

Wilderness

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Preacher: John Adams

[0:00] Amen. Amen.

All right. Well, good morning. Good morning. It's good to be with you. Yeah, my name is John Adams, like he said, and I'm here to represent Rehoboth Ministries and here to bring you up to date on everything that's been going on in Haiti since we last spoke.

So on the screen, you see a logo of our ministry, Rehoboth Ministries. From time to time, I think about changing the name because nobody can spell it and nobody can pronounce it.

But my parents chose that name because it's based on a story in Genesis where Isaac has been digging multiple wells and people keep taking the wells away from him and eventually he digs one that people don't infringe on and so he names it Rehoboth, meaning broad places.

He says the Lord has made room for us in the land and my parents felt the Lord speak that to them many years ago that the Lord was going to create room for them in the land of Haiti. Haiti is sometimes referred to as a missionary's graveyard because, you know, so many people come there and get burned out or things don't go as planned and, you know, like Pastor Matt said, it's very unstable, especially in the last few years.

[2:20] But the Lord has given us roots. He's allowed us to take root downward and bear fruit upward and we praise the Lord for that. So Rehoboth in my parents' day was essentially started as a church plant.

They moved to Haiti in the early 80s, kind of not too far out of college where they had both gotten saved and had gotten involved in a church here in North Carolina and they were sent out to teach in a Christian school.

And after a few years of doing that, they felt the Lord leading them to plant a church. And so they moved from Port-au-Prince, the capital, up to the north of Haiti to a city called Capatien, which is the second largest city.

And they planted a church there in 1990 and my dad was the senior pastor of that church for many years. And so during my parents' stay there, they were, it was kind of a ministry of direct supervision.

And since I have taken the helm a couple of years ago for the ministry, it's kind of moved from that to more of a, trying to move into more of a partnership. We now have four local churches.

[3:30] Each of them has a school that it runs. There's a Bible college and I'm not able to live in Haiti full time. And so I come and go every few months and really am trying to move into more of a partnership, a lasting partnership with these different leaders.

And so what we do is we empower Haitian churches, local Haitian churches to strengthen ministries, equip leaders and cultivate lasting gospel impact. So that's a map of northern Haiti. And the yellow star farthest to the right is the original church plant out near the airport in Capatien. And since then there's been three others that have formed.

And this is a picture of each of them. So the original church plant is in the top left. That's a nice new building that was built almost entirely by grace.

We never would have been able to afford it. And that's where I was last week. I was down there for the latest Bible college graduation and we had it in that room. And I just want to sidebar praise the Lord for the fact that it's not 100 degrees in here today because it was there last week.

[4:38] And I was wearing a suit for the graduation and each speaker at the graduation was trying to outdo the one before them. And so I was just praying that I wouldn't pass out up there on the stage.

Eventually I had to preach and I thought by the time I get up there everybody's going to be dead. But they're used to it. I'm not anymore. But they're used to it. And so everything went fine.

The bottom right is the church that's closest to the original church. It's pastored by a pastor named Pastor LaFour. I preached there the last time I was down there.

And they're a faithful congregation and kind of an urban environment. And then the top right is one of the church plants. It's kind of close to the ocean.

And they recently moved into this new shelter. It might not look like much to you, but that was actually a big answer to prayer for them because the previous one was falling apart.

[5:44] It was in danger of caving in. And so we kind of put the word out there. And thanks to a gift from a church in Tennessee that I've never even visited, they were able to build that.

And we're praying that the Lord would eventually bring in what they need to build a more permanent structure. But for now they don't have to meet with any fear of the structure collapsing on them. And in the bottom left is the church that's farthest out in the country.

To get to that church you have to drive through several rivers because there aren't any bridges over the rivers. And you have to be careful to watch which path through the river the vehicle ahead of you is taking because if you veer from that path you could end up not being able to get out.

And so I've driven out there at least once. And they've just added on some classrooms. That's what the picture is of, which we were able to help them do. Those are our senior pastors.

On the left is the pastor of the church that's furthest out in the country, Johnny Paulson. He had a heart for the people way out in the country where he had grown up.

