

Wilderness



**HOLY WEEK
2020**

PALM SUNDAY

Read: Exodus 14:10-25

Today we meet the Israelites just after they had been freed from slavery in Egypt. They had fled, with Moses, from Egypt and then found themselves with the Red Sea before them and an angry Egyptian army behind them.

They had just witnessed the power of God over and over through the ten plagues that had ravaged the land of Egypt, culminating with the death of the firstborn of every Egyptian. But also, over and over, they had been spared, protected from the plagues, including that final plague, the death of every firstborn.

They had seen what God could do and the actions that God could, and did, take on their behalf, but now as they stood before the Red Sea they cowered in fear. In fact, they were so afraid and sure that they would die they said to Moses, "For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness" (Exodus 14:12).

But Moses ignored their pleas and said to them, "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. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still" (Exodus 14:13-14).

It is often our human inclination to fight for ourselves, to defend ourselves, or even simply to do it ourselves. But in their first lesson of the wilderness, the Israelites must learn that God will fight for them. God is in charge.

In other words, their survival is not based on their effort or ability.

Left on their own, there was nothing the Israelites could do to defend themselves against the rapidly approaching Egyptian army or transport themselves across a body of water. But it wasn't up to them; the same God who brought them out of Egypt would not abandon them now.

I find great comfort in this wilderness lesson, because often I feel it's up to me to accomplish God's work in the world. Yet, this lesson from the wilderness assures me that God is working even when the situation seems impossible.

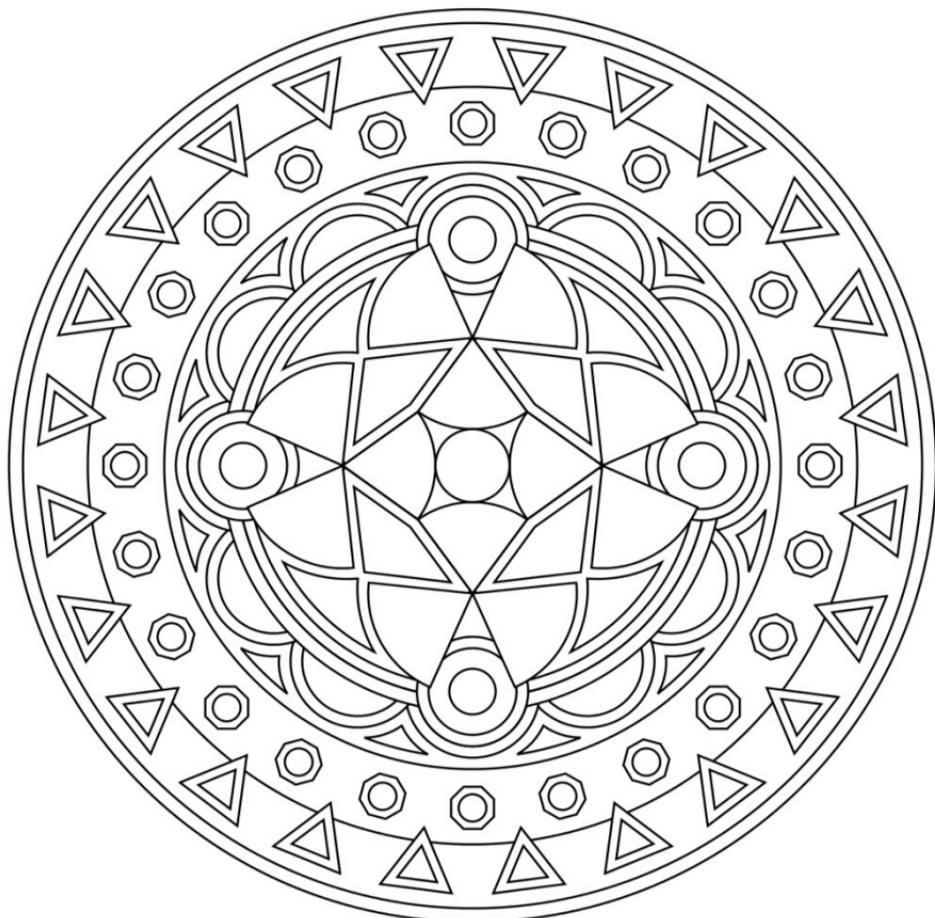
When there is nothing we can do to change the situation in front of us, it is our responsibility to trust in the power of God. For as the book of Ephesians reminds us, God is able to do far more than all we can ask or imagine.

