

“Wilderness Stories: Looking for Buds”

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Numbers 17:1-13

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We continue our Lenten walk in the wilderness, visiting episodes in the Book of Numbers during Israel’s forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Really we’re in some of the opening weeks or months of that time of wandering. You’ll remember that Israel had come right up to the cusp of going into the Promised Land, but some discouraging reports from some spies they had sent in spooked the people, and they preferred instead to go die in the desert. So God gave them up to what they wanted, saying they would wander in the wilderness for forty years until a new generation grew up, and the people might then be ready to enter into God’s promise.

So that verdict of wandering for forty years, a hard thing for a people to hear, is still pretty fresh. And last week, we looked at the aftermath, an uprising from among the people, born out of jealousy, anger, and anxiety, led by a Levite named Korah. And where we left off was at the peak of tension in this account, perhaps in the whole Book of Numbers, since we’re on the cusp of a full-on mutiny. Let’s go to God’s Word together, Numbers 17:1-13.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the Israelites, and get twelve staffs from them, one for each ancestral house, from all the leaders of their ancestral houses. Write each man’s name on his staff, and write Aaron’s name on the staff of Levi. For there shall be one staff for the head of each ancestral house. Place them in the tent of meeting before the covenant, where I meet with you. And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout; thus I will put a stop to the complaints of the Israelites that they continually make against you.” Moses spoke to the Israelites, and all their leaders gave him staffs, one for each leader, according to their ancestral houses, twelve staffs; and the staff of Aaron was among theirs. So Moses placed the staffs before the Lord in the tent of the covenant.

When Moses went into the tent of the covenant on the next day, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted. It put forth buds, produced blossoms, and bore ripe almonds. Then Moses brought out all the staffs from before the Lord to all the Israelites, and they looked, and each man took his staff. And the Lord said to Moses, “Put back the staff of Aaron before the covenant, to be kept as a warning to rebels, so that you may make an end of their complaints against me, or else they will die.” Moses did so; just as the Lord commanded him, so he did.

The Israelites said to Moses, “We are perishing; we are lost; all of us are lost! Everyone who approaches the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all to perish?”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Almighty God, help us hear and see and sense signs of your guidance. Truly we are lost and wandering without you, so we pray you would tune our ears to hear what you say to us, open our eyes to see what you reveal to us, and open our hearts and our minds to receive the Word you bring to us. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

The wizard Gandalf was stumped, and he didn't know which way to go. Just from the name, you may already recognize this from the J. R. R. Tolkien series *The Lord of the Rings*. If you don't know those books, just think elves and dwarves, these smaller beings called hobbits, and wizards along with it, they're all on a very long, dangerous journey—that's all you need to know for the sake of this sermon.

Gandalf and his eight companions were travelling through a vast mine, but it wasn't easy or safe. They were in great danger going through there, so they were trying to go through as quickly and quietly as possible. The wizard was leading the way, as he had been there before, but then he came to a part with three possible routes forward, three passageways leading onward through the mine. Unfortunately, he had no idea which way to go. And that's a problem when you're trying to slip through quickly and unnoticed. And with every second they were delayed, the chances of their being discovered increased.

He sits and ponders, trying to remember which way was the right way. It wasn't coming back to him. He sits and ponders in this dark place, not wanting to lead his friends the wrong way or get them all lost. He sits and ponders, worried just as much about what was behind them as about what was ahead of them.

And then a glimpse of epiphany comes to his face. “Ah, it's that way.” Everyone cheers. “He remembers!” “No,” he said, “But the air doesn't smell so foul down here. When in doubt, always follow your nose.” (That's from the movie. A bit different in the book, but same difference.)

Probably not the most convincing endorsement. He ended up being right, of course. But maybe he just got lucky. I mean, how conclusive of evidence is it that one way smells a bit better than the others? Follow your nose? Just keep moving forward, just follow your intuition, your gut, follow the signs.

This isn't a perfect comparison, but the story we read concerns a sign of sorts, a sign that distinguished which house, which tribe, God was with. Which staff, out of twelve staffs, would

show a sign that God was with *this* house, in particular when it came to treatment of the tabernacle?

A lot of big stuff has happened since last week. We left off with Korah and his company of rebels facing off against Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the tent of meeting. You might not have caught it, but this is a bit of showdown. You may be familiar with another story about the prophet Elijah facing off against the prophets of Baal with two rival altars and sacrifices, seeing whose God would listen and act. That may be more familiar, but this is a similar kind of scene. It's public; it's a public challenge, not just to Moses and Aaron, but to the way in which God had chosen to work among the Israelites.

Well, God shows up. And things don't turn out too well for Korah and his band. The earth opens and swallows them up. The people, interestingly, are not convinced, and the next day they in turn accuse Moses and Aaron of killing the people of the Lord. The selective memory is strong here.

Then a plague breaks out, and Aaron, at Moses' instruction, goes out with a censer and incense and miraculously ends the plague.

It's on the heels of that deliverance that we come to today's part of the story. The Lord tells Moses to get twelve staffs, one from the head of each ancestral house, that is, a staff for each tribe of Israel. One of them would be Aaron's staff, representing the house of Levi. Then Moses is instructed to place all twelve staffs in the tabernacle before the ark of the covenant. "And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout," God says, "Thus I will put a stop to the complaints of the Israelites that they continually make against you."

Moses does exactly that, and the next day, they find that Aaron's staff for the house of Levi had sprouted, putting forth buds, blossoming, and bearing ripe almonds.

And the funny thing was, the people were convinced. I mean, yeah, a staff, just a regular old staff bursting forth with buds and blossoms and almonds is pretty unexpected and miraculous, but as far as conclusive evidence goes, what exactly did it prove? By that I mean, I wonder why this was so compelling to the people, while everything else was not.

