



# **Life in the Wilderness**

## **LENT COURSE**



**Luke 4:1-15**

### **The Temptation of Jesus**

**Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”**

**Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written,**

**‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’”**

**Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,**

**‘He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you,’**

**and**

**‘On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”**

**Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.**

**Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.**

The season of Lent may provide for us a time of reflection and of discernment—reflecting on how God continues to journey with us, teaching us along the way and discerning who God is calling us to be today.

Throughout history, the place of desert or wilderness has proved an important place of learning, discernment and development for the people of God.

As we reflect on the sojourn of Moses and the people of Israel in the wilderness alongside the narrative of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, may we re-discover a synergy that enables and inspires us to live as God’s people today, finding courage, strength and companionship in every wilderness.

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**Isaiah 58:6-7**

**"This is the kind of fast day I'm after:  
to break the chains of injustice,  
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,  
free the oppressed,  
cancel debts.  
What I'm interested in seeing you do is:  
sharing your food with the hungry,  
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,  
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,  
being available to your own families.**



Smudging our foreheads with ash  
Fasting from whatever normally consumes us  
- be it technology, food or drink  
Focussing on our intentions  
to give thanks  
or to de-clutter  
or to be more intentional in our living  
may be good reminders  
of the season  
or of our intention to make space for God  
in our all too busy lives...  
But it's not enough  
It's not enough when there are beggars in our High  
Streets  
It's not enough when those who serve our country  
(any country)  
are homeless  
or unemployed  
It's not enough  
when we turn our back  
on those exiled  
forced to flee from their homes  
and their lands  
because of war  
or persecution  
or genocide.  
It's not enough  
when we'd rather fund arms  
or oil  
than clean water  
or health care  
or education.  
Unless each grain of ash  
symbolises our commitment  
to embrace repentance  
to seek forgiveness  
and to work on restoration  
of justice for all...

Unless each smudge  
signals our whole hearted desire  
to embrace the other -  
Those in our midst  
and those far off  
Unless we are prepared  
to wear our love  
as visibly as the ash  
by which we show our privilege  
of birth,  
Unless we feed the hungry  
and clothe the naked  
and shelter the homeless  
and welcome the stranger  
God is not served  
and the kingdom is not built  
and our fasting is in vain.  
May the ashes we don  
be a symbol of intent  
followed up by action  
that ushers in  
the reign of God

## Ashes of Intent

# GOD KNOWS US WELL

Exodus 13:17-18

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt." So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea.

Moses' survival depended on subversive midwives and an accommodating royal household. He becomes a fugitive, banished to the hills as a shepherd, from where God calls him to lead the people out of slavery.

He leads a grumbling people - and doesn't even see the promised land! How would you keep going? Trust the long rhythms of God.

***We live in the long rhythms of God***

God knew the Israelites and God knows us well. God knows it doesn't take much to throw us off course. As it happened, we know that the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness involved a lot of grumbling, a lot of yearning, a lot of facing up to all that they had lost - a lot of learning before they could even begin to face what was next.

***Wilderness is a place of learning.***

In the business of transition, which is a slow and often painful process, there will always be the temptation to "return to Egypt" whatever or wherever Egypt may be for us.

In the midst of disorientation and confusion we will be tempted to settle for what we know, however unhealthy or ineffective we know that to be.

The work of renewal demands that we hold tight through the chaos in the knowledge that, though arduous, the God-inspired journey is worth making however uncomfortable it becomes.

And identifying the "Egypt" in whose safety we are tempted to seek refuge will help us recognise when we are settling for less than the promised land that can only be reached by faithfully travelling alongside God.

As we recall the story of the Israelites in the wilderness:

- ◆ where does that story resonate with us today?
- ◆ What might call us back to Egypt - back to same old, same old?
- ◆ What are we learning and what is being transformed - in us today?

### Mark 1:11-13

And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”  
And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

*So, how is it going for you  
in the wilderness today?  
What are the wild beasts revealing  
of the self you'd rather not see?  
What are you being forced to confront  
by the relentless, driving Spirit?  
What distractions assail you,  
what yearnings haunt you  
and haul you away  
from the hard work  
you have to do?  
Gruelling work  
that unlocks a freedom  
only discovered in the wilderness.  
And, when you think you cannot stay there  
a moment longer  
who are the angels  
who minister to you  
whispering words from heaven  
“You are my beloved”  
Words that cannot be cancelled  
not even by wilderness  
How is it going for you  
in the wilderness today?*

- ◆ What distractions prevent you facing the wilderness?
- ◆ Who are the angels who minister to you?
- ◆ What is your wilderness experience?