And that's good news! It was good news for the Israelites. And it's good news for us today. It is not up to us!

As we journey through the wilderness, may we learn how to let go of control and trust in God's power.

Ponder: What difficult, or even impossible, situation do you face? How might you let go of control and trust in God's power?

Respond: Take some time to reflect in silence, in a journal, or through coloring as you consider where you might need to trust God.



MONDAY

Read: Exodus 16:2-31

Today we meet some hungry Israelites, who still have some lessons to learn about trusting God's provision in the wilderness. And once again, God responds by providing for their needs. But even more, God has something to teach the Israelites about God's intentions for their new life out of Egypt.

When they complain about being hungry, God gives them manna, something like bread, for them to eat. And God instructs them that God will provide manna each morning, and they are to gather just enough manna for the day because there will be more the next day.

Well, for people who were once slaves in Egypt, trusting that there would manna each morning was a hard lesson. So, some tried to gather extra, but it spoiled at night because God insisted that the people trust God's provision.

And then it got more complicated, because on the sixth day, they were to gather double, so that they could rest from their work on the seventh day. So, this time, the manna didn't spoil at night, because God insisted that the people trust God's grace.

You see, the Israelite's second lesson in the wilderness was that they were more than what they created, what they accomplished or what they could gather. God was giving them a new identity.

If you recall, in the book of Genesis, God created the heavens and the earth in six days, and then God rested on the seventh day. You might also recall that God created man and woman on the sixth day, and then, before they did any of the work God created them to do, man and woman rested with God on the seventh day.

Their identity was based on who God was and what God had done in creation.

But, in Egypt, the Israelites had been forced to work, without rest, and not just work, but their value was based upon how much they produced. They were defined by what they did, particularly how many bricks they could produce.

So, the temptation for the Israelites was to still define themselves by what they did and what they produced. Their life quite literally depending on how many bricks they could produce. So, based on their life in Egypt, the more manna they could gather, the better off they would be.

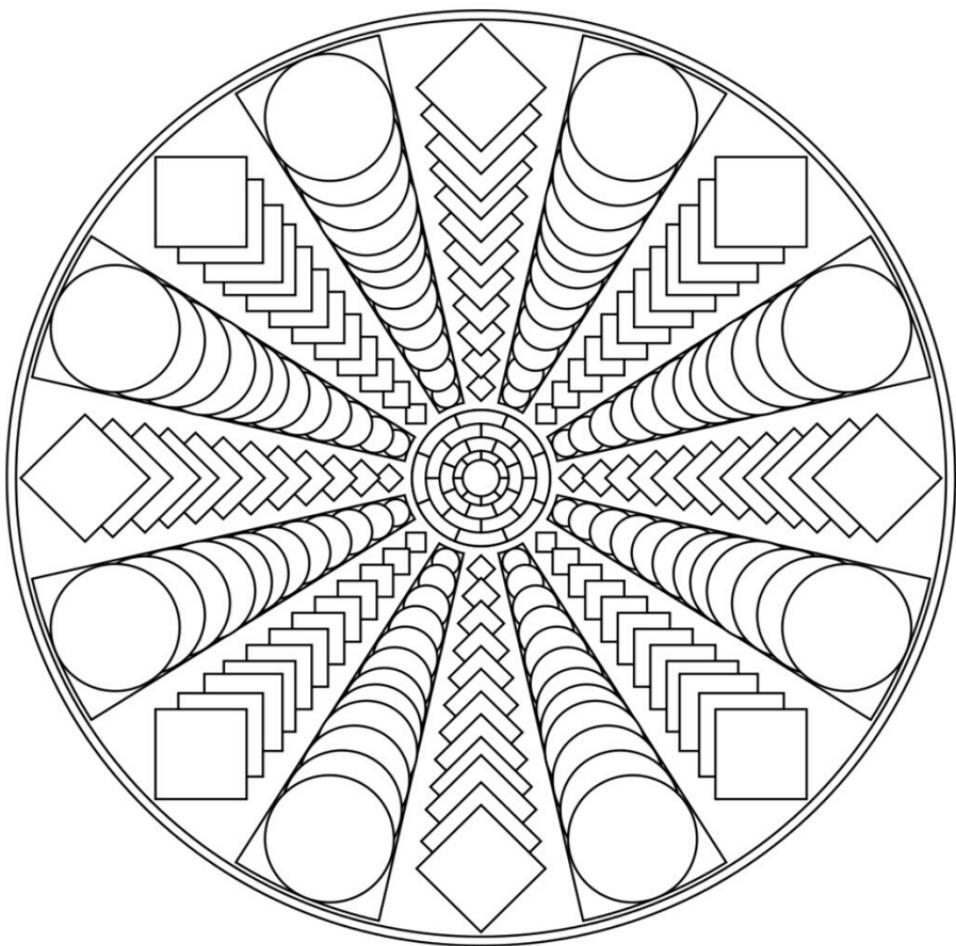
But now, in the wilderness, God wants to teach them something different. God wants them to understand who they are, and whose they are. So, God gives them the gift of rest. God challenges them to be defined by who God is, what God provides, and what God has already accomplished.