[6:54] And so he makes the commute every weekend. He goes out there, spends three or four days out there pouring into the people out there. And then he comes back to the city because there's no schools out there for his kids to go to.

His kids are in high school age and so they live in the city. The second one from the left is the pastor of the largest church, Pastor DeLinks Joseph. And he's a wonderful man, man of prayer. And on the second from the right is Pierre Boulos. He pastors the church that's the second farthest out in the country, the one with the new shelter. And he always has the cleanest shirts I've ever seen.

Haiti's a very dusty country. You know, it's very difficult to keep anything clean there. And yet you will see people with just spotless, spotless clothing.

And he always, like his shirt shines like the transfiguration every time I see him. So then on the right is Pastor LaFour. Pastor LaFour is an extremely gifted man.

[7:58] He just got his master's degree in organizational leadership. He's started his own small business kind of to support himself without having to depend on his church.

He runs a water purification business. Very gifted man. But all four of those men are pastoring in a very challenging context. And they're remaining faithful.

And so I just want to honor them. So each of our local churches has started a school where they educate children. And the bottom right picture shows you how big the largest school is.

That's a lot of kids. And the top left was from a couple months ago. May 18th in Haiti is Flag Day. And their national colors are red and blue. So all the kids got dressed up for that.

But each of those churches have a school attached to it. And three of those schools, the one farthest out in the country, it's just not logistically possible. But the other three are able to give a hot meal every day to every student.

[9:01] Thanks largely to the donations of the man in the picture, Richard Baker, who's from Hampstead, not too far away. And he has provided funds through an organization.

He was going through Orphan's Promise for a long time. And Orphan's Promise no longer exists. So he's shifting over to giving through an organization called Mercy Chefs. And that makes it possible for those kids to eat.

And for some of those kids, that might be the only meal they get all day. So it's pretty important. We also run a Bible college. As I mentioned, I was down there last weekend for the latest graduation. That's me with one of the students last week. I got a kick out of it. You can't really see it. But they all showed up with these little name tags that had their name on it. And then underneath that, it said Theologian.

I liked that. And that's the graduates in the other two pictures from front and back. We had 17 graduates. Usually some of our graduating classes have been as small as four.

[10:03] Pastor Matt was down there several years ago. I think they might have had five or six that year. So 17 was a big number. And they started with more. The 17 were the ones who made it all

four years.

And so we were grateful for that. So if you would like to stay in touch with us and kind of hear our updates month by month, I write a monthly newsletter.

You can go to RehobothHaiti.com. And you might want to take a picture of that in case you can't remember how to spell Rehoboth. But I send a newsletter out at the beginning of each month.

And that will give you kind of the play-by-play of what we're doing. And you can also like us on Facebook. We occasionally post things on there that we don't put in the newsletter. So that's a shot of Cap-Haitian from up on the mountain next to the city.

So, you know, it's been a very difficult last few years. In 2021, the president of Haiti was assassinated. And since then, they haven't had an elected government anywhere in the country.

[11:07] And the guy who's ruling now is kind of ruling by decree. And the large parts of the capital have just been taken over by gangs. For a while, Port-au-Prince was the kidnapping capital of the world.

There's been all kinds of horrible things that have happened. The part of the country that we're in has been kind of like an island of peace and stability in the midst of all of that.

And so we've been very fortunate to avoid most of the most severe problems. And yet there if you go to that city today, you notice everywhere there's a lot more people than there used to be.

Because there's an internal refugee crisis where people have been pouring into this city to get away from the capital. And so that brings its own problems. You know, more crime, more traffic, more lots of different kinds of negative things.

But in the midst of all of that, the Lord has given us grace. And, you know, he's also given us a few points of light. You know, a year ago I went down with a group to a part of Haiti.

[12:15] And we laid hands on this pastor's wife who came and asked for prayer because she had been suffering from what I think was probably demonic affliction.

She just, you know, would get these chills and this fear of death that would kind of overwhelm her. And we prayed for her for quite some time. And, you know, eventually she went home with her husband.

And her husband came the next morning and was very excited. He said this is the first time she's slept peacefully the whole night through in a long time. And, you know, I reached out to him several weeks later and asked him, you know, how are things going?

