

New Daylight

Edited by Naomi Starkey

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The spirituality of the desert

You can hardly miss the significance of the desert in the Bible. Many of the crucial moments in the story of God's relationship with his people occur in the lonely places of the world. Indeed, it almost seems that we cannot hear what God is saying to us until we go—physically or mentally—into the 'desert'. Moses, Jacob, Elijah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul: all of them, and many more, found that the 'wilderness' was the place of challenge, commissioning, guidance, rebuke or blessing (and sometimes all five).

The Israel of Bible times was more or less surrounded by desert: the wilderness of Judea to the east, Gaza and the Sinai deserts to the south, the lonely hills to the north. The wilderness was part of life—barren, hot, lonely, but also quiet and intimate. In the desert you can hear your own heart beating, but you can also hear the voice of God.

Not surprisingly, the early church shared this experience. By the third century of the Christian era, men and women of prayer were going into desert places to hear that divine voice and find spiritual sustenance and renewal, especially in times of persecution. Probably the greatest of these people of prayer was Antony of Egypt and, following his example, there was the birth of what became known as desert spirituality. It involved its followers in four practices: the search for love (not just loving others but also living in the transforming love of God), the search for inner stillness through 'interior silence', the recitation of scripture, especially the Psalms, and withdrawal (temporarily or permanently) from worldly society.

Over the next fortnight, we shall be looking at some of the biblical accounts of 'desert' experiences. We may not, like these people, have ready access to a literal wilderness, but inner stillness and interior silence can be found wherever we can shut out the insistent clamour of the world. On retreat or in a garden, walking in the park or sitting on a hillside, you and I can experience 'desert spirituality'. In the silence we can hear the voice of God.

David Winter

The place of spiritual conflict

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.'

Jacob had cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright (Genesis 27) but now retribution seemed to be at hand. Esau was 'coming to meet him' with 400 men. Jacob retreated to the lonely hill country of Edom and then crossed the Jabbok river with his wives and servants. He prayed earnestly to the God of his fathers: 'Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, for I am afraid of him.' He also prepared to make conciliatory gestures—gifts, cattle, goods—while at the same time making plans for escape if things went wrong.

With all this on his mind, Jacob tried to settle to a night's sleep. Predictably, it was a disturbed one. In what would appear to be a nightmare, he found himself wrestling with an unnamed man. In the course of their struggles, Jacob's hip was dislocated—some nightmare! He demanded to know the man's name, but it was not disclosed. In a strange gesture, though, he 'blessed' Jacob, who then assumed, understandably, that he had spent the night wrestling with God (his conscience?) As the sun rose, Jacob—now with a permanent limp—went out to meet Esau.

Reflection

The lonely night was painful and costly, but the day would bring good things (see Genesis 33:1–18 for the conclusion to the story).

David Winter

The place of calling

Moses... led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed... When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.'... Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.'

Although he was an Israelite, Moses had been brought up in the Egyptian royal household. When he killed an Egyptian taskmaster, he was forced to flee to the nearby territory of Midian, where he married a local woman and worked as a shepherd for her father. On this occasion, he had led his flock across the desert to the foothills of Mount Horeb, where he had this life-changing encounter with God. Like many of us, Moses had not chosen to move into the desert, nor had he gone there with the intention of encountering God—the whole event was a divine initiative. Indeed, it could be said, all that had happened thus far in the life of Moses and all that was happening to the enslaved Israelites in Egypt came to a head in this remote and lonely place.

What Moses learned was that God had heard the prayers of his people. He was 'coming down' to save them. Good news, indeed. What followed brought Moses up short, however: 'So come, I will send you to Pharaoh' (v. 10). For Moses, the desert mountain and a bush on fire were the locations of a call to serve. Nothing would ever be the same again.

Reflection

Sometimes it is only when we are away from all the other calls on our commitment that we are free to hear the call of God.

David Winter

The place of provision

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: “Gather as much of it as each of you needs... all providing for those in their own tents.”’... Those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage.

As Moses led the Israelites on their journey to the promised land, they had to make their way through long tracts of desert. Occasionally they would have the luxury of a short stop at an oasis, but, by and large, the area through which they had to pass was dry, hot and barren. Finding water and food, therefore, was critical to their survival. Whenever these were not readily to hand, the people complained bitterly. One such outcry is the setting for this story, which was to become a landmark incident in the history of their people.

Having been promised by Moses that God would ‘rain bread from heaven’ (v. 4), fresh meat appeared in the shape of a flock of quails that descended on their encampment. Then, in the morning, there was something on the ground. They called it manna—Hebrew for ‘What is it?’ Every day during the rest of their long pilgrimage this food appeared—and in precisely the right quantity for everyone to have enough. They all ate and were satisfied.

Manna was, for the Israelites, the visible proof that God would provide. They would not starve in the wilderness. Indeed, the very desert itself would feed them!

Reflection

Antony of Egypt once shared with a hermit friend a loaf of bread dropped by a passing raven. We may get ours from the supermarket, but, like manna, it fulfils the same promise: ‘Give us this day our daily bread’.

