

8.1.21 Embracing Uncertainty Numbers 11.1-15 14.1-11

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How many stories have been written, movies made, and TV series produced about people being lost - lost in the woods, in the wilderness or desert, at sea, or on an island? The list is almost endless. Hansel & Gretel, Robinson Crusoe, Little Red Riding Hood, Gilligan's Island. Lost in Space, Lost, Castaway, Alive, Homeward Bound - the Incredible Journey, The Revenant. Even the musical Into the Woods. Some stories have a happy ending, some end tragically. Sometimes people emerge with remarkable stories of survival and overcoming, other stories will never be known. You may have seen the recent story of the man in Alaska who was followed by a Grizzly bear for several days and was fortunate to be rescued by a Coast Guard chopper that just happened to fly by and see his appeal for help. We're drawn to these stories in which people cope with life at its most basic level of survival in difficult circumstances without losing heart or hope, without giving in to fear but holding on to faith.

While you may not be in a physical wilderness, the times we are living in are filled with uncertainty and many of us have a sense of anxiety, dread, and fear about the present and the future. The illusion of control and stability that many of us lived with for some time has been shattered by many different causes and events from changes to our own health, the COVID-19 pandemic, fears about the changing climate and the increasing intensity of heat, drought and wildfires in some places, and rain, floods, and storms in others, to our inability to acknowledge what is true and factual. How do we live faithfully when so much seems uncertain?

Today's book of the Bible is largely a story about embracing uncertainty, which makes it very appropriate for our time. Specifically, the uncertainty of trying to live faithfully when much is unknown and unpredictable. The English title, "Numbers," comes from the Greek (Arithmoi) & Latin (Numeri) translations based on the numbering or census of the people of Israel that is described in chapters 1-4 and 26. I prefer the title in the Hebrew Bible which calls it "***In the Wilderness***," referring to the long period, traditionally regarded as 40 years, that the people spent in the wilderness. This was not the people's finest hour of faithfulness. Again, and again the people, rather than

accepting and embracing the uncertainty of life, complained, remembering in an idealized way the relative security of being enslaved in Egypt compared with the precarious insecurity of life and freedom in the wilderness. Human beings have an incredible skill called selective memory. What the Israelites remember is a glorious menu of food they used to eat and not the fact that they were enslaved. I don't want to be too hard on them because we've been living with increased uncertainty for less than a year and half and it has impacted us in countless ways. 40 years is a long time.

In the wilderness there were power struggles among the leaders, raising the question of who speaks for God, there was even dissension in Moses' own tribe, the tribe of Levi, over his leadership. One revolt was instigated by his brother and sister, Aaron, and Miriam (Num. 12), others would rise against Moses later (Numbers 16). It was a tough time for everyone, Moses at times was ready to quit and I don't blame him a bit. There were crises that caused the people to question whether God was with them in the present which seemed so difficult or could guide them into the future. Even with the people's blindness and rebelliousness, God was faithful to the promises made to Israel's ancestors.

That's the context for The second scripture for today from **Numbers 14.1-11**, "Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, *"Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?"* 4 So they said to one another, *"Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt."*

5 Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the Israelites. 6 And **Joshua** son of Nun and **Caleb** son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes 7 and said to all the congregation of the Israelites, *"The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. 8 If the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. 9 Only, do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us;*

their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.” 10
But the whole congregation threatened to stone them.

Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. 11 And the LORD said to Moses, *“How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?”*

The first thing the Israelites needed to do and didn't, that you need to do is **Realize that God is everywhere**. It's like the people believed God was with them in Egypt, as bad as things were for them there, but they don't believe God is with them where they are. I can't imagine what it's like to go from one type of environment to a quite different one like the Israelites, but the desert wilderness can be disorienting to say the least. In his book, *Walking the Bible – A Journey by Land Through the Five Books of Moses*, Bruce Feiler relates his experiences as he sought to follow the journey of Moses and the people of Israel. Feiler describes the desert wilderness this way, *“**Light**. The first thing you notice about the desert is **the light**. The second thing you notice about the desert is **the space**. The panorama is almost overwhelming, with sand blowing across the ground, bushes bent against the wind, and everywhere rocks, mesas, dunes, and mountains. The last thing you notice about the desert is **the noise**. In preparing for this part of our journey, I steeled myself for the silence. But once I stepped into the open terrain I was amazed by the din – the wind whining through the mountains, the sand tinkling against your face, the rocks beneath your feet. The desert destroys affectation; it demands authenticity. **Come with a vague sense of identity; leave with a deeper sense of self.**”*

I think Feiler is correct about the desert and its role in shaping God's people, whether collectively as in Numbers or individually as we see with others in the Bible and in life. The idea of the wilderness as a place of transformation has deep roots in the Bible. The desert wilderness is a place of uncertainty, of spiritual testing and growth. **And God is there**. Moses first met God in the wilderness after fleeing Egypt after he committed murder. The Israelites spent many years wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus having their faith tested and refined. In the New Testament, John the Baptist emerged from the wilderness preaching about the need for repentance, for all people to

turn their lives around and to turn them over to the Lord. It was in the wilderness where Jesus wrestled with his vocation to be a Messiah who would do God's will and even suffer and die for the sins of others. In the wilderness Jesus provided food for those who were hungry and showed the people that God was there; God was with them in the uncertainty of the wilderness.

