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Title: Braving the Wilderness: God's Mobile Plan

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Text: [Exodus 25:8-15](#)

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From Middle School forward, I was a church camp person. I would spend at least a week, often two, at church camp during the summer. Here is a pic of me at CYF Conference while in high school. I loved going to Camp Christian in the middle of Georgia in the middle of the summer, which officially made it the hottest place on earth. Even though the

camp itself wasn't the nicest or fanciest place it was holy ground for so many and still are to this day. I loved it so much that when I graduated high school, I continued to give a week while in college and my early working life in the corporate world to counseling at camp. One summer, something happened. There were multiple facilities issues at Camp Christian and so summer church camp could not be held there. Our region had to find a new location to hold church camps that summer. We moved from Camp Christian to the Keg Creek campground. Same people, same program, just a different location and space. However, according to most everyone, it *just wasn't church camp*.

Place is an important concept to human beings. There are places for each of us that has special attachments. When it comes to our faith, we remember, and we cling to the places where we can go where we can experience the presence of God. These are places that are set apart, places where we can connect with God no matter what else is going on in our lives or in the world. Place is an important concept.

It becomes even more important when it feels like the world around us is shifting beneath our feet. We are in a sermon series called Braving the Wilderness: Living During Uncertain Times looking at how we live during this difficult and uncertain time through the lens of the story of the Israelites in their 40-year journey from captivity to the Promised Land.

"If place is important to human beings, then it is important to God." – Terence Frethiem

We've had to think more about place during this wilderness time. I often think back to March 8, which is the last Sunday that we really gathered together as we always had for church. For many, we have still not returned to the physical place where we came week after week to experience God. Many other places in our lives that we identify as sacred or holy have not been able to gather people and we have not been able to have experiences that we typically shape and grow our faith.

During this, we are dealing with the effects of a global pandemic, systemic racial injustice, economic difficulty, concern about the future, online schooling, and everything else that seeks to undo us. This is wilderness time and in wilderness time, God can easily feel absent. I'm sure you have asked the question more than once, "Where is God?" And we are not in places that we recognize as holy and sacred and we don't gather in ways that we have recognized as holy and sacred, the question of "where is God in all this?" becomes even more difficult to answer.

As the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness, they believed that God dwelled in a certain place. They believed that God was on top of Mt. Sinai and that in order to hear from God, Moses would go up that high mountain and bring down a word from the Lord. God was present apart from them; God was far off. God would appear on occasion, a cloud and a fiery pillar, God would show up at times. They believed that God was occasional, and God was distant. These were people who were mobile and perhaps hoped and prayed they might run into God somewhere along the way.

This was not working, because this is not who God is. It was time to change the story about where God dwells. My First Testament professor told us at the very beginning of that class, which was the first class that we took in seminary that in part, the First Testament of the Bible is the story of God learning what it means to be God. That's always stuck with me. So, we get the events of Exodus 25 that I want to share a bit with you today, because it is good news.

"They should make me a sanctuary so I can be present among them. You should follow the blueprints that I will show you for the dwelling and for all its equipment. Have them make an acacia- wood chest. It should be forty-five inches long, twenty-seven inches wide, and twenty-seven inches high. Cover it with pure gold, inside and out, and make a giant molding all around it. Cast four gold rings for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on one side and two rings on the other. Make acacia-wood poles and cover them with gold. Then put the poles into the rings on the chest's sides and use them to carry the chest. The poles should stay in the chest's rings. They shouldn't be taken out of them." Exodus 25:8-15

Let's acknowledge first of all, that this piece of scripture sounds like the instructions for putting together some Ikea furniture if Ikea furniture instructions had words along with the confusing pictures. But in these words, the way God interacts with the Israelites and with us today, changes. Did you hear it?

- Make me a sanctuary so I can be present among them.
- Make it so that the sanctuary is mobile and can be carried.
- Make it so that the sanctuary can always be carried, always be mobile.

God is no longer distant, and God is no longer occasional. God takes up residence among the people. God goes with the people. Where the people go, so goes the tabernacle or the sanctuary. God has made a home among the people. God is on the move. In this wilderness time, where is God? God is among us, in the wilderness with us. Those who follow Jesus of Nazareth recognize this as the Gospel of John says at the very beginning, "*The Word became flesh and made his home among us.*" John 1:14a

God dwells among the people and when the people move God moves with them.

If a place is important to human beings which makes the place important to God, then what does that mean for God's own mobility? What does it mean for the places we have established as Holy Ground?

People are asking, what does a global pandemic, what does this wilderness time mean for the Church?

I think it's time for us to confess that we are the ones who have confined God to church buildings. At some point, ministry became more about our seating capacity of a particular place rather than our sending capacity. You could say that we have worked against the will of God in the sense that we have spent some much time and energy throughout history gathering people in a particular place at a particular time for the purpose of experiencing the Holy, so much so that when COVID-19 forced us to think about new and creative ways of gathering, some said that the church was closed.

We acted like God was occasional and God was distant. We acted as though the Word had not become flesh and become one with humanity.

One of the challenges we have is understanding what God being both on the move and God always being present with us no matter where life takes us means for our living. In the Exodus story, the tabernacle was built to be mobile because life is never stagnant. If place is important to us, then it's

important to God. It's why God decided to be in every place that humanity dwells.

I love what James Baldwin says about home, *Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.*-- James Baldwin

We've all heard the phrase, "I can't wait until everyone gets back to church." That's a false hope, not because people aren't becoming less spiritual, but because we never really left. God never left our presence. God was on the move. We are now free from old patterns that were no longer life giving.

In the Exodus story, it's important to know that when the tabernacle is built and the instruction is given that it is to be mobile, God's people are headed *to* something. They are in the wilderness yes, headed to the Promised Land. A land of milk and honey, a land of love, grace, justice, freedom, mercy. A place of *new life*.

In your story in your life, in our story together as church, we are braving the wilderness. Living during an uncertain time. The good news is that God is with us and we are headed not away from something but to something. And with God's leading anything is possible in a new land, most especially new life. May it be so.

Let us Pray: