



“The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat! ⁵We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons,

the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

~Numbers 11: 4-6

Dear Friends in Christ,

Does your strength feel dried up? Is there nothing at all but online worship or half-empty pews to look at? Do you remember when we took regular in-the-sanctuary worship for granted? We remember the fellowship, the potlucks, the singing, gathering around the altar for the Lord’s Supper. Do you have a strong craving for going back to the way things used to be?

The thing is...we are in the wilderness. We have left Egypt (the good and the bad) behind, and God is making us, the church (and maybe society too), into something new. And if the experience of the Israelites is any guide, we are only in the beginning of our journey. If, as Dr. Osterholm says (an epidemiologist) we are only in the second inning of a nine-inning game, then we are only in the first decade of a forty-year journey, or in the first months of what will take a year to two years.

It is rather remarkable how the wilderness experience of the Israelites and our own pandemic wilderness experience is similar.

- Moses was under a lot of stress, and so is your pastor.

Every day is full of new decisions. There is much to take into consideration and pastors are being pulled and pushed into exhaustion. Do we resume in person worship? How? When? What if cases in the community are rising? What if someone shows up and won’t wear a mask? What if more

people show up than we can accommodate for social distancing? What if the most vulnerable come, how can we be sure they’ll be safe? What do I say to someone who doesn’t believe the threat is real?

Please be patient with your pastor and your leadership. The way forward is far from clear... for returning to worship, fall programming, and so much more.

- Moses learned not to be a solo leader and others stepped up to help.

At first it was all Moses. He went up the mountain alone and came down alone. But then he appointed more leaders to help shoulder the burden of leadership.

When the pandemic first started, your pastoral leader scrambled to provide resources and/or an online worship. There wasn’t time to recruit volunteers, there was too much else to do. He or she may not have had the means or initiative to get the council or others involved in meeting the needs of ministry in the congregation, much less the community.

But now, as we settle in for the long haul, councils and other congregation members would do well to ask their pastor how they can help, if they are not already doing so. Ask:

~Who needs a phone call and to be prayed with?

~What new technology can I learn that would help?

~Are there mailings I can help put together?

~Are there email lists and cell phone lists that need to be updated?

~Can I be a part of the online worship effort?

~Can I help someone use ZOOM?

Or please simply send a note of thanks and affirmation, so your pastoral leader knows their efforts are appreciated, and hold them in prayer.

- As their wilderness journey continued, the Israelites complained about a few things and so do we.

Wilderness times are full of high anxiety and stress. There is confusion. There is grief because we have lost the familiar and fear about an uncertain future. These feelings sometimes come out as anger or sadness or just untethered emotion.

Sometimes the best we can do is to take a deep breath and invite others to do the same. The words of Julian of Norwich come to mind...again, "All will be well. All will be well. In all manner of things, all will be well."

It is not up to you or me to fix the church or solve the pandemic or answer every question in the moment it is asked. This is a time of prayer and discernment, of conversation together to determine what is best, of asking how God is at work, and erring on the side of care for the neighbor.

Easier said than done. But being gentle with yourself and others is a good beginning.

- The Israelites arrived in the promised land a different people than when they left Egypt and we will emerge from this pandemic a different people too.

We are practicing our faith differently. At a time when we have not been gathering for worship as we used to means that feeding one's faith is not as easy as simply showing up to worship. This pandemic has challenged us to find new ways to deepen our discipleship and our relationship to God in Christ Jesus. Many pastoral leaders have done their best to provide online devotions, Bible studies, emails of encouragement, phone call prayers, and more.

In addition, I see the need for congregation members to take a new kind of initiative. For some, it may be more difficult to turn on the computer than get in the car to go to church. It may be more difficult to pray at home, than in the gathered assembly. Personal devotions depend on a person doing them. Online Bible studies are helpful only if one participates. Our rhythms are

off. The regular habits of faith have been disrupted.

By the time this pandemic is over, new patterns and practices will emerge, new insights will give greater clarity, and who we are as Lutheran Christians in the Northern Great Lakes Synod will look and feel differently than it does now.

- The Israelites were closer to God when they were in the wilderness - intimately dependent on God in a whole new way.

In wilderness times, that is, in times of fear and uncertainty, we pray all the harder and more frequently. We look for God more fervently. We rely on the presence of Christ walking with us with greater dependence. God is nearer, more palpably present, and this is an unexpected blessing.

As the Israelites travelled in the wilderness, their patience wore thin. They were tired of the journey, tired of Moses, critical of their situation and their leaders. I hope we can travel our wilderness road with a little more grace. 😊

As your leaders consider next steps, please understand that their priority is your health. And their primary challenge is how to nurture your relationship with God in Christ Jesus while observing the best practices for the safety of all.

So, as you travel this wilderness journey, watch out for your friends and neighbors. We don't want to lose anyone along the way. Check in on each other. Pray. Take your own initiative to deepen your discipleship and care for your congregation and community. Your pastor can only do so much.

And just as God led the Israelites through the wilderness, so does God lead you and me. These are trying days that will stretch into months and longer. But God is with you, your congregation, and with the Church that is the body of Christ.

Take heart and do not lose faith...or patience.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan