

## “Can God set a table in the wilderness?” (Psalm 78:19b)

That’s a good question—especially when you are in the wilderness. And I know that there are many feeling like we have been in a wilderness--the wilderness of pandemic, for much too long. We grow more and more frustrated with the news; with the lack of our old, good, and comforting patterns of worship; with the lack of physical closeness, the embrace of the Peace, the sense of community gathered shoulder to shoulder at the altar rail tasting and seeing the goodness of the Lord in sacrament; and we miss the healing presence of brother and sister in the GREATEST of all sacraments: coffee hour. Perhaps especially right now, we miss the family reunion of Diocesan Convention---now in its second iteration as an online event.

And many are tired. Fatigued by it all. I know I am. I have talked with many of you--congregational leaders, folks who serve the church, as clergy, wardens, and Lay Leaders, even bishops; also, community leaders: village administrators, chiefs, elders, and village health aides, we’re all tired of what some describe as this never-ending trauma. We all want some relief.

In his book: “The Body Keeps the Score,” Dr. Bessel von der Kolk, a psychiatrist and neuroscientist, clarifies that trauma is NOT an event—not even an unusually dramatic, terrifying, sad, or out of the ordinary event.

“[...T]rauma isn’t what happens to you, but how you respond to the traumatic situation. [Trauma happens] when your body continues to re-live that stress for days, weeks, months, or even years, that stress changes your brain, creating trauma inside your mind, and that trauma can eventually manifest in your physical body. The problem with trauma is that it starts when something happens to us, but that’s not where it stops – it changes your brain. Once your brain changes and you’re in constant fight or flight mode, it can be hard to stay focused, feel joy, or experience pleasure until this trauma is healed.”

I think we are all yearning for healing in this wilderness season. Our bodies are tired and hungry—hungry for restoration...hungry for healing.

So, the question is: “Can God set a table in the wilderness?” Even THIS wilderness? Can God set a table that will feed our hunger for healing and wholeness? A table that will minister to broken bodies in need?

Spoiler alert: the answer is yes.

The Bible tells us that Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years after fleeing Egypt. I’m starting to wonder if it really was only about 18 months, because, for many of us, 18 months in THIS wilderness is beginning to feel like 40 years. And like us today, Israel’s wilderness experience had people’s minds sinking deeper and deeper into a trauma response.

Tired and hungry for healing, Israel cries out in Psalm 78: “Can God set a table in the wilderness?”

In fact, Psalm 78, specifically Part I (verses 1-39), is a poetic study on God’s faithfulness in the wilderness and Israel’s trauma thinking. The verses flow with the richness of all that God provided the people. Yet, in the wilderness, starved by trauma, the people kept looking backwards to what they perceived was a much better life. One might say they just wanted to get back to normal.

‘At least, there were tables back in Egypt, tables with food,’ one can imagine them uttering. ‘Things would be better if we could just go back. If someone would just take care of us, give us what we need, what we want.’ Those are the thoughts of trauma thinking. We lack. We’re at risk. We’re starving. Death is near.

Can God set a table in the wilderness?

Frankly, the question isn’t *can* God set a table in the wilderness, for we know God does. The question is really “are we willing to trust God’s faithfulness enough to sit down and eat from the table already set?” Are we able to discern the feast that God has prepared for us and through us and with us? Are we able to taste and see the goodness of the Lord in our midst, in ourselves, in our communities, even in a wilderness that challenges us to try new recipes, or risk cooking some new dishes ourselves to share at God’s table?

I believe God sets a table in the wilderness for us, and God provides food at that table to satisfy our hunger for healing, to restore our bodies from trauma. It’s all there, all we need is discernment.

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I am starting to see this pandemic wilderness as a gift. I know that sounds like crazy talk but hear me out.

The losses and changes of this last year and a half may have been unwelcomed, but they have also been an invitation—a challenge. One of my favorite books is “Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah” by Richard Bach. It’s a great little book. It’s all about flying and philosophy—you know, my kind of read. In the book, one of the short lessons found in the Messiah’s Handbook is this: “There is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hands.”

COVID—19 and all we have lost in our “normal” ways of worship and gathering has been a problem. So, what is the gift this problem holds for us in its hand?

