

Rev. Lacey Hunter  
September 20, 2020  
Exodus 16: 2-15  
Church in the Wild: Care is Everywhere

It was this week five years ago that I set out on pilgrimage alone, to walk El Camino de Santiago, a 500-mile Christian pilgrimage across Northern Spain. Sharon and I had just started dating and I remember her patience and generosity with me as I prepared to go abroad for two months saying to her, "I may not contact you while I'm away. I need the space to just do this on my own." I truly believed that's what I needed, to travel to an unknown land, alone, and really do it myself. If I could do that, then I would know how strong I was, how powerful and in charge I was. I believed that if I could do this pilgrimage without needing anyone, then I would be a better partner, a better minister, a better person. I think it took me about three days to realize that a very different lesson awaited me in the wilderness of El Camino.

I was staying at a monastery for a few days before beginning my walk. I thought it would be a quiet, restful way to prepare myself. The Sisters there knew that I was a pilgrim. One night before evening prayer, one of the sisters pulled me aside to share with me a news report. She was worried about me walking alone. I told her thanks but she didn't need to worry, I would be fine, and I went into the chapel for prayer. And slowly but surely, my fears began to spiral. The monastery had just enough WIFI that I could get online and read the news. As I read, my own fears continued to surface. I called Sharon, freaking out, sure that I had made a terrible mistake. What was I thinking; I'm a small, queer, female-bodied person walking alone across a foreign country. I told Sharon, "Maybe I should just come home or stay at the monastery instead of walk."

As we talked, I was reminded that more than anything I am and we are as humans, relational beings. I encounter the divine most often in the presence of others and understand the world through its relationships. The fear that was rising in me asked me to go deeper. What would happen if I walked but not with the pressure of having to do it alone? So I started reaching out to friends for prayers and encouragement. I remember even posting to Facebook that I was struggling and as I did so, I felt ashamed and scared of being publically vulnerable and in need of others. I don't think I slept at all that night. But once I was able to slowly find my breath, once I could begin to release the shame I felt for being vulnerable, then a much truer part of myself was revealed. The way that unfolded before me as I walked was a wilderness of lives deeply woven together and in need of one another.

It doesn't surprise me that I believed being strong and in charge meant being an individual, entirely self-reliant. It is the dream that white supremacy and patriarchy in America has told us all to strive for if we want to be successful. Our rugged individualism dictates that you must know it all to be successful and needing others makes you weak. In the wilderness of El Camino I quickly realized these ideas were failing me, and had been failing me for a long time. In the wilderness of COVID, with individualism creating apathy for the safety of others, this dream is failing our country. It's time for a new dream.

I wonder if this was the kind of internal wrestling that the Israelites felt as they wandered through the wilderness, crying out to Moses? Moses was, in many ways, an ideal leader, a charismatic individual who seemed to know all things, who took charge and led everyone to freedom. The people put their faith in his power, his knowledge. In all fairness to Moses, I don't think this was the kind of power and movement he was after. But it can be tempting to either be the charismatic leader who knows it all or to follow such a leader. Either role forgets an important wilderness lesson, that all things are connected and no one individual is going to save us, not even our individual selves.

As the Israelites cry out, Moses sets out to reveal where his strength comes from, a strength not based in individuals working in isolation but individuals working in collaboration with one another and with God, who is working with all things for freedom. Maybe Moses says, "When you cry out against me, you cry out against the Lord," not to make himself look more powerful or to have authority, but as a way of painting a bigger vision of the co-creative life they are now a part of. It is not just Moses who knows the way to freedom, but Moses and Aaron and God and the quail who offer nourishment at night and the dew that refreshes at daybreak and the bread of the earth that sustains and the people together, gathering enough to tend to one another. It is this interconnected web of mutuality that will sustain the Israelites in the wilderness, not reliance on an individual leader.

At first the wilderness was an unknown place void of resources and life. The Israelites struggled to imagine what would sustain them and that they could survive, maybe even flourish in the wilderness. Once they opened themselves to the wisdom of this place however, to their intersecting lives with birds and morning dew, then a new way towards freedom emerged.

