

Return from Exile: The Wilderness of Fear to the Promise Land of Faith

Joshua 3:1-6; Matthew 3:13-4:2

Tonight we come to the end of our Wednesday evening series called “Return from Exile.” We have two more stops to make next week on Maundy Thursday as we remember the Passover and the Lord’s Supper and Good Friday as we move from Scape Goat to Sacrificial Lamb.

I don’t know how many of you have ever been in the desert Southwest. If you have, you don’t forget it. If you haven’t, it is like traveling through a desert wilderness. I grew up in Central Illinois, came to Concordia here in Ann Arbor when it was a Jr. College. Then I went to Concordia Sr. College in Ft. Wayne to finish my undergrad degree and to the Seminary in St. Louis. I had never been any further West than Missouri until I got my Vicarage, or internship placement in Ventura, California. Since Ventura is in Southern California, up the coast from Los Angeles, I took the southern route and stopped to see the Grand Canyon for the very first time.

After leaving the Grand Canyon and getting back on the interstate, I crossed the Colorado River and entered California. Since I had to be in Ventura by the end of the month, I was driving in later August. Needless to say California gave me a warm welcome. I didn’t have air conditioning in my car. **Not long after crossing into the state I started to see signs like this,** “No Gas. Next Exit 150 Miles.” I began to wonder what I was getting myself into. Despite how hot it was, I didn’t stop. I knew I had people waiting to meet me at the end of my drive.

The children of Israel had lived in exile in Egypt for a long time. Jacob and his family moved there when Joseph was in charge of distributing food to people during the 7 year famine. They didn’t return home after the famine, grew so large in numbers that they became a threat to those in power and were made slaves. When the people turned to God and asked to be rescued, God used Moses to set them free. God parted the waters of the Red Sea so that they could escape the Egyptian army, brought them to Mt. Sinai and gave them the Ten Commandments. Then God led them to edge of the Promised Land.

Before making preparations to invade, Moses sent twelve spies, one from each of the tribes, to scout the land. Two of the men, Joshua and Caleb, said it was great place, everything God had promised and said they could and should take possession of the land. **The other spies responded,** “No way. We can’t do it. The people who are already there are too strong for us.” So the report of these other scouts was quite disheartening; it made the people question God’s promise. “The land that we surveyed virtually eats its own, and the people themselves are gigantic.” (Numbers 13::31-32 The Voice)

Fear took control of the people. They grumbled against Moses and complained that God had led them there to die. They forgot all that God had done for them to bring them out of Egypt and to the Promised Land. Instead of moving forward in faith, they stopped in fear. So God judged the

people for their sin and their lack of faith. He left them to wander in the wilderness for the next 40 years until all of the adults, except for Joshua and Caleb, had died.

Sin kept the Israelites from entering the land God had promised to give them. Sin was the reason Adam and Eve hid from God and were sent out of the Garden. **Sin separates us from God and creates a gap** that we cannot cross on our own, that cuts us off from God. Without Jesus we would be cut off from God forever. But God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. Jesus paid the price for the sins of all people. He defeated sin and death. He bridged the gap that cuts us off from God on the cross.

After the 40 years in the wilderness, God again brought the Israelites to the edge of the Promised Land. By this time Joshua was leading the people. The two spies he sent into the land returned and said, **“The Lord has given us the whole land, for all the people in the land are terrified of us.”** (Joshua 2:24 The Voice) So Joshua and the people made preparations to enter the land. Before they entered the land Joshua told the priest, **“Lift up the Ark of the Covenant and lead the people across the river.”** (Joshua 3:6 The Voice) They did and God parted the waters of the Jordan River that was flooding at the time. So the people cross into the Promised Land just as they escaped from Egypt on dry land.

The Exodus happens when God leads the way. The Lord prepares the way. The Lord goes before the people into the Promised Land and the Exile is over. The people have returned home.

Jesus has gone before us, too, leading the way. Jesus went into the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized, to take our sins upon Himself. Then Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days to defeat temptation. When Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins, there was a curtain in the temple that separated the Ark of the Covenant from the people. The Ark was a symbol of God’s presence. The curtain in the temple was torn in two when Jesus died, showing us in a very real way that because of Christ we are no longer cut off from God.

Our personal journeys are not over yet. Even though the Holy Spirit gives us the gift of faith and makes us God’s children, we are still living in a time and place that is under the influence of sin. That is why we are told not to conform to the way everyone else does things, but to be transformed, to live the new life of faith that God gives us through His Holy Spirit.

We also look forward to the time that we are welcomed into our own Promised Land. Unlike the Israelites in the wilderness who didn’t know what to expect when they entered the land, we know that **Jesus is waiting for us. Jesus said**, **“My Father’s home is designed to accommodate all of you. If there were not room for everyone, I would have told you that. I am going to make arrangements for your arrival. I will be there to greet you personally and welcome you home, where we will be together.”** (John 14:2-3 The Voice) He is ready to welcome us from our wilderness of fear to the Heavenly Promised Land of faith.