

Exodus 16:1-9
Mark 5:21-24a
“Know Where You Are”

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In both of our scripture lessons for today, location is key. It's key to understanding who we're going to meet, what they're up against, and the possibilities of what might happen next. Location is key. But of course it is. We've always known this, because we can see it. We can see it in the different education a child receives based on whether they live in Cumberland or in Pawtucket. We can see it in the different houses available, and in the living wage that isn't available, depending upon which end of a single street you live on, a street like Diamond Hill. Location is key. We can see it in the food that is available for purchase on the shelves of our grocery stores. The fact is, there are not as many fruits and veggies for sale at the Stop & Shop in the town where I live as there are at the Stop & Shop just one town over. Of course, there is also no public bus line that will take you to the Stop & Shop one town over. So if riding the bus is your only way to go, sorry, but you won't be getting any blueberries today. Location is key. We can see it in the way COVID has visited urban minority communities, and generationally impoverished rural communities, with far greater sickness and death than it has our predominately white suburban communities, because medical care has become a luxury for the privileged in our country. We can see it in the disproportionate amount of crime that occurs in our cities versus in our suburbs. We can see it in the number of black and brown individuals who get arrested on our streets for crimes considered more minor than those committed by whites. We can see it in the longer prison sentences black and brown teenagers serve in harsher places. And we can see it in the more difficult time they will have getting out, and the more difficult time they will have in making it if they ever do. And we can see all of this why? Because location is key.

In our first lesson for today, from Exodus 16, the location is the wilderness of Sin. The name isn't meant to be a play-on-words, it's just the unfortunate title of the location. We're told it lies between Elim and Sinai. In other words, the wilderness, true to its name, is in the wild. It doesn't have a specific name. It's not Elim, nor is it Sinai, it's just somewhere in between the two. For the Israelites, it's just where they are. No longer in slavery in Egypt, but not yet to wherever it is that Moses and Aaron are taking them. As we are going to

discover, there's not a lot going for the Israelites in the wilderness. No shade, no food, no pretty flowers to look at, and they don't know how much longer they're going to have to be here. However, just as I could tell you the exact number of days it's been since we entered this wilderness of pandemic, the Israelites can tell you the exact number of days they've been in the wilderness. Let's listen together to how the story goes:

On the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left Egypt, the whole company of Israel moved on from Elim to the Wilderness of Sin which is between Elim and Sinai. The whole company of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron there in the wilderness. The Israelites said, "Why didn't GOD let us die in comfort in Egypt where we had lamb stew and all the bread we could eat? You've brought us out into this wilderness to starve us to death, the whole company of Israel!"

GOD said to Moses, "I'm going to rain bread down from the skies for you. The people will go out and gather each day's ration. I'm going to test them to see if they'll live according to my Teaching or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they have gathered, it will turn out to be twice as much as their daily ration."

Moses and Aaron told the People of Israel, "This evening you will know that it is GOD who brought you out of Egypt; and in the morning you will see the Glory of GOD. Yes, he's listened to your complaints against him. You haven't been complaining against us, you know, but against GOD."

Moses said, "Since it will be GOD who gives you meat for your meal in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, it's GOD who will have listened to your complaints against him. Who are we in all this? You haven't been complaining to us—you've been complaining to GOD!"

Moses instructed Aaron: "Tell the whole company of Israel: 'Come near to GOD. He's heard your complaints.'"

Unless you're off on a good hike, those who find themselves in the wilderness find themselves where they don't want to be, and when you're not where you want to be, you want to know two things: who's to blame for getting us here, and who's going to get us out of here? Suffice it to say, in neither case do we tend to begin by naming ourselves. The writer of Exodus records that the entire company of Israel put the blame on Moses and Aaron for taking them out of Egypt and bringing them out into the wilderness. "Why did you bring us out here? Did you know when you brought us out here that things were going

to be this bad? If we'd known freedom might kill us, we would have stayed in Egypt and died in slavery."