### Prayer

God, who knows us and loves us, be with us in our discomfort. As we face those things we would rather not confront, may we know your presence surrounding us and lighting the way ahead. And may we know angels ministering to us in unexpected ways.

## DISMANTLING SYSTEMS OF POWER

### Exodus 5: 1-9

Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.’” But Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.” Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword.” But the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labours!” Pharaoh continued, “Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!” That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors, “You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, ‘Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.’ Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labour at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.

Moses challenges Pharaoh to “let my people go”, but the whole economy of Egypt rests on these slaves and Pharaoh will not give in. The challenges are met with promises that are never fulfilled, or half-way compromises, but it takes ten plagues and the death of many before Pharaoh relents.

When we long for equity in our world today—for the homeless to have shelter, for the hungry to be fed, for free access to health care, for education for all—we do so knowing that there are more than enough resources in the world—but that the economy of many of the rich countries is predicated on unjust distribution of wealth and on promoting a notion of scarcity rather than abundance. To even begin to address injustice is to begin to tackle deep systems of power that so many have a vested interest in maintaining.

- ◆ Where have you seen people trapped in poverty by unjust systems?
- ◆ Where have you seen those deep systems of power challenged?
- ◆ What is one way we might make a difference?

## Matthew 16:21-23

### Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

*Power may enable  
lending strength  
drawing out wisdom  
enhancing all that is already present  
weaving together  
gifts and desires  
facilitating harmony  
Creator and creation  
working together as one*

*Power may corrupt  
taking us from that to which we are called  
bringing out the worst  
instead of the best  
scorching all in its path  
trampling  
devouring  
leaving no room  
for anything other  
than singular vision  
and purpose*

*We choose the dynamic  
by the way we hold power  
holding on tightly  
or openly sharing  
and by the way we respond  
to the power of others  
being caught up in drama  
or quietly subverting  
Choosing to enable or corrupt  
The dynamic of power*

- ◆ How might we model "right use of power"?
- ◆ Who are we prepared to disappoint by choosing the way of love?

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, you chose to challenge those in power by calling out injustice and oppression. And you confounded those who followed you by modelling a different way of being that calls us to love one another by serving one another. Give us the wisdom and strength to take our lead from you.

## NAVIGATING TRANSITION

### Exodus 15:22-27

Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he put them to the test. He said, “If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you.”

Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water.

As the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness, they learned more in times of adversity than in those times when things seemed to be going well, they learned more in Marah where the water was bitter than they did in Elim where there were springs.

Transition is hard work - acknowledging the loss folk feel when change occurs, journeying with them and helping them see the promised land - even and especially when it seems far off in the distance is sacred work. We are called, not to complete the journey but to begin the journey now.

- ◆ What have been, for you, times when you have learned most from adversity?
- ◆ What are your hopes and fears as we face change today in the church and in the world?





**Luke 4:1**

**Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.**

**Showing up**

*How often our calling  
is not what we imagine  
not the drama  
we may have envisaged  
not the obvious  
or even the logical  
but, simply,  
the most effective  
- to show up.  
To show up  
and to keep showing up  
to bear witness  
to all that we do not understand  
to all that we cannot change  
to heartbreak  
and anguish  
To show up  
even  
and especially  
when we feel impotent  
Because in every trial  
(and in every joy)  
God relies on those  
who show up  
those who bring all of themselves  
to all of the moment  
Those who will bear witness  
Those who will not turn away  
Those who will stand alongside  
Those whose vulnerability  
is laid bare for others  
Those who risk  
and in the risking  
invite possibility  
which begins  
with showing up.*

**Prayer**

God in every time of change may we know your faithfulness. In every time of fear, may you give us courage. In every time of trial, may we trust in your presence and know your love that holds us close.  
Amen

## SHARE THE LOAD

### Exodus 18: 17-22

Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you

None of us should travel alone. We all have something unique to offer that is enhanced by the gifts of another. Working together, we can achieve much.

Moses appointed 70 elders to help him with all the tasks of leading people through the wilderness. Jesus appointed the 12 disciples and sent others out in twos so that they might share the work together. There is a beautiful story that Henri Nouwen tells of going apple picking with some of his friends from L'Arche community. His initial instinct was to pick the apples and head home. And then he realised how it was more important to help his friends find apples they could reach and pick themselves, be complimented on their finding good apples or have a sense of belonging to the group by sitting under the apple tree in their wheel chair. Not very efficient but caring community building. (Henri JM Nouwen *The Road to Daybreak* DLT 1989)

- ◆ How have you experienced peoples' gifts coming together to make a difference?
- ◆ When have you "gone faster alone or gone farther with others" (African Proverb)?
- ◆ What might the wilderness teach us about collaboration?



