“Wanderings” - Stephanie Sorge, 9/18/22

Last week I pushed back against the story of Noah and the flood, and I’ve got issues with today’s story, too. Of course, there are major concerns with the promise of land, the cursing of other nations, and all the ways those have played out in the thousands of years since. I’m setting those aside for today, but even so, I find myself bristling against this passage.

God says, “Go!” and sends Abram and his household wandering to a place TBS - to be shown - and I’m done with it. I’m tired of the wilderness. When we embraced the wilderness theme for Lent in 2020, we had no idea just how appropriate it would be. COVID hit, and we’ve been trying to emerge ever since. We’ve masked, unmasked, upgraded our masks, distanced, and done it all a few times over. Some of you may be on your fifth or sixth COVID shot. COVID is with us. We’re wandering our way through it, as best as we can.

Kind of like global warming, which is permanently shifting weather patterns, and changing the habitability of entire regions. We continue to fight it, to do what we can to abate it. We have to. But we’re no longer trying to stave off a possible, future crisis. Crisis is here. We’re living it, and navigating uncharted wilderness as we go.

Kind of like the partisan divisions in our national politics. One of the strategies of Russian interference in the 2016 election was to sew discord and harden anger and division. Bot farms spread disinformation, stoked fear, and fanned the flames of hatred and vitriol. It worked quite well. How can we move forward when factions are becoming more deeply embedded in completely alternate realities, and when deadly violence and insurrection are no big deal? We wander.

It’s all been so much. We’ve lost so much. We’ve lost people near and dear to us - to death or to discord. We’ve lost mobility. We’ve lost learning. We’ve lost sleep. We’ve lost money. We’ve lost sanity. We’ve lost trust. We’ve lost truth.

We’ve been wandering, and wandering, and wandering, and it is exhausting. A year ago I worried about how we would “ramp up” to return to being together, in person. Where would that energy come from, when it felt like we had been going 120% just to make it virtually? A year later, we’re still wandering our way through hybrid terrain. We continue to navigate a new normal, but one thing is for sure - there is no going back to what once was. No return to Haran.

Haran. A place of comfort and stability. A place that feels like home. Or so I always thought. Last week, I saw something in the expanded text that I had never noticed before, in the verses that precede this story. I love it when that happens. It’s right there, tucked into Abram’s genealogy: “Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran became the father of Lot. Haran died while with his father Terah in his native land, in Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor both married; Abram’s wife was Sarai… Sarai was unable to have children. Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot (son of Haran), and his son Abram’s wife, Sarai, his daughter-in-law. They left Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan, and arriving at Haran, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.”

Terah had lost a son. Abram, a brother. Lot, a father. That’s some significant family trauma. Sarai can’t have children. That was not just devastating, but an existential threat to the family. Then the family left the beautiful, cosmopolitan city of Ur. Terah left behind one living son, and took the other, along with his orphaned grandson Lot, and together, they left for the land of Canaan.

Haran was never their intended destination. It’s the place where Terah died, and was buried. Abram was still in mourning when God called him to get up and go, to complete the journey his father started, into the land of Canaan. They traveled hundreds and hundreds of miles, and once they arrived, they were soon on the move again, going down to Egypt to escape famine. But that’s another story.

I have always thought of Haran as Abram’s home, but it wasn’t. It was a stopping place on a much longer journey, during which Abram and his family also navigated the wilderness of trauma and loss. The wandering continued from one precarious place to the next.

Is this the life of faith? An endless wilderness wandering?

A friend and colleague, MaryAnn McKibben Dana, was also on sabbatical this summer. The subject line of her first missal upon re-entry was “Sabbatical was not ‘Restorative.’”[[1]](#footnote-1) She named the assumptions about sabbatical - that it’s a time to recharge or refill the tank, but her reality was that, by mid-August, she was running on empty. Maybe even emptier than she had been at the start of her sabbatical in June. It was still good and necessary time, but she didn’t come back fully recharged, as she or others might have hoped.

She writes that one reason for this was that she “had space to go deeper on what’s actually happening in the world, and experience anew the grief of the past several years.” These haven’t been easy years for most of us, one way or another. Some of the challenges have been shared, and others more acutely felt depending on one’s particular situation and circumstances. But we’ve all been through some of this wilderness together.

MaryAnn was buoyed by a lecture from the amazing Barbara Brown Taylor. It was actually a replay of a keynote at an Evolving Faith Conference. The conference theme was “Wilderness.” Back in 2019. Before COVID eve hit, we were already there - in the wilderness.

