

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, October 8, 2023

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

One of the common and enduring ways we describe what it means to practice faith is to liken it to being on a journey. Because we recognize that faith is not a destination, faith is not something that you master. Faith is not another thing you can check off the daily to-do list. No, Beloved, we understand that faith is a practice, it is lived out and embodied and experienced with each breath that we take.

Faith, as Mitzi Minor put it a few weeks ago in the “Faith and Function” class, faith is not about mental assent, faith is not about believing that a set of statements are logically and factually true. Faith is not about mental assent, it is not about being right or simply believing the right things.

I wonder if anyone got a bit uncomfortable when I said that, maybe felt a sense of unsettledness begin to set up shop in the pit of your stomach. Because maybe you were raised in a tradition that linked faith with rightness, faith to righteousness at the expense of those who were just living wrong and doing wrong. Maybe you were raised in a tradition where faith was all about doing the right things, and saying the right things, and believing the right things—or at least claiming to believe the right things. But when we return to an understanding of faith shaped by the image of a journey we are admitting to ourselves that faith has little to do with rightness.

Faith is the sustaining, motivating, sometimes subtle reality of our lives that continually confesses that God is sovereign and at work in our stories, even when our stories bring us to the brink of brokenness.

Faith, when we liberate it from rightness, is less about doctrine and much more about the disciplines required to make our way through each day and not be consumed by the negative thoughts that cloud out our sound judgment. Faith helps us hear past the partisan sound chambers that masquerades as news to discern the voice of God. Faith bouys us when disappointments pile up on the pieces of our unrealized expectations. Faith is that which holds us together.

And that is why journey is an apt metaphor, because when we think about faith through the lens of journeying we are reminding ourselves that our lives will always vacillate between the ups and the downs, that which we deem good and that which we only understand as bad, and even the parts of our stories that we do not think belong, all the things that we wish would not have happened.

Perhaps that’s why the narrative that gives context to the content of this morning’s text is so immovable, so irreplaceable and so central to our collective story as Christians. That this story of the Israelites journeying through the wilderness is not just good storytelling, but it also resonates in our lives because each of us are on our own journeys, journeys that often intersects with seasons of wandering through the wilderness unsure of what comes next.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, October 8, 2023

For forty years the Israelites have been in the wilderness. Having been liberated from oppression in Egypt, having been emancipated from slavery, for forty years the Israelites have traversed an unwieldy and wild and dangerous and uncertain and depressing wilderness. They left a situation that had stolen loved ones from them unjustly and before their time, they left a place where they had been subjugated and dehumanized, they left a place where hope unborn had died, where there was no possibility. They left the kinds of places where if we're honest, we may have found ourselves every now and again. Places where hope was conspicuously absent and where possibility was a pipedream. Hard places that we finally escaped with glimpses of hope on the horizon, only to find out that we left a hard place for a wild place; a hard place for a wilderness.

This story of the Israelites journeying through the wilderness resonates with us over and over and over again, because our lives are filled with wilderness experiences. Transitions in our lives can feel like wilderness experiences. Transitions, where we go from partnered to single. Transitions, where we go from the one with all the power to the one no one pays attention to anymore. Transitions in our lives where we go from plenty to want, from healthy to bedridden, from depended upon to abandoned. Transitions that unsettle us because change is never something that anyone readily welcomes no matter how flexible and understanding we may consider ourselves to be.

We resist the things we cannot control, which might just be the understatement of the century. And the frustrating thing about change is that it has a funny way of showing up and revealing precisely how much we cannot control. Change shows up to reveal to us that no matter how many times we mistake ourselves for the Creator that we are in fact the created, and there are somethings in our story that God alone can handle.

