

First Sunday - A Spirit-led Journey

During these Lent sessions we will consider how things apply on a personal level, the interpersonal / corporate level as the gathered people of God, and at the 'whole of life' level so that there is an outward/missional 'whole life' worship focus too.

However, today as we reflect on a Spirit led journey, the material does have a more personal focus.

Would you agree with me that life has both mountaintop moments and desert days? There are times when you feel on top of the world, and others when it feels like you're just stumbling through the dust. There are times when you feel well fed, comfortable and surrounded by loved ones, and others where you're hungry, thirsty, lonely and tired. In our relationship with God, we have moments when we feel very close to him - perhaps at a Christian conference, a worship event, on a retreat or a holiday. And then we have other days when God seems far away, when we doubt him or struggle with temptations.

If you feel like that, you are not alone. Everyone has these ups and downs, these mountaintop moments and desert days. Not just us today - but even our heroes from the Bible, and even Jesus, experienced both. Our Lent series is going to help us journey with Jesus through the desert wilderness. Today I want to highlight three things that the Bible can teach us about our wilderness experiences.

1) Wilderness is not a sign of God's absence

The people of Israel experienced a huge mountaintop moment. They were led out of slavery in Egypt and then God parted the Red Sea, allowing them to pass and simultaneously destroying their enemies (Ex. 14). They celebrated this by singing a joyful worship song, dancing and playing percussion instruments (Ex. 15). They were on top of the world.

But very quickly in Exodus 15:22-24 they reach a desert or wilderness called Shur, where there is no fresh water. Here their joy turns to grumbling, their worship turns to distrust. They immediately doubt that God is with them. Similarly in chapter 16 they reach another desert called Sin, and here there is no food to eat. They start to long for their days in Egypt, and complain that they are going to die.

Yet in both the deserts of Shur and Sin, God provides for them: with fresh water and with Manna bread and quail meat. Our passage from Deuteronomy shows us the reason why all this happened:

"Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands." (Deuteronomy. 8:2)

GROUPS 1: Reflecting on the people of Israel's experience and your own experience, what are the challenges with our relationship with God when struggles/trials/wilderness come?

When we experience the struggles of the wilderness we should not see them as punishments from God, or signs that God is uncaring or non-existent. Instead we are challenged to see that the wilderness is an opportunity for us to find God in our hearts. Do we really trust in him, or do we trust in our ourselves alone? As Deuteronomy goes on to say:

“He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.” (Deuteronomy 8:16-18)

2) We are led by the Spirit into the Wilderness

Jesus begins his ministry with a very similar pattern to the people of Israel. He passes through the waters - not the Red Sea, but the waters of baptism in the Jordan river. Again, this is a mountaintop experience, where the Spirit descends and the voice of his Father speaks words of affirmation and devotion: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (Mk. 1:11).

We might expect that after this high-point Jesus would launch into his ministry of preaching and demonstrating the Kingdom of God. Yet this is not what happens. Like Israel before him Jesus goes from the waters to the wilderness, from spiritual feasting to the struggle of fasting, from affirmation to loneliness and temptation.

“At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness.” (Mark 1:12)

GROUPS: 2

Reflecting on Jesus being sent into the wilderness by the Spirit (Mark 1:12), have you experienced a time or times where you thought God was calling you, sending you, empowering you, only for there to be trials, temptations, setbacks or disappointments? Times of refreshing followed by periods of dryness?

If you have experienced this, take heart that you are following in the footsteps of Jesus. Wilderness is often a place that the Spirit of God leads us to. The Father led Jesus into the desert by the Spirit, and he leads us there too.

It says in Mark’s Gospel that the Spirit led, or sent, or drove Jesus... depending on your translation...into the wilderness. The Spirit led Jesus **into** the wilderness, **through** the wilderness, and the Spirit led him **out** of the wilderness. There was never a moment when the Spirit of God left Jesus. **GOD WAS NOT ABSENT.** Even in his weakened condition physically, even in the trials and temptations Jesus had the Holy Spirit with him and upon him as he faced the devil and the trials of the situation.