One gift I see is that our communities have adapted. You’ve stretched, embraced new ways of doing worship, you have been creative, you’ve tried new things, reached beyond your walls; you haven’t given up! I’ve seen you doing those things we talked about last year at Convention: staying connected as the body of Christ in the interest of others. That’s a gift.

God set a table in this COVID-19 wilderness, and you showed! Thank you and Thank God.

This is the 46<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Alaska. At least, that is what it says on the cover of our Convention materials. But the seal of the diocese has 1971 engraved at the bottom. 1971 is when the Episcopal Missionary District of Alaska became the Diocese of Alaska.

Despite this wilderness time, we are celebrating our 50<sup>th</sup> year as a Diocese. Congratulations! Another gift.

50 years ago, we also entered a wilderness period. As a new Diocese, we were stepping out into a different way of being the church. We were journeying into a land that was going to require us to do things in new ways. To adapt to different patterns of being. The whole shape of the church, or more accurately, the institution of the church in Alaska was about to change.

At the time, Bishop Gordon and the Diocesan leadership were clear that God would set a table in the wilderness, but it would likely be a table set in different ways. Gone would be the familiar dishes served by seminary trained clergy brought in from outside. Gone was the idea that “church” was a feast prepared by God then delivered by the clergy for the consumption of the faithful. Instead, in this wilderness, the table God was providing was to be gathered, prepared, set, and served by the whole community of God—the people of God.

The ministry was theirs. And God was giving them EVERYTHING they needed for the table.

The 1970s were an incredible time in the Episcopal Church. Alaska wasn’t alone in the wilderness. Across the Episcopal Church, faithful people were revisiting the traditional models of what ministry and church leadership looked like. There was a growing spirit of baptismal ministry; which is to say the recognition, formation, and support of ministry of ALL the Baptized, each according to his or her gifts, recognizing that all ministry is ultimately Christ’s.

These were the years of visionary Bishops like Wes Frensdorf who was a contemporary and colleague of Bill Gordon. Bishops who looked out into the wilderness and saw God setting a table in wonderful ways, ways that broke the old and traditional models of what it looked like to be a church. Wes Frensdorf served as the Bishop of Nevada from 1972-85. I first learned of him through a poem he wrote “Let us Dream of a Church...” The poem is an invitation to wilderness dreaming; the sort of dreaming that invites us to see a table set in new and unexpected ways. Bishop Frensdorf wrote:

“Let us dream of a church radically renewed by the concept and practice of ministry and a primitive understanding of ordained offices. Where there is no clerical status and no classes of Christians, but all together know themselves to be part of the laos—the holy people of God. A ministering community rather than a community gathered around a minister.”

Across the church, dioceses were beginning to discover that God can and does set a table in the wilderness by providing the faithful every good gift for ministry—not by providing “A Minister.”

This was a transformative vision of ministry. It was also extremely hopeful, because it released communities of faith from their historic dependency on the old institutional model of being the church: You know, the model that says, “nothing happens, or nothing is valid, until the person with the collar arrives.” The same model that would have the faithful waiting around for “the Diocese” to take care of them, or “the Diocese” to provide a minister.

To the question: “Can God set a table in the wilderness,” people were beginning to see that the answer was most assuredly YES! Yes, by recognizing that all of the baptized, each and every one of us, has a vocation—a calling to and for ministry. And each has gifts to respond to that calling in a variety of settings both in the life of the Church gathered AND in the midst of the Church dispersed.

The possibilities were boundless.

The 1970s were also the time of Liturgical Renewal. While many in the Church were envisioning this wilderness table set with the gifts of ministry by all, the Church was revising the prayer book to emphasize the primacy of Baptism. All we do as the body of Christ, as the Church, as ministers, finds its meaning, purpose, and direction in Holy Baptism. Baptism was

new ordination: we were ordered in the Body of Christ and took our orders from the Body of Christ—everyone called to the ministry of living a Jesus shaped life.

It all seemed to fit together so well. The primacy of Baptism and the primacy of baptismal ministry.

Instead, as can happen in the wilderness, “normal” intervened. Along with the 1979 Prayer Book’s primacy of Baptism came the primacy of Holy Eucharist—the primacy of Holy Eucharist as the principal act of Christian worship on the Lord’s Day.