I mean, remember, the people had just witnessed the earth open up to swallow those who were opposed to Moses and Aaron. But did that convince them? No. They had seen fire come out from the Lord to consume those who had rebelled against Moses and Aaron. But did that convince them? No. They had witnessed Moses and Aaron halt a plague among the people using a censer and incense. But did that convince them? No.

All of these amazing things happening, of perhaps more appropriate scale, if we're talking about who's God's chosen one and all, and yet for some reason, it was this odd—granted,

miraculous—sign of a staff blossoming that ended up convicting the people that their hearts were lost on their own.

Why do you think that is? Why do you think that they and, by extension, we may be compelled by these smaller signs? Amazing, sure. But conclusive? No. Not any more than all the other things they had seen anyway.

Is there something about us that gravitates toward these more intimate signals that God is at work? We can marvel, sure, at the majesty of the mountains or the power of the storm. But then there's something about the small, seemingly incidental things that can speak just as powerfully, if not more so, to us.

There's an important practice in following the Lord that maybe we don't speak enough about: spiritual discernment. It's the process by which the faithful seek to understand and identify the way God is leading. It's a powerful process. There's the practical side of it, considering all the factors, pros and cons, that sort of thing, but that's true in any kind of decision making, from the school to the office to city hall. That's discernment, but then there's spiritual discernment. What way forward, among all the possible ways forward, is the way God is leading us? As a church we've done a fair bit of that, and we'll be talking a lot more about how we sense God leading us when it comes to our building and our focus in mission later this Spring.

One particular way that has been handed down in the tradition of the church is the Ignatian Rules of Discernment. They're a series of guided reflections and prayers out of the Jesuit tradition. How have we sensed the infinite love of the Lord in Christ? What has held us back from embracing and being embraced by the love of God? How do we feel called to follow Christ today? What is holding us back from following Christ in this way? There is a whole lot that could be shared on that topic, but on the chance you're thinking, "I just want someone to tell me what to do in order to get more clarity in how God is leading me," the Ignatian Rules of Discernment are not the worst place to start.

It can be problematic, of course, the whole spiritual discernment thing. What happens if one person says, "Well I just know God is calling me/us to do *this*," while another person says, "Well I just know God is calling me/us to do *the exact opposite*." What do you do? Which way do you go? Hard to tell sometimes. That's why it's important that it be steeped in prayer, guided by Scripture, checked and affirmed by the community. It's all part of how we see God moving within and through us, but also how we see God leading us, calling us to follow.

And every so often, sometimes in our darkest hour, we are blessed with a glimpse of something that affirms or redirects our attention, that says, "God is indeed at work in this way," a signpost in the dark that tells you you're on the right track.

It is common language in support groups of various kinds not to offer necessarily direct instructions: you just do this and that and this and that and then your problems will be solved. But instead especially to someone who may be new to the journey, or lost in the journey, or at wit's end as to which way to turn, the message is, "You're in the right place. Keep coming back."

Have you ever felt a sign like that? In a dark hour of your life, feeling lost in the wilderness. But then there was some small signal you witnessed, something that you would feel almost silly bringing up because it could so easily be dismissed as coincidence, and even though in any other context it wouldn't have felt like much at all, because this sign came to you in just a particular time and place, you felt God speaking.

Have you ever felt something like that? A few buds on a staff, if you will.

I had a good friend share with me once something like that. This friend had known some struggles in his life. And at one point he had felt the clear conviction to be rid of something that had tormented him, physically, mentally, spiritually, you name it. A thorn in his flesh, to use a phrase from Paul.

And so I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say he went into a time in the wilderness, and time in the desert, wrestling with temptation, with hunger, with withdrawal, with pain. He shared of one night he was sitting on the floor of his bedroom, feeling consumed by the struggle, uncertain whether he had made the right choice, wandering whether it would be wiser for him just to turn back. But he shared he could hear God tell him, "Trust me; trust me."

Not long after, he was out in his car running errands. He went to the pharmacy to pick up a prescription, just through the drive thru. And when he came to the window something glinted in his eye, made him squint. At the window, the pharmacist was being unusually friendly for a pharmacist—that's not an insult to pharmacists; this person was just being unusually friendly in what is ultimately a medical conversation. "Hey, how are you? Are you having a good day? You know, today's going to be better." Things like that. Not just niceties, but genuine words of encouragement.

And my friend shared that, honestly, his inclination was just to indulge the pharmacist, not really being in the mood for chit chat. He still wasn't feeling good at all. He still felt lost and wandering and uncertain. You know how that is: you're not in the best mood, and then there's someone being too chipper, and it's kind of off-putting, or at least you don't want to deal with it. That's what my friend was feeling.

Then a second time, something glinted in his eye, a bright light or reflection of some kind, but he couldn't tell what it was or where it came from.

He gave the pharmacist his information and card and all that. The pharmacist came back with his prescription, saying “You just have a wonderful day now.” And as my friend was about to drive away, he caught that bright glint in his eye again, looked and noticed that it was a sparkle of light reflecting off of something the pharmacist was wearing around his neck. He looked a little more closely, and it was a necklace of a cross.

Nothing more was said. The transaction was done, and my friend drove away. But after getting down the road just a few minutes, he had to pull over to weep of appreciation for this sign, this small sign, that in any other situation he would have dismissed as pure coincidence, but today, it was assurance that God was at work.

Friends, you can call it intuition, a gut feeling, or just following your nose, but what are the sparkling crosses in your life? What are the budding staffs? What are the things that God may be using to tell you, “This is how I’m at work in your life. This isn’t the last step. The journey continues and may still be a long one. But you’re on the right track. Keep going”?

Look for them, friends, when the path seems lost to you, and when hope feels hard to come by. And you may find the assurance by which God is inviting you to come near.

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