

The lessons of the desert

Exodus 16:1-18

November 6, 2005

Can you remember a time in your life when you had almost nothing ... and it didn't matter?

In late August 1978, Lynne and I moved into our very first place as a married couple. It was a small two-room apartment tacked on to the end of a large summer home in East Gloucester, Massachusetts. The key word here is *summer* home! The owners occupied the house during the summer months and then rented out the apartment the other nine months of the year, so they could have someone keep an eye on the place.

We furnished the apartment with a small wooden dining table (a wedding gift), a pullout couch purchased with wedding money that served as couch and bed, and shelving constructed from bricks and planks. We didn't have a TV. No TV?! In the evenings, I listened to Celtics games on the radio or to "Calling All Sports," a Boston sports talk show.

We brought two vehicles to the marriage. Lynne had a four year old Subaru that decided to lose a transmission just weeks after we moved in. It was in the shop for five months and took all our wedding money, which, of course, was all the money we had. That left us with the other vehicle, a fourteen year old VW bug that I had purchased from my brother for \$50 and fixed up myself, a fourteen year old bug with no heat and a defective starter and brakes that worked ...most of the time.

It was quite a first winter! Remember the key word? *Summer* home! The apartment had huge glass windows and little insulation. When we sat at the table eating our macaroni and cheese, we could feel the cold wind blowing through the window and onto our faces. Yes, macaroni and cheese. We ate a lot of macaroni and cheese that year. You can't beat 19¢ a box.

We didn't have much, but it didn't matter. We had each other! It was a hard first year in many ways, but we remember it with fondness, because it was our first year ... because it was our first year.

Can you remember a time in your life when you had almost nothing and it didn't matter? When you had so little, but you felt so happy? Tell me, would you rather be rich or happy? If you had to choose, would you rather be rich or happy? It's a serious question, because sometimes you do have to choose.

I am the Lord your God, who led you out of Egypt. I took care of you in a dry, desert land. But when you entered the good land, you became full and satisfied, and then you grew proud and forgot me ...

This is the Lord's lament, voiced by the prophet Hosea.

I took care of you in the desert. In the desert you remembered me. In the desert you counted on me ...

So I am going to take you back into the desert again. There I will win you back with words of love ...

The desert is a harsh environment. There's no milk and honey in the desert. The people of Israel crossed the Red Sea, they escaped the clutches of Egypt's king, they left behind forever the land of cruelty and oppression, and found themselves in the desert! They found themselves in the barren desert with nothing to eat, and they complained:

We wish we would have died in Egypt ... at least we would have died with full stomachs!

Would you rather be rich or happy? Would you rather be full or free?

The Lord heard their complaints and the Lord took care of them in the desert. It wasn't milk and honey, but quails and manna gave them strength and kept them going. The Lord provided food, the Lord provided water, the Lord guided them, the Lord protected them, the Lord brought them out of Egypt and through the desert and into the promised land.

The desert time was a hard time, but it was a good time. It was a time of young love, of a people's awakening awareness and growing love for the God who was making them his own. It was a time of few distractions, a time of clear priorities -- survival itself was the only priority! It was a time of few options, a time of clear choices -- depend on God or die!

A whole generation came of age in the desert, learning in the desert how to live one day at a time depending on God's grace and mercy. When the people of Israel arrived at the eastern bank of the Jordan River, they were a people who knew God and knew themselves. They had an identity, they had a purpose, they had faithful and experienced leaders, they were ready to cross over into a new life and a new land. They were a people forged in the desert.

It is the hard times, the tough times, the crisis times that make us what we are and forge our characters. And it is equally true that times of comfort, ease, and plenty may leave us complacent and lazy, forgetful and distracted, spiritually out of shape ... not ready to make tough choices, not ready to take decisive action ... ready to fail. That may be true of people or groups of people. It may be true of you or true of your church. You can forget your identity, you can forget your purpose, you may not be fit for the kingdom of God.

I recently started reading a book on congregational revitalization. It included this disconcerting fact: many, if not most, of the congregations that do finally reverse a trend of slow atrophy and find a new sense of vitality and meaning in church life, only do so once they are reduced to almost nothing, when they have no choice left but to change or die. We can't wait that long! We must not wait that long!

So what's the antidote to being out of shape? Exercise! What is the cure for complacency? Discipline! The spiritual health of any person and any church are built on the foundation of discipline.

... the discipline of prayer: of remembering God, of remembering that we did not make ourselves and that we cannot save ourselves, of bringing to God all our hopes and dreams and doubts and griefs. Prayer is remembering -- remembering who God is and remembering who we are.

... the discipline of thanksgiving: thanksgiving is a discipline, an antidote to the illusion that our health and welfare depend on us. Thanksgiving is remembering,

remembering to whom we owe all that we have and life itself, remembering on whom we depend for everything. In times of plenty, the discipline of thanksgiving prevents us from getting carried away with ourselves and forgetting what it is that matters, forgetting who it is that matters.

... the discipline of stewardship. Good stewardship is vital to the health and welfare of the church. Good stewardship enables and empowers our ongoing ministries, to our own members and to the wider community. Good stewards remember the importance of the work we have to do and believe in it! Good stewards remember our past and believe in our future. Good stewards are persuaded that the church, this church, has a unique mission to fulfill in the city of Waterloo and in the world. And good stewards know that the church fulfills its mission one willing person at a time, one dollar at a time. The church is only as strong as its people, and we are only as faithful in fulfilling our mission as each one of you are.

Our recent stewardship record is good news/bad news. The good news is we do have some generous givers, we have paid our bills, we are not in debt, we have been generous in supporting both local and worldwide mission efforts, and we have provided a strong infrastructure for doing ministry -- both in terms of facility and in terms of staff.

The bad news? Some day, some year, maybe this year, our deficit budget will catch up to us, the deficit will simply be too large, and we will not be able to continue to do what we do without a dramatic increase in giving or a dramatic decrease in spending. That is scary to me because I believe that Tom Rehling is right with his description of the death spiral of churches. When a church begins to cut back on its mission, it ceases to be what it is, and far from saving itself by saving money, it dooms itself by forgetting why it exists in the first place.

I do believe in the future of the church. I do believe in the future of this church. It may not look the same or act the same as it does today, but it will continue to do the work of the kingdom of God in some way with God's help. If we want to be a part of that future, we must remember our identity and our purpose, and good stewardship is a discipline that helps do just that.

But as vital as good stewardship is to the health and welfare of the church, it is even more vital to your own personal spiritual well-being. As much as stewardship is about giving, it is equally about letting go. From your point of view, from the point of view of the steward, from the point of view of the giver, stewardship is about letting go! It is a letting go that allows you to see past the distractions, a letting go that allows you to let go of things and hold on to life, a letting go that allows you to let go of things and hold on to God. Letting go reaffirms our dependence on God. And the simple fact is that the more we let go, relative to what we have, the more we acknowledge our dependence on God, and the more we put ourselves squarely in the hands of God's grace and mercy. But that is a good place to be! Would you rather be rich or happy?

I do not pray for hard times for you or for us, but I do pray that in the midst of good times or bad, we will not forget the lessons of the desert.

- All that we are and all that we have comes from God.
- The road to life and freedom is not easy, but God provides.
- And never forget your first love, the One who loved you first and made you his own!