

2024 LENT AUDIO RETREAT – WILDERNESS

Week 1 | “Encounters in the Wilderness”

Episode transcript

I wonder whether you have ever been in a wilderness. Maybe you've been fortunate enough to visit the Holy Land and have spent time in the place where Jesus was for 40 days and nights. Maybe you've breathed its harsh air and seen its arid landscape stretching into the distance. You've seen the distant air shimmering in the heat or felt the sudden chill as the sun sets and darkness floods around.

Maybe you've wondered how anyone could survive being on their own in this unforgiving place, or maybe you've relished the stillness and the solitude. Perhaps you've been in other wilderness places. The experience of following what looked like a path through a forest, only to find it getting narrower and more overgrown.

At first, you step over the fallen branches in your way and hold back the arching brambles. But eventually you realise that it's no good. You're not on a real path and have become embedded deep in the undergrowth of the wood, where you can see no sign of other people, and are surrounded by bushes and the trunks of looming trees.

You hear a noise and wonder what is about to break out of the tangled thicket around you. A bird, a deer, or something more threatening. Although this is far from the desert wilderness we traditionally imagine there is a moment when you realise how easy it would be to get stuck here, and be lost and on your own in this wild landscape.

Our word wilderness literally means wild deer-ness, land inhabited by wild deer or other animals. This is land that is of the other. Land that is not familiar, that makes our lives harder. And so different people will find their wildernesses in different places.

To those who live in fertile, cultivated, and inhabited land, land that has been tamed and domesticated by humankind, then any wild and lonely place can seem alien and wilderness-like. But to those accustomed to life in desert expanses where humanity is sparse, and life is lived with the rhythm of the seasons and the natural world, it may be the busyness and concrete surroundings of towns and cities that feel to them like an alien wilderness.

Above all, wilderness is a place of strangeness, a place of potential danger where we feel threatened. The similarity between the words wilderness and bewilderment is telling. Wilderness is a place for which we have no map, no sense of direction. Even when the wilderness we are in is open and expansive like a desert, we can feel as though we are in a maze and do not know which way to turn.

Wilderness is a place in which we feel dislocated from the familiar. It's a place where we cannot see a way through or a way out. A place where we are cut off from our usual

practices and habits, a dry and unproductive place, a place of struggle where we cannot live or think as we usually do. Few of us today spend time in physical wildernesses like these. We may seek to get away from the comforts and distractions of our lives, especially in Lent, by going on a retreat or living more simply than usual.

But however hard we try, we rarely experience the sense of jeopardy, of physical threat, that life in a wilderness brings. But wildernesses do exist today for all of us, and we can find ourselves in them at any time of year, not just in Lent.

For many of us, we have a recent memory of a time of wilderness in the form of the lockdowns of Covid. These were alien times when we were cut off from friends and family, when a visit to the shops felt like running the gauntlet of infection, when the normal patterns of life were disrupted. Just as in the wilderness, the familiar disappeared, and we did not know how to navigate the reality we were living in.

We had to learn new ways to encounter God, discover anew what really mattered, and find refreshment in the unfamiliar. Covid was perhaps a time of national wilderness, but there are others that are more personal. The cost-of-living crisis is bringing many people into the wilderness of living in poverty for the first time. Here, the scarcity of resources and the starkness of the decisions faced echo the desolation of a wilderness where you need bread, but are surrounded by stones.

And it may sound counterintuitive, but at the other end of the scale, there is the wilderness of opulence, where the possession and acquisition of material goods crowds out the space needed for spirits to be refreshed and to grow. Ill health, both physical and mental, can cut us off from our friends and colleagues and leave us in a wilderness of social exclusion.

Just as grief takes us into the wilderness of loneliness, where the structures and enjoyment of society that we usually relish are obscured. Whatever takes us into these spaces of wasteland, here we must learn to navigate our world afresh and find new paths in the desert or through the jungle. And it is in the wilderness that Isaiah tells us that we must prepare the way of the Lord.

It is here that the first signs of God's new kingdom will appear as the desert rejoices and blossoms and springs and pools of water appear. And this is not only a promise for the future because the lesson of so many of the stories of Scripture is that in the wilderness, we are not alone. God seeks us out even there where no one else finds us.

So as we travel through Lent this year, we will reflect on some of the people of the Bible who encountered God in their own personal wildernesses. Among them, we'll meet Elijah marooned in a wilderness of fear as he flees the malice of Jezebel.

Esther isolated from her people in the opulent wilderness of the King's palace. The many whom Jesus healed, each trapped by their exclusion from society and wildernesses of pain and loneliness. And Mary Magdalene and the other disciples in the wilderness of grief.

And in each of these cases and others, we will see how God is the God not only of lives of comfort and order, but also of the wilderness. And in God's presence, the wilderness can and does become transformed and transformational.

No longer a place of solitude and abandonment, it becomes a place where we are not only found and held, but also through which we can journey, drawing nearer to the God who calls us onward into ever closer relationship.