

9th May 2021 10 am Wilderness

Service led by Andrew Attwood, Talk by Val Whiteman, Reading by Andrew Attwood
This transcript is only of the readings, the talk, and a notice about Retreat in Daily Life

[Andrew:]

Lord Jesus, would You help us to focus on You, to worship You, and also to hear You, especially now as we hear Your written word. Amen.

1st Reading: Exodus 19:3-8

3 Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, ‘This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 4 “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.’

7 So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. 8 The people all responded together, ‘We will do everything the LORD has said.’ So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.

2nd Reading: Isaiah 35:1-8 [NIVUK 1984]

1 The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, 2 it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendour of our God.

3 Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;
4 say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come, he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution he will come to save you.’

5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

6 Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

7 The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

8 And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness.
The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way;
wicked fools will not go about on it.

This is the word of the Lord.

So I'm just going to pray for Val now, and Val will come and speak to us.

Father, God, we thank You for Val, and for her preparation on this important subject of Wilderness, and how You lead Your people. I pray for Your hand on her now. And I pray for our ears to be open to hear in Jesus' name. Amen.

Thank you.

Talk

[Val Whiteman:]

Amen.

Thank you, Andrew. So I'm speaking on Wilderness, which doesn't sound terribly promising.



As Andrew said, it's the first of three talks. And so this one is kind of looking in both directions: backwards over where we've been, and forwards to where we're going. Wilderness in the Bible, as you've heard from the two readings, is remarkably rich in meaning. We have the wanderings of the children of Israel in Exodus, and I'd really like to concentrate on that experience. If you haven't read it recently, then I'd recommend you have a look back at it afterwards. I'm going to be mentioning briefly the new Israel, Jesus, whose Wilderness experience in the temptations is remarkably different.

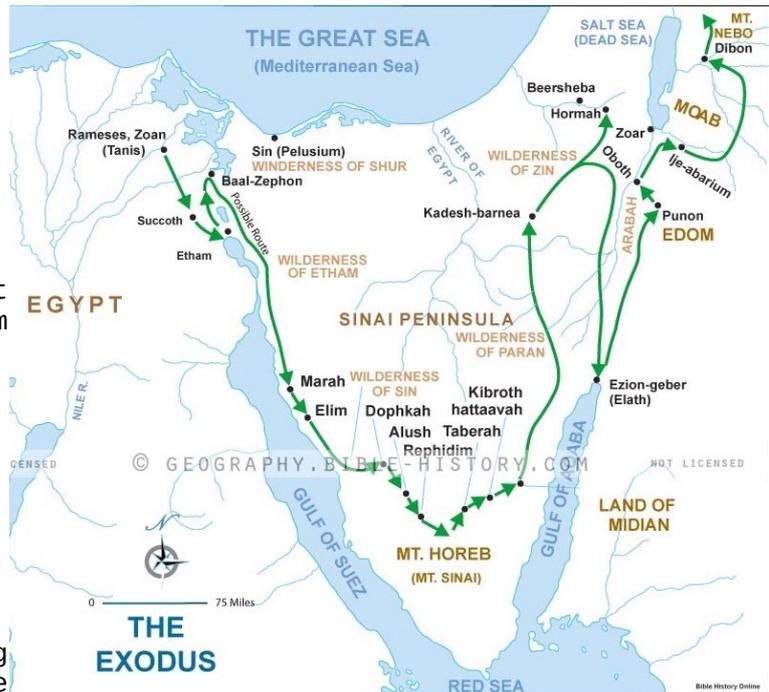
But I want to start off by saying that much of our spiritual language is in metaphor. That is, one idea stands in for another one. So Wilderness can have several meanings according to your individual understanding of the word. And also metaphors tend to be a bit imprecise. You can only push them so far. So please be careful.

Also, our experiences of pandemic are incredibly different. We come out of lockdown, for a while at least, with very different feelings. Some people I know were working harder than they've ever worked before; others are lonely and struggling with mental health problems; still others devastated by the loss of people they loved or jobs they did, and they're in deep mourning. So we come to think about Wilderness from very different starting points. So can we remember that, and listen to and pray for each other as we go on.

So, back to Exodus. You remember that the Israelites set out from Egypt after the last of the plagues, the death of the firstborn, which began the feast of Passover for the Israelites. And just quickly a bit of background: Joseph had been sold into slavery and then risen to become Pharaoh's right-hand man. But after 430 years of the Israelites living in Egypt, the reigning Pharaoh had forgotten all about Joseph, and so the children of Israel, now prosperous and seen as a threat, were enslaved by the Egyptians. Moses was charged by the Lord to lead them, and he took them, after the plagues, out of Egypt. So the first books of the Bible, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Leviticus, are part of their wanderings for 40 years in the Wilderness.

First kind of Wilderness: self-inflicted

So here's a map of their wanderings, just so you can see whereabouts they were. You will see that they didn't exactly take a direct route from Egypt to the promised land. You will also remember they weren't supposed to spend 40 years wandering around in the Wilderness. But after that first reading that Andrew gave us from Exodus, the children of Israel forgot what God had asked. And they went astray, they made a golden calf to worship instead of God. I just love Aaron's explanation as to why he cooperated in idolatry, "I took gold and threw it into the fire and out came a golden calf." A bit like "A dog ate my homework." So grumbling, kicking and screaming, God fashioned the nation who worshipped Him, sort of, from a bunch of slaves. I say I ought to have rewritten that sentence: it's not God that was kicking, grumbling and screaming, it was the children of Israel.



So our first reading from Exodus 19 comes from the beginning of the Wilderness experience for the Israelites. You'll remember that God promised that they would be His special people, and He would care for them. The people agreed to keep the covenant with God, but sadly, they forgot very speedily.

Just in case you think we are very different, both the writer of Hebrews and Paul in Corinthians warn about how Christians too can forget God and, like the children of Israel, need reminding. So the first concept of Wilderness I want to consider is the one we get into all by ourselves. Do you remember Jesus's parable of the sower, where the seed falls on all sorts of ground? If you feel that things are not as good as they were, between you and God, then you might like to spend a short time thinking about whether you've got yourself into bad habits that might mean thorns and thistles are growing up around you or in you. If you say sorry, and turn away from the things that are unhelpful, then God is faithful and just and will continue loving you and developing your faith. That's what you might call a self-inflicted wilderness. And I think most of us go there from time to time, particularly because the busyness of everyday life just grows up around you.

Ask yourself also, do you actually believe that God loves you and wants the best for you? I spend quite a lot of my Christian life forgetting that this might be so: I think I know so much better what suits me than God does. Like the children of Israel grumbling away, because they haven't got the bread of Egypt. So we all need a reality check from time to time. It's easy to say that the children of Israel were incredibly stupid not to trust God. Only, sadly, that's a little like the pot calling the kettle black, given that when we are facing difficulties, it's easy to forget God altogether, and even to forget what He's already done for us. Some of us are very slow learners.

So a self-inflicted wilderness needs attention. Mercifully, God teaches us slowly and patiently that He does love us, that He can be trusted, that He is dependable: wildernesses remind us of that. You remember that God gave the children of Israel manna in the desert, and He also gave them meat.

Second kind of wilderness: caused by life events

Other wildernesses can happen because of life events, and they might be slightly harder to face. They happen to everyone. But if we think that God is good and loving and actually cares for us, then we can face these challenges with Him. I remember my daughter saying when something really, really bad happened to her not long ago, "I'd rather go through this with Jesus than without Him," when she was challenged about her belief.

So imagine that you are going into a wilderness: it could be a desert, it could be a jungle, it could even be a wild place in this country. I don't know whether anyone else has read *The Salt Path*¹. It's written by a lady called Raynor Winn, someone who really doesn't like Christianity, but it's about a couple who face incredible difficulties: no home, a terminal illness. So as you do, they decide to walk the coast path in the West Country. And part of the story at the beginning is what they can't take with them. They can only take what they can carry on their backs. So at the beginning of the book, the writer describes the hard choices they had to make. And I'd suggest that it should be like that for us. Sometimes we get too much stuff, material things, ideas, habits or hobbies. And God says to you, "You'll struggle carrying that lot through the wilderness." And so we go back to God to ask Him what we really need.

Again, a reality check: have we picked up things that we don't really need? What might God be saying about coming out of lockdown into a simplified world, or a world where our priorities have become really different? Again, we need to consider whether we're carrying baggage or focusing on God. For the children of Israel, God actually provided water when they needed it. He provided manna: you remember, that's the strange stuff that came out of the sky, and they called it 'what is it?' (manna) because they weren't sure. And they used to collect it and use it as bread just as they needed it. He also provided quails for them to eat. And although they grumbled about the lack of security because they were never sure where the next meal was coming from – they only got what they needed when they needed it – He was utterly faithful to them.

Even in the New Testament, the writer of the Hebrews reminds us that we too can fall into the mistakes that the children of Israel make. He quotes that familiar psalm (for those of us who are old enough to remember). We used to sing it every Sunday morning: the Venite. So this is it in a modern translation ²

12 See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today', so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. 14 We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. 15 As has just been said:

'Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion.'

Third kind of Wilderness: transformational

Being in the Wilderness is not always pleasant or easy. But I want to move on to another side that the wilderness experience can bring to us which the prophets speak of. And that is that God's controlling love can bring joy and prosperity even in the bleakest of places. In our second reading, Isaiah speaks about the coming King, who will transform all of our barren places. I love this reading.³

Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

1 ISBN: paperback: 978-0143134114, hardback: 978-0241349649

2 Hebrews 3:12-15 [NIVUK]

3 Isaiah 35:6b-8 [NIVUK 2011]

- 7 The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.
- 8 And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.

That is such a wonderful promise we've seen fulfilled in Christ. You remember that when Christianity started, it wasn't called Christianity, it was called 'The Way' because Christ Himself said He was the Way, and so when we walk in the Way of Holiness we walk in, with, surrounded by Christ, which is wonderful. So even the world which is desert to us, and difficult and challenging, becomes a Way of Holiness for us, streams in the desert.

Fourth kind of wilderness: seeking God

You remember that when Jesus was in the wilderness, He spent time, as it says in the gospels, fasting and praying, and then He was tempted to see what kind of a Messiah He was to be, and to whom He owed allegiance. Unlike the children of Israel, He remains faithful to God, His Father, trusting in Him for support and guidance. He sort of fulfils the lost promise of the children of Israel. And you remember, He quotes words from the Old Testament, to show where He should trust. So Jesus is like the new Israel, who does what God desires for Him. And as a result, He brings all of us back into God's presence, when we accept Him as Saviour.

Jesus also goes into desert places to pray, to be with God. And that's another sort of aspect of Wilderness. There is nowhere that God is not. Even when we find ourselves in difficult places, God is there making the deserts bloom.

Isaiah 40 says,

- 3 A voice of one calling:
'In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
- 4 Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
- 5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

The proclamation job originally was that of John the Baptist, another wilderness dweller, who proclaimed the coming of the Lord. It's also our job now, to proclaim to our friends and neighbours that there's no place we find ourselves in that God cannot guide and guard us. And so it's a good idea to have had this experience ourselves.

Conclusion

As we come back into a new and strange world, maybe after the pandemic, maybe as only a way on the journey through, let's think about how we understand God.

Let's talk to Him about what may be unnecessary baggage. And remember that He's always trustworthy, and He never leaves us.

Also, remember, it's much easier to walk through the wilderness as of this world with other people. Although Jesus took Himself off into desert places to talk to His Father, He also spent time with 12 disciples, like the 12 tribes of Israel, for three years wandering around Palestine, no fixed abode. By the end of it, they would have understood what living in community meant. And they shared that with the churches they founded. We need each other's support as church. It's not something we should be doing on our own. So I want to end this talk with Paul's reminder to the Romans about what he's learned about wilderness experiences. Can we use this as a sort of prayer at the end of my talk?⁴

35 Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? **36** (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") **37** No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. **39** No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

[Andrew:] Amen. Thank you so much, Val. We're just going to have a moment of quiet to reflect on that. Let's just be still just for a moment.

Just a moment to reflect on your own experience of wilderness or desert, spiritual wilderness or spiritual desert.