The same is true for us. It is always a temptation to define ourselves by what we are able to accomplish, by the things we produce. But perhaps God challenges us to live differently by putting down the thing on which we think our life depends.

However, putting down the thing on which it appears our life depends isn't easy. But, in the wilderness, perhaps God is teaching us that the source of our identity is in God, in being a child of God, and in what God has already done for us. And that is far greater identity than anything we could produce on our own.

Ponder: What is the thing on which you think your life depends? What would it look like to put that down for an hour or even a day?

Respond: Take some time to reflect in silence, in a journal, or through coloring as you consider what it might look like to give up the thing on which you think your life depends.



TUESDAY

Read: Exodus 17:2-7

Yesterday we met some hungry Israelites; today we meet some thirsty Israelites. They have once again complained to Moses, and against God, saying “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” (Exodus 17:3).

For at least the third time, the Israelites make clear that they would rather be slaves in Egypt, than free people living in the wilderness. It’s easy for us to laugh at them, to see the error in their logic, but most of us don’t like the wilderness, or at least not the wildernesses that are forced upon us. It’s not usually a pleasant place to be and we don’t typically choose it for ourselves.

And so, I understand the Israelites. They are scared and confused. Probably bored and uncertain. They would rather go back to a place that they know, no matter how bad it was, than remain in a place that is unknown, with a future that they cannot see.

But God meets them in the wilderness, in their confusion, pain, and uncertainty. And God not only shows up, but God also provides for their very real need of water.

So here, at Massah, the Israelites learn their third lesson of the wilderness, God will provide. Even more, God provides when the people complain. God doesn't just provide when the Israelites ask nicely, trusting that just as God provided in the past, so also will God provide in the future. But God provides, and shows God's power, even when the people whine and complain against God.

That's grace. Because grace is the free and unmerited favor of God. It's God's action when we haven't earned it and when we don't deserve it.

