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Joshua 3:1-6; Matthew 3:13, 4:1-2
“Death to Resurrection: The Wilderness to the Promised Land”
Year B – Lent Midweek 5
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

There’s a clever statement that’s been out there for some time. It goes like this: “Not all who wander are lost.” It’s meant to express that sometimes people purposefully take the long road through life, taking in the journey as their full experience.

Of course, other times, those who wander are, in fact, lost. For instance, if I were to tell you I was traveling to the U.P. tomorrow, but ended up somewhere down near Detroit for a few days, that wouldn’t be considered a very successful trip. It’s one thing to take the long road home. It’s another thing to be perpetually stuck wandering.

There’s no group of people that knew this better than the Israelites. The plan was to travel an admittedly difficult road across the wilderness, but a road always with a clear and wonderful destination in mind. What they found, however, was half a lifetime, forty years, wandering in that wilderness.

That wasn’t the way it was supposed to be. 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, actually. But when it came time to send 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, they said, and war-like. The spies spoke with fear, and this fear then spread throughout the community of Israel. God’s people were terrified. And in their fear, they refused to go forward.

And it was because of this act of unfaithfulness, because of their lack of trust in the Lord, that the Israelites became wanderers in the wilderness. Not one of the people who were twenty years old and older would ever dwell in the land of Canaan. The only exceptions were the households of Caleb and Joshua, because they were the only 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.

The wilderness between Egypt and Canaan was a harsh place. And being sentenced to wander there was a sentence of suffering because of their sin. It would be a land that would claim their lives one by one until all had perished.

And to make this reality even worse, the Israelites had seen the Promised Land. They had seen it with their own eyes on the near horizon, they had seen the beautiful destination, they knew what was waiting for them, and yet, because they had forsaken the blessing, they would never be able to experience it. Because of their sin.

Sin exiles us from God. It sends us away from the Promised Land and into the wilderness. The Promised Land of Canaan was the place where the Lord would provide houses for the Israelites that they did not build, and vineyards and orchards that they did not plant. A land flowing with milk and honey, and land where they would lack nothing.

But the wilderness? The wilderness was a separation from all of that. The wilderness was the place earned by human sin. It was wild and uninhabitable. It was dangerous and deadly. It was the uncertain path as they wandered, with no clear destination in sight. It was what the Israelites earned by their lack of faith in what God promised.

Isn't it the same with us? Aren't we wandering in the wilderness of this life, the reality of this fallen and painful world, as a result of our human sin? It's a separation from the way life was supposed to be in the land of Eden. And it's far from the perfect imagery we have in our minds of heaven. Sometimes it feels we are wandering, with no clear destination in sight.

But there's something about the wilderness. Even though it is the deserved outcome of our sin, of our unfaithfulness to God, God still provides in the wilderness. He is still there in the wandering. He was present with and guided those wayward Israelites all their days. Those were days of testing, testing to see if they would fall away. Fall by the wayside in their anger, or bitterness, or idolatry, or unfaithfulness. Or would that time of testing cause them to rely all the more on God and His provision? Would they, in their sin, draw closer to God, seeing Him as He is—the only path to their salvation?

You see, God didn't abandon the Israelites in spite of their sin, in spite of their wandering. And He doesn't abandon us either. He continues to demonstrate His covenant faithfulness, His radical love and saving attitude, as He chooses to still lead His people to the Promised Land.

The Israelites' journey brought them out of the wilderness and to the waters of the Jordan River. It was not a journey that *they* planned, that *they* worked, or that *they* carried out. It was a journey that was brought about by God. With God leading the way.

And that's what we see in Joshua chapter three. The ark of the covenant, the place where God chose to dwell with His people, it led the way. And when the feet of those carrying the holy ark touched the waters of the Jordan River, the waters parted, just like they did at the Red Sea. The path stood dry and wide before the people. And once again, the Lord led them through the waters to their salvation. Their exile in the wilderness was over. They crossed over from death to resurrected life, into the Land of Promise.

We, too, find ourselves in the wilderness. And we, too, can't find the way out of this land of suffering and death on our own. That's why One came for us. Jesus went before us. Jesus went into the waters of the same Jordan River to be baptized by John. The Sinless One from God needed no cleansing, but by His baptism, took all the world's sins upon Himself. And in an act of complete reversal, He took those sins not into the Promised Land, but rather back out into the wilderness. His road took Him through the waters, and into the wilderness, taking our sins with Him.

His road took Him all the way to the cross. Where those sins were nailed with Him on the tree, and He gave His life for ours. But because Christ carried our sin, we no longer do. And Christ forever left the wilderness of sin behind when He emerged victorious and alive from the grave. He had the power to cross over from death to resurrected life.

Our journey brings us through the wilderness of sin, the place of our suffering and death, and to the waters of Baptism. And it's not a journey that we planned, that we worked, or that we carried out. It is a journey that is brought about by God, through Jesus, for us. With Jesus leading the way. And when our bodies touch the waters of Baptism, the path stands wide before us. Jesus leads us through the waters to our salvation. Our exile in the wilderness is over. We have crossed from death to resurrected life, and are welcomed into the Land of Promise. The Land of everlasting life.

Of course, for a time, in our earthly life, we are still in the wilderness. We still live in this world. But because of the way Jesus has directed us, we know we have a clear destination in sight. We know that we will not forever be wandering. The Promised Land was good for Israel, but the eternity God has planned for us will be infinitely better. The new heavens and the new earth will be unbelievably wonderful as we will experience them in the day of the resurrection.

You see, in Baptism, Christ brought us from death to life. And in the day of the resurrection, He will do so again. He will call us by name out of the grave, and bid us to follow Him on the road that He has already traveled. The road from the wilderness to the Promised Land. The road from exile to home. The road from death to resurrected and everlasting life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

(This sermon is adapted from CPH materials for the series, *Return to Exile: A Lenten Journey* 2017.)