Once again, I'd like to invite you, before we pray any further, to come to God with whatever is in your hands, whatever is in your experience. The privilege of being chosen by God as Israel was to be led into the wilderness towards a better future. And Jesus modelled that for us too. So there is submission required as we move towards God, who may choose to lead us into and through wilderness, as a way of knowing ourselves better and knowing God better. So with that in mind, we're going to sing again. And then I'll pray afterwards. So let's sing.

Prayerful Reflection

So let's continue to pray.

Father God we bow before You, and we come as we are.

Holy Spirit, we ask that You would begin to reveal to us what it is that You would like us to do. Where You would like to lead us as individuals, first, Lord? Would You begin to perhaps put Your finger on thoughts, ways of thinking, ways of life that we need to lay Your feet? We bring ourselves to You Lord. Do speak.

And Lord, in Your presence, would You help us to be honest about the nature of our heart towards You? How soft-hearted we are towards Your voice, or hard-hearted? Perhaps because we want to retain control? Would You help us to be honest about that?

4 Romans 8:35-39 [NLT]

And Lord Jesus, if there is reluctance or resistance, if we are beset with too many things and priorities and distractions, Lord, in this moment of quiet, would You just help us to confess that, as wrong. Lord, we confess these things, Lord, would You help us to repent, to turn away from anything that has filled our lives in the wrong way.

We're sorry, Lord.

Lord Jesus, we also come to You as a gathered community, even though we are meeting online at the moment, we are St. John's Church Kenilworth, and we recognise that You have a plan and a will for all of us, as a community. Lord, we acknowledge that we as a community inevitably have baggage. We have an inherited story, we have ways that we are fond of. Lord, would You begin to make space in our hearts, where there may be room for You to lead us into a different way of thinking and a different way of being, as church.

And Lord, inevitably, the letting-go of how things are and the moving towards the unknown will feel like stepping into a different kind of space, perhaps like a journey through a wilderness, where everything is unknown, or not quite so sure. Father, would You take us by the hand, so that we travel with You now into the next phase of church life, would You help us to consciously put our hand in Your hand as You lead us forward and through the next phase of church life. Help us to trust You.

Father, we acknowledge that it is perhaps only in the wilderness that our self can be blown away by the winds of the desert, where our preoccupations are purged and left behind. So Lord, I want to say that I want to have a positive attitude towards being led, like Jesus was, into the desert: it is a Christ-like thing, to choose to walk towards. And, Lord, I choose, and I hope on behalf of all the church, we choose to walk towards You, so that You can change us and train us and maybe even test us.

And I pray, Lord, that in that space that we make for You, that Your presence would indeed come. We don't want to do this without You, Lord. We ask in advance, that Your presence would come to us as church, especially as we start to meet again.

So Lord Jesus, would You lead us? In Your name. Amen.

Notice about Retreat in Daily Life

I'm going to pray some intercessory prayers in a moment. But before that, I wanted to give another brief notice that relates to everything Val was saying, and something that she and the wardens and I have been hoping to offer to the church. As part of the season of prayer that we're planning for St. John's Church, we would like to invite you into another phase of Retreat in Daily Life. Val herself pioneered a little bit of an experience of retreating in daily life with a few people in years gone by at St. John's, where people would commit themselves as individuals to pray for 20 minutes each day, and once a week, they would meet up with a partner, a prayer partner, to review how that week has gone and to pray for each other. And this was to increase our awareness of God and our openness to God and our devotion to God through a commitment of 20 minutes a day, and a review with one person a week: a very simple mechanism. There were some resources and will be some resources that can help people through that. Val told me a few weeks ago, she said on reflection when someone was going through that process in the past, they came and spoke to Val and they said, "Thank you for inviting me to do retreat in daily life. It changed my life." So as we move as a whole church into a season of prayer on Sundays at 10am, we want to invite the entire church to start this process of 20 minutes of prayer a day; and pairing up with someone, you can initiate this, you can choose this, find someone who will be a prayer partner who

you meet with once a week. And you will have a chance to review how it's going and pray for each other to keep going in your prayer. If we do this, the likelihood of God meeting with us on Sundays is going to be markedly higher, because we will already be a people praying. So we will tell you more about that over the next week or two. But just set that in your hearts and put it in your diary. We want everybody to be involved in ongoing prayer in the season of prayer.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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