While the last few years have been - dare I say - unprecedented, the years before COVID hit were also deeply challenging. We might reflect wistfully on the good old days of 2019. The Before days. It’s pretty common to find ourselves wanting to go back. Back to a time when things were less complicated. When the world wasn’t on fire. When the fundamentals of our democracy seemed unshakable. In our country, in our cities, and churches, and lives, we want to make things great again.

We want to go back, but back to what? Back to Egypt? Back to Haran? Back to Ur? Back to Eden? We reach back for that time or place where we felt the most stable, the most safe, or the most comfortable. When things were great - or at least good. Or maybe even just not a dumpster fire. But the wilderness can find us anywhere.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “If you've ever spent any time in a radiology oncology unit, that's a wilderness. So is a neighborhood where parents have to teach kids what to do when they hear gunfire. A dying church, a wilderness. Addiction, wilderness. Losing too many friends all at once is a wilderness… Aging is a wilderness. Deep love for the suffering planet is a wilderness. Basically anything that shows you how breakable you are, how breakable everything is, does the trick, which means …wilderness is not an optional part of the human condition and no one gets a pass.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Some seasons are better than others. Thank. God. But for those seasons when the wilderness feels inescapable on a global scale, when everyone seems to be running on empty, what are we to do?

Taylor suggests this: subsistence spirituality. She says, “It'll never sell. It sounds way too meager. But wouldn't it be interesting to cultivate a way of being with God and one another that is lean enough to live in the wilderness for as long as necessary? …You’d have to be able to see the sacramental possibilities in the tiniest piece of bread. And I think you'd have to imagine the wine.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

She continues: “You'd have to have… some kind of faith that God is in the wilderness, that the desert is for you, not against you.” This is starting to sound like Abram and Sarai.

Indeed, this is how the Abrahamic religions began - in the wilderness, without clear instructions, having little clue of the difficulties that lie ahead - but with the promise that God is there. God comes to Abram, after he’s lost his brother, and his father, and all hope for a child. When everything about the future looks uncertain, God initiates a new covenant. God will lead the way, and build a future, and in that future, Abram will be a blessing. In that future, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Abram trusted, but the longer he went without seeing those promises come to fruition, the more he questioned God. He continued to wander, seeking home in hostile lands. He continued to be childless, taking matters into his own hands. Miracle of miracles, he has not one son, but two! One he casts out of the household. The other he nearly kills. Then his wife dies. It’s not great.

I’m guessing that for most of his life, Abraham’s spiritual life was more famine than feast. Faith always mixed with a measure of doubt. But there were just enough signs of God’s provision and care to sustain him for the journey. The occasional dream, or visitor, or message from God, reiterating God’s promises of blessing. Even in the wilderness. That sounds like subsistence spirituality to me.

In our journey together, some of us may be running on empty, while others have full tanks. Together, we can go the distance, maybe even at full speed. But it’s also ok for us not to be full speed all the time. In the times when we’re collectively running on fumes, we can ease off the gas. Trust that God will lead us where we need to go, and give us exactly what we need to get there.

Sometimes it is precisely when our tanks are empty, or when we feel most discouraged and hopeless, or lost or afraid, that we experience the presence and care of God. After the loss of loved ones, and in the face of continued disappointments, like Abraham. On the run from the past, with no clear future ahead, like Jacob. Trapped in injustice, like Joseph. On a long and difficult journey, like the Israelites. Tired and hungry and ready to die, like Elijah. Hopeless and helpless and grief-stricken, like Hannah.

It’s not that following God’s call consigns us to wilderness. The wilderness is there. Instead, these stories assure us that whatever the wilderness, God is with us. God has been with us, from the beginning, and will be with us through our wanderings - detours and all. God is with us in the body of Christ. When we are bone-weary with parched souls, we can find sustenance here. Sometimes all we can do is drink in the grace that is poured before us. Other times, we share the bread we have found with other hungry souls - God’s presence in that sacramental alchemy of grace.

This is our story. Wandering and wilderness are part of it. But we are heirs of the covenant. God is always with us, giving us at least as much as we need to make it through. May God also cause us to be a blessing, and work through us, that all nations of the world - all of creation - may be blessed.

1. https://mailchi.mp/49fd14c9f901/sabbatical-was-not-restorative?e=8bdf5246f6 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://evolvingfaith.com/podcast/season-2/episode-1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-3)