

## **The Edge of Wilderness**

**Exodus 13:17-22**  
**Hebrews 11:1, 8-10**

**Elon Community Church**  
**January 10, 2010**

I just finished my first week here at Elon Community Church as your new interim pastor. I was given a great orientation in the front office by the secretary, Monica Nicholson, who efficiently had keys ready and waiting for me and printed council and committee minutes to get me up to speed. I enjoyed my first staff meeting with Sharon, Monica, Finance Director Lori Watson, and Director of Visitation, Bob Knowles who filled me in on the regular happenings here at Elon, as well as the pastoral needs of some folks in the congregation. Ray and Gayle Pollard took me to lunch and then Bob also kindly provided a driving tour of some of the nursing and rehab facilities and introduced me to some members who are facing health challenges.

The next day, I joined Dolores Truitt and some other Elon members at the first of a series of Interfaith Luncheons, co-sponsored by our Evangelism Committee and the Truitt Center at Elon University. Bill Blanchard helpfully reviewed financial and budget information, and Ken Sheldon volunteered his computer skills to set up an email account for me and get the laptop in the pastor's office in better running condition. Throughout the week, I saw kind faces from various Elon folks as they popped into the office to say "hello". So, thank you for your warm welcome! It has been a great beginning!

The time between the departure of one pastor and the calling of a new permanent pastor is a unique phase of a congregation's life. An interim period, by nature, is a time of transition and change. I will be your pastor, but I will be here in a limited and temporary capacity with one foot firmly placed within Elon Community Church and the other in the outside world. Interim times can be a bit confusing and somewhat anxious, but they can also bring moments of joy and discovery for both congregation and pastor. I'm looking forward to being on this journey with you!

About three years ago, I attended an interim ministry training workshop offered by the Center for Congregational Health. This two and a half day event gave me a helpful paradigm for thinking about the role of congregation and interim minister during the transition between permanent

pastors. I found it a useful experience and came away with helpful resources and tools. However, I confess that when I arrived I was a bit concerned to discover that I was the only woman in a group of twelve all white, mostly older, theologically conservative men.

I worried that this cohort would not only be estrogen-challenged, but might also be intolerant of women clergy and those with more liberal religious perspectives. However, I was relieved to find a good-natured group, respectful of each others' traditions and views, and accepting of me. I was also glad that there was another UCC clergyperson in attendance who offered even more of a contrast to the rest of the group than I did. Richard, a Harvard-educated professor living in both California and Washington D.C., is a bi-vocational pastor who also works as a yoga instructor and massage therapist. He brought out his yoga mat during our stretch breaks, much to the amusement of his colleagues.

During our discussions, we tried out various images and metaphors to help us speak about interim ministry. There can be so many emotions that spring up and swirl around in our individual hearts and in the collective congregational soul during an interim time....anticipation, anxiety, nostalgia for the past, renewed creativity, fears about an unknown future, excitement about new beginnings. One of the images that captured my imagination as a way to speak about the journey of an interim period is that of wilderness.

In Biblical times, the desert wilderness of Palestine was a place of deep spiritual significance for the Hebrew people. The major events of Israel's history, the moments of primary importance to her faith, took place in the desert: the burning bush, the exodus from Egypt, the theophany on Mt. Sinai, the giving of the law, and the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. These times were brimming with spiritual encounter, where God's presence was experienced in an extremely powerful and intimate way. Yet, they were also periods of hardship, confusion, testing, and teaching.

There are several Hebrew words meaning "wilderness" or "desert". In their literal sense, they designate different types of terrain- rocky or sandy soil, forest or desert- but eventually these terms came to have the common meaning of "unsown" land, places that were away from the "sown" or cultivated fields. "Wilderness", in ancient times, referred to what was on the periphery of civilization- that which was outside human control. It was a

place of ambiguity and mystery, a landscape of spiritual encounter, a place of disorder and danger.

In Biblical writings, the wilderness was dangerous because it was frequented by evil spirits, dragons and storm devils. Yet, precisely because it was “wild”, or not subject to human control, it was also a sacred space where God could be encountered. This was good. But God’s presence did not lessen the element of danger. Encounters with God in the wilderness were not always gentle. In the desert, Jacob wrestled with a mysterious divine Presence and limped away from this encounter with an injured leg but a strengthened spirit. Jesus found solitude in the desert but also temptation. The danger and chaos in wilderness places were part of the spiritual adventure.

I think there is a kind of wisdom that can come from our own visits to the wild places in our hearts and world. It is a wisdom that allows us to see ourselves in our true context by crossing over to the “outer edges”. We brave the dangers of wilderness journeys in order to discover a view from the periphery. It is a perspective that helps us see our lives in their proper context, giving us a truer picture of who we are and what we are about.

In a church’s life, just as in our own individual lives, times of transition and change have some of the same elements of wilderness journeying. One of the temptations that congregations may face during an interim time is to let anxiety give them a false sense of needing to hurry. It is difficult to stay in the wilderness when change in pastoral leadership brings up feelings of anxiety and confusion, and often, some church members will express a desire to move quickly to find that new pastor who seems to offer the leadership necessary to get to the Promised Land.

