

“The Long & Confusing Road to Freedom”

September 22, 2019
Exodus 14 selected verses

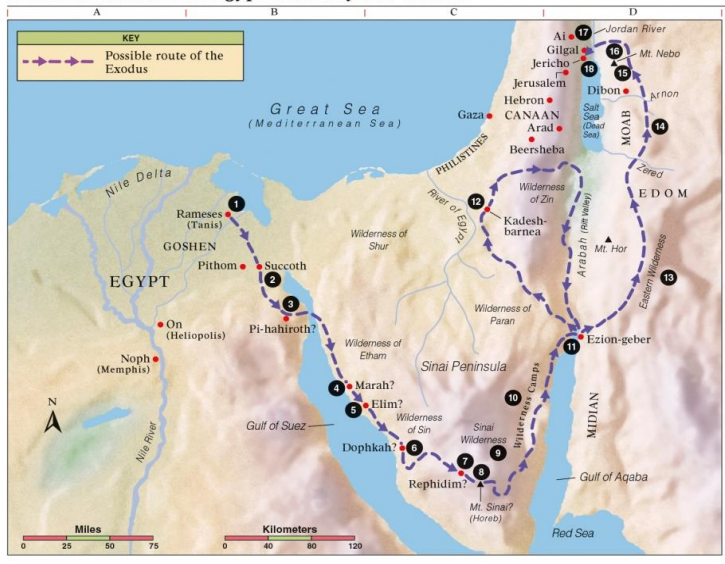
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Last week we were with Moses as he received his call from God at the Burning Bush to face the King of Egypt and to lead the Israelite people to freedom.

It takes Moses and Aaron a bit of time and some pretty cool plagues to convince the Pharaoh to let the people go, but finally they are on their way. They are led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. We can imagine the fist pumps to the air and the shouts of joy as they left — after all they didn't just leave empty handed, they left with provisions and gifts from the Egyptians. At last they were free.

Of course this is just the very, very beginning of their journey. There is nothing short and nothing easy about it. Here is a map of their route:

2. Israel's Exodus from Egypt and Entry into Canaan



You'll notice they did not take the short route across the desert from Egypt.

Between Egypt and the Land of Canaan -- the Promised Land -- is 250 to 350 km. It should have taken them a couple of weeks, or a month at the most, but they wandered around that desert for 40 years!

Now 40 is a symbolic number in the Bible; it

means a lot or too many to count. But it takes them a generation to get through that wilderness.

Ever feel like your life is one big drama with no real progress? Then you might understand their time in the wilderness. The people whine and complain about the water, the leadership, the food. They are constantly thinking that freedom is not what it's cracked up to be and that maybe they were better off as slaves.

The wilderness is uncomfortable, and the people are desperate to get out of it. They either want to go back to the familiar slavery in Egypt or get to the Promised Land *now*, but they can do neither. They seem stuck in a loop of drama and complaints and wandering, and never really get anywhere.



Do you remember the classic movie *Groundhog Day*?

The 1993 comedy starred Bill Murray, who plays Phil Connors, an egocentric Pittsburgh TV weatherman.

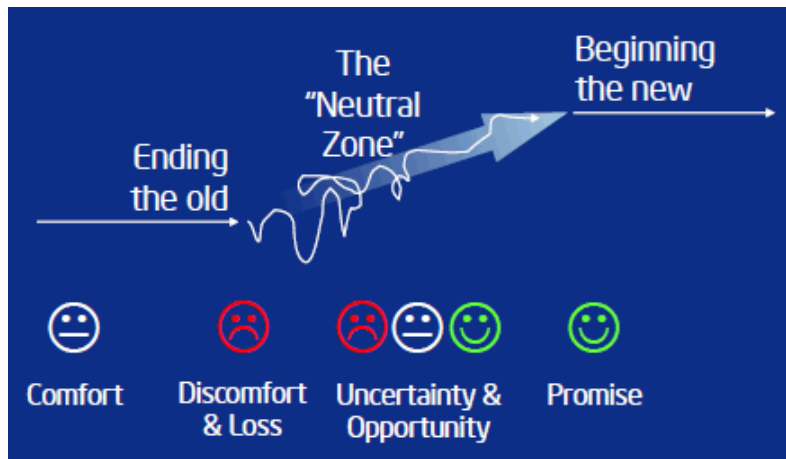
During an assignment covering the annual Groundhog Day event in

Punxsutawney, he finds himself repeating the same day over and over again. At first it's a bit novel for him, and he uses it totally to his advantage: eating anything he wants, seducing women and stealing money. But his real goal is to get Rita to fall in love with him, and that keeps failing.

As he continually wakes up every day to February 2nd and to Sony and Cher's Song: "*I Got You Babe*" on the clock radio, he gets depressed and tries to commit suicide. Even that doesn't work. He still wakes up to the same day. Until he can change himself, *really* change himself, Phil Connors is stuck in the loop of February 2: Groundhog Day.

In a way it is the same for the people of Israel. They are stuck. They are stuck physically, but they are even more stuck inside. God set them free from the physical slavery of the Egyptians, but they are still slaves. They are slaves to themselves. They are slaves to fear and worry and jealousy and anger.

Here's the thing: God cares more about *who* we are than *where* we are. God cares more about our character than our comfort. God was not concerned how long it would take for the people to wander around the desert. He wanted them to grow and change and be His people by the time they left the wilderness. God will use and can use whatever situation we are in to shape us and change us.



William Bridges was an American Organizational Consultant who was big on helping organizations to manage change. He pointed out that having something change on the outside is different from really changing on the inside. Bridges points out that there are three stages:

Endings, The Neutral Zone and New Beginnings.