And he said she hasn't had any more trouble. And so, you know, in the middle of all of the darkness, like the Lord is still at work. And we also, the whole country was very overjoyed at the fact that Haiti's World Cup team made it to the World Cup this year.

Which, you know, most Americans probably don't care about the World Cup. But in Haiti it's like everything. And so to have Haiti in the World Cup this year was a joy for a lot of people. All right.

[13:25] Well, if you would open your Bible with me. We're going to be in Exodus today. Exodus chapter 13. And we'll be in verses 17 through 22.

Exodus 13, 17 through 22. As I mentioned, I preached a sermon last week to the graduates of our Bible college.

And when I first sat down to start planning what I would say, the first thing that went through my mind is I don't know that I have anything to say to these people.

I mean, I graduated from Bible college myself 19 years ago. And I was kind of reflecting back on that time. I came to the Lord or came back to the Lord in my teens after a season of rebellion.

And, you know, I came to the point where I was very sure that I was a sinner and very sure that I needed Christ and very sure that Christ had forgiven me and given me new life.

[14:30] And I remember the first sermon that I ever preached. It was just a short little thing in youth group was on Proverbs 3, 5 and 6. You know, it says, trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding.

In all of your ways acknowledge him. He will make your path straight. And my understanding of that passage, I think, has become more mature over time. But at the time, I think my understanding of that passage was if you do the right things and you have faith in the right person, the Lord will kind of work everything out.

He'll make everything go smoothly. And that was still my understanding, I think, a few years later when I graduated from Bible college. And I still believe the words of that passage.

And yet I've come to understand over time that trusting in the Lord and the Lord making your path straight does not always mean that he's going to lead you on the most comfortable path. It doesn't always mean that, you know, everything's going to be easy or that everything's always going to make sense all of the time. And so I came to this passage, which made a lot of sense to me.

[15 : 37] And so the title of this sermon would be The Wilderness is the Curriculum. The wilderness is not a bug.

It's a feature of the Christian life at many points. And yet it's not a place where God abandons us. It's not a place where we are let go by the Lord.

It's the place that God uses to shape us often into his own image. So let's read Exodus 13, 17 through 22.

It says, Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near.

For God said, lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt. So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea.

[16 : 33] And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt. And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him. For he had placed the children of Israel under solemn oath, saying, God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here with you.

So they took their journey from Sukkoth and camped in Etham at the edge of the wilderness. And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night.

He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people. Lord, I just ask that you would help me to preach your word and speak to the hearts of each of us, Lord, what you want us to hear and understand.

In Jesus' name, amen. So this passage kind of falls in a transition line in Egypt, or in Exodus, rather.

The first 12 chapters of Exodus are about the Lord getting Israel out of Egypt. The Lord is sending plagues upon Pharaoh. He's getting Pharaoh to let the people go.

[17 : 48] And then the rest of Exodus, we see the Lord beginning to get Egypt out of Israel. And one happens in a single day, and the other happens basically for the rest of their lives.

Getting Egypt out of Israel is much more difficult than getting Israel out of Egypt. And the Lord leads his people in this passage into the wilderness.

And they may think this is a temporary stop. But as we know, if we've read the rest of the story, this is going to be where they spend the rest of their lives.

Their children are actually going to be the ones who enter the promised land due to their unbelief. But the Lord's not going to abandon them. He's not going to give up on them. He's going to shepherd them and preserve them in the wilderness.

But the wilderness is where disciples are made. And in this passage, we see the wilderness is God's classroom. And God teaches his children, every child that he brings to himself, at least three lessons that we can draw out of this passage.

[18 : 57] And so we'll talk about each of them. The first one is what I would call providence, the lesson of providence. God goes before his people and prepares their way.

And so that's providence. God is going before them. He goes ahead of them and arranges their circumstances before they get there. And the second one is what's called the lesson of history. God stands behind his people. He teaches his people in this passage that their story started long before they were born. Long before they were here, God had already been at work.

And then the last one is the lesson of presence. God is with his people. He is always present with his people. And he makes them aware of that in this passage.

So let's talk about each of those. So the first lesson is the lesson of providence. God goes before his people. In verse 17, it says, God did not lead them one way.