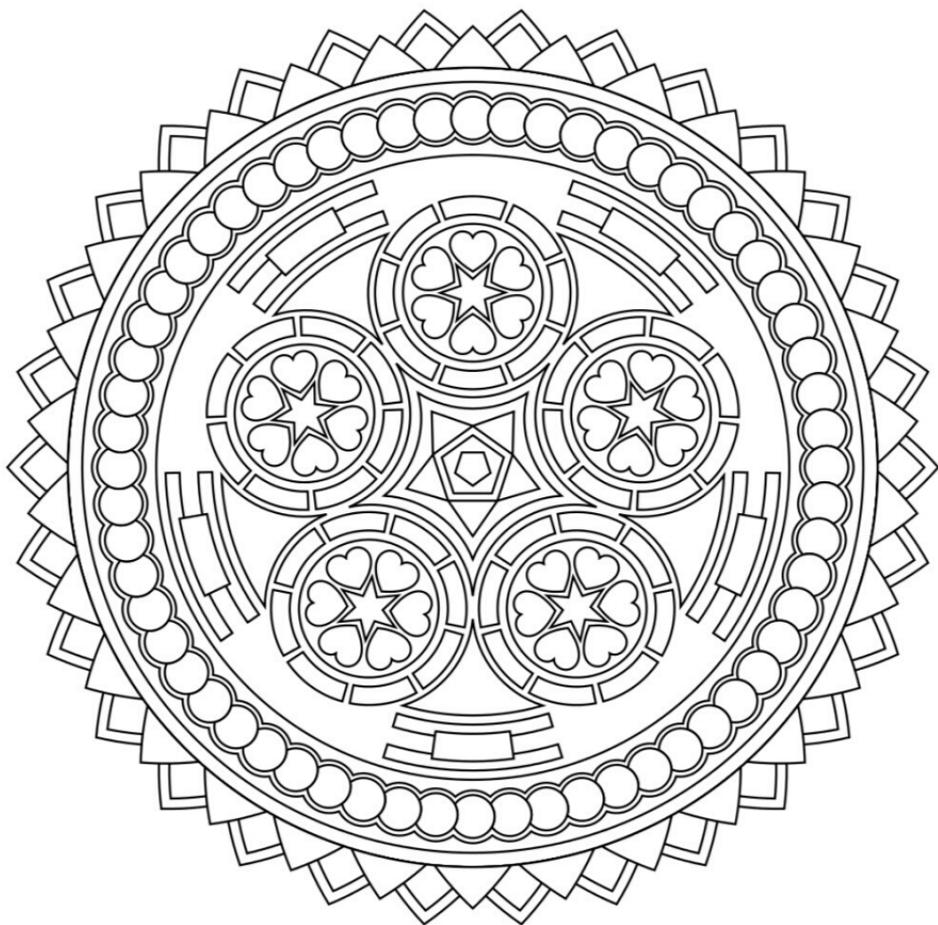
Now, grace isn't permission to whine and complain until God just gives in and gives us what we want. But grace is a recognition that everything we have is a gift from God.

Sometimes grace is hard to see in the wilderness. It's easier to get caught up in the difficulties of the wilderness, especially when we can't see the future. It's easy to whine and complain, wanting the things we're used to having.

But grace is always there, we just have to pay attention to find it. Perhaps grace shows up in a conversation with a friend, or in the sun, or in a good belly laugh, or in the blooming flowers, or in a meal shared with family. Grace takes many forms in the wilderness if we're willing to look for it.

Ponder: Where are you seeing glimpses of grace this week?

Respond: Take some time to reflect in silence, in a journal, or through coloring as you consider what grace might look like in your life.



WEDNESDAY

Read: Exodus 19:1-9a

About three months after leaving Egypt, the people finally arrive somewhere. It's not yet the Promised Land, but it is a place of significance. A place where they will set up their tents, and settle down, at least for a little while.

Upon arriving at Mount Sinai, Moses climbed up the mountain and God spoke to Moses saying, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:4-6).

These are powerful and significant words. It means that out of all creation, God has chosen to work through this one nation, Israel. And that brings us to the fourth wilderness lesson, God calls, God gives a new identity, and God gives purpose to God's people.

In this case calling is a powerful thing. Just three months ago this group of people was making bricks in Egypt. They were defined by how many bricks they could make. But now, even as they wander in the wilderness, God calls them by their new titles of treasured possession, royal priesthood, and holy nation.

These words were unfathomable to people who had only ever been known as slaves. This nation of people, the Israelites, had never in their memory been treated anything like a treasured possession. And so, how could they, of all people, become a royal priesthood and a holy nation?

