

Journey in the Wilderness

Gil Rendle has written a book called *Journey in the Wilderness*. He begins by saying that it isn't very often that a whole group of people go through a religious wilderness together. Yet, in North America, that has been exactly the case in our lifetime. There have been other experiences in our history where the church has gone through shifts, schisms, realignments, mergers, and inventions of denominations. There have been other times of discomfort that have required refocusing, restructuring, or restaffing. But, rarer is the radical, rooted shift in a global culture that prompts and requires a whole group to question who they are and what God is calling them to do. This is the radical shift we are going through today.

Gil describes his personal experience in the church as being defined by this exodus. He says it has been a pilgrimage through a changed North American landscape and a changed global landscape. To describe the radical change in our lives, we look back to the story of the Exodus in the Old Testament, about how God's people had to wander for a generation in the wilderness, before they were ready to enter the new reality that God had waiting for them. We are a people who have been taken out of a way of life that was well known and deeply established. The North American mainline denominational church used to be strong, confident, growing, and a dominant voice in shaping the norms of North American life. That is not true anymore. Now, the church is in a period of questioning, doubt, and searching.

But, this is not a reason for despair. The surprise is that hope grows in the wilderness. The surprise is that the wilderness is a great place to learn. The surprise is that the wilderness turns out to be a good place where the old supports are gone, the old assumptions are no longer true, and the old practices either fail or are no longer possible. Because of this, people have to learn new ways of doing the most basic things.

Gil says that there is little doubt that our mainline denominations will be changed in size and shape by the rest of the journey. There is little doubt that a good percentage of our local congregations, perhaps as many as 25 to 30 percent, will not live through the journey and they will close. There is little doubt that our denominational structures, staffing, and use of resources will continue to undergo deep change. Nonetheless, we are being helped and shaped by what we are learning and by how our trust in God is deepening. The metaphor of the exodus is meant to help us recognize ourselves as a displaced people who need to trust God for our future and who need to be willing to learn new ways and reshape our lives as we travel.

He suggests that our bias toward orderliness means that we expect too much from an exodus. We expect that the trip can be scheduled on a clear time line, that leaders will know the right directions to walk every day, that faithfulness will not be challenged, and that everyone will willingly take the trip together without argument. Were such an orderly trip even possible, the fact remains that neat, tidy trips produce little learning and perhaps, in the end, no change. But, moving through the wilderness increases our anxiety level. It sometimes causes us to be overcontrolling, overworried, and overreactive. These reactions do not allow room for the hand of God or the movement of the Spirit to work and lead us in new directions.

The longer we are involved in an exodus, the harder the work becomes, the more difficult the questions, the richer the results, and the deeper the hope. Because of our time in the wilderness, we are finally moving beyond the technical questions of the surface to the adaptive questions beneath. We are finally facing the more difficult questions of identity. Who are we as the people of God in this time and space? What is our purpose? Why are we here?

Gil writes that many mainline denominations in North America today are theologically, politically, regionally, racially, and ethnically diverse. Where once in an earlier age, we had a much clearer shared practice that held us in community, our breadth of differences now often makes the people within our denominations uncomfortable with themselves and one another. We are left wondering what we now hold in common. What holds us together? Without a clear sense of identity, it is hard to stay in community with one another in order to address our reason for being. Clear identity and reasons for being often give birth to new groups, movements, and denominations. The need to recapture and reclaim a central and functional identity is the unique challenge of a long-established denomination. Long-established denominations risk carrying forward an older identity that once served well, but is no longer accurate or effective. Recalling, reclaiming, and risking to live into a newer, fresher identity as a people of God are essential tasks of our particular wilderness experience.

One idea that helps us move through this time of transition today is to remember that we have been here before. We are the people of the original Exodus and the Exile. We have been displaced before. We have learned to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land before. And through it all, we have received an inheritance from those earlier people who faced the wilderness and responded with deeper spiritual, missional, and relational connections. It has been messy, but we have done it before.

One church historian has identified seven lessons the church has learned from past experiences:

1. Things move slowly in the church.
2. Because things move slowly, we need to be a people of great patience (part of the fruit of the Spirit - Galatians 5:16-17).
3. The church has a long tradition of making decisions collaboratively through councils. Top-down authority is not always the best.
4. The church responds best when it recognizes what is essential and what is primary.
5. The church needs to constantly discern and stay in touch with people. What makes this difficult is that the people the church needs to connect with are not the people already in the church, but the people the church is called to in our neighborhoods and communities.
6. Our God is a God of surprises. We are not in control. God is in control. We cannot always accurately predict what God will do. The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:25). God can surprise us.
7. We live in constant hope. History teaches us that we have seen worse, we have survived, and we have been renewed.

However one chooses to tell the story, we are clearly in a wilderness moment. Some call it a paradigm shift or postmodernism or an emergent moment. Whatever the description, we need to remember that the church has been here before, the church has managed change before, and the church has survived circumstances that it didn't think it would before.