

**Reflection on Exodus 16:2–15**  
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*“There are times when you need the extremity of rock, the hardness of an old, cold place against which you can measure yourself. There are times when you need to retreat to the wilderness.”*

These words from Sharon Blackie’s memoir join the multitude of reflections from those who have gone on pilgrimage and been changed. There seems to be an intuitive knowledge that being in wild spaces, simplified and stripped back, surrounded by raw landscape *is the making of us*. It is this potential that makes wilderness the traditional setting for enlightenment and transformation and another theme in the journey of freedom, love and life.

The reality of the pilgrimage is often far from ideal and I suppose, to a certain extent, that is the point. Those who set out in hope are soon confronted by the hardness of the expedition—physically, mentally, and spiritually. We may even be prepared and expect challenge, but are often surprised by what in the end causes us to come undone, to reach the near breaking point through which we must move if we are to discover deep wisdom and inner strength.

Each of us will have our own unique responses when pushed to the limits—both by a literal pilgrimage and those wilderness-like seasons in life that test us—but the reaction we hear in the scene from Exodus is quite a common one, I think: blame and complaint. “If only we had died in the land of Egypt... you brought us out into this wilderness to kill us.” The hunger they were experiencing may have been actual, but the feedback of the people towards Moses and Aaron is out of proportion to the reality and it is most definitely misdirected.

The Exodus story affirms that it is God who desires the people’s freedom and well-being, God who has initiated and called for this transformative trek. Therefore, it is God who responds to their complaint. God addresses the hunger of the people not by giving them what they *want*, but by giving them gifts that have the potential to *build up their faith and trust*.

The Hebrew people are instructed that they will receive manna each day—enough for everyone, no more, no less—except for the sixth day when they are to harvest enough for two days which introduces the idea of Sabbath rest. In this arrangement, there was no need for fear or hoarding, though some were tempted. Instead, the invitation was to trust that manna would continue to fall in the morning and



quails descend on the plains in the evening. A growing confidence in God’s loving providence and a Sabbath observance that affirms and rests in this confidence were instilled in the people during the Exodus pilgrimage.

As with most desert wisdom, that which is gleaned by our trek through the wilderness—again, real or figurative—can sound unbelievable, impractical and even absurd in the light of so-called real life. Similar to how the at-home dress code we enjoyed during lockdown—track pants, unshaved and make-up-less faces—may feel less appropriate as we emerge from our homes, so desert wisdom can be hard to integrate into the whole of our living.

In partly this is due to the pressure to conform to (unquestioned) conventions and assumptions. A kind of group think about what we are to value and how we are to view things takes hold. In the face of this pressure, we may doubt our own experience or wonder if our insights have any place beyond our own hearts and minds.

For example, some of the interpretations and conclusions since the recession was announced last week are not in keeping with how I’ve come to see things over these months. Amidst the graphs and “expert” commentary, my experience seems to pale in comparison.

It seems to me that measuring economic health primarily on Gross Domestic Product (GDP), that is, goods being moved back and forth across the globe, does not take into consideration the renewal of creation we've seen—the clean air, visible horizons, clear waters. And I wonder, might the health of our economy encompass a more wholistic view of welfare?

Also, the conclusion that we as consumers feel “insecure” about the future and this is the sole reason household savings have increased does not imagine the possibility that other factors might be at play. What I know in myself and hear from some others is that these months have reaffirmed our desire for simplicity and justice, thus taking away our taste for consumption, especially that which comes cheaply.

These, of course, reflect *my* gleanings from the pandemic journey so far. Hopefully, you will have some of your own. But it seems it would be a missed opportunity if we come out of this with little more to show for ourselves than tidy wardrobes, renovated bathrooms, revived hobbies and new garden beds.

In the first centuries after his resurrection, followers of Jesus made their way out of the cities into the deserts of northern Africa. Like the pilgrims in our time, they wanted to encounter deep wisdom in the wilderness and sought direction in the desert from the elders who lived in contemplative, monastic-like communities. One of their wisdom stories seems fitting given the Exodus reading for today:

Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen, “How should one fast?” Abba Poemen said to him, “For my part, I think it is better that one should eat every day, but only a little, so as not to be satisfied.” Abba Joseph said to him: “When you were younger, did you not fast two days at a time, Abba?” the old man said: “Yes, even for three days and four and the whole week. The Fathers tried all this out as they were able, and they found it preferable to eat every day, but just a small amount. They have left us this royal way, which is light.”

This wisdom from the desert may sound peculiar. To be unsatisfied often indicates incompleteness, something is unfinished or “wrong” and needs to be fixed. Perhaps this is the source of much of the blame and many of the complaints streaming forth from us at this time since life is not going back to “normal” as quickly as we hoped or in the way we imagined.

But desert wisdom suggests that to be slightly dissatisfied is *desirable*. To yearn is to seek. It is the energy that can lead us to community, to prayer, and ultimately, to God. But rather than raiding the refrigerator or wine cabinet, we must seek the things of God.

So, in these days, may we listen to the dissatisfaction that rumbles in our hearts, speaking of our yearning for God's realm of love to come fully to us and our world. May we not quell this rumbling with that which does not truly satisfy, nor transfer its positive energy into blame, complaint or any number of misguided responses. May our desire lead us deeper into God and the foolish wisdom of Christ's self-giving love. May we be open to the gift of transformation.

