

Wilderness: Photina

Rev. Dr. Leah Grundset Davis
Ravensworth Baptist Church
March 15, 2020
John 5:1–14

*Sermon inspired and adapted from “Hide and Seek,” by Rev. Dr. Theresa Thames and “Hide and Seek,” by Rev. Dr. Kristin Adkins Whitesides with permission and collaboration.

Have you ever played hide and seek with a four-year-old? It is one of the more delightful experiences in life. I have played many times and I have a feeling that I will be playing a lot more in the next month or so. If you have not played it with a preschooler, you really should. You see, young children are horrible at hide and go seek. Just horrible. You tell them you will count and that they should go and hide. And so you begin. 1...2...3...4...5...

When I have played the game with my children, I have found that it is best to count as slowly as possible. Because you can hear that they have absolutely no real idea of where to hide. When I play with Sadie and Lydia, Sadie often just hides wherever the other person hid the round before. So if Lydia was found in a closet, the next round, Sadie hides in the same closet. It makes the game go much quicker, but there is no real challenge to it.

Sometimes Lydia and I team up to find Sadie and we begin. 1...2...3...4... ready or not! Here I come! And we begin to search. The problem is, Sadie is usually very excited about her hiding place and she begins to giggle. Loudly. We try to pretend we don't hear her. Where could she be? My goodness! What a good hider! Finally, unable to take it anymore, Sadie pops her head out of...you guessed it...the closet...and says, I AM RIGHT HERE!

In the passage from Exodus, we meet the Israelites as they are wandering in the desert. When they were enslaved people in Egypt, they had been forced to work hard and long hours. But as they remembered those days as they wandered in the wilderness, the hardships of Egypt began to fade into warm fuzzy memories. All they could think about were the good times. Even though Pharaoh was oppressive, at least they had bread and water.

However, once they walked across the Red Sea, they found themselves in a very different world—in a wilderness where nothing looked like it used to. The Bible alternates between calling it a wilderness and a desert. In any case, it was a land where all bets were off. After crossing through the Red Sea on dry ground and successfully escaping the Pharaoh and his army, the Israelites begin to realize that the water available to them in this new and barren land is too bitter to drink.

In leaving Egypt, they have left behind their harsh years of slavery, but they have also left behind everything they had ever known. Including all that water. They begin to murmur, grumble, worry aloud. And God tells Moses to throw a piece of wood in the water and, by some miracle, that water is made sweet and drinkable.

Just a few weeks later, the people have continued on their way when they realize that food is not so plentiful in the wilderness. Once again they begin to gripe and whine and complain. Worry and anxiety overtake them. God hears their cries and provides, by some miracle, manna, which, in Hebrew roughly translates to, “What is it?” They've never seen

anything like it. Bread from heaven rains down and they are told to take what they need, but just what they need—not to hoard because it wouldn't last.

This story we read is one of worry and fear because all of a sudden they are in a strange land where nothing seems quite right. The Israelites feel like God is hiding from them and they don't know where to find God.

In our Gospel passage we meet a woman, who tradition, not John, named Photina. She wasn't even looking for God. She is tired of being let down and disappointed. She has been abandoned by husband after husband. Her life was one of social and physical distancing.

Most women gather around Jacob's well in the early morning, before the sun gets too hot. They catch up together, sigh over their children, and enjoy their friendship. But this woman does everything in her power to avoid that morning crowd, even if it means coming at the very worst time of the day with sweat dripping down her back, and feet sliding around in her sandals. To her surprise as she finally reaches the well and looks up, ready to draw her water and make her way home through the wilderness of an empty town, she sees a man waiting there.

Her heart drops into the pit of her stomach. She came at this time of day to avoid having to talk to anyone—much less deal with a man. Taking a closer look, though, it is clear she has never seen this man in town. He is a Jew and unfamiliar. Samaritans and Jews did not have a lot of common ground.

She soon found out in an intense conversation that he was offering her the water of life. At a well that provided sweet water to drink, here was Jesus offering much, much more to a woman who felt like she had been wandering in the wilderness for most of her life. Photina saw Jesus for who he was and he saw her for who she was. Jesus was present for the person who was alone, unsure, and isolated.

