

## WATER IN THE WILDERNESS

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, January 18, 2015*

*Epiphany II/Ordinary II*

*First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT*

*Listeners' Expectations: Inspiration; Spiritual Leadership; Spiritual Content; Lasting Impact*

*This Preacher's Expectations: To Teach, Delight, and Persuade*

*"In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity"*

**Text:** Exodus 15:22-27

22Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. 23When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. 24And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" 25He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water



became sweet. There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he put them to the test. 26He said, "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you." 27Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water.

I want to begin this morning by sharing with you how happy I am to be serving as your interim pastor. (I hope that the feeling will be mutual as we get to know one another!) Since this is the first time many of you are meeting me, I thought it would be helpful for me to do a brief self-introduction. I grew up in the 1950's in a suburb of Springfield, Massachusetts. Like many families in those years, my parents and brother and I were regular churchgoers (we attended a Congregational church that later became a United Church of Christ congregation). I was active in a Boy Scout troop until my late teens, a troop that spent a lot of time outdoors, hiking and backpacking and camping; we even went winter camping on at least two different occasions.

Like many of my compatriots in the baby boom generation, I came of age in the 1960's, during a time of significant social upheavals in our country: the civil rights movement, the assassination of President Kennedy, the war in Southeast Asia, the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan show., the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In the mid-1960's, I had the opportunity to study in Germany, where I first encountered the horror of the Holocaust and the stark presence of the Berlin Wall.

I spent the early 1970's getting my Master of Divinity degree from Bangor (Maine) Theological Seminary; my two daughters from my first marriage were born as bookends to my seminary years. I was ordained in the United Church of Christ in Williamstown, MA, in 1975, and served as settled pastor for UCC congregations in Massachusetts, Maine, and Southern California before discovering my true passion for interim ministry.

Back in 2001, when my family and I moved to the Washington, DC area from Southern California, I was given an opportunity to serve as an interim associate pastor at a Presbyterian church. This opportunity led me into a new vocational focus: from settled ministry to intentional transitional ministry. It has been a privilege for me to serve in transitional ministry for eight different congregations in a variety of settings.

In recent years, I have come to view interim ministry through the lens of the biblical wilderness narrative, for a couple of reasons. One reason is that the departure of a congregation's pastor can be a disorienting experience for many in the congregation, much as the wilderness journey was disorienting for the people who had left Egypt but had not yet reached the Promised Land. Another reason is that a secular management consultant named William Bridges, whose specialty is helping organizations manage changes of various kinds, has described the biblical wilderness narrative as a "management classic that provides an excellent account of a leader's successful transition-management project."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>William Bridges, "Getting Them Through the Wilderness – A Leader's Guide to Transition" (William Bridges and Associates, 2006), 4. Accessed online on September 4, 2012 at <http://www.wmbridges.com/pdf/getting-thru-wilderness-2006-v2.pdf>. Bridges also alludes to this metaphor multiple times in *Managing Transitions – Making the Most of Change* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2009).

Although I suspect that scholars of the Hebrew Bible might raise an eyebrow or two at the notion of the Exodus narrative as the story of a “successful transition-management project,” I am persuaded that the metaphor of guiding a congregation “through the wilderness” is a particularly apt one for transitional ministry. (This does not mean, I assure you, that I think of myself as a Moses kind of guy—far from it! But it does mean that we will be engaging with this story on a regular basis.)

As your wilderness guide, I see myself as having a unique opportunity to help you *enter* this foundational story of the wilderness; *live your way* intuitively and imaginatively into the setting, plot, characters and rhetoric of this story; and *re-author* your own story or stories in the light of this ever ancient, ever new narrative. To mix metaphors for a moment, this journey that we are undertaking together, this narrative that we are writing together, will help you to build a solid foundation for calling and welcoming your next settled pastor.

A number of years ago, my friend Rick and I planned a hiking and backpacking trip into one of the more remote wilderness sections of Baxter State Park in Maine. This wasn't our first backpacking trip together, so we were confident that we were well-prepared. Part of our hike took us over a familiar route: from the Chimney Pond campground up the Saddle Trail on Katahdin. In previous summers, we had stopped at a flowing spring just below the treeline to fill our canteens and water bottles. This was a particularly dry summer in Maine. It may have been that our favorite spring had simply dried up, or we weren't paying attention. In any event, we didn't fill our canteens, and when we reached the rock-strewn Tableland, as it's called, we were getting quite thirsty and realized that it would be a long hike down the other side of the mountain before we would find another water source. Fortunately, we had a map with us that indicated the location of a seasonal spring a little ways off the trail, and my friend Rick was able to find that spring, which was little more than a moss-lined puddle of reasonably clean water. You can imagine how relieved and grateful we were to have found this source of water in the wilderness.

Rare is the wilderness journey that doesn't include a time of anxiety about water. Consider this morning's text from the book of Exodus. On the one hand, there had been more than enough water at the Red Sea, where the children of Israel were being pursued by the chariots of Egypt. But God had parted those threatening waters, and the Israelites were able to cross over to safety on the other side. Once in the wilderness, however, they faced the problem of all desert dwellers: finding a source of drinking water in an arid and desolate landscape.

They walked for three days without water—and when they found water, at Marah, it was bitter and undrinkable. “The people [cried out to] Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' [Moses in turn] cried out to [God]; and [God] showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.” And the people drank this sweet water and were no longer thirsty. From the oasis at Marah, the people then walked to Elim, “where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water.”

An underlying theological claim throughout the Exodus narrative has to do with divine providence: with God providing for the people in the wilderness, whether it's through water from the rock or manna from heaven or the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night. Since this wilderness was uncharted territory for the people of Israel, since they had no map or compass or smartphones with GPS, they were completely dependent on God to guide them and provide for them.

When my friend Rick and I found that small spring on the Tableland, it wasn't necessarily because of divine guidance or divine providence. Rather, it was because the people who had been there long before us, who had marked the trail, who had drawn up the map with the location of the trail and the spring, those who had come before us had provided us with the resources we needed to guide us to that spring.

Likewise, today's congregations in transition between the departure of their settled pastor and the calling of their new settled pastor have access to a wide variety of resources that can guide them and provide for them during their wilderness journeys. Those of us who are engaged in interim ministry have maps and trail guides for this journey, what we might call "best practices" that have emerged and been nurtured by those who have come before us, as well as by those who are journeying with us.

As any good backpacker knows, maps and trail guides are essential tools for the journey. Another essential tool for the journey is a compass, which serves to properly orient our maps and trail guides. For congregations and pastors journeying together through the wilderness, our compass is our faith in God. So we will be turning often to the sacred texts of the Bible, and to the prayerful discernment of our congregation-wide conversations, to insure that our faith is properly oriented.

To borrow from the words of the hymn we sang earlier, for the next year or so, the journey will be our home. As we embark on this journey together, I'm looking forward to getting to know each of you. I'm looking forward to hearing your stories of faith: to learning how you have found God, or how God has found you, in your lives, both as individuals and as a congregation. Like every journey of faith, whether it is geographical or metaphorical, this will be an opportunity not only for self-discovery, but also for God-discovery. We will be attentive to signs of God among us and God with us: to those times and places where God provides for us water in the wilderness, sweet water to quench our thirst. Thanks and praise be to God! Amen.