I am NOT suggesting that was a bad thing; after all, Baptism and Eucharist are indivisible.

The unintended consequence, however, was that the model of Eucharistic leadership, Eucharistic ministry, with all of its clerical necessities, clouded the transformative and radical vision of the primacy of baptismal ministry. Instead of affirming the primacy of baptismal ministry and treating the various licensed ministries and ordained offices as equal, distinct, and non-sequential, dioceses, commissions on ministry, parishes, and communities continued to focus on how to call, prepare, and deploy ordained ministers to meet the sacramental needs of our parishes and, perhaps unintentionally, provide the leadership and ministry for our communities.

Even where dioceses had begun to make some inroads to recognizing lay leadership, the Eucharistic model of ministry hindered the full development of shared baptismal ministry. “Ministry” looked like what a priest does. No collar, no eucharist; no eucharist, no church, no church, no ministry.

You know the first thing a good Episcopalian says in the wilderness, don’t you? “We’ve never done it this way before.” That’s from the same category of jokes that answers the question “how many Episcopalians does it take to change a lightbulb? What? Change, why would you change that lightbulb?”

We are a liturgical people. We like to follow the book. Everything in good order. As a bishop, I appreciate those as comforting words. But they can too often limit us to a very narrow normal.

Recently I read an address given by Bishop James Kelsey, the former bishop of N. Michigan, and the father of our Convention Speaker, Canon Lydia Kelsey Bucklin. Bishop Kelsey was one of those visionaries of baptismal ministry. In this address he shared a story from his own diocese about how the primacy of what I call the “eucharistic” model of ministry can affect the fuller expression of baptismal ministry. How “normal” often intervenes and thwarts the discernment of God’s wilderness table.

The story tells of a letter that was received by Bishop Kelsey’s predecessor from two small rural parishes at the eastern end of the diocese. The letter read:

“We’re out here on the far eastern end of the diocese, and we receive communion whenever a priest can get here, which is about once every three months. Presently, we are being served by a faithful lay reader, *N.N.* who drives down here from Pickford, about 40 minutes away, to lead us in Morning Prayer. We are writing this letter to ask you to license him to preside at the Holy Eucharist so we might receive communion on a more regular basis.” The letter was signed by every member of the congregation and, on the reverse side of the letter, was a short note that read, “we think this is a good idea as well.”” (J. Kelsey, New York Church Club Address, Feb 27, 2003)

Now, as a bishop, I applaud these two congregations for their recognition of lay leadership. I also understand the challenges represented in their request. I, myself, have stretched the canons and “rules” of the church by licensing ministers to distribute holy communion beyond the context of a Sunday morning celebration. But the rest of the story reveals the deeper challenge of our “normal” models of clerical ministry as opposed to fully shared baptismal ministry.

The rest of the story is this: while the bishop, Standing Committee and the Commission on Ministry were still working on a plan, that faithful lay reader—whose leadership was so affirmed by both congregations, died. “And when diocesan leadership came to those two parishes, what they found was two communities which had been so dependent upon that faithful, perhaps over-functioning, lay reader that none of the rest had ever learned how to officiate Morning Prayer, prepare a sermon, choose the lessons, or prepare the prayers of the people.” (ibid)

Bishop Kelsey summarized the story this way: “You see, that faithful lay reader had emulated the behavior of the faithful [priests] he had known over the years.” [He did what was normal. What a “minister” had always done. And what the community had always done.] “In other words, he had done it all—he had taken care of them, so the rest of the community didn’t know how to assume responsibility for their own life and mission. [This is the clerical model that persists, whether with local or imported leadership, one person over-functions and the rest of the community under-functions and seldom are natural gifts—baptismal gifts—the Holy Spirit’s gifts given to the whole community, developed, or expressed.] (ibid)

Can God set a table in the wilderness? Absolutely! And with a variety of dishes and delights as vast and as diverse as the faces gathered together at the table—gathered in your communities. But the table is set in the wilderness. And that means we must be willing to step away from normal, to trust the gifts of the Spirit given to every one of us, and to share the feast.

