



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon August 1, 2021 “Drawing Nearer Even in the Wilderness” Rev. David Jones

It is pretty hard reading from Exodus this morning not to find ourselves identifying quite strongly with these ancient Israelites, a complaining congregation, hungry and thirsty in the wilderness. After the year and a half we have been through, and even now, finally beginning to take real steps toward a reawakened community, letting ourselves experience a little relief, a little hope--even now we are finding that we have to remain cautious. Many of us I imagine have been worried about the findings in Provincetown, for example. The vaccine remains crucial, but nonetheless we are realizing that this pandemic is far from over. Right now we remain safe here in Franklin County, but we're right to be keeping a close eye on things. I know I am looking forward to the border opening back up between Canada and the US to allow non-essential travel to resume. I'm more than ready to meet my new nephew Joshua and to see my family after so long...but my family and I are worried about how long this window of opportunity may be open.

Some of us will feel this increased risk of infection acutely and will have good cause to worry all over again, and others of us will simply dread what a setback will mean for our ability to be able to relax and enjoy our lives again. We're united with the ancient Israelites in feeling fear, uncertainty, frustration, and maybe in wondering, what is all this for--life and love and hope in a re-awakening, in a new Fall Festival, a new choir season, a new ministry together--if we have such little control over what the pandemic will look like next.

I imagine when the Israelites wandered those first days in the wilderness, becoming hungrier, becoming thirsty, that their trial seemed manageable. That's how I remember feeling in the early weeks of the pandemic. It was scary, but I felt like if I followed this rule and was diligent--if I stayed at home and used hand sanitizer and washed my hands, if I emailed my sermon instead of delivering it in the sanctuary--I and our community would stay safe, and soon enough things would return to normal. But eventually, hunger and thirst are not things you can endure, eventually you have to eat. Eventually these tasks to protect ourselves became rote--I kept doing them but I stopped noticing that I was doing them. The safe practices were now just my normal routine, and I started to notice instead how hungry I was for a night out of the house, or a weekend away, how much I craved my family and friends, how my downtime and leisure time left me still thirsty for something, anything, to break up the monotony and anxiety of always feeling a little unsafe and a lot unsure of what the future would bring.

Almost every conversation or visit I had with members of this church community over much of the past year, usually through a screen but maybe in a line at a store through masks--they were all similar, there was an understanding that we were carrying on as we had to but carrying on less and less. Extroverts felt alone, introverts felt unchallenged. The situation was taking its toll. It did take its toll.

And it's not like life stopped. We still had family members to worry about, who had a bad fall or needed to get to an appointment; still had friends who became sick. We still had those we have loved and adored pass on. But suddenly we didn't have the same ability to accompany them, to be beside them, to say goodbye, to celebrate surrounded by loved ones and trusted friends. We still had children who were struggling in school or struggling to make friends, but suddenly it was harder to get them the support they

needed. We still have experienced depression and anxiety and spiritual distress in this time, but suddenly had to settle for remote counseling and remote worship.

When the world and life felt like it stopped at the beginning of this pandemic, that was somehow a little more manageable for many of us. If everything was stopped, so could we; we could stop our lives for a moment and focus on just this task before us. But eventually we learned and experienced that life continued as before, just now with a pandemic. The one thing we could reassure ourselves with, to some degree at least, was that there was progress being made for a vaccine. And a vaccine is what we needed to defeat this thing. People used that kind of language. We were “at war” with the pandemic, and we conjured up images of a V-Day on the horizon. We were worn out and fed up and still scared, but at least there was an end in sight. We hoped the vaccine would be like manna, like bread from heaven, to take our hunger and thirst away.

