

Welcome

Have you seen Dwayne “the Rock” Johnson’s TV show The Titan Games? It’s basically his take on American Gladiators. In the second season, he invited professional, all-star athletes to be his Titans, to compete against the everyday Americans who had to run his grueling obstacle course. One of those pros was Victor Cruz, who won a Super Bowl ring (by beating the Patriots but that’s neither here nor there). What was amazing about the Titan Games was that almost every pro Titan got beaten in their first run at the obstacle course... including Cruz.

Then, in the second-to-last episode of the season, anyone who was a Titan and lost got to come back and try one more time... including all the pros. They had a really cool interview with Cruz where he talked about how surprised he was to lose so badly in his first run. He observed that it had been a couple of years since he had played pro ball, and he hadn’t stayed in the same peak physical condition.

I have to say, watching that during a pandemic, nursing my own quarantine-18, I felt him. There are seasons of our life where we feel all-in, fully present. In athletics, it’s when we’re prepping for big events - games, reality TV, whatever.

In faith, it’s often the difficult seasons of life that make our faith really strong (much like working out - it’s when you hurt that you’re really getting work done).

So the question is what happens after the season’s over. It’s hard to keep in game day shape when there’s no game on the horizon. And, if we’re being honest, for a lot of us, it’s a lot easier to be faithful when things are hard. It’s easier to pray when we need help.

So today, I want to explore how we can be faithful after the hard times. Because, after all, the bad times don’t last forever. But we want to thrive in the good times too!

Message

This is the fifth Sunday of Lent. Lent is our six week journey toward celebrating Jesus’ resurrection at Easter. We prepare by walking with Jesus toward the cross - Lent is a season of introspection, confession and repentance. We root out sin in our spirits, our families, our church and our world. We confess them to God and ask for God’s help to live lives of justice and flourishing for everyone.

This year, our Lent series is “Bad Deal”. We’re exploring the nature of sin and temptation. Our English translations use a couple of different words for the same idea: testing and tempting. We think of temptation as always bad, but in the Bible, the idea of temptation is more neutral, like the word test (I know, I know - you folks in school still think of testing as bad). But tests are not in and of themselves bad. Tests reveal the state of our lives. They’re an opportunity for us to

see the truth of our lives. Do we really trust God? Or are we trusting something or someone else?

We began with our most basic test: natural cravings. To be human is to have desires. Jesus showed us that we don't live by bread alone, but by seeking out connection with the "bread of Heaven".

Next, we faced our desire for certainty. We saw that a desire to test God is a sign of an immature faith, and that Jesus invites us to grow into a real trust because his path leads through a cross - and going there with him requires a lot of courage and faith.

Today, we're going to look at another question: what do we do when we're not in a wilderness? What happens when we're not facing trials and tests? That's part and parcel of Jesus' good news: that there's a resurrection after the cross. There's a Promised Land after a wilderness. This might seem like a strange message while we're still in a pandemic, while so many of us are still facing hardship. But we are looking toward the end of the pandemic, when life will go not back to normal, but into a new normal that will involve many of the things we miss (like meeting together in person!).

Beyond that, our faith in the good times relates directly to how we navigate these hard times. So whether you're continuing to feel the weight of the last year, or whether things are looking up for you, I want to invite you to consider with me what the character of our collective faith looks like.

Turn with us to Deuteronomy 6.

I think a lot of us can relate to where Israel is in this passage: they've spent the last 40 years living as nomads in the wilderness, but now they're just across the Jordan River from the Promised Land, the place God has been promising they're going to live for all those years.

Can you feel that, as we're here close to the end of the pandemic, the vaccinated world so close we can almost taste it? This long season of separation and solitude that has weighed so heavily on us all so close to being over. We're ready to get there.

Aren't we?

Here in Deuteronomy, Moses is offering Israel a final reflection as they leave the wilderness. He's looking back at their time in the desert, reflecting on how God has been present to them and encouraging them to remember that as they move into this new reality. He actually warns them that the new goodness has some real danger as well. Let's listen in:

Deuteronomy 6:10–12 NLT

"The Lord your God will soon bring you into the land he swore to give you when he made a vow to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a land with large, prosperous cities that you did not build. The houses will be richly stocked with goods you did not produce. You will draw water from cisterns you did not dig, and you will eat from vineyards and olive trees you did not

plant. When you have eaten your fill in this land, be careful not to forget the Lord, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt.

God is warning them that they're about to step into a radically different life. In the desert, just surviving takes work. The Promised Land has cities, fields and flocks.

The desert has tents, and the Promised Land has houses.

Moses warns them that prosperity can be dangerous. Because they're in danger of forgetting that lesson they learned in the wilderness: all they have is from God.

If you remember earlier in this series, we saw that the whole purpose of Israel's time in the wilderness was to learn to live as free people. When they first left Egypt, they saw God as no different from the Egyptians who had enslaved them. They were certain God had led them into the wilderness to die (because they were hangry, remember).

So God spent 40 years with them teaching them to live in faith, trusting God to provide everything they needed. 40 years later and they are a people of faith. They know that, no matter how hard things get, they can count on God.

