

“When You Have Entered the Land”

Lent I March 10, 2019

©Rev. William P. Te Winkle, Sr., Hope Church, Sheboygan, WI

Imagine Caleb, a little Jewish boy, born in a tent in the wilderness. Imagine Caleb’s parents joy in his birth, despite the fact that it is in a tent and there is sand whipping against the flap as Caleb’s mom endures the painful agony of birth, with midwives attending who receive Caleb and place him on Momma’s breast.

It isn’t too many years later when Caleb’s Momma starts to tell Caleb where they are going. “Our people haven’t always lived in tents, walking through the desert and the hard wilderness. We came from Egypt. It was beautiful and it was horrible. But then God set us free from slavery. And now we are going to our new home.”

“What does it look like, our new home?”, Caleb asks. Papa chimes in, “They tell us it is a land ‘flowing with milk and honey’, son. There will be water to drink whenever we are thirsty; there will be good food to eat whenever we are hungry. You will grow up in the land strong and happy.”

Imagine that Caleb hears this story for over thirty years, and now he is telling it to his children. Momma and Papa have been buried under the sand, with a rock to serve as their grave marker, some years ago now. The hard work of living in the wilderness was just too much for their aging bodies. But they kept going because they believed Moses when he told them they would enter the land one day. So, Caleb tells his children about the end of the wilderness wanderings, he tells them about the promise of shade from the noonday sun and warmth from the cold of the night.

Imagine now that thirty-nine years and 11 months and 29 days have passed from that first day the people of Israel escaped their Egyptian slavery and they are standing on a high spot in the wilderness. They can see miles ahead, and there is the river. And on the other side of the river, green grass. Animals. Compared to what Caleb has ever known, what he sees is paradise. The Promised Land.

Caleb and his children sit down to listen to Moses deliver his last sermon to the people he has led for decades, through times they were ready to abandon the trip, to go back to Egypt. The people wonder, what are we to do when we get there, across the river?

So Moses begins, (SLIDE) ‘When you have entered the land the LORD...swore to your ancestors to give us.’ Ah yes, never forget that the land comes as a gift from the Yahweh, the LORD. It is God’s land, and he is giving it to us. The land is always a gift from its Creator. Never forget that what you have is a gift, Caleb. Never forget that so long ago the LORD spoke to Abraham and promised this land. It has taken generations, but God didn’t forget; God didn’t let the sins of our people keep him from fulfilling his promise, because God doesn’t forget or renege on his promises. Not ever. When God swears an oath, God keeps his oath. Because God is bigger and better than we are.

When you get there, Caleb, on the other side of the waters that divide us from the land, you go up to the house of God, bringing along the best parts of the land’s first harvest and you bring them to God’s priests. You stand before the priest with your basket of fruit and grain in your hand, and you remember. You tell that priest, (SLIDE) ‘My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt.’ Remember that Jacob lived in Aram, that land north of here, and then when the famines happened he went down to Egypt with just a few people.

You remember that Jacob’s children and their children lived there in Egypt, first as beggars, and then as slaves. And what seemed like a wonderful place became a place of hardship, torture and death. So, our people cried out to God and the LORD heard and saw. God is aware of our lives, Caleb. He gets it when we are stuck in Egypt, and when we really wanted to leave, God acted.

(SLIDE) “So, the LORD brought us out of Egypt...and gave us this land.” The life of our people has been one long, winding journey, from the slavery of Egypt through the wanderings in the desert, and now we finally see what God has promised, a land of plenty. So, when you arrive there, Caleb, you (SLIDE) bring the first fruits of the soil that the LORD has given. It’s always about the land, Caleb. The land is not just a home, it is a land with the ability to sustain you. Show God your gratitude by giving a generous offering.

And then, finally, Caleb, when your journey through the desert these forty years is over; when you stand before the LORD with your basket in your hand, you start to sing. You sing with all you've got, because you have arrived on the land. Don't be surprised if there are a few tears that flow into your singing lips, because when we are most joyful, well, tears are not always tears of sorrow, sometimes they are tears of joy.

Rejoice! You and your children are about to be wandering Arameans no more. You are about to become the people of Yahweh in the Promised Land. And Caleb, thinking of Momma and Papa and their stories and their carrying him over rocks and snakes in those early years; of nearly dying of thirst and hunger; of the days in the sun-scorched land and nearly freezing in the darkness; Caleb sees the land and he lifts his hands and prays to God. "Bring us home LORD, bring us home."

Caleb's story is, of course, a product of my imagination. But your story is real. And Caleb's story is your story too. You, we all, have been or are slaves to something, in some part of our lives. Egypt is a part of our lives.

Egypt is the part of the story of our lives where we thought this was just what we wanted out of life, and then we became slaves to what was good, so it became bad. People with addictions don't start out wanting to become addicted. They want something good, to know pleasure, and God designed us to know pleasure and to enjoy it. But then, for some people, it gets away from us, and we become enslaved by the pursuit of what was pleasure and now becomes overwhelming to all of the other things in life we love. We need release.

Egypt is the part of the story of our lives when we are given a diagnosis that changes everything about our future. The cancer cells spread. The traumatically-injured brain that won't heal. We need healing.

Egypt is the part of the story of our lives when our relationships devolve into emotional or physical abuse. What was a beautiful relationship becomes one which enslaves us, binding us in chains of destructive behavior. We need freedom.

What are we to do? Cry out to the LORD. Learn how to pray. Pastor Donna' study on prayer isn't something for perfect people to become more perfect. It is a time for people who are living in Egypt to learn how to cry out so that God will hear and see. The difficult truth is that, sometimes, people who are in the chains of Egypt prefer to the alternative.

Leaving Egypt is no walk in the park. We are all the children of wandering Arameans, and we aren't so sure we want that life either. Sure, we want our promised land, but we aren't positive we want to go through the wilderness to get there.

Jesus didn't want to spend 40 days fighting Satan in the desert, I am sure. It wasn't like Jesus looked forward to living on bugs, going nearly out of his mind in the eerie desolation and isolation. But Jesus resisted every temptation known to human beings and he got through the wilderness. Jesus is a wilderness survivor, and he is prepared to walk your journey with you. Prayer will connect you to your brother who will not leave you alone in the middle of the wilderness journey.

What is your promised land today? Name the place that you want to end up at the end of your current journey. Then decide if you are willing to pray to God to release you from the slavery of your Egypt, from whatever binds you, weighs you down, restricts your freedom to live as God intended you to live. If so, learn how to cry out to God in prayer.

Then decide if you are willing to walk through the wilderness. (SLIDE) Our journey begins in the wilderness, but Jesus has walked the path for us already. Keep that picture of the land in front of your mind, and then remember. Remember how you were formed; the wandering Arameans who traveled before you. Remember that Egypt is not the place you want to be, and resist the strong temptation to go back there, to a life that slowly destroys you.

And then start imagining the Land God has promised and prepared for you. This isn't just some future event, after you die, although it is that too. But, the truth of eternal life is that God has prepared a land for you on this side of heaven too. God has prepared a way through the wilderness for you to overcome your addictions, to know how to live with your medical diagnoses and still flourish, to know how to live in relationships that bring you moments of joy instead of moments of fear.

Imagine your own story. Imagine putting together that marvelous basket of your first fruits harvested in your new land of plenty. And imagine the song God will put on your lips as you present your thanksgiving song to God, as you rejoice when you have entered the land.

Tears of joy flow because, at last, you will have arrived in a land you can call home.