

LOVING GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Romans 8:31-39

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Writing in *New York Magazine* ten days ago, Andrew Sullivan offered a sobering reminder of what our current pandemic portends:

It's quite possible that by the end of all this, almost every American will know of someone who has died. A relative, a friend, an old high-school classmate The names of the sick will appear to be randomly selected — the ones you expected and the ones you really didn't, the famous and the obscure, the vile and the virtuous. And you will feel the same pang of shock each time someone you know turns out to have fallen ill.

But it will be more than simple grief at the mounting losses, says Sullivan. From here on, *we* will not be the same.

[T]his will change us. It must. All plagues change society and culture, reversing some trends while accelerating others, shifting consciousness far and wide, with consequences we won't discover for years or decades. The one thing we know about epidemics is that at some point they will end. The one thing we don't know is who we will be then.

[He said] I know that I was a different man at the end of the plague of AIDS than I was at the beginning, just as so many gay men and many others were. You come face-to-face with mortality and the randomness of fate, and you are changed. You have a choice: to submit to fear and go under, or to live with the virus and do what you can. And the living with it, while fighting it, is what changes you over time; it requires more than a little nerve and more than a little steel. Plague living dispenses with the unnecessary, lays bare whom you can trust and whom you can't, and also reveals what matters.¹

Sullivan's assessment felt like a hard wisdom to me. There are certain experiences in life that, if they don't kill us, teach us valuable lessons about the world, and often, about us. We see more clearly in such events what is important; we discover those who speak with authority and those we do best to disregard. In our humanity, we won't always act wisely or with compassion or free of fear, but we know where our comforts lie, and we gain some inkling of where faithfulness would lead us.

This pandemic has been so swift and so disorienting. Many of us have felt adrift, searching for a North Star to get our bearings and help us calculate our true direction. We are

¹ Andrew Sullivan, "How to Survive a Plague," *New York Magazine*, March 20, 2020, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/amp/2020/03/andrew-sullivan-how-to-survive-the-coronavirus-pandemic.html?_twitter_impression=true&fbclid=IwAR1bMRPHDdhNEt9A8MT9QKyGRaGh5XE5495AIUWqz_ENGLYEK48Kxs3t3e0, accessed March 24, 2020.

making decisions that we hope are the right ones. We offer prayers for those who are putting their lives on the line, for those trying heroically to lead in a landscape that shifts daily – hourly. We seek to be our best selves. But we are in a wilderness of sorts, even in this normally thriving cityscape, wondering if we will ever find our way back to normalcy.

We're not the first or only people to blaze such a trail, of course. I was bemoaning the seemingly lost weeks and months looming before us this past week, when I had a thought of the children of Israel stumbling, struggling, feeling their way through the wilderness as they fled the tyranny in Egypt in search of an elusive land of promise. For forty years! Forty!

What were you doing in 1980, those of you who were alive at the time? What was your life like then? Some of you in the prime of your careers. Some of you in school. Some of you children. A lot has happened since then. Now, try to imagine spending those last forty years wandering under a Middle Eastern sun in search of a homeland, in pursuit of a dream that always begged to wait another day, another month, another year. And then try to imagine what it must have been like there on the plains of Moab to have Moses – your seemingly lost leader – stand before you and say *Shema Yisrael* – “Hear, O Israel”...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.”

The people had already discussed revolt, had talked about going back to Egypt, where at least the meals were steady and where they knew what was expected of them. They had tried keeping the faith, but where had it gotten them? “You shall love the Lord your God,” Moses said. What a hard word to hear in the wilderness! And yet, that's precisely where those words were first spoken.

Remarkably, in human experience that is also where many people encounter such a word today – in their own times of wilderness wandering – in dark times of personal distress, in arid times of spiritual deadness, in moments of personal pain and loss. The word of Moses still comes to confront them – to confront *us* – in wilderness times.

In the week before she died of lung cancer a little more than 40 years ago, my mother helped me to hear the command in a different way. The cancer and the chemo had wasted away her already frail frame, and she was taking only ice chips for nourishment. It was a strange time, spoon-feeding the woman who had spoon-fed me from infancy into childhood. I cherished those moments, painful as they were. We were both in the wilderness together, me knowing such shared moments were coming to a close, yet wanting to hold onto her. We sat there through some long silences, as I brushed her forehead with a cool, damp cloth. I remember asking after one of the silences, “Mother, what are you thinking?” She whispered back, somewhat uncharacteristically, “I'm just trying to love the Lord.” I have never heard that command of Moses in quite the same way since. Loving God in the wilderness.

I had a friend who, before he died, wrote a letter to his three children, in which he offered a few instructions, and then left a list of personal traits he hoped they would develop. Two of them, I thought, were of keen importance, and they still seem so – especially now. They were “the ability to endure” and “a capacity for suffering.” Call it ability or capacity, that afternoon in her hospital room, I realized my mother had found her North Star and was reorienting herself.

“Just trying to love the Lord,” she said. Sitting with her, I found the words of Moses had become an earworm for me: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart...” And I understood that in her own wilderness, those words had become not an irksome demand, but a rich reservoir of encouragement and welcome and grace.

Indeed, maybe it is precisely in such times that this word makes the most sense. Perhaps it is more difficult to love God when everything is clicking for us, when the wind is at our backs, and the road is opening wide before us. Maybe we can’t truly love God until we really need God, until we are free of all the traditional certainties and securities. Maybe it was the Exodus that led the Israelites to take this command as their basic affirmation of faith over all the subsequent centuries. Maybe it was this command that sustained Jesus during his own wilderness temptations.

And maybe it’s still true: in our wilderness times we are perhaps in the best position to meet God face to face, in the Christ who comes to us in the countless faces offering smiles of support and the voices – even across cyberspace – speaking words of encouragement and hope and peace. Perhaps in such moments the words of Moses cease to be command at all and become instead a promise. The word we hear in comfortable times as imperative becomes in times of turmoil a gracious indicative: you *shall* love the Lord your God with all your heart... you *shall* love God with your mind and strength because God has come into the wilderness in the person of Jesus to embrace you and hold you fast. No divine social distancing!

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The Apostle Paul was certainly acquainted with the wilderness, for it was there that he met the Christ and began his own pilgrimage of faith. It was because Christ had walked with him through the wilderness that Paul could write:

I have become absolutely convinced that neither death nor life, neither messenger of heaven nor monarch of earth, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, neither a power from on high nor a power from below, nor anything else in God’s whole world has any power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39, JB Philips)

Nothing, because God was there in the wilderness, loving us before we could love God in return. That, friends, was a promise on the plains of Moab. And it is a promise still.