As we read the news about the rapid progression of COVID-19, go to the grocery store with long lines and empty shelves, and look at a very empty sanctuary, I wonder, "Is God hiding?"

As each moment changes, we are all finding ourselves in the midst of an anxious season of life. Some are wondering about their jobs and reduced hours, lower pay. Some have not slept as they try to make decisions around school closings and childcare. Some of us are immunocompromised or have loved ones who are vulnerable. There are those of us who are making big decisions that are hard, critical, and that do not always come out fair. The fear is contagious and the anxiety is real. Everything feels too hard. We feel like God is not only far, far away from us, but maybe God is even hiding. We too have cried out, like the Israelites, "Where are you God?"

Another reminder of how small our world is right now is that we can read real time updates from folks around the world. As the stories from Italy roll in and we hear about quarantines

and the number of cases, it felt pain-filled and isolating. In the midst of the fear and the quarantine, a beautiful sound arose in the city of Siena. ¹

The video begins from a window in a home on a darkened cobblestone street. You hear singing rising up and then you hear more windows opening and more singing. In isolation, the people were coming together to sing.

“The song, titled ‘*Canto della Verbena*’ (‘*And While Siena Sleeps*’), is a popular folk song in the city typically sung to express local pride. “It’s a reminder that, especially during a tragedy, the human spirit keeps us all going in hope—that we shine our best in the darkness.”

Friends, God doesn’t play hide and seek. And the good news is that we serve a God who is ever-present.

Just as the Israelites were wondering aloud if God had forgotten them, water came gushing out of a rock in the wilderness. Clear, cool water that quenched their thirst and reminded them that God was with them, even when they were journeying through difficult spaces.

In the same way, the Samaritan woman ended up receiving something better than she could have ever imagined when Jesus met her at the well. Coming there for water and solitude, she instead found acceptance and a living water that broke down all the boundaries that had been constructed around her life and around her people.

Today, tomorrow, this week, we must be on the lookout. We must learn again to pay attention in the wilderness in which we find ourselves. Because our God of surprises is trying to get our attention.

In the coworker who needs to talk. In the child who wants to cuddle. In the disruption and inconveniences of this moment, God *is* indeed trying to get our attention. God is coming to find us because our all present and all loving God is always with us.

Lent feels extra real this year. Because of that, I believe that Resurrection will feel extra real this year too.

It's hard to not be together physically in worship as community at Ravensworth, especially on the Sunday we were to celebrate our 61st anniversary. It's weird to be in this space only with Phil, Russell, and Cathy. Part of what I love about this place so much is the deep commitment we have to building community. Every story I mentioned this morning takes place in community. These wilderness moments became stronger even in the unknown, wilderness wanderings because of relationships.

So now, RBC, we have a challenge: to do what we love so much, in a new way that reaches out even more in a creative way.

We will figure out how to Zoom and how to FaceTime more.

¹ Kate Ng, “[Coronavirus: Deserted Italian Street Rings out with Song as People Lean from Windows to Sing Together During Lockdown.](#)”

We will be good neighbors who make an extra casserole for our neighbor down the street who needs it.

We'll donate to ACCA and we will be sure to amplify voices who need to be heard.

We'll have sacred conversations on phones, and facebook messenger, and skype.

We'll rest.

We'll read some books and might even play some Hide and seek.

We'll look for where the springs of water are sweet and love is flowing.

We'll proclaim:

We believe in a wilderness God—

Who breathed life into dust, turned seeds into flowers, and flooded the sky with stars.

We believe in a wilderness God—

Who went hungry in the desert, walked barefoot on the water, and taught from the mountainside. We believe in a wilderness God—

Whose love could be described as nothing short of wild.

We believe in a wilderness God—

Who broke the bread and shared the cup to remind us of beloved community.

So with confidence and hope, we long to follow our wilderness God who walks with people in their darkest nights,

Who sings hope into places of grief, isolation, and suffering,

and who exists in the form of untamed joy, wildfire love, and impossible hope.

Step by step, day by day.

And we'll open some windows, and we might, we just might hear the song of the Ravensworth community, the song of God's love traveling all the way from

Annandale to

Arlington to

Silver Spring to

Alexandria to

Bristow to

Greenspring to

California to

Springfield to

Panama to

Germany and beyond.

Actually, I think if I listen closely, I hear it now...