But that's the beauty of this wilderness lesson. As it is with grace, the Israelites did nothing to earn these titles. God simply bestowed them on the people as an act of love.

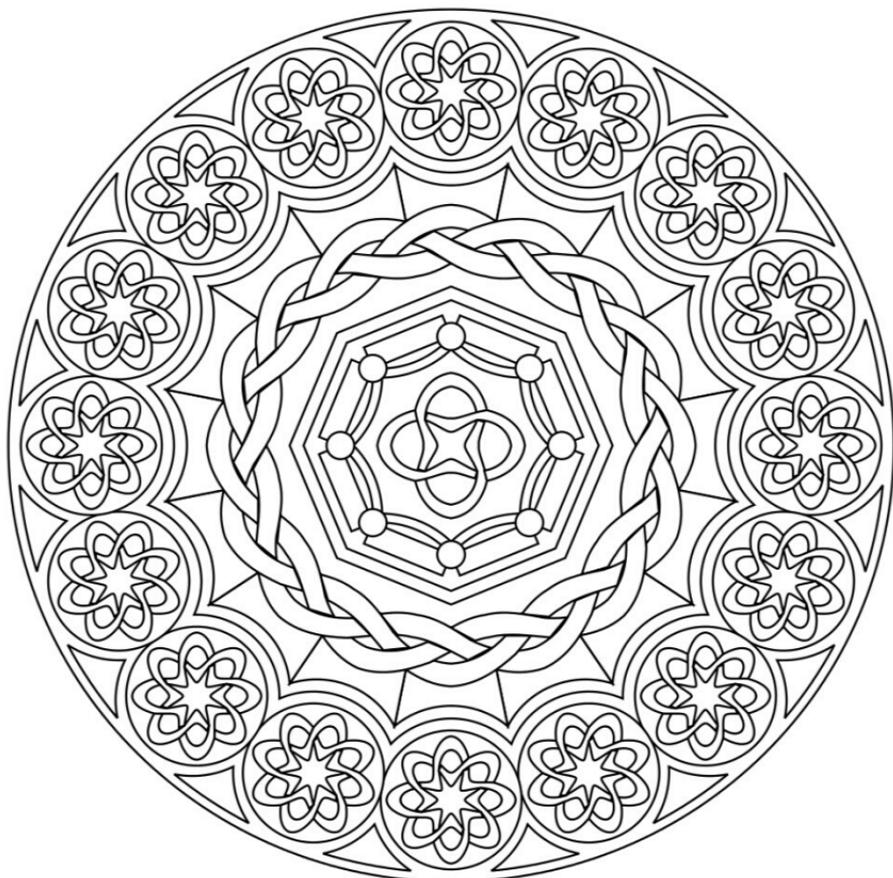
At this point in the story, the people have no idea how God will use them to ultimately bless the world. They have no idea that Jesus' ancestral line will trace back to this. But perhaps that's the power of this wilderness lesson, we never know God will take a ragtag bunch of freed slaves to be characters in God's story.

And perhaps that is how God continues to work today. For God continues to call us when we feel the unworthy, undeserving, or unqualified. Because God has plans for us, individually and communally, far beyond what we understand right now.

And that's good news!

Ponder: Where do you feel unworthy or incapable? What identity might God be speaking to you instead?

Respond: Take some time to reflect in silence, in a journal, or through coloring as you consider what identities God gives to you.



THURSDAY

Read: Exodus 20:1-20

Yesterday the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, committed themselves to God, and then prepared to hear God speak to them.

And the first thing God spoke to them was the familiar passage that we simply call the Ten Commandments. But to separate these words from the rest of the story is to miss their purpose.

Because the story of the Israelites, beginning when they were slaves in Egypt reveals a God who personally interacts with Israel throughout every stage of their journey. God meets them at the Red Sea. God provides manna and water for them. God calls them.

It's about relationship.

So now, as we come to Exodus 20, we hear God's direct instructions to Israel. Here God tells the people what it means to live as a holy nation, as God's chosen people, as a people set apart.

