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John 5-11

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WILDERNESS JOURNEY

REFLECTIONS ON JOHN 5-11

As we transition to a new year and return to our studies in the book of John we will spend some time reflecting on chapters 5 through 11. I have been immersed in this gospel for the past couple of years, trying to sort out each scene, seeking to understand the subtle implications of every dialogue, and there is still so much that has escaped my grasp. When you are immersed in a text, it can strike you in different ways without your even realizing it. That is what happened to me this past summer. Looking into the Scripture can be like gazing at the countless stars in the night sky and suddenly having the Big Dipper come into focus. There are many constellations in the sky, and there are many facets of truth in the Bible. This morning I want to share this one constellation with you. It has been a blessing to me, and I hope it will be to you as well.

I will begin by reviewing the high points of chapters 5 through 11. The focus in these chapters is on the new exodus for the people of God. The exodus journey out of Egypt, out of bondage into and through the wilderness into the Promised Land, is Israel's defining story. In this gospel Jesus takes many elements of the Israel's exodus story and redefines them in himself. We have looked at these previously, but I will review the high points.

Chapter 5: Jesus heals a paralytic, a man who has been disabled for 38 years. This is the length of time that Israel wandered unnecessarily in the wilderness, recorded in Deut 2:14. The context is Sabbath, which was instituted in the wilderness and was very prominent in Jewish thinking.

Chapter 6: On the mountain Jesus feeds the multitudes, and then crosses the sea in safety. All of this points to the Exodus: Moses on the mountain, the nation crossing the Red Sea, and manna in the wilderness. Jesus says he is the bread of life: in order to live one has to eat his flesh and drink his blood. The context is Passover, which recalls Israel's salvation out of Egypt. Jesus is the new Passover meal now remembered in the Lord's Supper.

Chapter 7 and 8a: Jesus claims that he is the water of life. Twice in the exodus story God performs a miracle to provide water. The water that Jesus gives becomes a spring flowing from the hearts of God's people. Water is a prominent metaphor in John's gospel. It speaks of cleansing and renewal, but also points to the Spirit and fulfills Messianic expectations. The context is Tabernacles, the greatest feast of the year, recalling the time when Israel lived in booths in the wilderness. A prominent feature of this feast was a water ritual in which

water was taken to the temple from the pool of Siloam and poured out on the altar. 5-11

Following Jesus' claim there is a story about a woman caught in adultery, in chapter 8. The story of Jesus and this woman illustrates what it means that Jesus is the water of life. The water of the Spirit cleanses, forgives and refreshes. It is the water of grace and compassion. People who have experienced the water of life pour out grace and compassion on others. Those who have not experienced it hide behind religious perfection and appearance.

Chapter 8b and 9: Jesus claims that he is the light of the world. God's light was a prominent feature in the exodus journey and the feast of Tabernacles. Four huge candelabras illuminated the court of the women, and people danced throughout the night. During the feast there was no darkness; the night was as the day.

In chapter 9, Jesus heals a man born blind. The story illustrates what it means that Jesus is the light of the world. Now God's people can see the kingdom of God, the eyes of their hearts can be illuminated and they can see behind the veil to the activities of God. Those who think they can see are blind. Those who recognize their blindness are healed. This too fulfills messianic expectations.

Chapter 10: Jesus claims that he is the door, and the good shepherd. God is present with his people in the wilderness and he shepherds them. The sheep know his voice and follow him. Unlike the religious leadership in Israel, God does not abandon the sheep when danger comes.

Following this the context is the Feast of Dedication. This feast is not tied to the exodus, but it does point to the temple, an indication to God's people of his presence, which is an exodus theme.

Chapter 11: Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead and proclaims that he is the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in him will live even if he dies. Martha is asked whether she believes what Jesus says, and to put this into action by rolling away the stone from Lazarus's tomb. This is the last sign that John records and foreshadows what is about to happen to Jesus.

In between the signs and the statements that Jesus makes about himself there is a great deal of debate, discussion, confusion and growing animosity from the Jewish leadership, from the followers of Jesus and the curious crowds. As everyone is grumbling and debating we are reminded of Israel's grum-

bling in the wilderness when God's people could not believe and enter into his rest. But when we take out all the dialogue and debate, the constellation of the wilderness journey comes sharply into focus.

