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## Episode transcript

### Week 4 | “Wilderness in the Everyday”

“This week we move from wilderness encounters with God in the Hebrew Scriptures to those of the New Testament. Now God is no longer veiled from our sight, a shadowy figure, a mysterious angel or a substantless voice, but is present in the person of Jesus. There's a different quality to these encounters.

They're both ordinary and extraordinary. They take place in streets, towns and villages and are often witnessed by crowds. There's no sense of mystery here about the encounter itself, even if the results are quite miraculous. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus meets ordinary people in their everyday lives.

Fishermen and tax collectors, soldiers and religious leaders, as well as countless others not singled out to have their story told. His encounters take place amid the bustling streets of the towns and cities of 1st century Palestine, amid the grandeur of the Temple in Jerusalem, or the more humble fishing boats of Galilee.

Wherever he goes, there are crowds, to the extent that he must get up early in the morning and retreat to the mountaintop to pray. The rest of the time he is surrounded by people, animals and all the daily bustle of life. And this is the world; the jostling, hustling, bustling world, in which his encounters with others take place.

This is not a wilderness, or is it? For some people then, as now, the busyness of daily life and the crowds of towns and cities created a wilderness experience of its own. Mental ill health, or physical impairments, could exclude people from this busy world, and from the companionship of its convivial society.

Social exclusion through perceptions of uncleanness would have been a particular kind of wilderness, but even without this stigma, many people go unnoticed and overlooked. And although on the face of it lots has changed since those days, there are still many today who feel on the margins of society, excluded from the thriving hustle and bustle of the world around them for a whole variety of reasons.

Indeed we can all at times feel isolated from the world. Maybe you have experienced for yourself the sense of being cut off from those around you?

We meet two such excluded people in the second half of the eighth chapter of Luke's Gospel.

The demoniac lives among the tombs. However we understand the nature of his affliction, he is clearly a dweller in wilderness. This is a place of death. A place with no way out and no route through. He is naked and exposed. The demons have robbed him of his voice since they speak through him. They have robbed him of his agency as they take control of his body. They have driven him both literally and metaphorically into the wilds, as his physical location mirrors his exclusion from the society he used to know.

And it is into this wilderness that Jesus comes for an encounter which changes everything. The demons holding him in their grip are banished and the man is released. He sits with the other disciples at Jesus' feet, calm and rational. There is nothing now to stop him returning to his community, but he does not. He remains among the tombs on the lakeshore, sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Does he recognise something in this transformational encounter that he wants to keep and hang on to? Is he afraid that without Jesus the demons will come back?

Is he reluctant to return to the city? Perhaps deep down there is a part of him that has grown accustomed to being alone among the tombs, and he is scared of leaving his wilderness. But Jesus knows that the wandering itinerant life of the disciples is not for him. He completes the man's return to society with the command to go home, back to his family and friends, back to the city from which he had been excluded, back to ordinary life.

But in one important respect, he is not going back. He is going forward. Freed from the wilderness, he proclaims his rescue by Jesus. The wilderness and his encounter there with the living God have transformed him. His life is no longer ordinary. His wilderness encounter with God has made him an apostle of the good news.

Jesus, too, returns to a city. He has no time to linger by the lakeside and the crowds once more surround him. An important man, Gyrus, falls at his feet with a request to come and save his dying daughter. The people continue to press around. They want to see him, to hear him, to attract his attention. It may feel wild, but it is no wilderness. Except it is,

for one person. The buzz of the crowds, the laughing and the shouting, the jostling and excitement are meaningless to one woman. Except maybe as a reminder of her own isolation.

For 12 years she has lived in a wilderness of pain and exclusion. She's tried to find a way out. She's used all the means at her disposal to find a cure. But her money and contacts have brought her no relief from her bleeding. Her plight deprives her of human contact, since anyone she touches will be unclean. It deprives her of her dignity, of her ability to live her life fully. For her, the life-giving blood of her womb does not bring life, but living death.

She carries her wilderness with her, as she moves through the crowds and draws near to Jesus. And in her desolation, she recognises that here is someone who knows what it is to be alone and in the wilderness. Someone in whom she sees the possibility of a path out of her own isolation. The possibility of not being alone anymore. The possibility of not being in pain anymore. And in the wilderness of her life, where so many paths before have led to dead ends, she's still ready to reach out to this hope, as she reaches out to touch Jesus's robe.

And in that instant, her life is changed. Her wilderness encounter with God brings no tentative start to a new path that may lead her back into society; this is an immediate transformation into a new stage of life. A stage that she can and does share with countless other women, and where she will be able to walk once more with others.

Both these people were in wildernesses where they were shunned and excluded by society. They might have spent the rest of their days living in this isolation had it not been for their encounters with Jesus, who drew them onwards and helped them move into new lives. Their stories show us that new life is possible and can be found in the briefest of encounters if we have courage to accept the challenge of conversation with another, or reach out in hope.

But we might equally ask ourselves whether we are people in whom the isolated and lonely can see hope. People to whom others can reach out. People who will welcome them and transform their lives by our encounters with others. Following Jesus means our calling is not only to receive from him, but also to give to others in his name. Can we look beyond the busyness of our lives and into the wildernesses of others? And when we do, can we reach out so that they know they are not alone, and so that by our actions and words, others too can know the transformation and new life God offers?”