That's what happens in the wilderness, we come face to face with our limitations, we are made to sit in the tension of the transitions, and we must walk the unwelcome legs of the journey that we really wish we could've found an alternate route for. And for forty years that is the hard and heavy work the Israelites have done. For forty years the Israelites' journey has unfolded within the context of wilderness. And for forty years the Israelites have been wondering, "Why would God bring us from a hard place into a wild place, and who cares about the promise that something better is on the other side of this wilderness?" Have you ever had to have that kind of conversation with God? Where you say, "God where I was before was bad enough, where I'm at now is pretty terrible, and even though you promised me that you'd never leave me nor forsake me, even though you promised me that you'd hold me in the hollow of your hands, even though you promised me that 'one day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere', even though you promised me that your love is always enough, the promise is feeling pretty empty right now.

Beloved, I believe that's where the Israelites find themselves in our text this morning. And so Moses, rises to stand before them, intimately aware of what they've been through, Moses rises to stand before the people, there in the Arabah, with an eye toward a Promised Land he will never see, Moses stands up and does what he's done so many times before, he begins talking about God.

Moses faithfully stands in front of these wilderness worn folks and proclaims words that I wonder if they were truly able to understand. Words I wonder if they were able to receive through the layers of pain and brokenness that had built up over the years. Words that may not have resonated because of how deep the resentment had settled over their memories. Words that may

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, October 8, 2023

have fell on deaf ears because of how fractured their faith had become because God had not lived up to their expectations.

Afterall, instead of bringing them from a hard place to liberation and the promise, God brought them from a hard place to a wild place that had worn them out for forty years, that had caused them to bury parents and children and partners and to lose all the things that had given them a sense of identity.

But Moses speaks anyway. And says, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” or as Robert Altar translates it “Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” And “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” But don’t just hear these words, work them into your life, keep these words in your heart. Recite them to your children, talk about them when you are at home and when you’re out and about, bind them to your hand and your forehead. Whatever you do, don’t let these words fall on deaf ears.

And yet sometimes, that is exactly what happens. That is exactly what happens when we find ourselves encountering hard truths about God, they fall on deaf ears. Hard truths that do not conform to what we believe about God, and how we believe God should act, and what we’ve convinced ourselves is true about God. And we resist the truth that to follow God means that there will be hard times and disciplines. We resist the truth that following God will unsettle how we see things, including the things we only were able to experience as pain, the seasons that we look back and only remember suffering, the parts of the story that we’ve never told anyone because they are too burdened down by shame and regret, following God means accepting the hard truth that God was even in the midst of those things; that God was precisely in the places where you wish God would have rescued you.

Those are the kind of hard truths about God that we resist, because if God was in the suffering, and we didn’t experience God doing anything about it, then at worst God comes off as a bit sadistic and at best, God failed to live up to what we expected out of a relationship with a God who claims to be sovereign.

At this point you should be at least a little bit more uncomfortable. Because admitting that, that’s a heck of a hard truth to sit with. But allow me to add another. For while God is neither sadistic nor is God’s sovereignty in jeopardy, our thinking, our thinking here is what must be challenged. Our resistance to the fact that God is present even in the moments we’d like to write out of the story that God is authoring exposes that we have a hard time accepting the truth that everything belongs.

Richard Rohr, that famed Franciscan friar has been so helpful to my life and my faith, there’s a passage from one of his daily devotionals that I’ve taken to reciting to myself over and over, if I could bind it to my forehead without enduring awkward stares I would. Rohr, like Moses trying to get his point across to a people worn out by wilderness experiences, Rohr tries to help us get out of the kind of thinking that consistently resists that God is so much God that God can be in the hard places and not act the way we had hoped, that God can be in the hard places and not save us from the pain, that God can answer prayers in ways disappoint us, and still be God.