In the uncertainty of the wilderness, **Remember all that God has done for you.** In the 4th and 5th centuries, many Christians sought spiritual refuge and insight in the Egyptian desert. Henri Nouwen writes about the desert wilderness: *"The desert – the Egyptian desert but also our own spiritual desert – has a double quality: it is wilderness and paradise. It is wilderness, because in the desert we struggle against the "wild beasts" who attack us, the demons of boredom, sadness, anger, and pride. However, it is also paradise, because there we can meet God, and taste already His peace and joy."* It's in the wilderness we discover that *"Reclaiming our true self requires a total transformation. It requires a long and often slow process in which we enter more and more into the truth, that is, into a true relationship with God and, through Him, with ourselves."*

It's in the wilderness that you learn your utter dependence on God and remember the one who delivers you and strengthens you for the challenges of life in a new place, in a new phase of our lives. You may be led into or enter a wilderness period at any point in your life, quite often for reasons beyond your control. Being in a spiritual wilderness is, as Nouwen described the desert, both a scary place and a land of opportunity. When you're in the desert of grief, loneliness, despondency, or fear, the difficulties may make you wonder how you can even go on or survive. **The key thing to do when you're in the desert is to remember to remember the right thing.**

The Israelites remembered, but what they remembered not entirely accurately was about the variety of their diet. What they didn't remember was all the Lord had done for them that enabled them to live to see this day. God says to Moses after one more day of people complaining, *"How long will these people reject me? Will they never believe me, even after all the miraculous signs I have done among them?"* **When you focus on what you don't have any more that you miss, it may cause**

you to miss what you still have. Obviously when someone you love dies, you miss them. However, if that's all you think about, you'll miss life and those you love who are still present. The Lord wants you to remember not just the past and what is gone, but to remember all the Lord has done for you because that's how your faith is built and strengthened for the uncertain days that lie ahead.

Realize that God is everywhere, even in the uncertainty of the wilderness. **Remember all that God has done for you. Third, Refocusing on God wherever you are helps you cope with uncertainty** It's important to keep on believing especially when life is difficult, the future is uncertain, and it's easy to be fearful. One descendent of Moses (Joshua Loth Liebman) put it this way, *"We master fear through faith – faith in the worthwhileness of life and the trustworthiness of God; faith in the meaning of our pain and our striving, and confidence that God will not cast us aside but will use each one of us as a piece of priceless mosaic in the design of His universe."*

When you find yourself in the wilderness and afraid, remember that life is worthwhile- even if you have moments when it feels like it isn't. God can be trusted – even when you find people sometimes can't be. It's worth giving faith a fighting chance and when we do, it may be the key that unlocks the door to meaning in our pain and struggles. Trust God who will not cast you aside and who will stay with you even in the wilderness when life may seem to be at its worst. Ernest M. Wadsworth wrote, ***"Pray for a faith that will not shrink when it is washed in the waters of affliction."***

When you're in the wilderness you have a better chance to make it through if you have good survival gear. For Christians, your survival gear includes a personal relationship with the Lord and knowledge of God's promises to God's people. Prayer which you can do anytime, anywhere to talk to and listen to God whenever and wherever you wish especially when you feel like there is nowhere else to turn. The presence of the Spirit of Christ who will not leave you or forsake you helps you to keep persevering as you struggle forward one day at a time. The company of friends, sisters and brothers in Christ, who will journey with you through the desert so that you're not truly alone helps to ease your burden and you can help others this way too.

We hold onto faith by remembering all the Lord has done to preserve our life to this very day. The reality for most of us even after we begin a relationship with Jesus is that (Abraham J. Heschel) ***“Faith is not something we acquire once and for all. Faith is an insight that must be acquired at every single moment.”*** That means every moment you’re choosing whether you’ll live out of fear or faith and that choice has significant consequences. Lewis L. Dunnington wrote, *“Fear builds prison walls around a man and bars him in with dreads, anxieties and timid doubts. Faith is the great liberator from prison walls. Fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages, fear sickens, faith heals; fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith sees beyond the horizon and rejoices in God.”*

Living faithfully in the wilderness means being willing to admit and accept that there is much about life and the future that is uncertain and unknown. Yet, you and I are called to live and walk by faith even when we don’t have and can’t have all the answers about what’s over the next hill, or around the next corner of our life. Uncertainty is normal, certainty is an illusion. None of us is guaranteed anything in life, not even the rest of this day. Rather than being surprised, shocked, or disoriented by uncertainty, we can embrace that it’s the nature of life. What we can do in the face of uncertainty is

Realize that God is everywhere, even in the uncertainty of the wilderness.

Remember all that God has done for you. Refocus on God wherever you are; that will help you cope with uncertainty.

Prayer: God some of us are deep in the wilderness today, the uncertainty we’re facing is making us fearful and scared. Help us remember you’re with us in the wilderness times and when all else is lost, the future is unknown. When we leave this worship service, as we move through and out of wilderness times in our lives, may we leave with a deeper sense of self and a deeper relationship with you. Help us to meet you, and to know your peace and joy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Blessing Numbers 6:24-25 “The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and Give you peace.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Have you ever spent much time in the wilderness, the desert, or the woods? If so, what do you like about it? What is challenging?
2. What do you find difficult about living in uncertain times like we're in presently (for example, is it the lack of control, the pace and amount of change, the emotional toll, etc.?)
3. How do we live faithfully when much seems uncertain and unknown?
4. If we realize that God is everywhere, how does that help us in the uncertainty of "the wilderness" of life?
5. Why are complaining and selective memory not helpful in the wilderness?
6. The Israelites didn't remember the correct things in their years in the wilderness, what difference does remembering all God has done make for us?
7. How does refocusing on God wherever you are help you cope with uncertainty?