

The God Outside Our Camp
Exodus 19:1-2, 16-19

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Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. Ex. 19:17

The verse I want to study with you today comes from Exodus 19 and reads, “Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God.”

The camp, of course, is the bivouac of the Hebrews who, just three months earlier, left their terrible slavery in Egypt. They are now situated in a wilderness somewhere between where they have been and where they want to go. At this stage in their journey, Moses leads them outside their camp to meet God.

There are three elements in this verse toward which I direct your attention. There is the wilderness around the camp; there is the camp itself; and there is the God outside the camp. Let’s lay this text and these three elements of it alongside our lives and look for parallels.

The wilderness around the camp.

The wilderness is something these people have to travel through. It is no place of their choosing. They do not want to be there. They don’t intend to stay there. They do not know how big the wilderness is or how long it will take to get through it. They just know it is something they have to endure now and for as long as it will last. It cannot be hurried through. It cannot be gone around. It is there and they have to deal with it.

The wilderness – we do not have to pay attention to the exact geography of it – is totally unfamiliar to these people. They had not been to it before. They have spent their lives heretofore in Egypt as slaves. Not even the oldest among them can remember what it is like to not be in Egypt and to not be a slave. This land outside Egypt and away from their slave quarters is completely foreign to them. Each bend in the wilderness road is a mystery; each sight along the way is a new experience; no one can really imagine what is beyond the horizon that is away off ahead of them and retreating.

You know something of that situation, I take it. You may know nothing about the geography just outside Egypt, but you know full well the feeling of being in unfamiliar territory that you have to travel through. You have been – and maybe are now – in places with no chart, no compass, no GPS, and no way around.

My work, for example, has often had me sitting with a family who is trying to plan a funeral after the death of a dear one. They turn to me and say, “What do we do? We’ve never done this before?” That is what I mean by a wilderness of unfamiliar territory.

Or perhaps a doctor has come into your room. You did not really catch her name. She was some specialist freshly called in. But she brought with her a diagnosis that suddenly thrust you into a whole new territory about which you knew nothing but had to try to learn in a hurry.

Or maybe your wilderness sojourn started when you and your spouse became empty nesters. You looked at each other, rather dumbfounded, and wondered together out loud what you were to do next, it had been so long since it was just the two of you.

The ancient Hebrews were in a wilderness about which they knew nothing. Now and again we find ourselves in the strange surroundings of unfamiliar territory. Let's turn now to the second element in our text: the camp.

The camp

We have already defined the camp as the bivouac – the circled wagons, we could say – of the newly freed Hebrews. The camp is not quite a shelter from the wilderness, but it is their one place of safety in this alien world.

The majority of those old Hebrews may have been loath to leave the camp and go outside its outermost picket lines. Think of *M*A*S*H* episodes from television. Occasionally there was a situation that called for some of the doctors and nurses to leave the compound of the 4077th. Every road they took was full of danger: danger from snipers; danger from buried mines; danger from enemy forces on the move. And so outside the Hebrew camp lurked threats: threats from wild animals; threats from desert marauders; threats of exposure from the elements. The camp itself may not have been much. It did not have everything. But it was safe. The majority of those old Hebrews were loath to leave it.

Now I imagine you have a camp in the wilderness you don't want to leave. I know I have them.

An elderly person, for example, is often loath to leave the home they love. They are surrounded by the wilderness of age and the desert of limitation age can bring. But this house they have lived in for years is a safe retreat filled with memories, and they fear leaving it, for if they leave it behind, what else shall soon go?

Someone else may have a dream that is like a camp for them, a camp they are loath to leave. Do you remember George Bailey from the Christmas classic *It's a Wonderful Life*? He has the wilderness of Bedford Falls around him. It's small and cramped and almost backward. He has a dream of a bigger life, a dream of travel to faraway places, and the dream of building huge buildings. He is loath to let go of that dream; he constantly retreats to it. Like him you may be hiding from today in some dream for tomorrow, and maybe desperately trying to cling to the dream.

Or someone may live in the camp of control, thinking that if they keep control of everything they will be able to master the wilderness and it will not get the best of them.

All of us encounter our wildernesses. All of us have our camps we are loath to leave. But let's move now to the third element of our text: the God outside the camp. "Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God."

The God outside the camp.

One look at the mountain outside the camp and the Hebrew people knew no camp of theirs could hold that God. The mountain – it was Mt. Sinai – was wrapped in thunder and lightning and a thick cloud, all signs in the Bible of the presence of God. There was a trumpet blasting, a trumpet so loud it sounded like 1000 trumpets echoing around the mountainside. And the whole mountain – Sinai itself – was shaking for all the noise and all the power of the presence of God. You can't get that into any little bivouac of a camp.

None of the Hebrews were surprised by that. They hadn't seen God but in the three months since they had left Egypt they had been blessed by the power of God. They knew God was a power beyond all measure of imagination. After all, God had defeated Pharaoh; God had parted the Red Sea; God had made a mysterious bread appear on the ground day by day to nourish them; and God had caused water to gush forth from a rock to quench their thirst. You can't begin to circle wagons around a God that great. If they were going to meet God, they had to go outside the camp – they had to venture beyond their preferences and presumptions.

Now, everything I have said up to this point has been said in order to say this. This God of 1000 trumpets, this God who could make a mountain shake, is alive today with the same power, the same wonder, and the same promise of deliverance. This God is ready to help you make it through whatever wilderness you are in.

But you have to go outside the camp to meet with God. God cannot fit into the little safe place you have made for yourself. Step out of your place of entrenchment. Step out of the state of mind you are loath to leave. For right in the middle of the wilderness around you is Someone far better than the safe place you have made for yourself. Dare to leave the dream you had for yourself and others. Dare to leave the control you want to keep. Dare to leave the surroundings you know best. And there you will find God: powerful, majestic, able, loving, and ready to lead you forward not to defeat in the wilderness but to blessing beyond your imagination. Go outside the camp and meet God.