Think about your life, and you will see parts of your life that are in these stages. There are small wilderness times and some huge ones.

We changed our morning routine at home, and I've gone through a mini-wilderness to make the shift. I think I'm almost there, but it's taken 3 weeks. It used to be that my husband would take the kids to school. There would be the weekday morning tornado of getting kids up and dressed and out on time, and then they would leave and I'd still be in my housecoat. At that point I'd make my coffee and in a fairly relaxed way get the house back in order, get ready for work and head out. Now I'm on to getting the kids on the bus and to school! Now I am the tornado, and it's been quite a struggle to make the adjustment.

That's a pretty small adjustment. Life has huge ones ... like grief. Like the loss of a loved one, the breakdown of a relationship, the loss of a job or the loss of health. You can be months and years adjusting and in the neutral zone with these.

Personally, I think the "neutral zone" is too benign a name. This is the wilderness. And it is not neutral. It is uncomfortable. In this stage, people affected by the change are often confused, uncertain, and impatient, even angry. Think of this phase as the bridge between the old and the new; in some ways, people will still be attached to the old, while they are also trying to adapt to the new. However, this stage can also be one of great creativity, innovation, and renewal.

The time in the Wilderness was the "neutral zone" for the Israelites. Their time of being delivered from slavery and wandering around the desert for 40 years before entering the Promised Land is the time that most defines the Jewish people. It shapes them. It shapes them more than any other experience. Much later, when they are taken captive by the Babylonians and taken away from their land, they will experience another Wilderness that will shape them, but not as much as this first Exodus and Wandering in the Desert.

Had they marched quickly and efficiently across the desert—had they gone straight from point A in Egypt to point B in the Promised Land—they would not have changed, and they would not have learned to trust God. They also would not have survived the battles that were to come.

The choir sang the anthem "Kairos" earlier. Kairos is God's time. We are very worried about Chronos — our time ruled by minutes and months and years. As a culture, we Canadians are pretty obsessed with time. I know I am. My order of service tells me where I ought be, down to the minute. Frankly I think our sense of time often makes it difficult to fall into the rhythm of God's time. Everything is a schedule to us. I often see questions online in parenting

groups that ask things like “How old should your child be to walk to the store on their own?” People gave all sorts of numbers from about 7- 15, but the truth is every kid is different.

I think we get that it’s not about Chronos when we talk about whether a child is ready to go to the store alone, it’s about whether they are confident enough, mature enough, and have a sense of knowing what to do if the journey to the store doesn’t go as planned. You don’t want to send a child out alone before they are ready. You don’t want a baby to be born premature if you can help it.

A couple of weeks ago I told you that I read Nelson Mandela’s Book *The Long Road to Freedom*. I paraphrased his book title for my sermon title today. He had no idea when he was imprisoned that he would be in jail for 27 years — most of his adult life. The road to his freedom and to the freedom of the black people of South Africa was not one simple direct line. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has often said that Nelson Mandela needed that time in prison to become the leader he was called to be.

Last week we had Moses being called at the age of 80! 80! Why so long? He wasn’t ready! Now I think there might be ways to speed up the maturing process if we yield ourselves to God and trust God completely, but yielding and trusting means that it will happen in God’s time. The Bible says that in the fullness of time, Jesus was born. In the fullness of time. At the right time. In God’s time. In the fullness of time, the Israelites stopped wandering, and they moved forward to something more.

Eventually in the movie *Groundhog Day*, Phil tells Rita his problem and she suggests that he try to improve himself. So he does. At first it’s all about him, learning to play piano or craft ice sculptures, but more and more it turns to others. He gets to know everyone in the town and starts to understand them and help them and make a difference in their lives and in their community and begins to really change from the inside. That’s when Rita finally falls in love with him, and he finally wakes up to February 3rd!

Our wilderness times-- our times of difficulties and struggle-- can shape and define and transform us and make us stronger and really shine if we allow them to, especially if we see God right there in the middle of them.

As uncomfortable as that wilderness time is, God will use it for good and for growth, and we are never alone during that time. God is right here in the wilderness.

For the Israelites, the very presence of God was right there with them. By day, the presence was seen as a cloud; by night, as a pillar of fire — filling and hovering over the Tabernacle, or the Tent of Presence, which housed the Ark of the Covenant. When you are in a desert, what is one of the things you need most in the day? Shade. And at night in the desert? Light and heat. God

was right there in plain sight, and yet it took them a very long time to see Him and even more time to trust that God would provide for them and would always be there with them. Probably the greatest thing to come out of their time in the wilderness is that they learned to turn to God and to trust God for their security and their lives.

If that's all you learn in that in-between time—that God is good and that you can trust God, that you can lean your whole weight of worry, of fear, of anger of whatever is heavy on God — then your wilderness time will have been worth any pain and struggle.

My hope and prayer for you today is that, whatever difficulties you are going through, you will see God right there in the middle of your wilderness. I pray that you will invite the presence of God to come and fill you and to change you. The Presence of God during Moses' time was in a tent. When Jesus sent us the Holy Spirit after his resurrection from death, the Presence of God filled anyone and everyone who wanted it. This presence is for everyone. It is for the young and the old, the gay and the straight, the put-together and the messed up. It is for everyone. It is for you. Just ask: "God, fill me with your presence today." But I have to warn you: don't get too close if you don't want to change! Because you can't help but change and be changed when you get close to the Presence of God. If you do dare to get close, you will not only begin to change, but, for other people who are still wandering around in the wilderness, you will *be* that Presence of God.

Thanks be to God! Amen.