What we're talking about is the cost of freedom, which is the sacrifice all of us, each of us, must make for the sake of the whole. In writing to the church at Corinth centuries ago, Saint Paul said, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial." Paul is referring to what it will take if we want to live peaceably in the world. We will have to do more than just follow laws, we will have to consider what is beneficial for all. For a law isn't necessarily just because it affords me a certain freedom. As Martin Luther King Jr. would come to say, "An unjust law is no law at all, and any law that degrades human personality," that supports segregation and inequity, that says all lives matter while black lives are treated as less than lives, is an unjust law that more than just not being followed should be disobeyed. And so it is well past time for us to acknowledge that any law which affords me freedom and protection at the cost of your freedom and protection must go. This is the cost of freedom that we all must work for, sacrifice for, and pay for—a freedom of the law that is beneficial to all. And it will take work, and diligence, to stay the course and not slip back into our positions of power and privilege.

"Did you know that by bringing us out here into the wilderness, things would be this bad? If we'd known freedom might kill us, we would have stayed in Egypt and died in slavery."

The Israelites lodge their complaint with Moses and Aaron, but I think it's only fair to remember that neither Moses nor Aaron wanted to lead this particular freedom march. When God said to Moses, "I'm going to send you to Egypt to lead the slaves out," Moses said, "No you're not." Moses was living quite comfortably in the home of his father-in-law at the time. God said, "Yes, but let us not forget Moses, these are not just my people, they are also your people." So Moses goes. But out in the wilderness where there's no bread to eat, Moses is quick to remind the Israelites, "Hey, coming out here wasn't my idea. I had it pretty good back home. Now I'm hungry just like you. If you want to complain to someone, complain to God."

We have one more scripture lesson that I want to share with us this morning still, and to do that we will need to change locations, but before we go, I want us to see that out in the wilderness, God draws near to hear the complaint of the Israelites, and God gives them bread. Not a lot of bread, just enough for each day, and on one day enough for two days—enough to keep them moving, working, hoping, looking forward; enough to fill them but not so much that they aren't going to have to think about sharing and sacrificing still.

It will take them another 40 years to get out of the wilderness, but never again will they have to go a day without bread. It's a reminder that the road to freedom is long and we are the ones who pave the way. With every complaint for justice, with every demand for daily bread, we pave the way, and God draws nearer, and the way becomes clearer and brighter.

Which brings us to our second scripture lesson for today, from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 5. Like the story in the wilderness, location is key to hearing these few verses. So let's move...

“When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” So Jesus went with him.”

In Mark's gospel, Jesus spends a lot of time by the sea, and he spends a lot of time crossing the sea. This is because the people you meet are different on different sides. A leper over here, a demoniac over there. Today, Jesus is meeting Jairus. Indeed, he is different than most of the people Jesus tends to meet up with. He's privileged, powerful, rich, and for all of this, maybe he figures he can get an audience with Jesus. Only Mark tells us that he comes to Jesus on his knees, begging for mercy on behalf of his daughter. When he asks Jesus to come with him, to lay his hands on his little girl, Jesus goes.

Mark has a knack for simple writing, and this is about as simple as it gets. Jairus asks, Jesus goes. There is no consideration on the part of Jesus for what Jairus' daughter is sick with, or whether he'll really be able to do anything for her, or how much time she's got left to live. Read the rest of the story and you'll see that, so unconcerned with these things is

Jesus, that on his way to Jairus' house, he stops off to help someone else out. It's like getting the call to come to the hospital to see your mother, she's only got an hour to live, and on the way, you pull the car over to help someone change a flat! It's a stop that inserts a moment of doubt into the story as to whether Jesus is going to get there in time to save the child from dying.

I wonder, how many places can you think of that are at the point of death today? Places where people are in danger of not making it, places you'd like to take Jesus to. "Here Jesus, stand in this doorway and do your thing. Keep death from coming in."

The good news is: Jesus goes with Jairus. The better news is: he's in no rush to get there. Because he knows death will come, if not today, then tomorrow, and if not tomorrow, then eventually. But the trick is not to be toppled by it, not to run in fear of it. Jesus isn't afraid of death. Jairus asks him to come and lay his hands—his healing hands—upon his daughter so she may be made well, and live, and Jesus know that's exactly what he's going to do. Whether she's dead or not, and especially if she is dead, he's going to put his hands all over her, to make us see that we don't need to be afraid...of anything...anymore.

Yes, the road we walk today is long. But God has heard our complaint for bread, for justice, for mercy, and God has come to deliver.