I think that’s what it’s been like at church and in our hilltowns too. Once we fully appreciated that church was going to have to continue just like our lives did--only with more difficulty--we got back to church in so many ways. And we have kept our spirits as best we could by reassuring ourselves that with that vaccine, we could regather, and then we could start to sing, and slowly but surely we would have our V-Day, all of us back together in the sanctuary without masks, without fear, and rebuild our community together. And rebuilding is what we will have to do. It’s not possible to add a dangerous pandemic on top of the everyday struggles and joys of life (and church) and not be stretched too far, and not drift a little, and not doubt, and not wonder, and not complain like the Israelites. I can’t imagine that there is even one person in this community or in our church, in our families or friend circle, who is not asking themselves that deep question of “why?” or “what for?” Why do we have this pandemic? What was the church when we couldn’t gather? What is it now when we can’t sing all together? Why have I been sick? Or, why am I doing just fine but my child or grandchild is suffering? Where is God in all this? Did God know, when God created us, and when God set us free from Egypt--did God know when God took us out of Pharaoh’s grip--that we would be gripped with worry and fear and made to feel powerless anyway, overwhelmed by something we cannot control? Exodus is an ancient book, but asking why God saved us only to give us over to a life in the wilderness is a present day question.

But this unity that we feel with our ancestors in faith--and with each other, all of us who are so ready to have more joy and more fun and more visible smiles without masks getting in our way; this acute feeling that life is not fair right now, that our church is not as it should be right now, that our communities are out of balance...our scriptures, the Old and the New Testaments alike, they teach us that this unity, this shared complaint and need for bread, is the beginning of a prayer and an answer, it is the start of a new communion with God. With so much uncertainty and risk still in front of us, we are deep in the wilderness and all of us are hungry and thirsty for life. Only from a place of deep faith can we see a situation that is so widely shared--can we see a difficulty so universally felt--and see *not* a fact of life to accept but a condition to complain about. To sense that something is wrong and unfair when it is all around us can only mean that we also sense a deeper right and fairness--a promised land--that is longing to (be)come.

In both the old and the new Testaments, the people are sharing in the experience of hunger; their desperation moves them to cry out, to demand answers, to seek a new kind of community than the one that prevails right now. That is faith born of doubt; that is constructive action born out of a destructive situation. That is hope born out of despair. And most of all it is a need and a resolve to see God when the vision of God has been obscured by a thick wilderness. We may feel down as we watch the news of this pandemic; we may feel anger when we see people ignoring it; we may feel discouraged, and even hopeless. But we need to remember this unlikely good news in Exodus and in John: we feel these things at the beginning of a miracle, at the beginning of a new meeting--a fresh meeting today--when we will come face to face with our ancient Creator and Source. We recognize and become outraged and ask tough questions of one another and our God, precisely when we are preparing to draw nearer to our God.

In Exodus all the people need the bread of life, and so they recognize and express their deep faith that it is their right to have it; the God who is love cannot help but be moved and to answer with the bread of heaven, with this manna that is frost-like on the ground. The Israelites have a hard time believing their

eyes; until now their faith had been based on what they could not see. Suddenly they see something new, and they ask each other, "what is it?" And Moses explains that it is bread, the very bread they had believed in before they saw it, bread that God provides for them to eat. You see, the bread of heaven *is* the bread of life. The bread of heaven is a miraculous process that transforms the bread we see only by faith--only by faith in each other, only by faith in ourselves, only by our resolute faith in justice and righteousness even in the wilderness--into the real bread of this life that we can eat.

I think that is an answer to our questions right now, as people living during a pandemic, and as church-goers in this very hard time. We already recognize that things are not as they should be. We already have faith in a new community--in bread for all who are hungry--even though we cannot see it just now. Trust our ancestors in faith, but especially trust each other. Trust your friends in the pews. Trust our community and our neighbors. Trust your frustration and your complaints. Because what we cannot see right now as we wander in this wilderness time will soon appear. It might not look like what we think it will look like. It may be very fine and flaky beneath the morning's dew. But it will be bread for us all to eat. Because by our deep faith in one another, we are drawing nearer to the Lord, for the Lord has heard our complaining.

Alleluia and amen.