

Finding God's Grace in the Wilderness – One Hebrews 11

This sermon builds on the Wilderness Covid sermon two weeks ago. There was a church that was over 100 years old. As all churches, it was made up of a mixture of holiness and humanness. Its roots go back to the Netherlands of the fifteenth century. In 1642, some from this movement fled persecution by going to Poland at the invitation of the king there. Later, because of constant war and political upheavals, from 1789 on, many moved to Russian Ukraine at the invitation of Catherine II who needed good farmers.

Then in the 1870's a large group moved to North America to southern Manitoba, Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. In the 1890's the Manitoba group expanded to homesteading north of Saskatoon. Then the Kansas and Oklahoma groups expanded to Drake in the years 1904 to 1910. Also a number of people in Russia, in the years between 1923-1929, came to Canada, and some settled around Drake. Later, after World War II this church sponsored relatives to come here from Russia. In the past decades this church has been joined by many whose ethnic and cultural roots are more diverse.

Most of the time one could find lots of grace and mercy at the center of this church. At other times one could hear sounds of murmuring and grumbling. It was no different than other congregations, so the people of Israel provide a good analogy for understanding this church. The people of Israel were saved only by God's grace. He took them out of slavery in Egypt. He rolled back the Red Sea so they could escape. It's the same kind of situation with many of the ancestors of the people of this congregation.

This church knew that salvation and life were gifts of God's grace. And they rejoiced in this gift by being a people that poured out God's grace on others in many practical ways. But struggles came as they come to all churches, just as they occurred with the people of Israel. Many centered around, "How are we to live as God

wants us to live today, in our community?" Israel had the Ten Commandments and the idea that they were to be a light to the nations. This church has the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' instructions to go & make disciples, and live by the Fruits of the Spirit. Like Nicodemus they heard the call to be born again, to receive God's grace, and worked to figure out what it meant exactly for their time and place.

On January 17, **1906**, a month before the founding of the church, a meeting was held to organize a Sunday School. Then on February 7, 1906, a formal meeting was held to establish a church. Within a week a constitution was agreed on and the first Sunday of March, 1906 was the first official worship service of the congregation.

This church had the sense that it was on a journey. They could point to many examples of God's grace in their individual lives and in the history of fleeing hardships. Many persons came to know God's grace in the church. Their church cemetery came to be filled with saints who rest in peace knowing their labors in Jesus were not in vain. They found their way in the wilderness – over hundreds of years and through many hardships.

Of course there had been times of struggle, over leaders, over mission, over worship, new social issues and so on. Like all churches, this church became set on certain ways of doing things. And they had standards and beliefs and accepted ways of conduct. But this church also had a mission. To serve people. To include new people. To receive sinners. At times this mission created tensions over who to include, what to do, and how to help people with out compromising the church standards and practices. So they would stop and discuss. These times of discernment proved profitable. They were a sign of God's presence. At time these tensions and relationship difficulties, caused people to feel like they were in a time of wilderness. But God led them on.

By April, 1906, meeting in homes was no longer possible. So a portion of a barn hayloft was offered. And it was decided to build a church

building on July 23, 1906. Land was donated as well as for a cemetery. Funds for the building came from Kansas, Nebraska, Ohio, Rosthern, Osler and Winnipeg. The dedication service was on March 24, 1907. The congregation intentionally was a part of the larger local group of congregations as well as the Canadian Conference.

I'm guessing that the next ten years or so, the church felt appropriately proud of what it had organized and accomplished. They continued to adapt to living in the prairies and adjusting to life as Canadians. I would guess these could be described as the honeymoon years, despite the harsh winters and struggles to get established.

The members of this church knew itself to be a gift from God. It was obvious that the gifts of the Spirit were there - leadership, administration, service, encouragement, teaching, hospitality, mercy and music. It was God's gift that there were older members, involved middle aged persons, young families, young adult members, children & teens. God had graced the congregation with wealth, wisdom, vision, energy and a good church building. The people of the church desired to follow Jesus and to serve God.

But then wilderness living occurred. The second decade of the congregation, **1917 to 1926**, was a hard time. The world intruded on the community. Despite a buoyant farm economy, growing church numbers and opportunities to help the destitute at home and in Europe, worries rose up. The ethnic and religious walls of the church began to crumble under the influence of the larger, divergent community. Issues included marrying non members. Alcohol consumption. Playing cards and pool and dancing were also considered sins. What to do with church members who refused to pay or could not pay their church levy – or dues?

In response, as usually occurs, a stricter code of ethical living and a somewhat harsh church discipline which was meant to be redemptive was mandated. Because of this outside

influence, the leadership at North Star saw a need for training in the Biblical, cultural and ethnic understanding of church & its people. All groups do this when new issues, tensions, changes, and wilderness disturbs the comfort of relationships and church life.

