

Sooner or later, the excitement of going on a journey wears off. The hike becomes a trudge. “Are we there yet? How much longer? I’m tired.”

Israel was trudging through the wilderness of Sin. Interesting name. They were trudging along and the excitement had worn off. “I’m hungry. What’s for dinner? When’s dinner? No dinner! We ate better in Egypt!”

And the LORD said, “Don’t make me come down there! I’m going to count to three.”

No, the LORD didn’t, and that is good news for us. We’re trudging through our own wilderness. We face our own challenges, and sometimes we lose it. Little Mary Sunshine snaps. We need more than a Snickers; we need some food for thought. We need some soul food that will transform our trudge into a pilgrimage, an encounter with the Lord our God that changes us forever, but “What is it?”

✦ Wilderness – A State-of-Mind

Exodus invites us to see ourselves and our situation differently: We are not lost. We are right where God wants us to be. We’re not *there* yet, but before we can get *there*, we need to *go through* what God wants us to *go through*. Going *through* that gives us a wilderness state-of-mind.

Israel is in the wilderness. The wilderness is not a pleasant place. When I was on pilgrimage in Israel, there were places that were so rocky and so bleak that if they wanted to pick a place to fake the moon landing, that was the place.

There’s not much in the wilderness. That’s the problem. “Wilderness” is the wild, alarming wasteland where we feel lost, bewildered, and disoriented. “Wilderness” is the land of anxiety. All that was familiar, all that gave us a sense of security and stability disappears in the wilderness.

We feel like we’ve gone astray. We must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. Perhaps this wilderness is the consequence of our sin?

We’re not in our happy place. The wilderness is an unhappy place, and we can learn a lot there. We can learn what we’re hungry for, what we’re really hungry for, and what will truly satisfy. Our trudge through the wilderness can become a holy pilgrimage that changes us for the better forever.

There’s not much in the wilderness. That problem opens up new possibilities to us. We get hungry, and we don’t have the usual distractions to divert our attention. We can’t eat junk food that fills us up but leaves us empty. We can’t have what we want when we want it. So we complain. “I’m hungry. Egypt was so much better. Why did you bring us out here – to die?!”

We have our moments. We take our trip to “total Drama Island.” We complain. Complaining is the first stage of becoming aware. We name our longing through our complaints. We identify the growth area where God is at work in us. We prepare ourselves for some food for thought.

We are not lost. We are right where God wants us to be. When that isn’t where we want to be, we’re in the wilderness. It’s not a happy place, but it is the place where we can identify problems and discover new possibilities. It is the place where our relationship with God can go to the next level. We learn about ourselves. We hunger, and only God can satisfy. There’s no other option. Nourished by that food for thought, we emerge with a wilderness state-of-mind; we emerge with an awareness that there is a qualitative difference between the distractions that fill us up but leave us empty and the abundance of God that satisfies us to a depth we’ve never known.

We are not lost. We are right where God wants us to be. We’re not *there* yet, and we may have something to say about that. We may have a complaint or two. We may have our moments. That’s OK. Listen to your longings. Pay attention to your hunger. Become aware. And get ready for God to surprise you. God will give you abundant food for thought when you develop a wilderness state-of-mind.

✦ “What is it?”

God is full of surprises. We hear the story of manna in the wilderness, and because we “know” that “manna” is that white, flaky substance that God provided so that Israel would have bread to eat, we miss the sense of surprise.

“Manna” simply means “what is it?” Israel is surprised, and perhaps even a little unsure, “What is it?” They don’t know that it is edible until Moses tells them so.

The Israelites aren’t experts in identifying what is edible and what is not. If they were back in Egypt, back in familiar surroundings where they could separate their

leek from their onion, they would know what that white, flaky substance was and whether or not it was safe to eat. But they're not. They're in the wilderness. They're in unfamiliar surroundings confronted by an unknown phenomenon.

Have you ever tried to introduce a new food to a child; perhaps a vegetable? “What is it?” “I don't want to try it. You try it.” “I'm not going to try it. You try it.” “I'm not going to try it. You try it!” “Where's Mikey?”