David Winter

The place of renewal

But [Elijah] went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

It is, of course, sad, although, in another sense, rather reassuring for us, that as great a servant of God as the prophet Elijah should find himself in the desert discouraged, defeated, desperate and ready to give up completely. Sometimes when people go into the desert (on retreat, for instance) that is very much how they feel. Circumstances have overwhelmed them; life has come crashing in; they feel utterly defeated and helpless.

In that desperate state, God met Elijah, his faithful prophet. Touchingly, first of all there was the provision of two simple things that he needed very much: sleep (and lots of it) and food. Only when those human needs had been met—in this case, by angelic hands—was Elijah ready to hear the word of God. 'In the strength of that food', he was able to make his way to mount Horeb (the very mountain where Moses met God) and there, in a 'sound of sheer silence' (v. 12), the Lord was able to tell him that his task had been completed and his successor, Elisha, was waiting to take over as prophet in his place.

Reflection

We are not angelic spirits but mortal men and women. God knows our needs and renews us in body, mind and spirit.

David Winter

Sitting in a different place

He said to me: Mortal, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart and hear with your ears; then go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them. Say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God’; whether they hear or refuse to hear... The spirit lifted me up and bore me away; I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me. I came to the exiles at Tel-abib, who lived by the river Chebar. And I sat there among them, stunned, for seven days. At the end of seven days, the word of the Lord came to me.

The calling of Ezekiel involved visions of God, the beating wings of cherubim—sounds and sights that arrested him and, despite his reluctance, eventually brought him to the moment when ‘the word of the Lord came to me’ (v. 16). A priest in the temple in Jerusalem, he had himself been carried off as an exile to Babylon, though it seems that most of his prophetic ministry subsequently took place in Judah and Jerusalem (‘Go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them’, 3:4). Where God wanted him as the starting point of this ministry, however, was among the captive Jews, far from home, ‘by the rivers of Babylon’.

Ezekiel’s experience had many features in common with what we have seen of desert spirituality. He did not choose to go to another place, far from his comfort zone, but was sent there. He went reluctantly, ‘in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit’, but with ‘the hand of the Lord being strong upon me’ (v. 14). Finally, he was put down, so to speak, among the exiled people, living in misery on the banks of a canal, the Chebar, in Babylonia. He sat there among them for seven days in silence—a time of profound but stunned enlightenment. Only then, at the end of the seven days, did ‘the word of the Lord’ come to him (v. 16).

Reflection

‘Stunned’, overwhelmed, Ezekiel found, by the distant canal, the interior silence in which he might hear the message that he was to share with the dejected exiles.

David Winter

The place of preparation

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

At last, after decades of suffering at the hands of the Babylonians, there is good news for the people of Jerusalem. The prophets who had cried 'Woe!' now have a message of comfort and tenderness for the people. Their penalty has been paid, their sins pardoned. The Lord himself is going to bless them.

For that to take place, however, there must first be preparation. Spiritual obstacles to blessing must be removed. The metaphor is of a landscape being prepared for the building of a highway. Rocks and boulders must be shifted out of the way, hills flattened, hollows filled in. The bumpy ground must be levelled.

It is a lesson often heard in the stillness of the desert places—those times in life when we withdraw from day-to-day business to hear the voice calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord!' Sometimes it takes time and costly self-searching to identify those 'boulders', the 'rough places' in our lives that need our attention if we are to know the rich blessing of God's presence with us. The hard rocks of resentment must be identified. The boulders of pride and envy must be rooted out. The ruts of prejudice and the little hills of worldly ambition must be eliminated. It is the prepared heart that provides a fitting landscape for the highway of our God.

Reflection

To 'prepare the way of the Lord' is to engage in serious self-examination and sincere and true repentance, but it is the way to blessing.

David Winter

The place of revelation

John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

Matthew's Gospel begins in Nazareth, Luke's opens with Zechariah in the temple in Jerusalem, and John's 'in the beginning', in eternity. Mark's, however, begins in the desert. His opening verses recall the prophecy of Isaiah that we read yesterday—the voice in the wilderness crying out 'Prepare the way of the Lord!' Now the 'voice' is identified. It is that of 'John the baptiser'.

John was a great and influential figure during his lifetime. He called people to repent, but specifically to do so as preparation for the 'coming One', the 'more powerful' person whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. The baptism that he offered was a sign of that repentance, a public witness to a new start. At a time of intense expectation, when it was widely believed that God must surely act to deliver Israel from Gentile occupation, his was not only a message of challenge but also one of hope.

It was also a new message, a fresh revelation of God's purposes. He spoke of a new age, a time when the Holy Spirit would be poured out on God's people, echoing a prophecy of Joel centuries earlier (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17). If John was the last voice of the Old Testament, he is also emphatically the first voice of the new one.

Reflection

Here is the authentic voice of the desert: no show, no luxury, no status, just a man standing alone before God and the people with a new message.

David Winter

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