

Sermon, 16 Pentecost  
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## Refugees

In 1999, the acronym Y2K was known all over the world. It meant Year 2000. And it was the most anticipated and prepared-for non-crisis of my lifetime. Computer codes had crept into our banking systems, our air traffic systems, our business commerce systems. Computers had changed the way the world transacted business.

But there was a fly in the ointment. Some software and hardware had been designed without the possibility of the date odometer, so to speak, rolling over the first digit in the year. So, 1997, 1998, 1999... all of those were cool. But what would happen when the date was January 1, 2000? Would software programs stop? Would banking stop? Would airplanes fall out of the sky? Would business crash?

The hype over this question was big. We bought Y2K software patches, upgraded hardware, and, frankly, crossed our fingers.

On December 31, 1999 there were epic New Year's Eve parties in London, Paris, New York City. As David and I pondered how to spend that night, we decided to do something quite different—we would camp in Big Bend National Park.

We knew that Big Bend is a desert, so we packed our tent, sleeping bags, blankets, and even threw in ski jackets. Early on December 31, we set off for Big Bend.

As we set up camp, we were wearing t-shirts and shorts and complaining about the heat as the sun beat down on us. We sat in camp chairs and watched as the sun slipped behind a mountain peak. That was the first moment we noticed the chill in the air. I pulled on sweat pants and a sweat shirt. The sun continued to set. I dragged blankets from the tent. By nightfall, I was wearing the ski jacket and gloves. Eventually, I was too cold to worry about the chaos that could happen at midnight, so we got into the sleeping bag—with ski jackets and sweats.

We awoke to the sun rise, boiled some water and made hot tea. By the time tea was finished, we had shed ski jackets and sweats. After breakfast, we hiked in shorts and t-shirts.

In Exodus, God has been writing an epic tale about God's work among the Israelites. Moses, against all odds, becomes a leader – an intermediary between God and the Israelites. Moses negotiates the freeing of the Israelites. God parts the sea and leads them out of Egypt. And, now they are in a desert....hungry, cold...and wishing they were back in Egypt.

For those of us who've read the whole story, we know that this desert experience is a **liminal space: a place where the Israelites must leave something behind before they are ready to receive something new.**

Who are these people God has led to the desert? We know they are the Israelites—God's chosen. But here, in the desert, they are refugees. A people with no zip code, no housing, no vocation, no money, no food, no employer. These people have been enslaved for generations. They have served Egypt, not as an act of generosity, but to survive.

They are spiritual refugees--they understand that power and bondage go hand-in-hand. This, they must leave behind before God will lead them from the desert.

The desert is a time of struggle for the Israelites. Nothing is the way it used to be.

On the night of December 31, 1999 as parties celebrated a new millennium, David and I watched the stars emerge on the clear desert sky. Orion's belt and the Big Dipper were so vivid, I felt like I could reach out and touch them. We weren't worried about the hands on any clocks that night. Time in that place is measured by the sun's warmth and the moon's phase.

For that one night, we were unplugged from civilization and culture. We were plugged into the majesty and Mystery of Creation.

The Israelites are making a different desert journey. No doubt they saw a similar canvas of stars. But they did not pack for a night in the desert. Whatever food they may have brought has long since run out. There's no water. There is no SUV at the trail head ready to speed them back to civilization, their homes, their old way of life.

I think the darkest hour of their struggle is realizing the fragility of their existence in the desert.

They need Yahweh.

And Yahweh will meet each need with generosity.

This is a turning point in their relationship with God. Eventually, they will be prepared to enter a new covenant with Yahweh.

Y2K was an interesting human experience....business and technology worked together to fend off an expected crisis, on a particular timetable.

The virus pandemic is different. This is more like the Israelites encamped in the desert. How long will we have to wear these masks? What do you mean, life might never go back to the way it was? Why isn't there a vaccine?

You can hear the frustration and anger in FB rants as people grow weary of waiting....of change....of not knowing what to expect next...of not knowing who to believe. We are like the Israelites shaking their fist at Moses: How long will God leave us in this pandemic desert?

We are reminded that we are fragile – we are *not* in control of the pandemic, of time, of the outcome.

And so, I wonder, how can we make the most of *our* liminal time? I have heard others say that we shouldn't waste a good crisis. There are many practical adjustments all of us have made to protect physical life. Some of these practices, like Zoom, have both physical and emotional benefits. We are able to experience gathering, virtually—hearing other voices, seeing the smiles on faces. We are connecting, albeit differently.

But what about our spirituality? If the Israelite's 40 long years in the desert are any indication, God is keenly interested in our relationship with God.

In his book, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Richard Foster lays out—The Inward Disciplines, the foundation for spiritual growth. Meditation, prayer, fasting, and study. These four spiritual disciplines shape who we are, what we believe, and how we live.

**And not one of them is available on the evening news.**

These spiritual practices aren't luxuries for those who have excess time on their hands. They are as essential to our wellness and wholeness as food, exercise, and face masks. If we are to emerge from this pandemic desert ready to enter a new landscape of worship, stewardship, and fellowship, we must continue developing our inward disciplines.

***So, what is on offer at your St. Martin's Spiritual Fitness Center during the pandemic?***

Each week day at 9:00am, we host a 10-minute virtual morning prayer service. We've been joined by a monk, persons from other faith traditions, and our own faithful group. I invite you to re-imagine your day such that you are able to gather with us and pray, together, for God's guidance each day. Our liturgy reflects a contemplative style—and we move between traditional language and contemporary language prayers.

We have a beautiful labyrinth at St. Martin's that offers a quiet, kinetic path of meditation. Walking it weekly with an open mind listening for God's inspiration will give you 30 minutes of *quiet* time *any* time you choose that path.

Fasting in our culture is less about the stuff we put in our mouths and more about the stuff we allow into our minds. What would it feel like to listen to a news program for one hour per week? Or to turn all of off and pick up a newspaper on Sunday? Would that kind of fast help or hinder your ability to interpret the events of the world through God's lens?

Study: Tonight, at 7pm, St Martin's begins a new Lectionary study program using Zoom. Details are on our website. In October, we will begin studying human flourishing and books that invite us to imagine a better world. Dr. Scott Bader-Saye, academic dean of the Seminary of the Southwest, will be our first lecturer.

Richard Foster says that [we must] "detach from the confusion all around us in order to have a richer attachment to God".

One way or another, the pandemic desert will one day end. And God, who has traveled with us throughout the journey, will lead us into a new place. I wonder, Who will we be?