[19 : 59] He didn't lead them by the coastal road that goes, is the most direct route from Egypt up into Palestine. It's probably the way that the highways travel today. But instead, he led them another way, a way that really didn't make much rational sense.

He leads them down to a dead end on the coast where eventually Pharaoh's army is going to pursue them. And they're going to have the experience of turning around with their backs to the

ocean and seeing the largest army in the world bearing down on them.

So God doesn't lead them one way. Instead, he leads them another. God spares them one battle and leads them into a different battle.

He avoids the Philistines, but he leads them to the Red Sea, which is unavoidable. And so the point here is a little different from how my less mature understanding of how God works might have supposed.

You know, I might have supposed coming to this passage, oh, God's not leading them to the coastal road because he says they're not ready to fight. So he's going to take them the easy way. But that's not exactly what he's doing, is it?

[21:08] He's not taking them in a way that has no trials. He's choosing different trials. He's choosing the right trials for them. Because some battles would destroy us and other battles would build our faith.

So he's leading them a way where they really have no capacity to care for themselves. And he's going to prove to them that he can take care of them, even in that situation.

A couple of years ago, I faced a situation kind of similar to that. When I first took over the ministry, you know, I went through the ministry's finances, and I went through what we could give to my parents, you know, as a thank you on a monthly basis.

And, you know, I kind of thought through everything and ran all the numbers. And I remember actually praying this. I said, I think we're going to be okay as long as there's no major medical crisis that happens anytime soon.

You know, because that was the way that I thought. And like a month into me running the ministry, a major medical crisis happened to my dad, where my dad's brain started bleeding, and he had to go to the hospital, and they couldn't do anything for him in Jacksonville.

[22:29] So they put him on a helicopter, and they flew him down to Wilmington, and they were able to save his life. But during that whole process, we realized that, you know, his Medicare had been expired because somehow a bill had forgotten to be paid, and so basically he had no health insurance.

And he got a bill in the mail for like over a million dollars. I remember just kind of laughing. And also worrying, you know, because my parents own a house, and it's like one of the only things they own. Could they take this away from my parents? And if they do, what happens? And so long story short, through a series of events, you know, we had multiple applications, talking to financial offices.

They eventually forgave. Like both hospitals forgave almost the entire bill. And a social worker was able to get them signed up somehow, and so now, you know, they have better health insurance than I do.

And, you know, now everything since that event a couple years ago has been provided for. And so, you know, I found it funny in retrospect that the one thing I prayed that the Lord would help me avoid was the thing he led me directly into and then showed me that he could take care of it anyway.

[23:55] And so God is already in your future, and he knows what would crush you, and he knows what will strengthen you. And God is rarely concerned with the most efficient route.

That passage teaches us that, right? He doesn't take Israel on the shortest route to Palestine, and he doesn't take us down the easiest road all the time because he values character a lot more than he values efficiency.

And so I think the lesson that we can draw from that is that we can trust God. We can trust God's leading even when it doesn't seem to make sense. So providence, God goes before his people, is one lesson that we learn in the wilderness.

Another lesson we learn is the lesson of history. God stands behind his people. Long before we were here, God was already at work. Verse 19, Moses adds in an interesting detail.

Now, if your Bible stopped at verse 18, where he's talking about the children of Israel going up in orderly ranks, I think some translations make it more explicit that that's military language, which you might expect that the next thing Moses says is going to be something to do with soldiers or weapons or gleaming spears or swords or helmets or armor that they're wearing and how many men they're able to put out into the battlefield.

[25:24] But he doesn't mention any of those things in the next verse, does he? What does he mention in verse 19? A coffin. Bones. A box of bones.

Not swords, not shields. A bone box. Why? Because Joseph's bones, as they're being transported, and I like to imagine, like, think about this huge crowd of people trekking across the desert, hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of people.

And somewhere in the middle of that big crowd, one or maybe a few people, their whole job is just to watch those bones and make sure those bones get out of Egypt safely. Why?

Why are they so concerned with getting Joseph's bones out? Because Joseph made them promise. And his bones are preaching. Because Joseph had predicted many centuries before, like, one day God is going to get you out of here.

