

Hope in the Wilderness sermon series
David on the Run
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You probably know a few things about King David. You know that he was the young boy who used a slingshot to kill the giant Goliath. You may know he was the most successful king Israel ever had. And my guess is you know about his affair with Bathsheba. But did you also know that David spent significant time in the wilderness? As we continue our fall sermon series about finding hope in the wilderness, we're going to follow David into uncharted territory to see what we can learn about surviving in our own wilderness time, times when we don't know the future and we are held captive by fear.

We pick up David's story right after he slays Goliath. Immediately after David's victory, his fame begins to spread. People are tweeting and texting and posting on Facebook so that before he even make sit back home, David is an instant celebrity, which doesn't sit well with Israel's current king, Saul. I Samuel 18 tells us that as David and Saul process through towns, people would throw ticker-tape parades and sing, "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands!" Now, I'm no genius at math, but if I were King Saul, that song would not make it into my Top 40 playlist. In fact, I'd be a little bit peeved. We're told that upon hearing this song, Saul begins to keep an eye on David.

The Bible tells us that Saul also begins, using a medical term, to lose is marbles. An evil spirit enters him, and he turns the full force of his rage upon David. Saul tries to kill him six different times. If I'm David, I'm thinking, "OK, one time, maybe that was an accident. Two times, I must have caught him on a bad day. But by the sixth time, I'm getting the idea this guy doesn't like me."

Saul's son Jonathan, who was a friend of David, intercedes on David's behalf. Saul is remorseful for a bit, but then gets all worked up and tries to kill David again. This cycle plays out several times until finally David's wife persuades him to go on the lam, fleeing from Saul's presence. David was probably about 20 years old when he left home and went into the wilderness.

Does that sound kind of familiar? What were you doing when you were around 20? As best as I can remember, I was in college. Is there any better description of that time in our lives than being in a wilderness? I was wandering around, spiritually and vocationally. I was working at a video store – remember those? – trying to figure out my major. And I had no real connection to God or a church. Like David, I was in the wilderness.

We've all be there, haven't we? One day we're relaxing in the luxury of our palaces and then – boom! – we're in the wilderness, driven there by a doctor's appointment or divorce papers or bad news from our children or a national pandemic. That's the thing about the wilderness: no one ever chooses to go their voluntarily. No one wants to leave the safety and comfort of the Promised Land. No one expects to live in a season of dryness. And yet, for each of us, the wilderness is a reality.

One of David's first stops on his flight away from Saul is at Nob, to a group of priests who lived there in a temple. While there, David receives holy bread to eat and a sword for protection. It makes me wonder where we go when we're in our wilderness? There are plenty of tempting options available to us to help us escape the rigors of our deserts. I believe that many

addictions and so much debt are caused by people trying to escape the trials and temptations of a dry season in their lives. Sometimes it's easier to check out than to push through.

Where did David go while in the wild? He went to church. He went to a group of priests, where he received community, sustenance, and protection. During our difficult times we are so vulnerable to quick fixes and easy solutions, when what we really need, deep down in our parched souls, is spiritual nourishment, protection from temptation, and a reminder that we are not alone on our journey. And that's what the church has to offer us. That's where I ended up when I was in my own wilderness during college, and I think that's worked out pretty well so far. The church is an oasis in the midst of our desert, offering provision and companionship and bread for the journey.

Once David left the priests at Nob, he continues to wander in the wilderness, trying to stay one step ahead of Saul and his army. At one point in the story, we're told that David is joined by a group of supporters. The beginning of 1 Samuel 22 says, "David left there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; when his brothers and all his father's house heard of it, they went down there to him. Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him." People in distress, in debt, and discontented – sounds like the church today, doesn't it? This group of people was a tangible reminder to David that he was not alone on his journey and they helped him stay one step ahead of Saul. We need our community, even virtually, to survive our wilderness.

But David's ability to elude Saul was more than just craftiness. We are told repeatedly throughout this story that the Lord was with David. As you may know, among many of David's accomplishments is the fact that he wrote a number of the psalms we have in the Bible. And many of those psalms were written while David was in the wilderness, like the one I read today. As he negotiated rough terrain, as he searched for food and water and sleep, as he came face-to-face with Saul's evil intent, David continually turned to God for comfort. Knowing what we know about David's story so far, listen to these familiar words of David, and listen to them as if written by someone being chased in the wilderness:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

In Ch. 24, Saul learns that David is in the wilderness of En-Gedi, so he pursues him with 3000 men. While there, the passage says that Saul needs to relieve himself – even kings need potty breaks! So he goes to a nearby cave to take care of business. Unbeknownst to him, hiding in the back of that cave is David and his followers. David's men say, "'Here's your chance! Catch him with his pants down and kill him!'" Instead, David says, "I can't do this to him, he's the king!" So instead, he cuts off a corner of Saul's cloak to prove he was there, then he let Saul escape.

In our wildernesses, we will be tempted to be someone we're not. While in the wilderness, Jesus was tempted by Satan to do things that went against who Jesus was created to be. The Israelites succumbed to their own wilderness temptations to forsake God, building a golden calf to worship instead of trusting in God's promises. David faces that same temptation. Should he give in and kill the king to save his own hide? We can be tempted to do things in the wilderness we normally wouldn't do in order to survive.

Once Saul leaves the cave, David comes out and says to Saul: ““My lord the king! Why do you listen to the words of those who say, ‘David seeks to do you harm’? This very day your eyes have seen how the LORD gave you into my hand in the cave; and some urged me to kill you, but I spared you. See the corner of your cloak in my hand; for by the fact that I cut off the corner of your cloak, and did not kill you, you may know for certain that there is no wrong or treason in my hands.”

David stays true to himself, true to the person God created him to be, even when faced with the chance to escape once and for all. I’m sure it wasn’t easy for David to spend that decade in the wilderness, just as it’s not easy for us to spend time in our own wildernesses. David’s wilderness time defined him, but it didn’t force him into becoming something he didn’t want to be. The wilderness we face will indelibly shape us – the time we spend in a hospital bed or an attorney’s office can never be erased. But it’s up to us whether or not we let the wilderness make us or break us. For David, he went through the wilderness and yet stayed true to the person God created him to be. Even in the darkness of a cave, he honored God by honoring Saul, his enemy. . It’s easy to identify people who feel like our enemies today. But they are only our enemies if we choose to let our hate and fear win out over God’s love within us. He didn’t let the wilderness win by changing him into someone else

We don’t choose the wilderness, but it is there, and there will be times when we find ourselves in a barren place not of our choosing. The only way through it is through it. Even if we run away, it will be there. But if we can’t run away, we can still run. We can run to church, an oasis in the desert of our dry season. We can run to each other, the distressed and discontented among us, a reminder that we don’t walk this journey alone. And we can run to God, our shepherd, who leads us to quiet pastures and still waters, who walks with us through death’s valley, who restores our soul, who overflows our cups with grace and love. The only way through it is through it. But we are not alone.