And the question is why? Why does God call the Israelites to live this way?

The answer has a lot to do with God's intention for calling them in the first place. God wants them to be a light to the nations. It's all about getting the other nations to ask questions, to notice that Israel is different.

And so, the people encounter their fifth wilderness lesson. In response to what God has already done, they can do nothing other than obey.

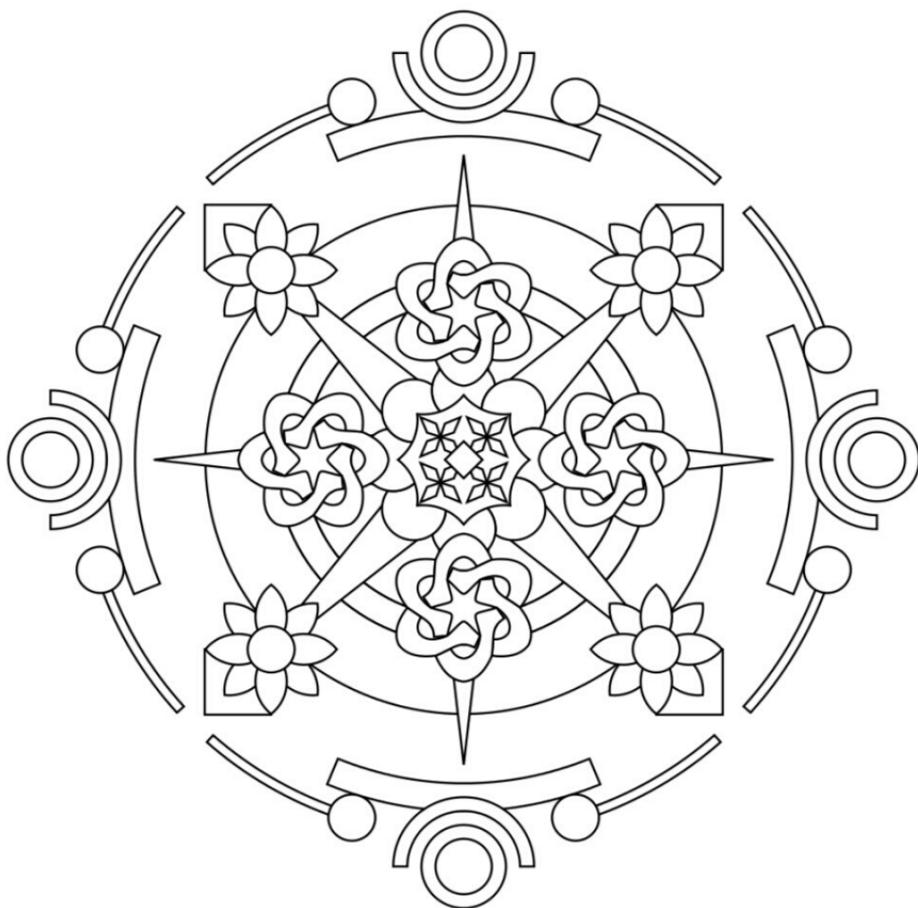
Obedience isn't about earning redemption or even earning God's favor, but it is about living in response to what God has already done.

The commandments in Exodus 20 are for an already called, already chosen, and already redeemed community. That was established before they were given the Ten Commandments. But now God explains to that same community what it means to be God's chosen people, to be a community rooted in worship of God and living in justice and peace with one another.

Our obedience is the same, it is always a response to God. As Good Friday draws near, we're reminded that in Jesus Christ our salvation is already accomplished. And we're now invited to a new way of life, a new way of being in this world. And our way of life in the world is meant to show the love of God to the world.

Ponder: What might God be calling you to do? What might a new way of life in Christ look like in your life? How is your life showing others the love of God?

Respond: Take some time to reflect in silence, in a journal, or through coloring as you consider how you live in response to what God has already accomplished.