I wonder if it feels hard for us to imagine the wilderness as life-giving, as a place where we can learn a new way of living together? After all, isn't the wilderness a potentially scary, unknown place where only the strongest survive? In that way, our understanding of the wilderness doesn't sound all that different than the messages of individualism that echo in the world around us. What if I am not the fittest individual in the wild? Will I not survive?

The survival of the fittest doesn't have to be the only story of life that we tell, not for the wilderness, not for ourselves. Survival isn't actually about competing and being stronger than everyone and everything else. It's not about our individual success and strength. What if that is another layer of individualism that we can let go of? The way that God fed the Israelites in the desert was not so much a miracle of bread falling from the sky, but God's revelation that the wilderness was ready to nourish them if they knew how to be in relationship with it. Maybe manna showed them that they could learn from the wilderness to see their interconnectedness with all that was ready to sustain them. What might God be revealing to us about our interdependence in this wilderness?

Scientists Peter Wohlleben from Germany and Suzanne Simard from Canada both have dedicated their lives to studies that are revealing that rather than competing for resources, trees actually "share resources and form alliances with trees" inside and outside of their species. Simard says that acting as "resource-grabbing individualists"<sup>1</sup> doesn't actually make good

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>

evolutionary sense. The most stable forests are the more complex, diverse forests that have “evolved to help their neighbors.” What can we learn about collaboration and mutual support if we pay attention to the trees, to the pheromones they release that communicate distress to one another and the resources they send through their roots from the eldest tree to the youngest and across species?

It’s not just the trees in the wilderness that work collaboratively for the good of the whole forest. Scientist, teacher and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation Robin Kimmerer<sup>2</sup> writes about the collaboration of the “three sisters,” otherwise known as corn, beans and squash. While pesticides and technologies have been developed so that these crops can grow individually and in mass, Kimmerer reflects that when planted together, each crop naturally supports and protects the other, rendering pesticides and environmentally unfriendly technologies useless. The corn grows tall eventually creating a support structure for the beans to attach to and grow with the right balance of shade and light, while the squash spreads out protecting the roots in many ways from insects. As individuals, these crops can survive, but together, these crops create a complete story of sustenance and life.

In these wilderness times, some of us may fear being a burden to others and decide it’s easier to just take care of ourselves, to not reach out and need one another. Some of us may be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the need and feel incapable of showing up to it so instead we rely on others to care for our neighbors. Some of us might be waiting for that charismatic leader to take charge and make sure we are getting all we need. Some of us may be sending out roots, thirsty for collaboration. Wherever you are on this wilderness journey, I pray that you remember you are not alone. Every inch of soil beneath our feet contains miles of interwoven relationships. Every dewdrop can feed a people.

As I offer this sermon, I am aware that we are individually and collectively holding a great deal of pain and fear. The death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is one many of us feel with tremendous grief, respect, and dread. Her spirit goes before us now, gathers us together, calls us to action. In a country that is on fire, that is brutalizing women in immigration detention centers, and ignoring the rights of many others, this wilderness time is asking us to find new ways to care for one another. What would it look like for us to seek answers not from an individual but from our collective wisdom? How might we respond to the great need in our world like the trees? I am reminded that this weekend is Rosh Hashanah for our Jewish kin, the start of a new year. In the words of Puerto Rican, Jewish, poet, healer, activist, teacher, Aurora Levins Morales, here in this place, in this wilderness moment, “May we have a sweet year of struggle / May we sing and hear our voices multiplied / May we find the deep roots of courage in love...”

How can you begin to lean into this wilderness time as an invitation away from individualism and into interconnectedness?

Maybe when you leave worship today, you could call someone from the church you haven’t heard from or seen since sheltering-in-place and share a wilderness story with one another.

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<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/26/882828756/suzanne-simard-how-do-trees-collaborate>

<sup>2</sup> *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*

<https://milkweed.org/book/braiding-sweetgrass>

Maybe you could imagine yourself as one of the three sisters—corn, beans, squash—what’s the unique gift you bring to the world and how does that gift come to life when you offer it in community?

Maybe you could find a tree to sit by and draw all of the systems of relationships and communication you can imagine exist in and from that tree. Think about one action you can take so that your life more fully honors and reflects this interconnected world.

Maybe this is how we will find manna in the wilderness.