

Sunday next before Advent

Allow me to begin with a question: **Would you like God to shower you with blessings?**

No doubt your answer would be yes! Of course, it would be! One would have to be mad not to want the best in life.

Second question: **What might be some those blessings you would like to see come your way?**

A lovely house and garden, one that looked as if it jumped off the page from Southern Living magazine?

A satisfying job, one that propelled you to get out of bed each morning?

A good homelife? A husband or wife who was always attentive and agreeable? Children that were brilliant and always obeyed? A cat that had no fleas and never scratched the furniture?

Good looks? Sharp-looking clothes? A nice set of wheels. Exciting travels? Robust health? A secure retirement? /// I could go on and on.

With that said, we find encouraging words in scripture . . . words which indicate that God likes to give good gifts to his children. It's right there in the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 7:11:

“If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?”

If that indeed is the case, why don't we have everything we want? Why does God not open the windows of heaven and just dump down bucketloads of blessings, everything we want with no waiting?

I don't know the full answer to this question, but just perhaps we get a hint in this morning's Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy 8.

First, we have in this passage what I am going to call, the **lesson from the wilderness**.

Before we go any further, allow me to give you a little background . . . put the passage in context.

Moses is addressing the children of Israel. They are at the edge of the Promised Land . . . for the second time.

I say for the second time because 40 years earlier the previous generation, that generation that had come out Egypt, had stood where they are now standing, poised to go in.

What prevented them from doing so?

In a word, unbelief.

As I am sure you will remember, Moses sent in 12 men to spy out the land.

Ten came back with a negative report. **“There are giants in the land. We are no match for them,”** they said.

The other two came back with a very different report. **“This is a good land with all sorts of produce, and with God’s help it can be ours,”** they affirmed.

To whom did the people listen? /// Well, to the 10 of course. If you haven’t noticed, people prefer bad news to good. Just ask any newspaper man.

So, it was their spiritual immaturity and unbelief that kept them out and caused God to send them back into the wilderness to wander for 40 years, until that whole first generation died off. Was this time wasted?

Today’s passage suggests no. Here we come to **the lesson of the wilderness.**

As it turned out, the wilderness experience was God’s way of testing and training them for success. It was not wasted time.

What lesson did they learn out there in the wilderness?

In a word it was **trust**. They had to learn to lean on God and to depend on Him for their daily bread and everything else.

Go back to my opening question – If God is a good and generous God, One who wants to give His children blessings, why does He not just open the windows of heaven and let them rain down?

Might it not be for the same reason that He did not give the children the Israel the blessing He wanted to give them the first time round – the Promised Land?

They were not ready for it? He needed to prove them . . . to bring forth from them trust.

If they had gone in and tried to possess it under their own steam . . . well, it would have been disaster. Father, knows best.

Some of you will have seen the movie *Bruce Almighty*. God, played by Morgan Freeman, allows Bruce, a television newsman, to take over His job.

In one scene Bruce is seated before a computer terminal. Requests are coming in from around the globe at such a rate that he cannot read them, let alone respond to them. So, what does he do? He hits the ‘yes’ button on all. Pandemonium follows.

That’s a silly movie, but there is no doubt truth in this scene. Throwing down blessing indiscriminately from on high would be like giving your children everything they asked for at that very moment. Disaster would follow.

The ‘wilderness’ was the Hebrews’ university, and it is ours.

“It is good for me that that I have been in trouble, that I may learn thy statutes,” says Psalm 119:71.

A number of years ago at St. Luke’s we had a family who had a son in prison in another state. I’m not sure of his exact crime, but it must have been a weighty one because of the number of years of his sentence.

His mother’s view of what had happened to him -- his arrest and imprisonment – was instructive to say the least.

Instead of viewing it as a colossal tragedy, she came to see it as a great blessing. “Without it, she said, “my son would not be alive.”

The young man eventually did get out of prison and because of this 'wilderness' experience was a changed man. This does not happen in all cases, but by God's grace it did in his.

The wilderness, as painful as it may have been for the Israelites, was an underhanded blessing. They learned to trust God . . . at least some of the time.

Perhaps a good exercise this evening before you go to bed would be to look back in your own life at dark times, difficult moments, delays.

Were you forced to trust God more fervently because of them? Was your sense of dependence on God strengthened and developed? Did you, in any sense, learn patience?

The Hebrews' downtime in the wilderness was not wasted time. It led to greater maturity. I think upon reflection we shall find the same to be so in our lives.

A 20th-century American Gospel song contains the chorus:

Learning to lean,
Learning to lean,
I'm learning to lean on Jesus.
Finding more power than I've ever dreamed,
I'm learning to lean on Jesus.

Whoever wrote these words had undoubtedly been in the wilderness.

The lesson of the wilderness is trust, but there is second lesson we can learn from the experience of the Hebrews, and that is the lesson of the land.

Once the children of Israel had crossed over Jordan and entered the Promised Land there came intermittent periods of prosperity. Along with this prosperity came the temptation to forget God, to think they had achieved it all on their own.

In verse 14, Moses sees this coming and warns them in advance:

“When thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied. Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the Lord thy God.”

If the lesson of the wilderness is trust, the lesson of the land is obedience, continued obedience.

The prescription Moses gives for staying on track, for staying humble, for obeying was **remembering**.

It’s right there in verse 18: **“But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth.”**

Remembering God’s past acts of faithfulness and the giving of thanks remains a good spiritual exercise. Use it.

“O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good,” says the Psalmist.

“All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above,” says one of our Thanksgiving hymns. ///

In closing, the journey of the children of Israel closely parallels our journey.

The perils they faced we face.

The temptation to which they were subject we are subject, both individually and as a nation. Let’s learn from them.

In times of darkness and deprivation, let’s learn to trust and lean on the Lord. That is **the lesson of the wilderness**.

In times of plenty and prosperity, let’s learn obedience by remembering God’s past provisions, by naming them one by one and by giving thanks. That is **the lesson of the land**.

Lessons from the past. Lessons for today. May we receive them