FRIDAY

Read: Exodus 32:1-6, 21-24

This story makes me laugh. It makes me laugh because while Moses is literally on Mount Sinai talking to God, and receiving the law, the people grow restless and want to build something that they can see to worship. It makes me laugh because when Moses comes down the mountain and confronts Aaron about his role in building the golden calf, Aaron says, "They gave [the gold] to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" (Exodus 32:24), as if it just mysteriously happened.

The story makes me laugh because it's so human. It's so honest. And it's so real. Humans try to create things we can see and touch because it makes us feel like we have control of something. And then sometimes we're confused when we see the actual result because it's not what we expected, or even wanted.

I don't think the Israelites, or us today, intend to create objects to worship. But I do think we want control, and then, when we end up with something that blatantly breaks God's commands, we wonder how we got that far.

And so, the sixth wilderness lesson is a challenging one, you can't see into the future, so instead you must journey by faith.

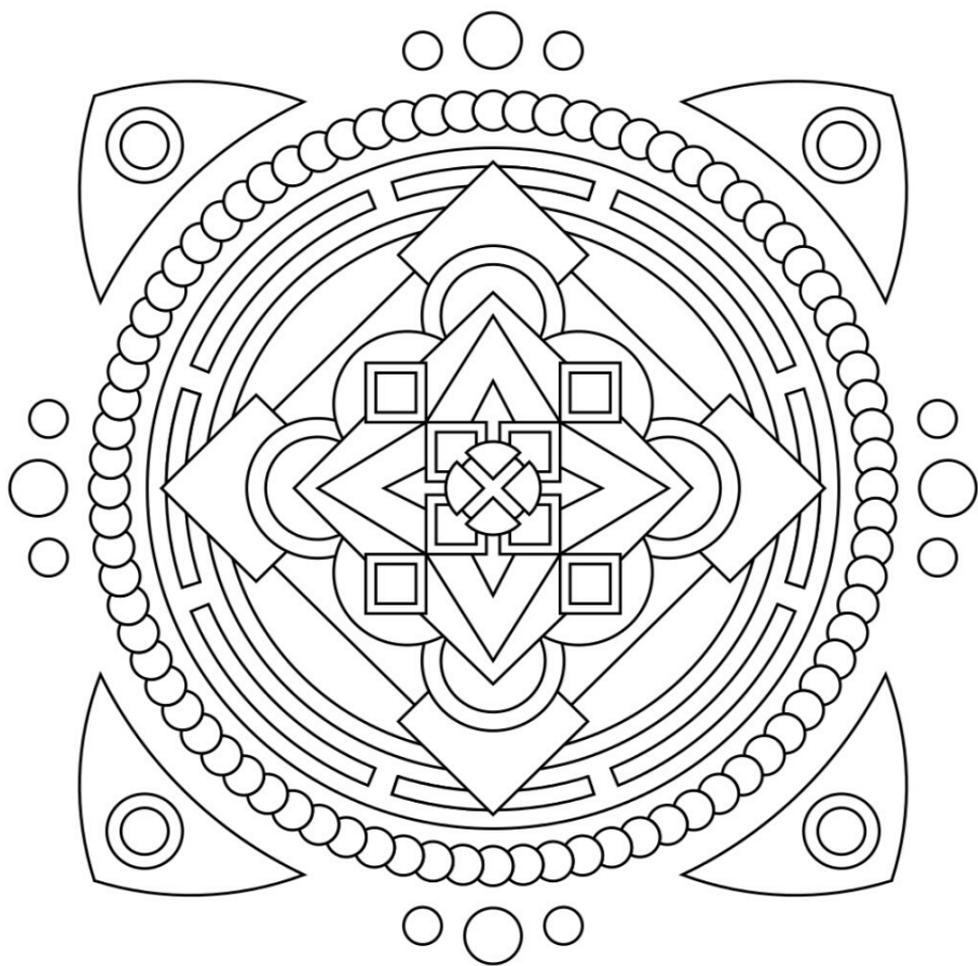
You see, the wilderness is a hard place to be, especially when you can't see the other side. The Israelites are experiencing that even as they also have tangible experiences of God. But their temptation, and ours today, is to take matters into our own hands, to take control, as if somehow, we know better, and can do better, than God.