Jesus himself takes an exodus journey. He leaves the right hand of God and lays aside his divinity. He goes into the wilderness of fallen creation and humanity. He proclaims the word of God. He learns to live by faith on what the Father gives him. He is obedient to the Father's will and trusts in his sovereignty. In his exodus journey, Jesus dies, but he is raised from the dead.

And like both Israel and Jesus, God's people are taken on an exodus journey. Jesus takes us out of Egypt, out of bondage either to sin or to law, and takes us on a journey into and through the wilderness, into the promised seed of David, Jesus himself. This is a defining story in Israel's history, in the gospel story and in our own story. This is a journey of faith, a journey of our heart. As I reflected on the sequence of events in John, I saw that the apostle gives us a road map for our own journey.

The Beginning

Our journey begins like the story of the paralytic in chapter 5. We want to be well so we take up our pallet and begin to walk by faith. Like the paralytic, our tendency is to sit around a pool year after year disabled, waiting for an angel to stir up the water and miraculously heal us. Jesus implores us to take up our pallet and follow him into Sabbath healing and Sabbath rest. Stop waiting and begin to live by faith. Stop depending on your own work but trust in the work of God. This is fulfillment of Sabbath. This is what gives us rest.

As we begin to journey into the wilderness we encounter many dangers: the Cliffs of Insanity, the Fire Swamp, and the Zoo of Death, if your journey is anything like Westley and Buttercup's in *Princess Bride*. The dry wilderness produces weariness. We realize that the journey is undefined, uncertain and uncomfortable. It creates doubts and fears and anxiety. We find ourselves lacking and wanting. In order to survive there are several things that are indispensable, and John mentions four necessities for wilderness travel.

Necessities for Wilderness Travel

First, we need food, because in the desert we become hungry. The wilderness makes us acutely aware of our hunger. We hunger to be known and understood, to be loved, to be accepted, to be significant, to be at peace within ourselves. In John 6, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." Just as Israel learned to live on manna in their exodus, so we learn to live on this supernatural bread that gives supernatural life in our exodus. We learn to nourish ourselves on Jesus. We feed on him because earthly food does not satisfy our hunger or give us the life we desire; it leaves us wanting. In chapter 6, Jesus tests Philip by asking him where they could get food to feed all the people. And we too are tested in the wilderness. What

will be our source of nourishment? The food is free, but will we accept it?

If you are like me, you love food. I think about food and even dream about food. I look forward to a good meal, like the ones we have at Thanksgiving and Christmas. I like to exercise heartily before a good meal so that I am hungry and can eat more. I can even be obsessive about my preparations for a great feast. Am I as obsessively thoughtful for the bread of life?

Second, we need water on our exodus journey. The wilderness makes us acutely aware of our thirst. We recognize that we are weak, weary, wicked and wounded. We are the least, the lost and the left out. We need Spirit, forgiveness, compassion and renewal. I know of no person who by the age 25 has not been deeply wounded by either their own sin or someone else's sin. We need to be cleansed from all the filth and failure that we have accumulated in our hearts in the way dirt becomes caked on a car driven through the slush of melted snow. We try to become clean through our efforts to succeed. We build a white picket fence that hides the blackness, or we allow ourselves to be swallowed up by the darkness where no light can expose our pain. Generally speaking, Christians do the former and pagans do the later.

What we need is living water, the water of life that Jesus offers us in our desert thirst. We need to stand under the fire hose of God's grace, mercy and compassion to be cleansed from the condemnation, guilt and failure we feel from others and from ourselves. In John's gospel Jesus offered this water to the woman at the well and to a woman caught in adultery. There is nothing sweeter than the father's bear hug that welcomes prodigals home.

There is a scene in the movie *The Color Purple* that always brings tears to my eyes. In a subplot, a woman whose father is the minister of a church leaves home and walks away from her father's faith. The father and daughter are estranged for years. One Sunday morning the daughter hears the choir singing a familiar song from her father's church while she is trying to sing at a speakeasy. The choir is drowning out her voice. She begins to sing the song she sang as a child in her father's church. She marches to the church, accompanied by a large crowd belting out the song. As she enters, still singing at the top of her lungs, she stands in front of her father. He steps out from behind the pulpit, like God steps out of heaven, and walks to his daughter and embraces her with a bear hug. She says, "See, daddy, sinners love soul, too."

