

**The Wilderness Forms**  
Lessons from the Wilderness  
March 14, 2021  
Deuteronomy 6:1-9;20-25

**Scripture**

*These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, 2 so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. 3 Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.*

*4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. ...*

*20 In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?" 21 tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. 22 Before our eyes the Lord sent signs and wonders—great and terrible—on Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. 23 But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land he promised on oath to our ancestors. 24 The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. 25 And if we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness."*

**Sermon**

"Suffering stops being suffering when it finds a why."

That's the wisdom Dr. Andrea Cook, a family therapist in Gainesville, Georgia, gave to us on Wednesday night at our Beyond the Wilderness Lecture Series. Summarizing Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl, Andrea spoke of the importance of finding meaning in our pandemic experiences.

In the book of Deuteronomy, the Lord, through the prophet Moses, helps the People of Israel find the why of the wilderness to give meaning to their wandering.

Forty years have passed since the Lord saved the Israelites from the Egyptian army by opening the passage through the Red Sea. For 40 years, the Israelites have suffered through the rugged, nomadic life of the desert wilderness. They have lived exclusively

on manna and quail, watching as the older generation who knew Egypt and slavery slowly died.

In the book of Deuteronomy Moses outlines how God used the wilderness to form the People of Israel into a free people ready to live in the land of Canaan. Moses repeats the 10 Commandments found in Exodus and describes the laws and religious traditions that now shape their life together.

Central to their understanding of their covenant with the Lord is the 6th Chapter of Deuteronomy. This is the heart of Old Testament faith which leads to the heart of Christianity is v.4-5. It is known as the Shema based on the first word in Hebrew – to Hear.

*"4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."*

In their 40 years in the wilderness, the Lord saved the People of Israel, taught them to trust, clarified their identity, and formed them into God's people. As the people of Israel move into to the Promised Land of Canaan they will live as the first monotheistic people in the world. Their faith will be built not on fear or subservience or personal sacrifice, but on LOVE - A faithful, loyal, steadfast act of the will called Hesed.

### Our Story

On March 15, 2021, one year ago, we held our last regular worship service at First Baptist Church before moving to virtual services the next week. Like most of us, I never imagined a pandemic like we have experienced would rage for over a year. I remember feeling overwhelmed and sad that Sunday as the weight of what would be required of us to keep worship and the church going settled on me. I grieved we would not be able to properly say goodbye to Brandon and Jueun. I wondered how we would film our first worship service. I struggled to figure out how to include Donn who was scheduled to be voted on by the church the next Sunday. And I knew we had to make sure our fellowship stayed connected as moved into lock down and isolation.

Now, as we begin to see friends and sacred partners returning after a year and make plans for a wonderful Easter event, I am allowing myself to see the hope for what comes next. Before we arrive in our Promised Land of no masks and a stadium filled Swamp (isn't that always a Gainesville Promised Land?), we have work to be done. The Lord invites us to slow down to find meaning in the last year in our lives and in our church.

The Lord uses our wilderness experiences to form us for the journeys ahead.

Our passage from Deuteronomy guides our reflection on the ways God has formed us over the last year.

### The Lord Forms

#### **Our Identity (Who are we)**

At the heart of their identity as the People of Israel is their confession of faith: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. (Dt. 6:4)*. This confession of faith transformed a loose confederation of individuals, families and tribes into the People of Israel. It remains central to the Jewish faith today.

When Joseph welcomed his 11 brothers and their families to Egypt, they became 12 separate tribes in Egypt. Over 400 years, this loose confederation of related people fell into slavery and multiplied exponentially. They had a common ancestor – Israel; were known as a single people group called the Hebrews and shared a common language.

When they escaped into the wilderness, nothing held them together. The Lord used the wilderness to form their identity as one people, a covenant people, defined by their relationship with the Lord God – Yahweh. Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. This is who they are!

When we entered the pandemic, we knew the heart of First Baptist Church which had beaten for 150 years. Through the pandemic wilderness, our identity as First Baptist Church Gainesville has grown clearer. On this side of the pandemic, we can see how God has formed into one people.

We are a people of God who care for one another and our community enough to listen to the best of our community health leaders.

We are a people of God who are not defined by a building.

We are a people of God who are creative – always finding new ways to preach the Gospel, worship, and care for one another.

We are a people of God always on mission – seeking to speak for and care for those on the margins and living the way from Jesus.

What about you? What has God revealed about who you are during the pandemic?

Have you discovered a seed of hope, a well of grace, a strength of patience, a faith greater than before? Take time to speak and write down who God has revealed you to be this year.