He was led by the Spirit and we too are to be led by the Spirit. Gal 5:25. If we live by the Spirit we must keep in step with the Spirit.

SO let us look at the role the Holy Spirit played in this sequence of events that Jesus faced and hopefully learn something from Jesus of how to handle the wilderness, the trials and temptations when they come our way.

1. Obedience to the Holy Spirit (slide)

The first thing I picked up reading it afresh this year was Jesus’ obedience to the Spirit in all that happened. He demonstrated obedience in his being baptised and he demonstrated

Editable Sermon Outline

obedience to the Spirit to enter the wilderness and obedience to God's voice above all the other voices.

Obedience is a big deal. With the influence of sin, the flesh and the devil our inclinations are not always to be obedient to the guidance and promptings of the Spirit.

Yet, obedience to the Spirit is a key to living life in all its fullness and overcoming situations in our lives that try to empty that fullness.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ is about love and it's about faithfulness... and that involves obedience.

That's part of what Lenten disciplines are all about.

I've talked it over in my head and heart with the Lord and this year I've decided to give up alcohol and every time I have a desire for a drink I've got some people and situations I'm going to pray for. The stronger the craving the more prayer they'll get! It's about me saying I want you Lord to work in these situations more than I want to have a drink and satisfy my own desire and longer. It's a little bit of my heart... a little bit of obedience to the Spirit.

But life is full of these little love and obedience moments. Do I go with the inclination and provocation to curse / bad mouth, to speed, to over indulge, to cheat or do I live in obedience to the Spirit?

The human condition has had an inbuilt disobedience and rebellion towards God since the beginning. Genesis sets the scene whilst the accounts of God's people throughout Scripture show plenty of disobedience and rebellion. We can't live the life God wants in our own strength. God's plan of salvation is for him to put his Spirit within us to live his way, but we have that choice whether to align our will with God's will, our spirit with his Spirit.

Romans 8:5 Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

GROUPS 3: With Romans 8:5 in mind, how do you get on with being obedient to God? Do you know that tension in you personally... where what you want is different to what God wants? (slide)

2. Assurance of the Holy Spirit (slide)

While Jesus was being baptized, two extraordinary things happened. First, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. Second, the Father spoke from heaven with words of divine approval: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:10-11). The entire Trinity is revealed at this point: Jesus as the Son of God, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and the voice of the Father. This is then repeated at the Transfiguration.

Yet, as we know from Matthew and Luke's account of Jesus in the wilderness that this assurance of his identity was challenged. "If you are the Son of God." (Luke 4)

We've had a number of sermons about needing to listen to and remember God's word and promises, and to rest assured in God's love for us NOT only on the mountain top but also in the valley and in the challenge of trial and temptation.

We belong to him. Remember your baptism into Christ Jesus. You have died with him and have been raised with him. You are marked with the seal of his Spirit. You belong to Christ!

The Spirit works in the depths of our being to confirm his love for us and our salvation.

Romans 8:16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

GROUPS 4: Reflecting on Romans 8:16, how much assurance do you have that God loves you, that you are his beloved child in whom he is well pleased? (slide)

3. Power of the Holy Spirit (slide)

However you wish to explain it, something happened to Jesus in the wilderness and because of the time of temptation, that he was then ready to minister with great power on leaving the wilderness. Jesus in his humanity needed to rely and depend on God's Spirit to get through the wilderness and so do we. I don't know why bad things happen to good people or why we have to have such drastic times of trial and resulting temptation but it does seem to be the reality of Christian life that God permits us or even drives us to enter situations where we will face severe temptations.

Martin Luther once remarked that in making a minister of God, three things are required:

Meditation ... Prayer ... Temptation

The first refers to meditation on God's Word. The second, prayer is spending time with God. But what about "temptation?"