And you're going to bring me with you when he does. And so they remind Israel at every step of the journey that God keeps his promises. And now he has.

[26 : 35] And so what's the application for us? Our story didn't begin with us. No matter how high we stand, we always stand on someone else's shoulders.

You know, it might have been your parents. It might have been the person who first led you to the Lord. It might have been your pastors. It might have been a missionary or a teacher, whoever it was.

And even if you've become more gifted or more knowledgeable than they were, you're still standing on that foundation.

I told the Bible college graduates last week, you might be more educated than the pastor in your local church now. You're still standing on his shoulders. And you should be respectful and honor that person and honor the people who came before you.

The Apostle Paul chastens the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 4-7. He asks them, What do you have that you did not receive? I mean, just sit with that question for a minute.

[27 : 43] What do you have that you did not receive? That's a humbling question, because ultimately the answer is nothing. Everything we have we received from someone, and ultimately from the Lord.

So everything is grace. I think one of the points of application for us today, especially perhaps in the American church, might be we need to have more of an appreciation for and a knowledge of church history.

Not that church history is scripture. It's not inspired. But I think it's very tempting in a country where everybody is always focused on the future. It's very tempting to forget about the past and forget that we have an identity that actually transcends our American identity.

We're connected to the history of God's people all across the world and throughout history. Church history has become very meaningful to me in recent years because it gives me a sense of identity, and it gives me a sense of groundedness, too.

Sometimes people can get so pessimistic about the way the world is going and the way things are, and sometimes when I read church history, I'm like, I think maybe I'd rather be living now than in some of these other times.

[29 : 02] I mean, you read this guy named Athanasius. Athanasius was exiled from the Roman Empire five times, five different times by different emperors. He had to go off into the woods outside beyond the reach of civilization because he refused to concede the point that Jesus is God.

And the empire had become, it was a Christian empire in name, but it had become corrupted already where the emperor was punishing Christians who refused to say that Jesus wasn't God.

And Athanasius refused to give up that point, and he spent his entire life running from one place to the other. And at the very end of his life, he was able to come home and start to see that a lot of the young pastors, the young people who were coming up, thought he had won the debate.

You know, we need stories like that. We need stories like Augustine. Augustine poured his life into a rural church. He was a very educated man, one of the most educated men of his day, and yet he lived way out in the country in North Africa.

Poured his life out, and at the very end of his life, the last thing he saw was the barbarians breaking through the gates of his city and burning everything, and that's how he died. And yet he couldn't see that many centuries after he was gone, people would still be reading his books and drawing great insight.

[30 : 26] So, like Israel, we need to carry the bones of our ancestors with us, so to speak. We're connected to them, and they're connected to us, because neither of us will inherit what we're about to inherit without each other.

And so Israel found an identity in the wilderness, in being the people that God keeps his promises to. And so whatever we walk through in life, that needs to be our identity as well.

We are the people who are connected to a people long before us that God keeps his promises to. The third lesson in the wilderness is the lesson of God's presence.

God walks with his people. In verses 21 and 22, it talks about that. The Lord goes before them by day in a pillar of cloud. He goes ahead of them at night in a pillar of fire.

And he communicates to them that way, that he is with them. They are never alone. It doesn't mean that that eliminates difficulty. As we've already seen, the cloud is going to lead them to the Red Sea, where they're going to experience great fear and difficulty.

[31 : 35] And so God's presence doesn't guarantee comfort, but it does guarantee companionship. The Lord is with them. And Israel's job is very simple, and I think it's still our job today.

Their job is just to stay close. When the cloud moves, they move. When the cloud stops, they stop. Today, the Lord doesn't reveal his presence to us by cloud and fire, but he still reveals himself to us by his word and by his spirit.

And Psalm 119 says, Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And the point of application I draw from the fire and the cloud is, you know, sometimes it was light out, and Israel might have thought, we can see.

Like, we know where we're going. But that wasn't the call. The call was to follow the cloud, because sometimes they think they should be going this way, and the cloud is going that way. And so, well, I guess we've got to follow the cloud.

