

Sermon Archive 241

Friday 19 April, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A Reflection: because today he dies

Back in an almost lost inkling of the past, the story of a wandering Aramean. Those who almost remember it are descendants of someone who journeyed through a wilderness, was formed by the wilderness, chose, sought and seized life from difficulty in the wilderness. Wilderness stories. They decided to spend their season of Lent with wilderness stories.

In the first week they prayed with Jesus in his desert place. They listened with him as the voices blew into his heart and mind for testing. I know you're hungry. I understand it makes you weak. I know where you're suggestible. Blackmail Jesus. Bribery Jesus. Fear Jesus. The second voice joins on in. Jesus finds himself hearing reports of the corruption of power - leaders with arrogant overblown sense of privilege, the people being fodder for the egos of the awful. You are nothing to me - everything is mine - while the third voice trolls and simply says, "go on, jump". The people abided with their Lord in his time of testing. He prevailed. In the wilderness, they lived, with him, to be tempted another day.

The second week they'd planned to visit Abram. But someone down the road shot and killed fifty of their neighbours; so instead the preacher cried and the people lit candles. New wounds. Old wounds opened again. The tearing of human fabric. Within an unwelcome huddling in the wilderness, they were called to love more - to find a new resolve. Within the wilderness, they lived to grieve another day.

The third week: sorry we didn't see you last week, Abram. How are you? Abram's not so well, actually. All his wealth and working won't secure him a sense of solid joy or lasting treasure. Nothing that he's built will last. People always leave. Names and faces fade. We forget what their voices were like. Even the offering this defeated figure makes to God becomes food for the vultures. In the wilderness, wilderness creatures treat his hope like something dead. Yet he hears a promise repeated, and within the wilderness he lives to hope another day.

The fourth week: Moses is confronted by something flaming and strange. What is it? Will it burn him? Who speaks from its centre? "Who are you?" he asks, yet hides his face because he is frightened. All we don't know. All we fear. All we are not equipped to understand. All that burns - does it consume, purify or destroy? What do you mean: "I am"? With uncertainty, amid the strange, and challenging, God says "I will be with you" - and surrounded by wilderness, we live to fear and struggle another day.

The fifth week: a people, having journeyed for a long, long time, come to the point where the old provision of food comes to an end. They have been fed during their time in the wilderness. But now they come to a new time, and have to build their own kind of life. A life where they will need to plant crops, and make food for themselves - all the while remembering the days when they had needed help, because they were helpless. How do you make a new life, when you carry with you fears and doubts from bitter old experience of want? How do you see light on the new horizon, when the wilderness has made you too frightened to look or hope. We live - we live to hear the call "come and follow me". We live to dare to move another day.

We descendants of the wandering one, the desert one, the journeying one, have many wilderness stories. With nuance and detail we're quite the experts. As the Lord lives, we hear and tell our stories.

But today . . . Today with all the old ones, we put the strangest and saddest story of all. Today wilderness comes not only as corruption of power, not only as the pecking of vultures at our hope. Today it comes not just as weary wisdom before the challenge of the building of life. Today it comes as betrayal. Today it comes as friends who sleep when you need them to pray. Today it comes as we no longer are able to say "As the Lord lives"; because today he dies. Today there is a death in the wilderness.

The light shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Well today we put out the light.

The water he gave us was like a bubbling spring, gushing up into eternal life. Well today the water sinks away into the ground - a small and fading wet patch.

The branches were in the vine, receiving life, being one, forming something living. Well today the vine is chopped to its root, thrown on the fire as worthless dead things are thrown on the fire.

Today the living, breathing, bleeding discovery of "God with us" becomes bleached bones in the desert. Today the wilderness becomes the place of the Saviour's death.

He was the descendant of a wandering Aramean. The desert formed him. It taught him to sing. It tested his spirit. It made him strong. But this . . . this is different. This is not formative. This is not soul making. This . . . it's just death.

And we, O God, we descendants of the descendant, would rail against the death. We would say that's not who we are - it's not what we're building. We'd shout our protest, declare our dissent. We'd say death is an import - some strange intruder for somewhere else - nothing to do with us! We are not builders of wilderness.

Yet, the comments we do not challenge. The failures to speak truth

to power. The snigger behind the hand. The pretending that all is well. It's just death. This is not formative. This is not soul-making. It's complicity in the building of a wilderness within which a death occurs. A death in the wilderness - - - By human hands our God is dead.

Brothers and sisters, by our lives, with our tears, let us tell the saddest story - death in the wilderness. The death of God.

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