

## Midweek Lent 3 2017 Wandering in the Dark

We live in town, a few blocks from Neenah High School. Our lot is on a fence line that is probably only 25 ft. deep but it runs the full length of the lot. On the other side of the fence is a road into Bergstrom's woods.

After years of work we finally have the buckthorn cleared out, so now we can see houses on the next street through the trees.

However, when our kids were young, the fence line was thick with underbrush. One Sunday afternoon, I watched from our kitchen windows as Sam ventured through the buckthorn and wandered up and down this strip of woods, exploring.

There were times the buckthorn was so thick he couldn't get through and had to backtrack.

Sometimes his head would disappear as he bent down to examine rocks or old tree stumps.

I love the woods and I was happy that he had wandered in the "wilderness."

Later he told me he had got lost in there. I hadn't seen any evidence of it but I said, "***Well you figured it out and here you are!***" He beamed with pride and I never told him that he had been under my watchful eye the whole time.

As J.R.R. Tolkien wrote, in the Lord of the Rings.  
***Not all those who wander are lost;***

When I think of "wandering," I think of Moses and the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.

Do you remember how they ended up wandering in the wilderness for 40 year?

Believe it or not, it is not because they were lost.

Here is how it happened:

As you know, Moses and the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. Moses told the Pharaoh, "***Let my people go.***"

The Pharaoh didn't but Moses kept asking and each time the Pharaoh refused, there was a plague, and finally the Pharaoh let Israel go. Then, Pharaoh changed his mind and the Egyptians chase the Israelites and Moses into the sea. God parts the Red Sea. Israel goes through on dry land and end up safe on the other side.

But when the Egyptians follow, the sea comes together again and the army is drowned.

God had saved them.

And God stays with Israel as they travel to Canaan, which was the land promised to Abraham.

All along the way, God provides for them and is faithful to them.

And then they get to the edge of Canaan and before they go into the land, Moses sends 12 scouts, (That's one from each tribe of Israel), 12 scouts into the land to look around and to come back with a report about the geography of the land, the number of people and their strength, the potential for farming and forestry, and he wanted them to find out how big the cities were and if they were protected.

Finally they were supposed to bring back samples of local produce.

The chosen spies, scouted the land for 40 days.

When they came back, they brought with them samples of wonderful produce including a cluster of grapes that took 2 men to carry.

They all agreed that Canaan was *"A land flowing with milk and honey."*

In spite of this, 10 of the scouts came back with negative reports. They said that conquering the land could not be done. It was too risky. They were afraid to go and possess the land.

They even suggested that Israel return to Egypt and back into slavery and then concluded their report by saying: *"The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. There we saw the Nephilim and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."*

This was exaggeration.

They made it sound worse than it really was.

So, in spite of God's protection throughout their travels from Egypt, these 10 scouts were essentially denying God's trustworthiness.

They didn't believe that God could help them take Canaan as their Promised Land. And they also convinced the people of Israel that it was impossible to take the land.

The people refused to believe the promise of God.

They had hardened their hearts.

So God declares that the entire nation of Israel was to wander in the desert for 40 years. (40 years, 1 year for each day of scouting.) Their whole generation would die out.

Only Joshua and Caleb returned with favorable reports. They believed God's promises and trusted that God would remain faithful. So Joshua and Caleb and their families were

allowed to enter the Promised Land after the 40 years of "wandering in the wilderness."

But again, *not all that wander are lost.*

Israel remained under the watchful eye of God.

God continued to provide and protect them.

And during this time Israel learned how to be a community that worked together, relied on God and trusted in God's promises.

When they finally entered the Promised Land they understood what it meant to be God's people.

We are all prone to wander. Our minds wander, our hearts wander, our feet wander, our love wanders, our trust wanders.

That is what sin really is: wandering away from God's love and protection and guidance, thinking we are independent and in control, masters of our own universe, deserving of whatever catches our eye.

Trusting in the wrong things, investing our lives in the wrong things, attending to the wrong things.

Our view is too small.

This is why God sent his son, Jesus, to remind us that no matter how far we have wandered, we are never lost but rather always under the watchful eye of God

In the hymn, Come thou Font of Every Blessing ELW 807 there is a verse that includes these words:

Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;  
Here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.

Not all that wander are lost.  
This is the good news of the Gospel.