Matthew 9:35 - 10:1

Then Jesus made a circuit of all the towns and villages. He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. "What a huge harvest!" he said to his disciples. "How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!" The prayer was no sooner prayed than it was answered. Jesus called twelve of his followers and sent them into the ripe fields. He gave them power to kick out the evil spirits and to tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives.

***Prophets***

*Willing to speak truth to power  
Willing to call out injustice  
Willing to draw attention  
to the plight of those on the margins  
whose voices are not heard  
and whose cries go unheeded  
Accomplices of **Poets**  
who describe  
and prescribe  
a better way  
Who put into words  
a vision of inclusion  
A vision in which nothing  
is right side up  
and where influence is found  
in the least and the last  
Alongside **Dreamers**  
who remind us  
that transformation is possible  
for those who believe  
who reimagine  
a future  
that is not yet  
but will be.  
An unholy Trinity  
those three  
Prophets, Poets, Dreamers,  
who mark out the thresholds  
and stand in gateways  
and remind us of the margins  
where the rejects and the outcasts  
and all whom we exclude  
gather together in hope  
and in certainty of the knowledge  
that God's favour rests  
on those who are overlooked  
Prophets, Poets and Dreamers  
showing us where and how  
the Kingdom of God is  
in every place and time.*

**Prayer**

Make us willing, Lord, to offer our gifts alongside others, knowing that you transform the world by the gifts of all your people.

## SEEING GOD PRESENT

### Exodus 13:21-22

**The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.**

God is in our sanctuaries but is not confined there.

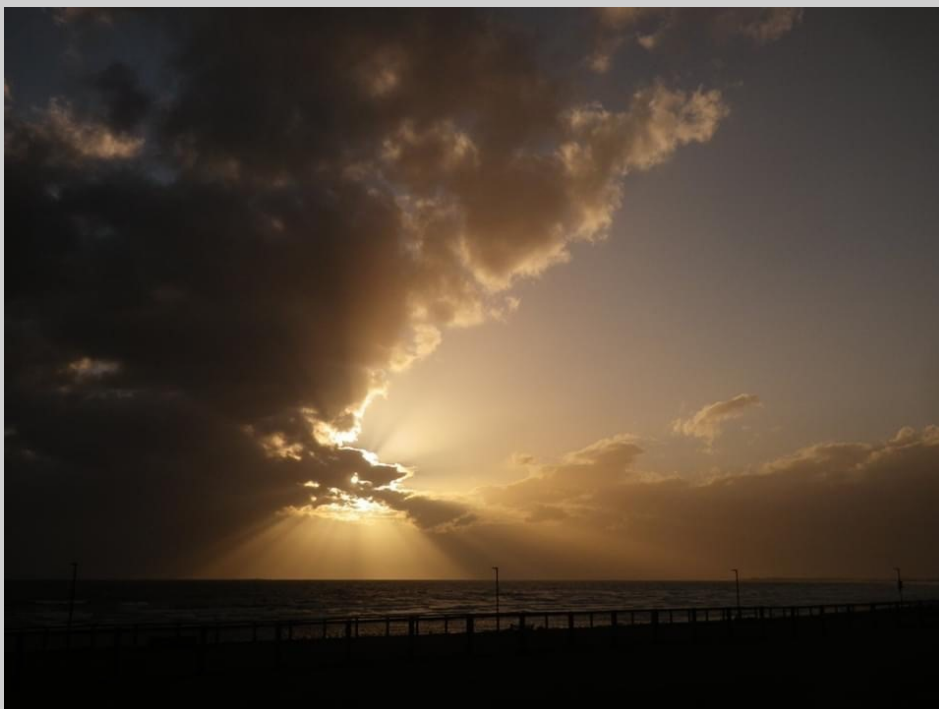
God inhabits the street corners, the playing fields, the dog parks of our communities - and more - God inhabits the lives of those who frequent those places in our neighbourhood.

Our calling is to be faithful in serving the affairs of the Spirit manifest in our buildings but also to recognise and promote the activity of God's Spirit that roams freely in our world, changing lives without programme or plan or even expectation.

Our calling is to be awake to those signs of the Spirit at work, to celebrate lives changed and purpose rediscovered, to lay down our need to corral and control, sharing the wonder that God continues to dwell in the life of the world.