But, the quickest way is sometimes not the best way. In the Old Testament text for this morning, we heard that God did not let the people of Israel take the road that offered the nearest route, but “led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness”. The text says they camped “on the edge of wilderness”, a place of danger and opportunity. We know the rest of the story. The people’s journey to the Promised Land took forty years, surely one of the longest interim experiences in history!

Though no church needs years of pastoral interim time, the people of a congregation do need enough time between pastors to get a “view from the

edge”, a clearer picture of who they are, what has brought them here, what they want to strengthen, and how they may want to change.

Gilbert Rendle, an interim ministry advisor and writer, looks at the story of Exodus as a way to help churches consider using interim time to do good transitional work. He writes “...it took forty years in chaos, the wilderness, because the people needed the time to reorganize at a higher level. Had they made the trip in forty weeks or forty months, the people of Israel would have arrived in the promised land unchanged. (*Rendle, “Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders”*. The Alban Institute, 1998, p.98)

Here at Elon, I hope that we can think together about how we can do some good transitional work. We will want to be able to share ideas, listen carefully and respectfully to each other, and talk honestly about the future. We will want to honor the past but also acknowledge that there have been times of conflict and pain. We can encourage each other as we share these wilderness travels together. Movement is a necessary part of that journey.

In today’s New Testament Lesson, Abraham is commended for setting out on a journey, even when he did not know where he was going. The text also says that when he arrived at the place that was promised, he still lived in tents, not in the city with foundations. He had arrived at the promised land, *but* he was still a traveler. Abraham’s spiritual journey was one where he sometimes stopped and waited for God, and at other times moved forward to meet God along the way; it was a movement and a rest.

In the apocryphal gospel of Thomas, Jesus tells his disciples how to respond to those who ask, "What is the sign of God in you?" "Say to them", says Jesus, "It is a movement and a rest."

A few years ago, I discovered the works of a Welsh poet by the name of R.S. Thomas. Thomas was an ordained Anglican priest who spent all of his working life as pastor to farming families in the stark Welsh countryside. It was this grim, rural environment which sparked his poetic imagination and his spiritual questioning.

He watched the hard life of those who were his congregation as they struggled to endure on a bleak land, and it caused him to wonder where God was in this barren place, and what his own role should be as priest. Writing

poetry was his way of pondering the eternal human question of "Where is God?"

The central motif of his poetry is that a genuine spiritual life is always a search, an ongoing journey. But his poetry is not pious or comfortable. It is achingly honest, for in his own personal experience, God was often hidden.

For Thomas, the spiritual search is the way we live, and this search is always before us. In his poem "Kneeling" he describes himself in these words:  
*"kneeling before an altar of wood in a stone church/ in summer, waiting for the God/ to speak; the air a staircase for Silence....Prompt me, God: but not yet. When I speak,/ though it be you who speak through me, something is lost./ The meaning is in the waiting."*

For this priest and poet, spiritual life is a seeking where there is no ultimate goal. "The meaning is in the waiting." But this is not passive waiting. It is attentiveness, where all one's spiritual senses are "standing" on alert. (Peggy Rosenthal, *The Christian Century*, Vol. 118, No. 2, p.4-5.) It is both a movement and a rest.

My wish for this church, for you and for me, is that these next months of interim time together will be experienced as both movement and rest, a time when our spiritual senses are standing on alert, when we choose to hold ourselves in that creative but sometimes uncomfortable tension that involves both work and waiting, when we allow ourselves the freedom to live in tents. I hope we will not hurry too much.

During the last day of our training, our small group at the interim ministry workshop I attended, huddled together for a short bible study. We looked at sections in Exodus which described the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness. We read the biblical text and then took a few moments to think about what it might mean for us personally as we took on new roles as interim pastors.

Richard, the yoga instructor with the PhD, closed his eyes and reflected that the wilderness could be a scary place, that he worried about how he might be received in a congregation going through the stresses of a change in leadership. David, a retired Navy chaplain, commented that his primary feeling was one of uncertainty, that having left a career with direction and purpose, he was struggling with feelings of no longer being useful, of

wondering what he might be able to offer in a new place and a different context. “I will be looking for the pillar of cloud or fire”, he said quietly.

I confessed to the group that I have a tendency to want to move too quickly toward a goal. I am often too future-oriented, and I said that I hoped I could pause awhile in the wilderness landscape of interim ministry and not be tempted to move too quickly out of the desert toward the civilized lands of outcomes and results. I looked at Richard. “The wilderness is beautiful,” I said, “but it does seem a bit scary to stay there very long.”

The last person in our group to speak was Danny, the seasoned pastor of a small Baptist church on the coast. He smiled at the rest of us and leaned back in his seat. “Just remember, y’all,” he said, “when you find flowers in the desert, they are gorgeous!”

And so, people of Elon, I look forward to moving and resting, walking and waiting with you in the months ahead. May we take time to notice what needs our attention, to ask questions that help us go forward, and to trust that God’s presence, seen and unseen, will accompany us along the way.

And may the flowers we find in the wilderness be gorgeous!

Amen.