When we experience the compassion, love and grace of God we never forget it. Then the Spirit within us becomes water to others, pouring out grace rather than condemnation. We become the father welcoming home prodigals with holy hugs. In order for the people of God to experience this thirst-quenching water, the church must be a safe place for people to share their brokenness, abuse and failure. There must be honesty, unconditional acceptance and life-affirming truth.

Third, on our exodus journey we need light. The wilderness is a dark place, with many temptations, dangers, snares and distractions. In the darkness our eyes grow dim and we have difficulty seeing God's goodness. We have difficulty seeing whether God is present with us or not. We have difficulty knowing what is true and what is a mirage. Jesus says he is the light of the world. He heals our blindness and gives us sight to see the kingdom of God present around us, moving out of the shadows and into the foreground.

What is important is not what we see with our eyes but what we see with our heart. Frederick Buechner says it so much better than me:

Our eyes tell us that the mountains are green in summer and in autumn the colors of flame. They tell us that the nose of the little girl is freckled, that her hair usually needs combing, that when she is asleep, her cheek is flushed and moist. They tell us that the photographs of Abraham Lincoln taken a few days before his death show a man who at the age of fifty-six looked as old as time. Our eyes tell us that the small country church down the road needs a new coat of paint and that the stout lady who plays the pump organ looks a little like W.C. Fields and that the pews are rarely more than about a quarter filled on any given Sunday.

But these things are only facts because facts are all the eye can see. Eyes can't see truth. The truth about the mountains is their great beauty. The truth about the child is that she is so precious that without a moment's hesitation we would give our lives to save her life if that should somehow ever be necessary. The truth about Abraham Lincoln is a humanness so rich and deep that it's hard to stand in his memorial in Washington without tears coming to our eyes, and the truth about the shabby little church is for reasons known only to God it is full of holiness. It is not with the eyes of the head that we see truths like that, but with the eyes of the heart.¹

The truth is that the kingdom of God is all around us. The truth is that God is working out eternal purposes beyond the facts, beyond our human understanding. Things are often not as they appear. We need Jesus to heal our sight, the ability to see with our heart.

Finally, on our exodus journey we need a shepherd. The wilderness road is not well marked. There is no AAA, no mileage signs, no billboards announcing that the Best Western is only 54 miles more. There are many detours. It is easy for us to take a wrong turn, to lose our way and follow false shepherds. But false shepherds will serve themselves, steal from the flock or abandon God's people when the wolves attack. Jesus is the good shepherd. The sheep know his voice. He will lay down his life for the flock and will not abandon us even in the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus doesn't e-mail us with a link to MapQuest directions, he travels with us. He is our constant companion and our dependable guide. Jesus knows the way because he is the way.

The End

Where will our exodus journey take us? The journey begins by walking in faith and ends with resurrection and glory. Jesus said that he is the resurrection and the life. The resurrection of Christ foreshadowed in the raising of Lazarus reveals to us our destiny. We will be raised with Christ to be with him forever in his glory. The home and the glory that elude us in this world will be fully present in the next when every longing and every dream and every desire will be fulfilled. Knowing our destiny allows us to be content on the present journey when weariness and doubts overtake us.

Years ago I took my family on a cross-country adventure to Yellowstone, the Grand Tetons and the Rockies. As we began our journey everything started to go wrong. We got no further than Fremont when a radiator hose blew out. Fortunately I had packed an extra. After driving for two days our van broke down in Idaho Falls, near Yellowstone, on a Friday night. An angel showed up at our motel that night to diagnose the problem and tell us where to get it repaired on Saturday. It would have been easy to turn around and go back home. But it was our dream of swimming in Jenny Lake, enjoying a family reunion in Estes Park and hiking with dear friends in the Rockies that kept us moving towards our destination. Knowing our destiny is imperative for wilderness travel.

The exodus story was the main Jewish story. The Jews remembered it continually and it formed their identity with God. Jesus rewrote the story, and this revised version of the exodus is our main story. We are on a journey out of Egypt. We are on a journey into Jesus. We are on a wilderness journey where we learn to experience Jesus as our bread and water, our light and guide.