Rohr calls the freedom from that kind of dualistic thinking “contemplative consciousness”. The kind of consciousness we resist. Here’s how Rohr puts it, “Every bit of resistance to this contemplative consciousness comes from some previous mental explanation of how things should be, or what we want or expect them to be. If we start our day with ten expectations, we have just

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, October 8, 2023

set ourselves up for an unhappy day. When we live out of our minds, it just creates expectations and reasons to be disappointed. Don't do that! We've got to choose God here, in this moment, and whatever happens, happens. [...] It's okay. We don't always succeed at this, but when we do, we know that everything belongs. We know that God can use even this and that maybe the experience really was all right." "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

Beloved, when we live out of our minds, when we are constantly judging experiences as good and bad, acceptable and alien. When we live out of our minds we may find ourselves gathering evidence to confirm that nothing can heal our hurts or soothe our sorrows, gathering evidence to confirm that some things just don't belong. When we live out of our minds we have a particular proclivity for catastrophizing. When we live out of our minds, we resist that God is sovereign and that in God everything really does belong.

Beloved this text before us this morning is referred to by our Jewish siblings as the *Shema* from the Hebrew word, "to hear", "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Hear! Because if you hear, you may eventually move to listening, and from listening to understanding and at the very least if you focus on hearing you may be able to slow down the pace of that catastrophizing thinking.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." A scholar of Hebrew liturgy and rabbinical literature at Brandeis University when talking about the *Shema* says that part of the reason why these words have endured as a central part of Judaism is because when you recite the *Shema* it ought to summon an all-consuming feeling of love for God. It's a reminder of just how much you really ought to love God with all your heart, and all your being, and all your might. Professor Kimelman says it like this, "It's a love that is unreserved, all-demanding, at all times, in all places and in all circumstances," But this is where it got good to me, he goes on to say that this love that is summoned by remembering the words of the *Shema* it's a love where "Nothing is excluded."

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Everything belongs. And we don't get to hold back parts of our experiences from God whether because we're angry at God for how it unfolded or whether we're ashamed at what we've done or said or believed. Nothing is excluded. And if we can choose God and not live out of our minds, then not only can we hear this truth, we can accept it as the reality of our stories and the reality of God's great love for us.

Nothing is excluded. Everything belongs, because as Bishop Yvette Flunder reminds us, God is God enough to change the key of our song, such that the dissonant notes of our lives become the missing sound of the symphony. Everything belongs.

I close with this, a dear friend of mine told me about an interview Father Gregory Boyle once gave. Father Boyle is the founder of Homeboy Industries, a youth program and transformational social enterprise working to give former gang members and young people caught up in the criminal justice system a way out of the wilderness of social marginalization. They're about the work of redemption. And my friend was recounting to me this interview in which Father Boyle explained how he has kept his faith, kept his hope when the redemption work fails. When members of the program find their way back to gangs or when their lives are taken because someone from their old lifestyle didn't want to see them liberated. You'd think Father Boyle would be resistant to those situations, you'd think he has a hard time accepting them as part of the story, but what Father Boyle said in that interview was, "I don't mind what happens."

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, October 8, 2023

Now let me be honest because I'm preaching, I heard that and thought well Father Boyle must be out of his mind, because I do mind what happens, and I want others to mind when lives are snuffed out, and liberation is denied, and justice work is politicized. I do mind when my plans don't pan out and when I've been wronged and the wrong can't be righted. How can you say "I don't mind what happens."

And then it clicked. Father Boyle is out of his mind! And we should be too. And perhaps that's what Moses was trying to get the Israelites to remember. Get out of your mind, get beyond your need to deem everything as acceptable to your story or alien to your story. Get out of the habit of trying to figure out what's excluded and what doesn't belong. Because it's imperative that you get out your mind Beloved, it's imperative that you stop living out of your mind, so that you can hear and understand, and be conscious of how God is at work in the places and moments you're just trying to hurry up through.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Hear! Listen up! Understand! Remember! Because one day you'll move from this wild place to the promised place, and when you get to where you're going, when your journey of faith eases up and things meet up with your expectations more suitably, there will still be battles you have to fight.

And the key to holding it together whether in wilderness or promise, is to remember what Moses implored the Israelites to recall each day, and to recite to their children and to inscribe on their hearts. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." And because God is one, because God is sovereign, because God is always near, and never abandons our story, everything belongs.

To the Glory of God, Amen.