

Wisdom at 3 Miles an Hour
Deuteronomy 8:2-3
Rev. David Nieda

Good morning. My name is Rev. David Nieda from the Northwest United Methodist Foundation and I'm glad to be able to bring you this message. I want to start with a question. Now I can't ask for hands so I'm going to trust you to answer honestly, "Which of you has got patience down to a science that you don't even notice when you're having to wait?" "Who has no problem with waiting?"

My sense is that most of us kept our hands down. Except for maybe a couple of you who have mastered waiting, or just want to be contrarian! I can see you through the camera!

For the rest of us, patiently waiting does not come easy. There a scene from one of my favorite movies, *The Princess Bride*. In it, the great swordsman Inigo Montoya waits at the top of the Cliffs of Insanity for the hero, Wesley, to climb up so that they can have a duel and Inigo can kill him. Inigo tries to encourage Wesley to climb up the cliff faster, but given that Wesley is climbing without a rope, he tells Inigo that he'll just have to wait. Inigo scoffs and says in his made-for-movies Spanish accent, "I hate waiting."

I hate waiting. From the time we are born we learn quickly that waiting is a part of life. Beginning with feedings and diaper changes, we make it known, sometimes very loudly, that we don't like waiting. As we get older we learn phrases like,

"In a minute, dear."

"Be patient."

"Not yet."

How many of us have heard these words that did absolutely nothing to quell our disdain for having to wait? How many of us have said these words in a vain attempt to mollify the impatience of someone else? Waiting. It's not something we "want" to do or "like" to do. It's something we "have" to do.

"Did the package come?"

"Did they call our number, yet?"

"How long until...(you fill in the blank – we get there, etc)?"

"Well, I guess we're just gonna *have* to wait."

"I hate waiting."

It is a lifelong lesson that some of us get better at as we get older but most of us can never master.

The Israelites had to wait 40 years before they arrived at the promised land. The scripture read to you are just two verses of a longer commentary about the purpose of the journey. It's very short so let me reread it to you.

² Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. ³ He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you

understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.^[a]

The Exodus and the story of the 40-year sojourn through the wilderness that brought the Israelites out of captivity and oppression and into Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey, established what it meant for them to be the people God. You know the story. For hundreds of years, the Israelites were an enslaved people under the thumb of Pharaoh. And God heard their cries and sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt. It was an exciting time: escape, freedom, plagues, seas parting. Then the long wandering in the wilderness.

It is this 40-year journey that speaks into our lives so much even today. While there are many questions a person could ask about the Exodus: Did the plagues really happen? How did God part the seas? Where did the manna come from? How did the burning bush not burn down? Great questions! And I have a great response. Ask your pastor!

The question that I want to focus on is: ***Why did it take 40 years to go from Egypt to Canaan?*** I realize that it takes a while to move a whole nation of people, but if you look at a map, the physical distance between ancient Egypt and Canaan is not that far. While we don't have precise GPS coordinates of exactly where the Israelites began their journey or ended it, it is clear that it wouldn't have taken 40 years, even walking at a slow pace. So, the question is why did it take so long? What is the point in taking a 40-year journey that could have been completed in a few months? Why did God make the Israelites wait for 40 years before delivering them to the promised land?

Liberation theologian Kosuke Koyama gives us some insight into this. In his book *Three Mile an Hour God*, Koyama says, "God wanted to teach the Israelites that 'people don't live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.'" Koyama goes on to say, "This was an extremely important lesson for God's people to know and understand before they went into the land of Canaan. God decided to spend forty years to teach this one lesson."

Koyama wrote his book in 1979, and yet the lessons he uncovers is even more relevant today. While the Israelites experienced hurriedness in their escape from Egypt, that was nothing compared to the hurriedness we've come to live by in our current culture. We don't just live a hurried lifestyle, we have come to have instant expectations. Instant shopping, instant delivery, instant communications, instant news. We are amidst a technological boom that will continue to provide "instant-ness" to our lives. Much of it is very cool and makes parts of our lives easier. Some of it tries to be helpful. Like being able to get an EKG on your Apple Watch without having to wait to go to the doctor. But the lure of "instant-ness" is that we come to expect it. When we have a need, we want an instant solution. Problem? We expect an instant resolution. And when it doesn't come, we grow impatient and angry.

Life was buzzing along when the pandemic hit. And so we, as good people, hunkered down. We ventured into this journey of the wilderness called the COVID shutdown to "get through" it, so that our lives could return to normal. Everyone wanted this. But then weeks turned into months and now nearly a year or more, depending on when you hear this sermon. And we're still not "through it." Vaccines are rolling out but we're not really sure when we'll get "through it." And we're not sure how life is going to look after we get "through it."

Do you hear the voices of the Israelites in their wilderness wondering the same questions? When? When? When will we get through it? Our faith story is bookended by people who had to wait. God told Abraham and Sarah that they'd be biological parents of a new nation when they were already collecting their social security checks, and then had to wait another 25 years. The disciples retreated while they stressfully waited after the crucifixion, under fear of discovery and punishment, to see if indeed Jesus would be resurrected.

Here is the other point that Koyama had regarding this long journey of the Exodus. Koyama says, "In the wilderness our speed is slowed down until gradually we come to the speed at which we walk...*three miles an hour.*" It is at three miles an hour that the Israelites began to absorb God's message, "You shall not live on bread alone but by everything that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord." It is at three miles an hour and over 40 years that that message took root in the people of Israel. The promised land was reached with a people who were fully steeped in trust and faith and hope in God. They lived and breathed "I am your God and you are my people."

Now I'm not saying that this pandemic is a good thing. It is not. So many lives have been lost and damaged. But perhaps. Perhaps we can look at this time through the lens of our faith tradition, where God used slowing down (or in our case shut down), and a period of waiting to deepen the faith of God's people. We have been waiting to get back to "normal." Sometimes growing impatient and frustrated. Understandable. Israelites were no different. But maybe we are learning and continuing to learn that while it is very important and we do need it very much,

"we don't live by in-person worship alone,"

"we don't live by coffee hour alone,"

"we don't live by live preaching alone,"

But we live by *everything* that proceeds from the Lord, for God has provided us with so much already – pastors who are going above and beyond to be a pastoral presence, virtually in our lives; a congregation that is a community even when not in person; family and friends whose relationships persevere through technology; our leaders continuing to lead in the areas of peace and justice; medical personnel, grocers, hair stylists, first responders – the list goes on. *Everything* that proceeds from the Lord is a blessing for us.

The vaccine will be made available to everyone soon. That is our prayer and hope. Perhaps by the time you hear this you will have already received your inoculation. We will all be glad and relieved when we see that on the horizon. And like the people of Israel, when they realized that entering the promised land was imminent, will we be people who, amidst waiting for the pandemic shut down to end, were transformed by God's word and work in our lives? As the rock artist Tom Petty says, "The waiting is the hardest part." But as the lessons of the Exodus teach us, God is in us, with us and using this time to mold us into God's people and will lead us into a new future with hope and promise. Amen? Amen.