We've got to go the way the cloud is moving. And so sometimes we might think, like, we have enough information by our own lights to make the right decision. We might think, I don't see why we need God to tell us what to do here.

[32 : 49] Like, you know, we think we've got it. But the call is to stay close to the Lord. Sometimes the Lord might be calling us to do the counterintuitive thing.

And if we're not listening, if we're not paying attention, we might miss that. And then on the other hand, you know, there's kind of an opposite error that we're often tempted to fall into, where we've only got enough light for, like, one step.

And we can see one step ahead. And the temptation at that point is, well, I can't see more than one step ahead. I'm just not going to move. I'm just going to stay right here.

And that's not the call either. You know, if the fire gives you enough room to take one step, then take that one step. And then the Lord will give you the next step. And then the next step after that. So our calling is just to stay close to the Lord at every point and to do what He says. It doesn't mean the Lord will always lead us down the easiest path.

[33 : 53] I remember 20 years ago, my dad was kidnapped out of their churchyard in Haiti. And they were being driven way out into the country in their own vehicle.

And I remember my dad describing it later, because he was released, you know, a couple days later. I remember him describing it later as being, like, he felt like he was in the womb of God. You know, there was just a sense of God's protection, God's care, God's presence that was just there. And they did not feel afraid, he and my mom.

They just felt like God was there with them. And the presence of God was greater than their circumstances. Another story that illustrates that to me is a story from church history.

Ignatius. Ignatius was one of the first martyrs in church history, early 2nd century. And he was arrested in what today would be Syria. But the Roman Empire wanted to make a point at his expense, so they had him shipped to Rome.

[34 : 58] And that actually turned out to be a big benefit for us today, because the soldiers were kind of permissive. And at every place they docked, they allowed him to write letters to the churches that he had pastored, that they were preserved for us today.

And he got to meet with different church leaders and encourage them. At every stop, his message to them was always the same. He said, don't pray that I would be delivered.

I know I'm going to die for the Lord, and I know that that's what God's calling me to do. Just pray that I would have the courage not to buckle under the pressure. And in one of his letters, he says something that's kind of stuck with me since I read it a few years ago.

He says basically, earthly desires have been crucified to me and I to them. And all that is left now is a current of water running underneath everything else that murmurs come to the Father.

The deepest miracle isn't escape. The deepest miracle is God's presence. God is with us no matter what we go through. And so, you know, as I said this to the graduates last week, and I'm saying it to you here today in a very different context, I don't know where your road will lead, but God does. [36:24] He's already been there. He's gone ahead of you. And he's preparing your way. And I don't know how long your journey will be, but I do know that many others have walked the same path before you.

And so you're not alone. And I don't know what suffering you might end up facing, but I do know that the Lord has promised to be with you no matter what.

And, you know, so none of us in this room have arrived. We haven't gotten to where we're ultimately going yet. But we all should be following Jesus because Jesus is ultimately, he's the greatest example.

He's the true providence of God. He's the one who's blazed the trail ahead of us, who's gone before us and prepared the way for us. Jesus is the culmination of the history of the people of God.

All of our stories find their resolution and their completion in his story. And, of course, Jesus is the abiding presence of God with us.

[37:28] He's God made flesh. He's God who is always with us. And so if you're walking through the wilderness now or whether you end up doing so in the future, the wilderness is not evidence that God has forgotten you or abandoned you.

The wilderness is God's classroom where God begins to make you into the image of his son. And one day you might realize that all the time you thought you were just trying to get to the promised land, God was actually using that wilderness season to transform you into what he wanted you to be.

So, let's pray. Lord, I just thank you for your word. I thank you for how you've worked it into my heart through many seasons of difficulty and seasons of joy.

And I thank you, Lord, for what you're doing in each life that is here. And I just ask you, God, to remind us when we walk through wilderness seasons, Lord, that you're always with us.

And I pray especially for our brothers and sisters in Haiti, Lord, who have been walking through a very long and difficult wilderness season, Lord, that you would be with them and that you would get them to where they need to be and help us.

[38:54] Thank you, Lord, for letting us be a part of their story and part of encouraging them and supporting them and advocating for them as they become the people of God transformed into the image of Christ.

Make us that as well, Lord. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.