There are answers. Theories abound as to the route of the exodus. The Sinai Peninsula has been studied, excavated, and surveyed by satellite. Along the way, we've learned of an insect that secretes a white resin that is rich in natural sugars. When this resin dries, it leaves behind a white flaky substance that is sweet. Could this be manna? We've also learned that quail migrate across the Sinai. During their migration, they come in great numbers and become exhausted. They can easily be caught by hand.

Does this mean it wasn't a miracle? That God didn't provide? “What is it?”

It's not what we expect. It's unfamiliar and outside of our comfort zone. Listen again to what happened: *Exodus 16:11-12 (NRSV) The LORD spoke to Moses and said,¹² ‘I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’ ”¹*

We Presbyterians do not believe in good fortune or happy accidents. We do not surrender to the fickle hand of fate. We believe in the providence of God. We believe that God works through natural and ordinary means as well as through supernatural and extraordinary means to fulfill God's purpose. We do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Maybe the miracle here isn't the quail and manna. Maybe the miracle is “you shall know the LORD.” Our journey in the wilderness leads to an encounter with God. Our

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

trudge becomes a pilgrimage. It's not what we expect, but it is grace to help in our time of need.

Today's *Reading Eagle* features a column by Bill Uhrich titled “Bible Found at Thrift Shop Finds Its Way Home.” It's a story of being surprised by grace and discovering manna in the wilderness:

This is a Bible story.

The story of a Bible my wife, Michele, and I found in an Adamstown thrift shop a couple of years ago.

It's a well-worn, red Bible with cracked, floppy covers and a split spine.

Throughout the Bible are underlines, highlighting and dog-ears along with notes and exclamation marks.

The book falls open naturally to Isaiah 40, where nearly the entire chapter is underlined, with verse 11 bracketed: "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."

In the margin, in a distinctive teenage-girl's hand, is written, "We have such an awesome God!!"

The presentation page of this New International Version Student Bible says that the Bible was a Christmas gift in 1991 to Kristina Ann Dibbs from her mom and dad.

Printed in ink below the date is added, "With our prayers that you will always follow Jesus and lean on Him, as you hide His Word in your heart. 3 John 4."

Inside is a three-year plan to read through the entire Bible by focusing on approximately one chapter a day.

It looks like Kristina was left-handed, as the checks are backwards, but 365 boxes

are checked with varying shades of ink and pencil.

We wondered how this Bible got away from Kristina, since we all have our childhood Bibles in a drawer somewhere.

So we bought it.

For a dollar.

We Googled her name thinking to return it to her but came up with too many hits to sort through.

It has sat on my desk here at work since, and I often use it to check a passage for a blog or column I am writing.

A couple of weeks ago, I leafed through the Bible to look up a verse and decided to Google her name once more, this time adding Lancaster as a search term.

Her obituary popped up.

She died in the Lancaster Hospice in 2007 at age 28 from Huntington's disease.

A couple of searches later, I was on the phone with her father, a retired pastor in Marblehead, Mass.

"She was never bitter, never angry at God," he said.

The Rev. Robert and Elaine Dibbs adopted Kristina when she was 6. She came from an alcoholic home in Brooklyn and was being cared for by a relative of hers who had cancer. The choice eventually became foster care or adoption.

"She had a faith that was unbelievable," Robert Dibbs told me. "Within three months of being in her new home, she asked Jesus to come into her life. It was amazing."

Dibbs told me how she taught Sunday school and worked in youth groups and with kids whenever she could. She was remarkably forgiving and would ask, "God, how do you want to use me now?"

She came to Pennsylvania to attend Lancaster Bible College and was married when the incurable disease struck.

One of the doctors in the hospice told her father how her faith radiated from her. When the doctor made his rounds and came back to Kristina's room, he felt as though he needed to take his shoes off before entering.

Kristina's Bible must have been a comfort to her as the disease ran its course.

The Bible's red ribbon marks the place at 2 Corinthians 12 where Paul writes about the thorn God had given him:

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

"I was a pastor of 32 years," Dibbs said, "and have never seen anyone like her."

Kristina's Bible is on its way home.

"What is it?" It's not what we expect. It's food for thought. God is full of surprises. God will provide. Eat your fill. Grace comes in ordinary ways. Grace comes in extraordinary ways. We're not lost. We are right where God wants us to be. Learn from your hunger. Develop a wilderness state-of-mind, and God will nourish, sustain, and challenge you with abundant food for thought. Amen.