But now things are about to get good. They're about to have more than they need. Forget manna - they'll have flocks and crops.

And once they don't have to rely on God for every little thing, once they gain some independence, the danger is that they'll forget. They'll forget that all this prosperity comes from God.

That's a real danger, one we see in our own lives. You've probably heard the saying, "There're no atheists in the foxhole." It's a reference to wartime, and the idea that when your life is on the line, when our circumstances are life-and-death, everyone prays for help. On the one hand, that's not actually even true - plenty of people face death without turning to God. On the other hand, it points to an unfortunate reality of that immature faith we explored over the last couple of weeks: people turn much more readily to God in times of crisis. But what we're looking for, so often, in crisis isn't a relationship with God. We want a fix.

We're hungry, so we want bread. We're hurting so we want to be comforted. We're sad so we want healing. And we want God to do these things for us.

That's not a relationship. That's... a vending machine. We put in prayer, we get out miracle. That's the sort of shallow, immature faith that doesn't actually weather the wilderness well. It's a faith that disappears the moment we get hungry or hurt or sad again.

[Cycle 1]

So there's a weird sort of vicious cycle that can happen: faith requires trust, and trust is something we develop especially in extended, difficult times (like during this pandemic). It's a faith that can carry us through the wilderness. We emerge from the wilderness with a strong faith, a deep trust in God. But as we settle, become accustomed to the good times well... faith becomes less urgent. We can feed ourselves. We can bake our daily bread - we don't need to trust in manna every morning. So our faith begins to weaken. Like an athlete who slowly loses shape in the off season, our relationship with God drifts further and further from that strong unity we experienced in the wilderness.

Sadly, this is exactly what happened to Israel. Over the years, they became content, self-sufficient. They forgot that everything they had is from God. They took their position in the Promised Land for granted. And their connection to God weakened to the point they began worshiping other gods, gods who were like the Egyptian gods who had enslaved them all those generations before.

It's no wonder then that prophets in those later, faithless days, looked back to the wilderness not with horror, but with fondness. Take Hosea, for instance, who famously compares Israel's abandonment of Yahweh to an unfaithful spouse. Through Hosea, God promises that, even though Israel is headed for calamity,

Hosea 2:14 NLT

"But then I will win her back once again.
I will lead her into the desert
and speak tenderly to her there.

God says, "The wilderness isn't so bad... that's where we fell in love. And that's where we can fall in love again."

In Israel's story, this is very much what happens. Their faithlessness and complacency leads to the Exile. But on the other side, Israel finds a renewed faithfulness.

The question I want to pose for us, poised today on the edge of a promised land, is whether that cycle is inevitable. And as you might suspect, I'm with Moses here - I don't think it has to be that way. Yes, it's really easy when we're settled in the Promised Land to forget the lessons of the desert. But we can choose to live a life of faith even in the Promised Land. Just a few verses earlier in Deuteronomy 6, Moses outlines what this can and should look like:

Deuteronomy 6:4–9 NLT

"Listen, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

[Cycle 2] What Moses described we call Spiritual Practices. These are behaviors we can use to create routines that become rhythms for our lives. Rhythms that, especially in those good times, keep us connected deeply with our creator. That connection is vital exactly because we know that in the course of our lives, we'll navigate both deserts and gardens. The key to a flourishing life isn't avoiding the deserts. It's a strong, deep connection to the one who is with us wherever we go.

On a corporate level, there's one other reality this text raises. Moses warned the people that they were about to take possession of a land they didn't cultivate or develop. In the same way, we in this area live on land we did not cultivate or develop. Dealing with the conquest narratives in the Bible is a whole sermon series on its own, but I couldn't help but read Moses' words and think of the peoples who were the original stewards of this land we now call Rowlett (or Rockwall or Wylie or Garland or Dallas) - the Tawakoni and the Kirikirish, or Wichita.

Like the Israelites who inhabited the Promised Land in the generations after Moses and Joshua, we live in a place with a legacy of violence and genocide. This is a painful, scary thing for me to admit because I have no idea how to fix that. We can't go back in time. But if we're to be a people of faith, a people of redemption and restoration, then we must have the courage to ask the question in prayer. To have that conversation with each other, with our Native siblings.

We owe it to the Tawakoni and Wichita to be in relationship with them, to humble ourselves and ask their forgiveness and to discern with them what a holy way forward might look like. To continue to ignore this deep wound is the sort of shallow faith that cannot sustain us, particularly as our community continues to grow and diversify.

Now. Take a deep breath. As we respond today, I want to invite you to reflect on where you are. Are you still deep in the desert? Do you feel like you're at the edge of the Promised Land looking in?

Or maybe things are pretty good. You feel like you've made it. Or you've been in the promised land for a while.

I want to invite you to use this time of response as an opportunity to consider the state of your faith. Is your connection to God strong? Is it... weaker than you wish it were? How will you respond to God?

Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to his table and to his cross.

When in the last week have I made space to be with God?

When have I ignored God? Why?

When in the next week might I want to ignore God?

How can I make space to be with God this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Spiritual practices!