

Midweek of Lent 5

Death to Resurrection: The Wilderness to the Promised Land

Texts: Joshua 3:1–6; Matthew 3:13; 4:1–2

Textual Notes

Joshua 3:1–6

V. 1: The people of Israel have spent the last forty years wandering in the wilderness. This was a result of their unfaithfulness and lack of trust when twelve of their men spied out Canaan, the Promised Land. Now Moses has passed the leadership mantle to Joshua, and Moses has died. The Israelites have come to the Jordan River, which serves as a border to the land of Canaan. It is interesting to note that they formerly approached Canaan in a way that avoided the barrier of the Jordan River. The reason for this different, more difficult approach becomes apparent in the book of Joshua. God will exalt Joshua as the new leader so that the people will follow him as they followed Moses (v. 7).

V. 2: “At the end of three days”: The timetable is important because leaving the wilderness and entering the Promised Land is a “Death and Resurrection” motif. Three days points to the three days Christ was in the grave before His resurrection to life. (Also, Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days.) Now, the people of Israel wait three days until they go through the waters into the Promised Land.

V. 3: The ark of the covenant signifies the presence of God with His people. God has promised not only that He will go into the Promised Land of Canaan with the people, but also that He goes before them and will eventually establish His dwelling in the Most Holy Place of the temple in Jerusalem.

Interestingly, it becomes a pattern later that the ark of the covenant always leads the people into battle. God is fighting for them.

V. 4: The ark will show the way. This is no surprise to a people who have been led by the Glory Cloud for forty years. The Glory Cloud would move out, followed by the ark of the covenant, and then the people.

Vv. 5–6: “Consecrate yourselves”: The people are called upon to do what is commanded so they can be holy as the holy presence of God in the ark passes through their midst. God dwelling with His people is a great blessing, but it can also be a dangerous thing if not properly handled.

Matthew 3:13; 4:1–2

3:13: Jesus comes to the Jordan River for Baptism. Location is crucial to the death and resurrection motif, which is reversed in Christ. Sometimes one might be inclined to focus on the “who” (John) rather than on the “where” (Jordan River). Both are very important.

4:1–2: Following His Baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness where He fasts for forty days and then faces the temptations of the devil. This is a reversal of the “Wilderness to the Promised Land” motif. The Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness before passing through the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Jesus passes from the Promised Land through the Jordan River by means of His Baptism so that He might spend forty days in the wilderness and be tempted by Satan.

It was sin that exiled Israel from the Promised Land, and now, Jesus takes that sin back to Satan so that the people are reunited with their God. This reminds us of the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement.

The Death and Resurrection Motif: Return from Exile

There are many sub-motifs of the “Death and Resurrection” motif in Scripture. One which plays an important role is the “Return from Exile.” Exile is being removed from the presence of God, or being removed from the Holy Land, the Holy City, and the holy temple. Frequently, the wilderness is the place of exile and considered to be the place where Satan dwells—an evil and dark place.

The first exile is when Adam and Eve are removed from the Garden of Eden. The people of God then were nomads until they were brought out of exile in Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan. Even though God announces that His presence is with His people even in exile, the Promised Land is where God desires to dwell with His people. That is where He establishes His dwelling in the temple.

When the Israelites go into exile in Assyria and Babylon, the concerns are telling. They are first concerned about the presence of the Lord. Is God with us? They are also very concerned about the condition of the Holy City and the holy temple. When they return from exile, they are tasked with rebuilding the temple. Because the temple is the place where God has determined to dwell with His people on earth, it serves as a constant reminder of His presence and His relationship with His people.

Ultimately, the “Return from Exile” sub-motif is fulfilled when we enter into the courts of the new Jerusalem, heaven. In the final return, once again, it is God Himself—Christ Jesus—who brings us home to the promised land.

Sermon

It is one thing to travel across the wilderness in order to arrive at a destination; but it is quite another to wander around a wasteland for forty years. The Israelites did both. As they left Egypt and made their way to Mount Sinai, the plan was to continue on to the Promised Land of Canaan. And they did, but when they sent twelve men to spy out the land of Canaan to see what their new homeland would be like—and what would be required to occupy it—events took a dramatic turn. The spies returned and spoke highly of the land, but they were terrified of the people already

living there. Yes, Canaan was a land flowing with milk and honey, but the inhabitants were giants and war-like. The spies spoke with fear, and this fear spread throughout the community of Israel. God's people were terrified. And in their fear, they refused to go forward.

