

Sermon – Matthew 9:35-10:23

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Grace Lutheran Church

2 Pentecost – Year A

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“Amidst the Wolves”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Remember vacations? Unable to take the trips we were planning for this year, I suppose it's inevitable that I'm thinking about our family trips last year. This week I've been thinking about our vacation to California, particularly the day we spent exploring Joshua Tree National Park, a beautiful wilderness at the nexus of the Mojave and Colorado Deserts. There weren't too many other people there that day, probably because it was the desert. And it was July. The temperature was in the high 90s when we arrived first thing in the morning and would be well into triple digits by the time we left. Our first stop was at a ranger station. We wanted a map that would show us some walking trails. The ranger obliged, but he also said, "You don't really want to take any of these hikes today." One of the kids asked, "Why?" The ranger replied, "Because you'll die." He was kidding, but only sort of. It was a day that could leave you dead from heat in the wilderness. He advised us to stay within five or ten minutes of our car at all times, and to never venture forth without plenty of water, not even for a minute. The wilderness is a dangerous place. You don't want to get out too far ahead on your own, and you never want to be without water.
2. The scriptures draw us into the wilderness today. Our first reading locates us with Israel as they reach Sinai. In the third month since their liberation from Egypt, they reach the wilderness around Mount Sinai. The wilderness has not been easy for them. Earlier, at Rephidim, they had noted out their closeness

to death: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” What the Israelites seemed to forget (don’t they, don’t we, always forget?) is that they are not in the wilderness on their own. The God who freed them from the harsh chains of their Egyptian overseers journeys with them. God meets them in their thirst, commanding Moses to draw forth water from the dry, dusty rock at Horeb. Moses names the place Massah and Meribah – Test and Quarrel in English – to commemorate God’s thirst-quenching presence. At Sinai, they receive the law as God cuts covenant with Moses: “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy people.” The wilderness was dangerous enough that the people yearned for the miserable certainty of slavery. But the Lord was with them, slaking their thirst and making them promises. The wild is exactly where God is to be found. The wilderness gives lie to our pretense that we can care for ourselves. In the dusty desert, Israel learns to depend upon God. And so do we.

3. So it is that Jesus, having gathered his disciples, sends them out into the wild. Not the wilderness of Sinai, the but wilderness of sin. It won’t be easy. The harvest is plentiful, but there are few to work it. They are to take nothing with them, depending upon the power of the message and nothing else. And they, little lambs, will encounter wolves. The powers will rise against them and families will be divided. Still, they are to go. To cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. Sounds easy enough, right?
4. We are the ones whose names are added to the list of the twelve. We are the ones called, gathered, enlightened, and sent by the Spirit of God. And it is a wilderness. We are in uncharted territory. The COVID-19 pandemic continues, and while we may wish to be done with it, it seems unlikely to be done with us. In the midst of this, an awakening is happening. Racism and systemic oppression, realities that have long been present in our broken world, demand our attention, and properly so. What do we do? Where is the

map for this journey? Well, the advice of the park ranger isn't a bad place to start. Don't go too far on your own, and don't go anywhere without water. As Paul reminds us, "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." Yes, we were, we *are* sinners. We are guilty, complicit, in the broken systems of this world. Even if we are not overtly or intentionally racist, those of you who look like me are participants in and beneficiaries of a world that tilts in our favor, and against others. It is time to do something about it and we start by remembering that we are not in the wilderness alone. God journeys with us, and out of the once dusty rocks of our hearts flows the baptismal water of life.

5. Enlivened, we are empowered. Jesus works in power by giving power to his church. If God can raise Jesus from the dead, what can God not do? In Jesus' name, we have the power to cast out the demon of racism. By Jesus' resurrection, we have the power to bring a life out of death. In Christ we can freely acknowledge that Black people and people of color not only matter, but that they matter so much to God that Jesus was given to die for them every bit as much as he died for me; that their resurrected lives are as important as ours. Whatever this might mean politically, for us it is a statement of faith.
  
6. This may feel like we are entering divisive territory, but perhaps this the wilderness into which Christ is leading his church. Jesus doesn't seem to shy away from painful conversations in our text today. But be of good courage, trusting that since you can't depend on your own wisdom or strength, that God goes with you. And if this message meets resistance, move on. Shake the dust off your feet, with your Savior's permission. But what then? As the preacher Sam Wells asks, "What happens to the grief and the sadness and the loss and the pain? You're walking away from this person or house or town, the job not done. The dust not settled." As Wells points out, with our God that's never the end of the story: "And what does God do? *God makes us anew*

*from the dust of the earth.* God makes something beautiful out of our dust and ashes. When we shake the dust off our feet, we're saying, "Thank you, Lord God, for the privilege of being part of the way you redeem the world. I've tried with this, your precious child, and I've been rejected. You're going to have to re-create this one on your own." Yes, Church, our efforts will never fully succeed. Sin and brokenness, division and discord, will play in this world until its end. But even then, God won't be done. Christ is alive and in him the future is secure. Christ is alive, and in him we have power in the present.

7. It's a dry, dusty world in which we live, where wolves prowl and wild things wreak havoc in our own hearts. But the wilderness is where God does God's best work. So go. Don't go too far on your own; the risen Christ is with you. Don't forget to bring water, the graceful flowing streams that bring forth baptismal blooms from even the hardest rock. Having nothing else, learn to depend on God alone. Keep the faith, and remember that Jesus was dead once, and now he's not. Death has been defeated. What can our God not do? Let us join God's work, that abundant life would burst forth for all people. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.