Somehow God uses trials and temptations. Firstly it shows what is in our hearts... Deut 8:2 "to see what is in your heart and whether you would obey his commands." But secondly, the trials and temptations can be used to release and increase spiritual power in our lives. The tougher the time, the more we have to depend/rely on God. IN our weaknesses we know his strength and power to save.

It can be helpful to see a difference between trials and temptations. In the course of life with its ups and downs God may allow, permit or even lead us into times and situations of trial and wilderness BUT God is not responsible for the severe temptation? No, Satan does the tempting.

We see this pattern occurring in every area of life. God sends or permits a trial BUT Satan turns it into a temptation.

When Kathy was ill... that was a trial and a half... why God allowed it I don't know... but the temptation was to doubt him etc...

Suppose you lose your job. That whole process may be a really tough trial, but it is Satan who tempts you to anger, despair and discouragement, gambling, drink or something else.

Or perhaps let's take a Christian spouse away on a long important work trip. They check into a hotel room tired and lonely and missing the closeness of their partner. They know that in the hotel there are other people in that situation. Despite knowing it could lead to crossing boundaries they go to meet some people in the bar. Does God know there are other lonely and needy people there? Yes, he does. Did God allow his servant to go into that hotel? Yes. Is it a trial? Yes, it is. And if that person can overcome the trial s/he will be stronger spiritually because s/he said "no". S/he must learn to lean on God for strength in the trial. Is it a temptation? Yes, it is! It's a temptation to give in to lust and other deadly sins and s/he must learn to lean on God for strength to overcome temptation. It is only in and through Christ, who has overcome trials and temptations, and by his Spirit that we too can overcome.

Sadly, it seems that we don't grow spiritually without facing strong temptations. It is in those times of greatest weakness that we discover and hopefully learn our true need, reliance and dependence upon God and his Spirit and not ourselves.

GROUPS 5: Reflecting on 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 and Jesus' dependency on the Lord throughout his trials, temptations and passion, what might we do to know God's strength and power at times of weakness? Have you known the strength and power of God's Spirit in your weakness?

Obedience to the Spirit in the wilderness, the Assurance of the Spirit in the wilderness and the power of the Spirit in the wilderness leads to freedom and transformation.

3) Wilderness is a place of worship and transformation

Ultimately, God leads us into the wilderness so that we might learn to worship. He says to Pharaoh through Moses:

“Let my people go that they may worship me in the wilderness.” (Exodus 7:16) **(SLIDE)**

Worship in the wilderness might look quite different to worship on the mountaintop. It is great to have joyful hymns and songs, to celebrate with banners and colours and hundreds of people. But wilderness worship is often about taking away rather than adding more. It might involve aspects of worship such as fasting, or solitude, or simplicity. It might turn us towards silence, or lament, or giving things away.

MEDITATION...

You are walking towards Jesus, and Jesus is reaching out his arms to embrace you. But as you look down your arms are full of stuff. What is it that your arms are full of - the things that you rely on for your worship and your life?

Are they full of musical instruments; full of computers or books; full of food and drinks; full of work and activity; full of relationships and family? None of these are bad things, in fact they are gifts of God. But God knows that for us to grow in him we might need to start putting down some of these things we're carrying. Lent and wilderness is about laying down some of these things until we have empty hands. Hands held out ready to receive from him, to be embraced by him.

Some of us may feel we have had wilderness thrust upon us. You might be going through a desert time right now. God is with you, he never wants to see you suffer but he is passionate to see you trust in him, and learn to worship in the wilderness. Others of us may feel great, we might be on mountaintops right now, but even so we can actively choose to learn to worship in wilderness ways. Learning to find God in simplicity will prepare us for whatever lies ahead. Israel was transformed through her wilderness worship. We can be too.

Finally, whilst the Spirit of God is at work within individual believers on a personal level, the Spirit is also at work corporately in the Church. WE are on a Spirit led journey together. But the Spirit of God is also at work in the world over and above the church!

GROUPS 6: In what ways have you been aware of the Holy Spirit doing a corporate leading of God's people in the church and in what ways have you been aware of the Holy Spirit working in the wider world over and above and beyond the church?