“The Devil You Know” - Stephanie Sorge, 10.5.25

Can you remember what you were doing a month and a half ago? That was the beginning of our school year here, which included a new start in middle school in our household. The middle school bell rings an hour and a half earlier than the elementary school bell, so we’ve all been getting used to the earlier wakeup time at home. I remember after that first short week - just 3 days - I was surprised to feel a little invigorated waking up early, making breakfast, getting a little work done, and getting all of us out of the house! Now, a month and a half later, we’re all varying degrees of exhausted and grumpy in the morning. Some of us more than others. The moods fluctuate throughout the day; the exhaustion does not. We’ve got five years of this to look forward to.

It’s not at all an apples-to-apples comparison, but thinking about our reality softened my reading of this story. I don’t think the Israelites are portrayed in a very sympathetic light. They complain, they don’t trust Moses, they don’t trust God, and when food finally arrives, they call it manna, which literally means, “What is it?”

These were traumatized people, who also carried the trauma of generations of enslavement. They stepped out in faith, in so many ways. They were only a month and a half into this journey, and maybe the uncertainty of their circumstances was really starting to sink in. They were tired. Hungry. They didn’t know where they were going. I can’t imagine leaving the only home you’ve ever known and having to make your way in a wilderness, unsure of where you were going, how to get there, and how long the journey would take. Given all of that, their desire to retrace their steps and go back to the familiar makes sense.

Moses has the benefit of being Moses in the story, and the fact that God communicates with him seems to justify his salty attitude. I can’t really blame him, either. He didn’t ask for any of this. He had tried to tell God that he wasn’t the right person for the job. Instead of showing their gratitude for liberation, the people were turning against him in anger.

Can you imagine if any of them had known how long they would be wandering, how much worse it would have been? There are times when you’re just better off not knowing. This cycle of complaint against Moses and God would continue throughout Exodus, but God remained with them through it all. Fire by night, cloud by day, and an all-you-can-eat buffet. There are only two items, and to-go containers are only available one day a week, but it’s food. Many people have far less than that.

The further they got from Egypt, the more attractive it looked in the rearview. Better the devil you know, right? Life was pretty awful in Egypt, but at least they knew what to expect. They were enslaved, but fed. They were overworked, but they knew where they’d be sleeping at the end of the day.

Freedom brought uncertainty. It brought a different kind of hard. This was the start of a journey. They weren’t just traveling to a new home, they were beginning to live into a new identity. They were learning what it meant to be people in a covenantal relationship with God.

This story takes place before the law is given, but they were already starting to learn about God. God initiated this whole move because God had heard the cries of the people. God listens to them, and has compassion for them. God can also take their anger, while still choosing to draw near to them. God is always present with them, no matter where they go. God also gives them instructions and expects obedience. From these instructions, they learn that in God’s economy, there is enough for everyone.

In our economy, like in Egypt, there is forced scarcity. We don’t have a lack of resources. We have an extremely unequal distribution of them, and the way things are going now, it’s going to get a lot worse.

We are experiencing some very challenging days. We may even feel like we’re in the wilderness, wondering what is happening in our country, and when it will reverse direction. As people of faith, we need to be wary of what we see in the rearview. Objects may be closer than they appear, and the past far better than it was. We can understand the appeal of a return to some version of Egypt, but as people of faith, that’s not our destination.

The Israelites began to long for the devil they knew, which seemed preferable to the God they didn’t. God offered liberation and a reorientation to community and creation. God offered freedom from oppressive systems. God offered a vision of new relationship with God and with each other, and an economy of enough for all. It was a lovely vision, but how were they supposed to get there? How long would it take?

When things are going well, or relatively well, or even not great, but could be worse, we don’t have a lot of external motivation for change. Even when things are pretty bad, change is hard. Sometimes, time in the wilderness can be the impetus for change. Other times, the wilderness might make us more resistant to the upheaval that the changes we need will bring.

There are so many areas of wilderness in our lives today:

* Mental health struggles, addiction, or serious illness - whether they afflict you or someone you love
* Financial stress, job uncertainty or loss, unemployment, underemployment, or toxic employment
* Lack of a support system, or being caught in a web of abusive or destructive relationships
* Loneliness, whether one is alone or surrounded by others
* Fractured friendships or family strife, or ongoing grief following loss
* Living under the weight of crushing debt, or without stable or safe housing, or reliable access to food and other necessities

Zoom out, and we see just how far the wilderness extends:

* the dismantling of entire government agencies designed to protect and promote life, health, and well-being
* widespread cultural attacks against, and attempts to erase, trans and nonbinary people
* arrest, detainment, and deportation of hundreds of our neighbors; and the thousands in our community who live in fear of that every day
* continuing gun violence, including 386 mass shootings this year so far
* dead of night, indiscriminate raids designed to terrorize, dehumanize, detain, and deport
* things happening in and actions carried out by our country that we thought only happened elsewhere
* the uncertainty of the shutdown, and millions of people who are struggling because of it
* the proliferation of lies from what should be the most reliable sources of information
* the devastating situation in Gaza and Palestine
* the anniversary of Hamas’ terrorist attacks on Israel
* Israel and Palestine, Russian and Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, Congo, Ethiopia, and many more countries impacted by war
* global warming, which is an appropriate note to end on since our whole world feels like it is on fire…

It’s all too much. It can make us long for Egypt - or whatever the equivalent is today.

Presbyterians don’t talk much about the devil or spiritual warfare, but ignoring or minimizing the evil in our world is another way of normalizing and accepting it. Making a deal with the devil is a way to accomplish something otherwise impossible, right? Who says the devil needs any more advocates? Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t. If society can speak so freely about the devil, we sure as hell better be ready to fight it. We call it “renouncing evil and its power in the world,” in our baptismal vows.

The Israelites were finally freed from slavery and oppression in Egypt, but the devil they knew was starting to look preferable to the God they did not yet know. God responded by providing for their needs through a new economy of enough for all, and by reminding them that God was with them, day and night, still leading the people to freedom.

One of the most important things we can do today is to take care of each other, especially those who are most vulnerable for whatever reason. The devil we know will encourage us to draw into ourselves in self-preservation mode. The God we know will provide enough for all, trusting us to be part of that faithful distribution. That’s why we’ve got Artists for Peace. It’s why we’re building relationships in Nabarangpur. These are acts of faith in God’s economy of provision for all. As for God’s presence, we experience it in the body of Christ. We are God’s presence to each other, and together we can be God’s presence in our community and beyond. What we can’t do is acquiesce to the evil in the world.

I don’t know how big this wilderness is or how long we’ll be here, but I trust that God is with us. I believe that God’s desire for humanity and all of creation is peace, justice, joy, and reconciliation. The devil we know will convince us to settle for far less. The God we worship will not.