I know that God provides all that we need for our communities to be ministering communities. You lack nothing for the same Spirit that anointed you at your baptism abides with you now and always and abides in your neighbor. You have the gifts. You are the ministers. Together you are the table God has prepared to satisfy our hunger for healing, our hunger for community, our hunger for hope.

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I am now into my twelfth year as the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alaska. Every day I give thanks for the indescribable blessing and joy that I receive from serving with you. Over these many years I’ve been trying to build up—to reclaim, the primacy of baptismal ministry. I am invested in training the laos—the people of God in the way of ministry, and I hope to continue to increase and improve the opportunities and materials available for training. I see it as an investment in the formation of disciples; and remember, making disciples is what Jesus commissioned us to do. I feel called to make disciples whose gifts for ministry are the feast that God prepares in the wilderness; to make disciples whose baptismal ministry is the primary ministry of the church.

But as I hope I’ve made somewhat clear; I realize that our systems and structures are not designed to emphasize the primacy of baptismal ministry.

When we speak of discernment for ministry, or the process of discernment for ministry, mostly folks understand that to mean ordination. It should be no surprise, therefore, that the Commission on Ministry has a defined process for discernment and preparation for ordained ministry—so does TEC. But what is the process for discernment of baptismal ministry? How does someone prepare for baptismal ministry?

Likewise, People speak of being called to ordination. But I wonder how often someone feels called to baptismal ministry? Called to a process of discernment within his or her community not leading to ordination, but to deeper recognition of the gifts that have been given them and how they might offer those gifts to the church gathered and dispersed.

I don't think we are well organized or structured to address those questions.

And this is the work I am looking forward to engaging with the Diocese of Alaska in this next season of our ministry together, in this period of wilderness and beyond.

I am delighted that we have the profound gift this year of having Canon Lydia Kelsey Bucklin as our Convention guest, Keynote Speaker, and preacher. I already noted that Lydia is the daughter of Bishop Kelsey, so I might say that baptismal ministry is in her DNA. Lydia serves as the Canon for Discipleship and Vitality in the Diocese of N. Michigan. My bishop classmate and friend, Rayford Ray, is the bishop in N. Michigan and I tell him whenever I see him how blessed he is to have Lydia on his team.

Lydia has been working with me and the COM on how we might redefine the norms we have inherited for discernment. Our focus in the coming years is to develop the process of ministry discernment in this Diocese putting the emphasis on how communities can see the table God sets with the extraordinary gifts already present in their midst. My vision is a wild new process of discernment that EVERYONE can engage because EVERYONE is called to baptismal ministry.

The Commission on Ministry is going to be working with this Convention to further this exploration of baptismal ministry. Following my address—and that will be soon, I promise, you will have a short break and then be in small break out groups to talk about the table God sets in the wilderness as you have experienced it. Commission on Ministry representatives have been assigned to each breakout group to facilitate the conversation. Those of you who are watching this convention on the YouTube feed are also invited to this wilderness feast. The discussion questions will be posted on the screen, and you may add your reflections in the “Comments” section of the YouTube feed.

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Some have said that the COVID-19 pandemic—this wilderness, will be the fatal blow to a church that has been dying for years. Now is the Church's cross.

I think that is trauma thinking.

Remember what Paul said: “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the very power of God.” (I Corinthians 1:18)

Death may be the last great wilderness. But can God set a table in the wilderness? Even the wilderness of death?

Oh, you can count on it! I do, and that is why I do not fear this or any wilderness. I know the power of the resurrection, and I now the power of the Holy Spirit working in ALL of you can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

The table is already set. You are here. You are witnesses to the resurrected one. You are ministers of the feast.

Come on Diocese of Alaska, let's be the Church! A church that doesn't just trust that God sets a table in the wilderness, we KNOW it. So let us keep the FEAST!

#### Reflection/Discussion Questions:

What makes it a feast?

Who is at your feast?

How are you nourished at your feast?

What do you do together at your feast?

How does this feast happen?

Who sets the table?

Who brings the food?

Who invites the people?

Who leads the people in thanksgiving and prayer?

Reflect this week:

How is our feast a celebration of our baptismal covenants?

What special gifts of the community are visible at the feast?

How is the love of Christ expressed at your feast?

How can we better live into the commandment to love God and one another?