One spiritual practice that encourages us to reflect on where we have noticed God in our everyday is The Examen—taking time, often at the end of the day, to recall where and when we were aware of God's presence in our day, though we may not have been aware of God at the time.

- ◆ Where are the unlikely places that you have encountered God?
- ◆ How might you be more conscious of God in your everyday?



### Numbers 21:4-5

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

*When we can only see what is before us  
Lord, lift our eyes to see beyond  
When we can only see what is around us  
Lord, lift our eyes to see beyond  
When we can only see all that we have lost  
Lord, lift our eyes to see beyond  
When we can only see change and upheaval  
Lord, lift our eyes to see beyond  
Show us, O Lord, how far we have come  
Remind us of how you have stayed with us all the way  
Reassure us that still you walk beside us  
Restore our faith in all the new things you reveal  
and the new paths in which you lead us  
And though we may not recognise  
the places we now inhabit  
May we trust in your goodness  
which is for every generation  
Lord, lift our eyes to see beyond.*



### Prayer

God, keep on surprising us by showing up when we least expect you. Remind us that there is nowhere that we can escape your presence—simply because you love us. Make us more aware and alert to your love.

Amen



# FINDING HOPE IN ALL THINGS

**Deuteronomy 31:7-8,14**

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: “Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”

The LORD said to Moses, “Your time to die is near; call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, so that I may commission him.” So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting,<sup>15</sup> and the LORD appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud; the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance to the tent.

In the midst of uncertainty we are nudged to move from optimism to hope

For optimism involves reframing the darkness while hope enables us to embrace it and to sit with the darkness until hope dawns.

Although Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness teaching the people of Israel in the ways of God, he did not get to enter the promised land. His task was finished. Joshua, who worked alongside Moses was the one appointed to take them on the next stage of the journey.

Joshua was a different kind of leader for a different season.

- ◆ When have you known the sense of being in the right place at the right time?
- ◆ Where do you find hope today?
- ◆ Who are you mentoring in faith?



## 1 Corinthians 13:13

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

*One of the purposes of lament  
might be the enabling of a re-orientation  
Naming loss and fear may be the first steps  
to realising hope and potential  
Lament is a necessary passing place  
in which we must rest for a time  
before navigating whatever lies before us  
A passing place that allows us  
to move at a slower pace than those around us  
And, like any passing place  
it is not somewhere to languish  
or to linger longer than necessary  
It is a temporary shelter in which we glimpse  
some perspective on the journey we are on  
that enriches the way ahead.  
Our openness to lament may determine  
how we move forward into a landscape  
that is littered with new and emerging features  
that have replaced familiar landmarks  
And, as we grieve the known and loved  
we unwittingly make space  
to cautiously embrace  
a new way forward  
A way we did not anticipate or choose  
but a road we will traverse  
with rawness and realness  
with vigilance and vulnerability  
with grittiness and grace  
making space for those  
who also need to use  
the passing places of lament along the way  
until, together, we become re-orientated  
to a new hope for a new journey.  
May it be so.*

### Prayer

God help us believe that, in every time and season of life, you are enough. You go before us, surrounding us with love and wisdom and the strength that we need for every step. So may our hope be in you.  
Amen

Luke 4:1-2

### The Temptation of Jesus

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

*Fresh from the waters of baptism  
with the voice of God ringing in his ears  
Knowing himself beloved of God  
Jesus retreated to the wilderness  
Taking his fill of communion with God  
knowing that, all too soon,  
everything would be changed forever  
Realising that as soon as he stepped back onto  
the treadmill of life -  
even before that  
the opportunity for solitude  
for rest  
for soaking up the pleasure of God  
would be lost forever  
And sure enough  
Even before he emerged from the wilderness  
he was offered the temptations  
of comfort, wealth and power  
that sought to sabotage his mission  
before it even began.  
On those days when our status  
as beloved of God  
rests on a shaky nail  
(for us - not for God!)  
when we are vulnerable,  
ready to give in,  
when it seems  
that it would be easier to use our power,  
to assert our authority  
in ways that trample on others' dreams  
and that would take us further  
from communion with God  
may we be stopped in our tracks  
by the God who offers retreat  
in the midst of life.  
And may we know that God  
resourcing and enabling us  
to choose hunger over comfort  
and compassion over power  
and love over everything  
that seeks to diminish  
the heart of God  
that beats  
deep within us  
connecting us  
with the source of all life*