

“Base Camp”
Psalm 121
Exodus 19:1-6
October 4, 2020
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The people of Israel spend a lot of time in the wilderness.

40 years is what it says in the book of Deuteronomy.

40 years for a journey that could have taken a few weeks.

Why did it take so long?

Well, they spent a lot of time getting off track.

And a lot of time was spent receiving the law from God.

It took TWO tries for them to receive the 10 commandments.

So there was more going on than a geographical journey.

There was the spiritual journey - - of growth - - and of God.

This wilderness time was about establishing their relationship with God.

And it took a while...

They spent 11 months at this base camp - - described in chapter 19 of the book of Exodus, and they are there for the whole narrative and time-span of the rest of the book.

Then they spend years in the wilderness of Paran...

The book of Numbers describes year after year of sending explorers north to check out the land God was calling them to move into and call the “Promised Land”.

Deuteronomy begins after 40 years in the wilderness, at the base of a Mountain.

So it took a while - - and they spend a long time in the wilderness.

I wonder if any of them thought they would get to the “Promised Land” sooner. / I’m not sure anyone told them how long it was going to take, but it wasn’t that far geographically.

So it could have been a much shorter journey - - geographically speaking.

But instead it was a long time - - and they did not know how long it would be.

And that can be true for a lot of things.

We don't always know how long - - a wait - - will last.

Right now for us - - the timeline for a Covid vaccine drags on - - and it isn't clear how long that will take. / Waiting can seem like a wilderness.

You can probably think of other examples...

Situations around health care, jobs, relationships...can all be about waiting.

Part of the experience of the Hebrew people - - in the wilderness - - is about waiting.

Jesus also spends time in the wilderness.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was being prepared, or preparing.

A poet from North Ireland, named James Simmons imagines the scene with Jesus:

His poem is called: "In the Wilderness", and goes like this...

"I sit alone on the rocks trying to prepare a man to teach what the laws of life are.

Sunlight and silence, nurses against disease,

are busy fighting my infirmities.

The life is simple, you could not say rough,

A stream, some cans and firewood are enough to live on;

but a hostile shift of weather

would bring me sharply up

on the short tether of endurance.

We haven't survived by strength alone.

We have neither fur nor fangs.

I will go home, just as I rise from sleep, eat and get dressed.

This is one more resort, not the last nor the best.

A teacher in the wilderness alone

Learns to make bread and sermons out of stone.”

Jesus’ base camp - - described in this poem - - is different from that of the Hebrew people. / Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness instead of 40 years.

But it is in a wilderness - - and it is a time of waiting.

That is true for both of these base camp moments.

A base camp in the wilderness...

So what do we learn from these accounts of a base camp, set up in the wilderness?

One thing is that the purpose of base camp is preparation.

A base camp is not an end in itself.

You don’t go to a base camp - - to stay.

It is a base for going further...

The July edition of National Geographic has an article called “The Great Mystery of Everest”, about Sandy Irvine and George Mallory who may have preceded Sir. Edmund Hillary to the summit of Mt. Everest.

Irvine and Mallory disappeared in 1924 during a storm as they climbed.

Mallory’s body was discovered in 1999. / Irvine’s body has never been found.

The great mystery is: what happened?

And more to the point - - did they MAKE it to the TOP?

Did they die on the way UP - - or on the way DOWN?

No one knows...

A recent expedition tried to find Irvine and solve that mystery.

The expeditions all begin at a base camp set up on the slopes of Mt. Everest.

Base camp on Mt. Everest is at 21,000 feet.

For comparison: Mt. Hood is 11,000 feet high, and Rainier is 14,000

Base camp is higher than many people have ever climbed.

And it is difficult even to reach the base camp.

But if you are going to explore the top - - you have to set up a base camp.

So what do we learn from these accounts of a base camp, set up in the wilderness?

Well as I said before: A base camp is not an end in itself.

You don't go to a base camp to stay. / It is a base for going further...

And if you are going to explore the top - - you have to set up a base camp.

And so - - another question is - - as we think about the Bible:

Are we going to focus on what happens in base camp, or on the mountain top?

In the Old Testament, the focus is on the law - - not the mystery of God.

God is described briefly, and then God is in a cloud.

By comparison - - the law is described in GREAT detail - - chapter after chapter.

On Everest, the mystery of what happened to climbers at the top of the mountain was never solved. / And the writer seems to suggest that if it remains a mystery, that would be OK.

He ends the article by writing: "To all of the questions about the climbers, I had no answers. But I had learned something about the pull of Mount Everest that drives people to push themselves so hard, because if I hadn't walked in Sandy Irvine's footsteps, I never would have felt that myself. The only thing I could now say for sure was that the mystery of Mallory and Irvine would endure - - perhaps forever. And that was OK."

So maybe the point is not the mystery, but walking in the footsteps of the seekers.

Remember - - Jesus began his ministry in the wilderness.

Why?

Jesus walked in the steps of a seeker.

Jesus set up a base camp for 40 days in the wilderness.

Jesus has walked - - in our footsteps.

Maybe that can help us be more compassionate and focus on the right things.

Our summer pianist, Kathy James, wrote a song for us for today. The song is called: "Look to the Sky". / The words are about what to do in the face of the world's pain, and they urge us by saying, "Close my eyes doesn't seem the right thing to do, so I look to the sky, lift my heart and pray for human kindness". / At first this seems to direct us to focus our looking upward toward the mystery at the mountain top. / But that upward glance is not about solving the mysteries of God - - as much as it is a prayer of compassion.

In the Old Testament, the focus is on the law - - not the mystery of God.

And really what are the 10 commandments and the law - - if not a prayer for human kindness - - and a path toward justice, compassion and right relationship?

God doesn't tell Moses or the Hebrew people NOT to look to the sky.

God just says - - don't spend all your energy trying to climb this mountain in some effort to touch ME - - and reach the answer to the mysteries of God and the universe.

Instead - - focus on the law - - on the 10 commandments - - on right relationship.

Look to the sky - - but pray - - and act - - with compassion and human kindness.

That's basically what God says to Moses...

The mysteries of God are solved through human kindness.

If we keep our focus on things down here - - God will lift us up there.

After all, remember HOW God describes their flight from slavery?

How does God describe - - freeing the Hebrew people?

In chapter 19 God says:

“I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself”

We don’t have to spend all our time trying to figure out how to climb life’s mountains or resolve the mysteries of God and the universe. / If instead we focus on right relationships like those described in the 10 commandments - - THAT will lift us up. / And IN that - - God will lift us up.

So may we let ourselves be: raised to God as on eagle’s wings...

While we BOTH - - look to the sky...

But pray and act - - for human compassion and kindness.

Amen