation is currently in a *wilderness*. Unrelenting partisanship and polarization. Over 800,000 federal employees without a paycheck and parts of the government shut down, with no end in sight. The wilderness can be a literal place, or it
can be a time of transition in your life; a powerful place to learn something about God, and something about yourself.

Grief is a wilderness. The death of a loved one, loss of a job, loss of health, or mobility. We lose things. And when we lose people, or things we love, we grieve. Grief is the evidence of love.

When you experience loss, you have to change. You can no longer be the “Somebody” you were. That “Somebody” was who you were with that person, or with that job, or with your health. That was your identity. Now you have to become “Somebody Else.” You have to be “Somebody Else” without that person, or thing you loved.

The trick is, we can’t just move from our “Somebody” to our “Somebody Else” overnight. So in-between the “Somebody” we were, (Stay with me!) and the “Somebody Else” we have to become, is a state of “Nobody.” We’re not who we were, and we have yet to become who we are to be. We are in a place of “Nobody.” That’s the wilderness. It sounds like this;

O God, you are my God, I seek you, and my soul thirsts for you: my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Ps. 63:1)

Israel is between Egypt (where they were slaves) and the Promised Land (where they will be a great nation). They are in both a literal, and a spiritual wilderness. They are neither who they were, nor are they who they must become. There’s a lot we learn about God, and ourselves, in such a place. You can call it our Wilderness Theology.

“Theo” means, “God,” and “logy” means, “study of.” So, theology is the study of God, a daunting thing. So, what do we learn about God in a wilderness?

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The most obvious is that God allows us to go there. None of us are immune from the wilderness, not as individuals, nor as a nation. It doesn’t matter how educated you are, or how much money you make. No one has a “Get-Out-of-Wilderness-Card.” Even Jesus went to the wilderness and was tempted there. Any brand of Christianity that offers immunity from the wilderness is not being truthful or honest. We all go there.

Sometimes it’s a consequence of our behavior. Other times it’s the consequence of someone else’s behavior. It may be because of an accident, or an illness, or an act of nature that sends us to the wilderness. Whatever it is, God allows us to go there.

You can spend your lifetime asking “Why?” but there is no answer. The wilderness can be a cruel and painful place. Why would an all-loving, all-powerful God allow us to experience the wilderness? Why not protect us? Does God watch over us, or are we left to deal with whatever happens? Those are wilderness questions we can’t answer, but we do know this. All of us will experience the wilderness. God will allow us to go there.
You learn a lot about God, and who you are in a wilderness. You can either learn about God’s providence, or you can fall into a state of despair.

God provided Israel with manna. It wasn’t much, but it was enough. Manna was a fine, frost-like thing on the ground. They ground it and made cakes. That’s breakfast...and lunch...and dinner! Maybe a little meat from time to time, but that’s it.

Why is that? Why wouldn’t God provide more than manna, more than the bare necessities? More wilderness questions.

In times of prosperity we have proven that our faithfulness often declines. Prosperity can be a different kind of wilderness. Surrounded by things, but barren on the inside. It’s when we are most hungry that we cry out for God. Maybe that’s why Jesus said it’s so difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. We are lured into self-sufficiency. You lose that in a wilderness. You become solely dependent upon God.

Your faith can either intensify in the wilderness, or it can die. Sometimes it does a little of both.

It is true that not everyone makes it out of the wilderness. Some people fall apart out there. Others cope, but never thrive. And then there are those who come out stronger than they were when they went in.

In a few moments we will say these words in the creed;

In life and in death we belong to God. …we trust in the one trine God, the Holy One of Israel, whom we worship and serve. (A Brief Statement of Faith).

Those words can become a reality in the wilderness.

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There are lessons to be learned in a wilderness. People can give you bad advice out there. Quick-fix answers. “Six Easy Ways to Get Out of the Wilderness!” Simple platitudes. Bad theology.

Good theology tells us that God has no limits, no boundaries, no calendar, no clock, no place of deprivation. The sceptic says this is make believe, wishful thinking, or a fairy tale. But too many people have come back from the wilderness with a deeper faith and experience of God for that to be a fairy tale.

You can learn to trust God in a wilderness, or you can lose your faith. There really isn’t much in between. Israel cried,

“If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (16:3)
Just let me go back to the life I knew. But we can’t go back. We can go forward. Good theology says that God makes a way where there was no way. The *wilderness* is where you can learn to trust that to be true.

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Sometimes it takes a crisis to awaken someone’s faith. The nation Israel was shaped on the anvil of the *wilderness*. They returned to the lessons they learned out there. They remembered the love of God that will not let you go, no matter how barren your *wilderness* might be.

You wouldn’t want to take a trip through the Bible and not stop on the word, *wilderness*. You’d lose too much good theology, too much knowledge of the love of God for a world that from time to time finds itself in the *wilderness*. The good news is that we will find God in every *wilderness*! Don’t put up a mailbox out there! You’re just passing through!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Congregation:  **Amen**