We want to know the future, but the wilderness challenges us to keep journeying day by day, and sometimes step by step, even when we can't see to the other side. That practice takes faith and trust. It means we don't get to control the future. And it means that we must learn to live in the uncertainty.

And trust me that's always easier said than done. But, in the end, the journey is worth it.

Ponder: What uncertainties are you facing right now? What might it look like for you to give up control and trust God?

Respond: Take some time to reflect in silence, in a journal, or through coloring as you consider what giving up control might look like in your life.



SATURDAY

Read: Exodus 33:12-23

Yesterday the Israelites made a golden calf to worship. To call it a mistake is an understatement, and God was not happy about it. In fact, God was so angry that God told Moses that God was done with the nation of Israel.

God said to Moses, "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people" (Exodus 33:3).

Now, keep in mind this was the same God who had brought them out of Egypt, journeyed with them to Mount Sinai, provided for their needs, and appeared on the mountain to them. But the people, as soon as they were left alone, turned their back and rejected God by building this golden calf.

And so, God considers turning God's back on the people, but Moses intercedes. And Moses makes one of the boldest, yet truest claims, of this wilderness journey. Moses says to God, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth" (Exodus 33:15-16).

Moses' words highlight their seventh wilderness lesson, the people are nothing without God's presence with them.

On some level Moses understands that the people will not survive without God on their side. But even more, Moses knows that it is God's presence among them that makes them distinct. Without God, they are just like every other nation.

And so, Moses begs God to be gracious and show mercy to the people. And ultimately God decides to stick with the people.

Perhaps we're tempted to think that we can go at it alone, that we don't need God's presence in our lives. But I think Moses' words speak a reminder to us too, we need God. We need God in both big and small ways. For we are nothing without the power, grace and mercy of God on our side.

Ponder: Where are you tempted to go at it alone? Where do you try to use your own strength to get through life? What would it look like for you to ask God to stick with you?

Respond: Take some time to reflect in silence, in a journal, or through coloring as you consider where you need God's presence and power in your life.



EASTER SUNDAY

Read: Exodus 40:34-38

We skipped through the portion of Exodus that outlines the instructions for building the tabernacle and the actual building of the tabernacle. If you recall, the tabernacle was a sort of moveable temple. It was a large tent and inside were the materials necessary to properly worship God.

In today's passage, the tabernacle has finally been completed! And Exodus tells us, "The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34).

And so, the people learn their eighth, and perhaps most important, wilderness lesson, God is with them. The people still have a long journey before them, and trust me, they haven't figured it all out yet, but God promises to be present with them through it all.

And God promises to not only be present with them, God also promises to lead and guide them through the rest of their wilderness journey. Because, God's presence will be visible in a cloud by day and fire by night. And then, the cloud will lift when it is time to pack up and continue on their journey. And then the cloud will lead them to the next stop. And when the cloud settles again, the people will know that is time to set up camp.

And, in that way, God will lead them to Promised Land. God will always be present with them.

And that's the promise of Easter too. That's the good news we celebrate today! The grave is empty, sin has been defeated, and Jesus is on the loose. God's presence is here, among us, now and forever.

Today's Easter celebrations look different than years past, but what we celebrate remains the same. And perhaps, today we're experiencing a glimpse of that first Easter.

Because on that first Easter the disciples were devastated by the death of Jesus on Friday. They weren't gathering in large groups out of fear of the authorities. They weren't singing glorious songs. Instead, they were scared because their worlds had been turned upside down.

And in the midst of that Jesus appeared to them saying, "Do not be afraid" (Matthew 28:10). Jesus showed up in their darkest hour and announced the good news of his resurrection.

And that good news still rings true today! God is with us, wherever we are and wherever we go!

Ponder: What are the dark corners of your life? Where do you need the good news of Jesus' resurrection to break into your life?

Respond: Take some time to reflect in silence, in a journal, or through coloring as you consider where you need to see the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