However, the most traumatic event and far reaching influence on the second decade of the church, **1917 to 1926**, was probably the flu epidemic of 1918. It claimed the lives of six of the church members and five children in the church community. Millions died around the world. More than all the military and civilian deaths of World Wars One and Two. By law, North Star Mennonite was closed for five Sundays until the flu had run its course. Hardly enough people were well to be able to care for the sick. Daily chores were a struggle for many to carry out so the healthy men went from farm to farm to do the chores and give what assistance they could.

Then the optimism of the 1920's changed to the deep financial depression of **1927 to 1936**. The distress continued. Crop prices fell as did the average yield per acre. Teachers were not paid. 1932 had an invasion of rats. 1935 was the winter of the snow storm. Riots in Regina by the unemployed. 1937 brought record heat waves. Wilderness living had fully arrived with the dirty thirties. Where was God in all this? These years survival depended on government relief, church programs and generous gifts from individuals and groups from eastern Canada sending train cars of food and clothing relief to stricken communities.

It was in this scenario that the church lived, worked, struggled, and celebrated in their **third decade**. But it kept on keeping on – being faithful. Trees were planted on the church yard in **1927**. A German school and Bible school was started and continued until the early 1940's. Tensions with the English speaking people in the community arose because of WWII. The church pastors helped with an outreach house church at Guernsey until 1931 when members moved away.

After a May 28, **1928** brotherhood meeting to build a new barn to accommodate all the horses, a new priority surfaced. It was decided very quickly to build a church in the town of Drake, where many had settled. Then build the barn with left over timber. Sunday School began on Sept 2, 1928. The new church was dedicated on Nov. 4, 1928. In 1931 it was decided to abandon the church levy system in favor of a free will offering budget system. But in January 1933, with the Great Depression, the church was in great financial difficulty, so the levy system was reinstated.

This church was really no different from any other church. Every group that God has ever had, has reached a point in history where the people say, "Wow, we finally made it! Let's stop right here and go no further. Here we have a common set of beliefs, here we have a good tradition, we have a nice history, we have a certain set of practices, as well as a certain way of doing things, and it feels comfortable for us. Let's stop right here because now, surely we have it made. We've built our tower of Babel. And so let's keep doing church this way forever and preserve this form of church until the Lord returns. But often it seems God intervenes to help keep his momentum going, through internal and external pressures.

We find from this brief overview of history, the church didn't settle down and just keep the wheels of the church rolling. Despite the flu and the Depression, and the changing society and norms, they keep being faithful. They had new programs. They built a building. They didn't fall apart. What is impressive is the speed and the determination that was displayed. Wilderness situations and disagreements didn't sidetrack them from going forward, or relaxing or turning on each other.

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. By faith the people passed through migration, the flu, the great depression, many sorrows and lack of funds. By faith the people carved out a living in the prairie wilderness, for themselves

and for others. By faith the people understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

I am impressed with how seriously people took their worship and ministry in the church. How seriously they took the word from God as they read the scriptures at the opening of almost every meeting. I am impressed with how often it was suggested that a particular issue should be made a matter of prayer. How often an issue to be voted on was first brought to the Lord in prayer for wisdom and direction. There is much that we can learn and appreciate from those who have been a part of the church of Jesus Christ in the community. They repelled descending back into a continual state of wilderness living.

More change occurred in the years **1937 to 1946**. There was new leadership. On May 21, 1938, the first election of women to a committee took place. But it took until 1969 for women to have the privilege of voting at congregational meetings.

On January 2, 1939, a local relief treasury was formed. This was a change from simply asking for funds when a need arose. Quite a number of destitute individuals living in and sometimes outside the community were given a monthly living allowance from this fund. This treasury was separate from the foreign relief treasury. There seemed to be an undertone of spiritual unrest or hunger in the church during these years.

A mild internal threat arose in December 30, 1940. People wanting to be married were not allowed to do so on Sundays and had to have paid their church levy. But refreshing winds were blowing. December 30, 1941 brought the first regular prayer meetings – within a month of Pearl Harbor and World War II going on in Europe.

By December 28, 1945, there were plans to celebrate the 40th anniversary upon the completion of the choir loft addition to the church. At the end of 1946, there was a record membership of 329 and church population of 583. The congregation didn't allow the winds of war to distract them.

Possibly, having a hope focused community church was an attraction for people facing a world at war as well as getting their financial feet under them after years of depression. The Almighty was seen as good. And the church seemed to be a beacon of hope and support and faith in troubled wilderness times of pandemic, war and rationing.

They grew in faith, hope love and confidence that the Creator, who had begun such a great work among them, would not stop in mid-design but would keep perfecting them until the day Jesus the Anointed, the world's Liberating King, returns to redeem the world. Amen.