

Lent 1 Title Slide

Gathering Prayer

God of feasting and fasting,
mountaintop and desert,
you gather us together by your Holy Spirit.
May we follow Jesus into the wilderness,
feeding on your living bread
and tasting your water of life.
We come hungry and thirsty
for more of you, God. Amen.

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Blessed Be Your Name intro

Song: Matt Redman, Blessed Be Your Name

[Deuteronomy 8:1-5, 15-18](#)

[Mark 1:9-13](#)

When we speak of having a 'wilderness experience', we don't tend to mean something good. A wilderness experience is a time when life is hard and discouraging, when we feel far from good and unable to gain spiritual nourishment. Nothing grows. We hunger and thirst but are not satisfied.

It's not good.

Would you consider it strange, then, to hear this week's title: 'A Spirit-Led Journey'?

'At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness' (Mark 1:12) says Mark of Jesus. It's just after his baptism, and at that wonderful experience the Holy Spirit has descended on him. 'like a dove' (Mark 1:10). According to Mark, being sent into the wilderness is every bit as much an experience of the Holy Spirit as that of the dove and the voice from heaven.

In fact, as I'm fond of pointing out when preaching on the baptism of Jesus, to say the Spirit 'sent' Jesus out into the wilderness or 'led' him there does not reflect the full force of the Greek. Perhaps it's our British fondness for understatement, but a more literal translation would be, 'At once the Spirit *threw him out* into the wilderness.'

The Greek word is *ekballo*. The 'ballo' part is where we get our word 'ball'. So think of a sports competitor hurling a ball a long distance, and you have some idea of what Mark is saying here. Imagine a fielder in cricket running round to stop a ball going for four, and then hurling it back to the wicket-keeper.

So the Holy Spirit has very forcefully taken Jesus into the wilderness to face temptation. And as Jesus resists that temptation, he wins key battles that refine and strengthen the calling he has had affirmed at his baptism.

And that may be the **first** reason why some of our wilderness experiences are Spirit-led journeys: they are ***training exercises***.

You may have seen television documentaries that follow prospective recruits to elite military outfits like the SAS, where the candidates are put through a series of tough, uncompromising, and even distressing experiences. Those who overcome are further on the journey to selection.

And for us, when the Holy Spirit leads us into a bleak place for a training exercise, we are being refined for when we face future battles. If we win victories over difficulty in a wilderness experience, we may be more ready for the trials of life later so that we can overcome them by faith in Christ for his glory.

You will not become an elite soldier by watching Netflix episodes from the comfort of your sofa. Nor will you grow in spiritual strength as a Christian if all you have is an easy life. So sometimes the Holy Spirit removes our comforts and prepares us for what is to come.

That's one way to see the disciplines of Lent, such as giving up certain things. Our lack of those creature comforts for a season can be a way that the Holy Spirit trains us in the way of Christ.

A **second** reason why a wilderness experience can be a Spirit-led one can be found in our reading from Deuteronomy 8. It's about ***learning humble dependence on God***.

² 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. ³ He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone

but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. ⁴Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. ⁵Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.

Who or what do you really want, God asks us. Do you want me, or do you want an easy life? Learn to depend on me, he says, and to listen to my word, because that is where you will find life.

It's not about us. It's about God. Things may seem fine and dandy when we have plenty of good things to eat ('bread alone') but we need to learn the lesson that our priorities are not the same as those of the rest of the world.

Remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, when he told his disciples not to worry about food, drink, and clothes:

³²For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

For me it was the experience of living without a guaranteed income for my first three years as a student when I didn't qualify for Government grants. I learned as time after time people gave money that enabled me to study and to live.

Again, a Lenten discipline of giving up something may help us cultivate this humble trust in God. It may also be that the experience of being deprived of many good and valuable things through the coronavirus pandemic has done something similar.

God wants our trust, and sometimes he takes us to the wilderness to find it.

A **third** reason why a wilderness experience can be a Spirit-led journey can be found in the prophecy of Hosea. In the book, and I'm particularly concentrating on [chapter 2](#) here, Israel is compared to an adulterous wife who is always running after other lovers than her husband. In particular, one of her 'lovers' is the false god Baal.

But God wants Israel to know that he is the source of all good things, such as grain, wine, and oil. So what will he do?

At first it is severe. Israel will lose her crops of grain, wine, wool, and linen, making her metaphorically exposed before the world. Her festivals will stop, and her vines and fig trees will be ruined.

It all sounds like devastating punishment.

But the thing is, it doesn't stop there, with Israel in a new but figurative wilderness. For what is the next thing God says?

¹⁴ 'Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the wilderness
and speak tenderly to her.

¹⁵ There I will give her back her vineyards,
and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she will respond as in the days of her youth,
as in the day she came up out of Egypt.

This is the third way in which a wilderness experience can be a Spirit-led journey: ***God brings us back to himself when we have gone far from him.***

In other words, when God takes away things from us in the wake of our walking away from him, it's not the final punishment. Instead, he is removing items from the scene so that all we have is him. He wants us to see him and him only, so that our love for him may be rekindled.

It is a severe form of mercy, but mercy it is. God removes our idols and in doing so shows they have no power. 'Who will you worship?' he asks us. And better that he asks us that now than later when it will be too late.

So in **conclusion**, I haven't specifically chosen to give up anything for Lent this year. But maybe sometimes the Holy Spirit makes the choice for us. He leads us into the wilderness and removes props from our lives as he trains us to be stronger spiritually for future battles. He takes away our creature comforts so that we may depend on Christ. And he gets rid of our idols so that we may devote ourselves wholeheartedly to our God and Father.

How is the Spirit leading you in the wilderness right now?

Song: Kathryn Scott, Hungry (Falling On My Knees)

First Sunday Responsive Prayer

Sometimes we feel like we're walking through wilderness:

Jesus we choose to walk with you.

When our spirits feel dry, help us trust in your Spirit:

Jesus we choose to walk with you.

Fasting seems difficult, prayers seem unanswered:

Jesus we choose to walk with you.

The world howls like wild animals all around us:

Jesus we choose to walk with you.

We can choose to worry, or to trust you to provide:

Jesus we choose to walk with you.

Temptation is everywhere, doubts can overwhelm us:

Jesus we choose to walk with you.

You know what it's like to walk through this desert:

Jesus we choose to walk with you.

You long to transform us with wilderness worship:

Jesus we choose to walk with you. Amen.

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First Sunday Sending Prayer

Holy Spirit,
fill us with your water of life,
so that even as we walk through the desert
we might know your refreshing
and share it with those around us.
Lead us, as you led Jesus,
to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

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Song: Matt Maher, 40 Days

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