

## Into the Mystery - FLUNG - 2-28-10

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

### **Luke 4:1 The Temptation of Jesus**

4 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,...

### **Exodus 13:20-14:22**

<sup>20</sup>They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. <sup>21</sup>The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. <sup>22</sup>Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

### **Crossing the Red Sea**

14 Then the LORD said to Moses: <sup>2</sup>'Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall camp opposite it, by the sea. <sup>3</sup>Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, 'They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them.' <sup>4</sup>I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD. And they did so.'

5 When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed towards the people, and they said, 'What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?' <sup>6</sup>So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; <sup>7</sup>he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. <sup>8</sup>The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. <sup>9</sup>The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

10 As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the LORD. <sup>11</sup>They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? <sup>12</sup>Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, "Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians"? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.' <sup>13</sup>But Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. <sup>14</sup>The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.'

15 Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. <sup>16</sup>But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. <sup>17</sup>Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. <sup>18</sup>And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.'

19 The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. <sup>20</sup>It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. <sup>22</sup>The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Song      WADE IN THE WATER

Last week we heard stories of what happens when God catches up with us; stories of God's presence and calling; stories of a dove, a burning bush, and a still small voice, all summoning to action. Today, we see how that summoning to action intensifies as the characters are flung out into the desert; out into unknown territory; out to the places where their normal defenses are not available to them.

Jesus was baptized, called by name, commissioned, and then sent out to the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. Why do you suppose the first thing to happen to Jesus after he is baptized is to be whisked off to the wilderness? Moses encountered God in the burning bush and was sent to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. But just like Jesus, the Israelites had to journey into the wilderness. Do you suppose the wilderness is a place of preparation? Do you suppose the wilderness time is a time of emptying, taking away the crutches and the assumptions that we live by, but which may prevent us from truly being in tune with God. In order to be clearly focused on the purpose and vision for his ministry, in order to be able to receive the Promised

Land, Jesus, Moses, the Israelites, and we, need to be flung into the wilderness of the soul.

The truth is, in order to do extraordinary things, it often requires a period of disorientation; a time of letting go of the ways you used to see yourself and the world and life so that you have the capacity to do a new thing. The Israelites had spent generations in slavery in Egypt. God called them out of that life and into a grand vision of freedom and community and care. One of the first barriers to overcome, however, is how they saw themselves. They had been conditioned to see themselves as bound to the authority of the Egyptian Pharaoh, simply doing what they were told, not in charge, not responsible; not the principle actors in their own adventure. God called them out of that, but that is all they knew, so the wilderness period was a time of unlearning and disorientation of how they *had* lived so that they might be able to develop other ways of being and seeing the world and behaving. And believe me, it didn't happen overnight. You can see from our story this morning, the Israelites were grumbling and

acting like victims. Even as they were in the process of gaining their freedom, fear and victim mentality was at play. "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" they grumbled with an ease that would not serve them in the new life to which God was calling them.

Recently, there was an article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled, "Deep in the Forest, Bambi Remains the Cold War's Last Prisoner." The article "tells the story of how deer in the Bavarian Forest National Park twenty years after the removal of the fortified border between West Germany and Czechoslovakia continue to honor the barrier as if the fences and guards were still there. The area which once was the location of high electric fences, barbed wire, and machine-gun carrying guards now is one of the largest national reserves in Europe. Thanks to the quick thinking and work of environmentalists from the East and West, much of the land that served as a divider is now called the Green Belt. Even though the deer are free to roam on both sides, GPS tracking is documenting that generations later "The

wall in the head" is still there and they choose not to cross the imaginary line." (from NACBA Ledger, Volume 29, Number 4, Winter 2009, p. 4)

In these stories of calling and sending in the Bible, wilderness always seems to be a crucial part of the story. Because, like those deer, we often have walls and barriers that are in our heads, even if they are not real, and it takes getting flung out of our comfort zone, out of our usual environment and habits in order for us to see that we are free to choose who we will follow and how we will order our lives and use our resources and whether we will live by the courage of our convictions as God's people; actors in the great adventure that is life in the kingdom of God. We need the wilderness in order to correct our assumptions and our vision; to see as God sees, to change our orientation, to tear down the walls of fear in order that we might trust in God to guide us.

Have you ever had the experience of being flung out into the wilderness and experienced that sense of disorientation. You're old

ways of thinking and doing just don't work or even make sense any more. Sometimes that happens when we move to a different community, or when we lose a loved one, or when a tragic event occurs that shakes the foundations like a disaster. Surely the people of Haiti must be going through a wilderness experience that most of us can hardly begin to imagine. In those wilderness times we get a glimpse of what really matters, and the strength of our character.

It is hard to create wilderness experiences, but during Lent we try to do so by giving up things that take a lot of time and focus in our lives. This practice is not so much about depriving ourselves as it is creating an opening where God can call to us and show us the way out of our own bondages. That may come as we shift our focus in some ways big or small - whether that be giving up something or changing our habits. These little changes just may allow us to see things in a new way; maybe even see that the fence we thought was keeping us from doing something grand has long since been removed and God is

summoning us to be actors in a grand adventure if we will only venture out. Amen.