It was because of this act of unfaithfulness, the people's lack of trust in the Lord who had brought them out of Egypt, that the Israelites became wanderers in the wilderness for forty years. None of the people who were twenty years old and older would ever dwell in the land of Canaan. The exceptions were the households of Caleb and Joshua, for they were the faithful spies who proclaimed their trust in the Lord's ability to give His people the land. All of the rest would die in the wilderness—only their children would enter Canaan.

It is one thing to travel across the wilderness to arrive at a destination and quite another to wander around the wasteland for forty years. The wilderness between Egypt and Canaan was a land of suffering and death—a land where they were sentenced to suffer because of their sin, a land that would claim their lives one by one until all had perished. To make this reality even worse, they had seen the Promised Land on the near horizon, they had seen the beautiful destination, and they had forsaken the blessing.

Sin, that which exiles us from God. Sin, that which separates us from life. Sin, that which sends us into the wilderness of suffering and death. Sin. There is no escaping it, though we have tried. The Israelites tried to go into Canaan without God. All of their fears were realized, and they were left to wander in the wilderness to face suffering and death. We also attempt to conquer sin by our own merits and strength, and we, too, fail and find ourselves lost and wandering. Sin forbids our entrance into the land flowing with milk and honey.

The Promised Land where the Lord provides is a place where the Hebrews would live in houses they did not build and eat from vineyards and orchards they did not plant. The land of Canaan is a land flowing with milk and honey where there is no lack. It is a land of plenty and perfection—the Promised Land. This land is not only where the Lord provides abundantly, but also a place where the Lord will dwell with His people. But the wilderness?

This Promised Land of the Lord's provision and presence for Israel points us to another promised land. Canaan reminds us of another place of plenty and perfection—we know it as heaven. Truly, there is no want or lack in the heavenly courts. Truly, it is the place where the Lord dwells and where His people live in His presence in heavenly mansions which have been prepared. But there is sin. There is the wilderness. How does one exit the land of suffering and death and enter into the land of life and joy?

The journey out of the wilderness must go through the waters. For the people of Israel, the way was through the Jordan River. It is not a journey upon which they embark alone. It is not a journey they take to make themselves acceptable to God once again. It is not a journey they plan out, work out, or carry out. This is a journey that is brought about by God. This journey begins with the Lord leading the way. The ark of the covenant, the dwelling place of the Lord with His people, leads the way. And when the feet of those carrying this holy ark touch the waters of the Jordan, the waters part, and the path stands dry and wide before the people. The Lord prepares

the way, the Lord leads the way; the presence of the Lord goes before Joshua and the people. The exile is over. They have journeyed from the wilderness into the Land of Promise. They have returned.

So also has the Lord, our God, our Savior, Jesus Christ gone before us. Jesus goes down into the waters of the Jordan to be baptized by John. The Sinless One from God needs no cleansing, but we do. By His Baptism, our sins are taken up and placed upon this Holy One of God. And in an act of complete reversal, Jesus takes our sins, not into the Promised Land, but rather back out into the wilderness. He goes through the waters into the wilderness, carrying our sins back to Satan.

And because Christ carries our sins, we no longer do! The wilderness of sin, the place of suffering and death, is no longer our dwelling place. The path has been cleared of obstacles, and the journey lies ahead. The way to the promised land is open before us; but it is still through the waters. Now, those waters have been cleansed and purified so that our Baptism by these waters will grant forgiveness, life, and salvation. These waters make us the children of God—those who have been renewed and restored to His presence. We have passed through the wilderness and through the waters, into the promised land of everlasting life!

The journey from the wilderness to the promised land of heaven is not one we embark upon alone, not one we plan out, not one we work out, not one we carry out—it is the journey Christ first made to prepare the way. He has gone through the waters to prepare them for our Baptism into the Kingdom, and He has now gone ahead of us to prepare a place that we have not built with our own hands and a great feast that we have not prepared. He has gone to the right hand of the Father to prepare a place for us, that we might go to be with Him. That where He is, we may be also. In Jesus' name. Amen.