However, we have a very real problem, at least I do. We don't like the wilderness. We want home, comfort, security and relaxation. We don't really want to live by faith. We want to know where our next meal will come from. We want to plan our life because we think that will give us life. We want to plan our retirement and make it all the way to the end without fear. But the wilderness is a wild place where the unexpected happens more often than not. We are forced to let go of control and we don't want to do that. "The Gospels confront us with this persistent voice inviting us to move from where it is comfortable, from where we want to stay, from where we feel at home."²

This reflection on John's gospel is helpful to me. It gives me a biblical context for my life. In the light of John's gospel my life makes sense. I don't have to understand everything. I don't have to have all the answers. I can't plan things out the way I want them. I can live with mystery and unresolved situations. I can live in the gray, and for a black and white person like me that is nearly impossible. But what I realize through this reflection is that the most important part of the journey, the only part of the journey that really matters, is for Jesus to become my bread, my water, my light and my shepherd. The

only thing that really matters is to trust that Jesus is the only thing I really need for the wilderness.

Listen to these words by Carlo Garetto: “One of the phrases you have forgotten most, which is just the one you ought to have remembered, is, ‘Without Me you can do nothing.’ Oh, I did not mean to say that without Me you could not make aeroplanes or bake bread. I meant that without Me, who am the door, you could not enter the kingdom. Without Me, who am the light, you could not see my Father’s affairs. Without Me, who am life, you could do nothing vital in the invisible Kingdom I founded.”³

But this wilderness is not all bad news. In the desert we have the sweetest times with God. God himself said this to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah:

“Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:

“This is what the LORD says:

**“I remember the devotion of your youth,
how as a bride you loved me
and followed me through the wilderness,
through a land not sown.**

**Israel was holy to the LORD,
the firstfruits of his harvest;
all who devoured her were held guilty,
and disaster overtook them,”**

declares the LORD. (Jer 2:2-3 TNIV)

The wilderness was the best time that God had with his people. They were his bride and he was as enraptured and intoxicated with his love for them as they were for him. This shows us how deeply God wants to be intimate with his people.

The road may be treacherous and the night might be pitch dark, but tasting the sweetness of Jesus far exceeds any delicacy we can find in the world. It is much less painful to give up control and be crucified with Christ than suffer the lack of fulfillment of our selfish desires for pleasure. And it is much more satisfying to have the life of Jesus than all the possessions and glory that the world has to offer. So even in the midst of wilderness our hearts can be filled and even overflowing with joy. Our joy is in the Lord and knowing the depths of his love and presence in our lives. “It is said that the spirituality of man on earth is the spirituality of Exodus, of the long journey which stretches from the freedom up from slavery to the joys of the Promised Land, possessed and enjoyed for ever.”⁴

Sometimes I think Christians are the ones blessed with this journey. People in the world seem to have a much easier time of it. For years I was envious of people who appeared to have the comfortable, fulfilling kind of life that I started to desire as a young man. I envied people whose life always turned out the way they wanted and everything they touched turned to gold. But now I feel sorry for them and sad that the true joy of Jesus has eluded their journey.

This is the journey that God calls us to take. The question for us is, Is Jesus enough? Do we want Jesus more than anything else? Are we willing to walk by faith, to stop grumbling and lamenting and embrace Jesus as our supernatural bread and water, our light and our guide? Spirituality is not about studying some distant, abstract God who lives somewhere out in the heavens, controlling the cosmos like an uninterested and uninvolved wizard of Oz. God came to us to be with us. We don’t just talk about God and theology, but rather we eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus. Spirituality is about knowing the sweetness of Jesus, feeding on him and feeling his arms wrapped around us in a giant bear hug.

“The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything.” (Deut 2:7)

If you were to ask God for anything, here is what I would say: “Give me Jesus.”

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 261-262.

² Henri Nouwen, *Seeds of Hope* (edited by Robert Durback, Doubleday, NY, 1989), 142.

³ Carlo Carretto, *The God Who Comes* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1974), 209.

⁴ Carlo Carretto, *The God Who Comes*, 20.