### **Our Love (What we do)**

While the Lord God formed the identity of the People of Israel in the wilderness, The Lord also formed their purpose. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Dt. 6:5)*. This is how the People of Israel are to live in the world – with their lives aligned completely in love of the Lord.

During their wilderness experience, the Lord gave the Israelites multiple laws, traditions, and religious practices. The biblical books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers are filled with new rituals that will shape their worship and life together. Here, in Deuteronomy 6, Moses provides the heart of the law. This is the center of their life together – Love the Lord your God with all of who you are!

In the Gospels, Jesus does the same thing. In Matthew 22 a lawyer asked Jesus: *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"*

*37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

The Great Commandment defines for us what we are to do to live the Jesus life: Love God. Love others.

During the pandemic, First Baptist Church has described how we do this together. We call it the Trellis. The Trellis is the structure for how we live the Jesus life – a rhythm for how we love God and Love others together. The 8 stakes of the trellis guide our spiritual actions calling us to deeper love of God and more expansive love of others.

I wonder how the Lord has reshaped what you do during the pandemic. Our actions have changed. We spend more time in gratitude. We make efforts every day to care for family, neighbors, and strangers. We have learned the value of slowing down. Not every minute has to be crowded with activities. As you reflect on your experience, what new actions will you take with you in the years ahead?

### **Our Remembrance (How we live)**

Finally, while the Lord formed the identity and actions of the People of Israel, the Lord also formed their remembrance. Remembrance is the heart of the spiritual life. When we remember God, we connect with God.

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. (Dt. 6:6)

Remembrance is a vital part of this passage. The Lord describes how to remember.

*Impress (these commands to love) on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. ...*

From this point forward – even till today – the People of Israel built practices into their lives for remembering what God had formed into their lives in the wilderness. They created phylacteries to do this. Phylacteries were small leather containers which held a small piece of parchment to hold pieces of the divine text in them. They were literally placed these on their foreheads and attached them to the doorframes in their homes.

The Lord God does not want the Israelites to forget the covenant of love God has created with them. Never forget our love of God is the number 1 priority of life.

This week I've wondering how we will remember the ways God formed our church in the pandemic. I'm sure we will have a time of sorting as we consider what ministry practices we will carry out of the pandemic – such as living streaming; what practices we will not – like masks every Sunday; and what practices from before the pandemic we will keep or what we will let lie dormant.

On the deeper level of faith, though, I am wondering how we will continue to remember God's constant presence during the long days of isolation. How we will

remember God's deliverance from fear, the joy that comes as we participate in the body of Christ, the power of love for God and others to transform us.

The secret to a life of deep faith is simply remembering. Remembering God each moment of each day. This is our invitation moving out of the pandemic in the months ahead: Remember the Lord Your God. Remember by loving the Lord with all of your heart, soul mind and strength. Remember by Loving your neighbor has yourself.

Remembering will change your life. It will sort the pieces of your life – clearing out the cluttered debris scattered around us; aligning our hearts and actions with the sole purpose of love of God and Love of others. As this takes place – the true power of God's formation of us in the wilderness will truly be known!

### Conclusion

The Lord uses our wilderness experiences to form us for the journeys ahead.

The Lord has formed our identity, our Love and our Remembrance. In doing so, the Lord brings meaning to our hardship and our hope for our future.

When Jewish psychiatrist Victor Frankl was arrested by the Nazis in World War II, he was stripped of everything--property, family, possessions. He had spent years researching and writing a book on the importance of finding meaning in life. When he arrived in Auschwitz, the infamous death camp, even his manuscript, which he had hidden in the lining of his coat, was taken away.

Frankl wrote, "I found myself confronted with the question of whether under such circumstances my life was ultimately void of any meaning."

He was still wrestling with that question a few days later when the Nazis forced the prisoners to give up their clothes. "I had to surrender my clothes and in turn inherited the worn out rags of an inmate who had been sent to the gas chamber," said Frankl. "Instead of the many pages of my manuscript, I found in the pocket of the newly acquired coat a single page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book, which contained the main Jewish prayer, "Shema Yisrael" (Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.) "How should I have interpreted such a 'coincidence' other than as a challenge to "live" my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?"

Later, as Frankl reflected on his ordeal, he wrote in his book Man's Search for Meaning, "There is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions, as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life. ... 'He who has a "why" to live for can bear almost any "how".'"

Will You allow God to guide you to find your meaning in the wildernesses of your life?  
Thanks be to God. Amen.