

Worship in the Wilderness

Third Sunday of Lent - A Sorrowful Journey

Good morning and thank you for joining us as we worship, bringing together the Gloucestershire Circuit and beyond. Wherever you are right now, you are very welcome.

Our worship this morning follows the theme of Worship in the Wilderness - a Sorrowful journey.

Gathering Prayer

God, you rejoice with those who rejoice;
you mourn with those who mourn,
and you call us to do the same.
Help us to come to you today
with honesty and openness, sharing our sorrows
and knowing your comfort. Amen.

Song

You say the things in the past are gone,
there's no need for shame.
I feel its easier said than done,
so help me today.

You say there's nothing I need to fear,
you're making a way,
around me sorrow is drawing near,
Lord help me to pray:

*You are my way in the wilderness
my streams in the wasteland.
And when the waves seem to cover me,
Lord you take my hand.
And as I walk through the blazing fire,*

*your love refines me,
You are my way in the wilderness,
my faithful God.*

You say I'm precious before your eyes,
you say that I'm loved.
I soon forget that you're by my side
so help me to trust.

You say a new thing is rising up,
you're bringing new life.
Right here, this moment it's feeling tough,
I'm longing for light:

"You Say (Way In The Wilderness)" © Sam Hargreaves 2021. Admin by churchsongs.co.uk CCLI #7169403. Please report usage on your CCLI licence. Video by Sam and Sara Hargreaves for engageworship

Bible readings:

Exodus 3:1-10.

3 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 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. 3 Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' 4 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.' 5 Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' 6 He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

7 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, 8 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, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 10 So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'

John 11:20-29, 32-36.

20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21 Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' 23 Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' 24 Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' 25 Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' 27 She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' 29 And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' 35 Jesus began to weep. 36 So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'

Hymn: STF 28 Jesus calls us here to meet him

Jesus calls us here to meet him
as, through word and song and prayer,

we affirm God's promised presence
where his people live and care.

Praise the God who keeps his promise;
praise the Son who calls us friends;
praise the Spirit who, among us,
to our hopes and fears attends.

Jesus calls us to confess him
Word of life and Lord of all,
sharer of our flesh and frailness,
saving all who fail or fall.
Tell his holy human story;
tell his tales that all may hear;
tell the world that Christ in glory
came to earth to meet us here.

Jesus calls us to each other,
vastly different though we are;
creed and colour, class and gender

neither limit nor debar.
Join the hand of friend and stranger;
join the hands of age and youth;
join the faithful and the doubter
in their common search for truth.

Jesus calls us to his table
rooted firm in time and space,
where the Church in earth and heaven
finds a common meeting place.
Share the bread and wine, his body;
share the love of which we sing;
share the feast for saints and sinners
hosted by our Lord and King.

John L. Bell (b. 1949) and Graham Maule (b. 1958)
Words: From Love From Below 1989. WGRG, Iona
Community, Glasgow G2 3DH Scotland. www.wgrg.co.uk
<<http://www.wgrg.co.uk>>

Reflection:

Third Sunday - A Sorrowful Journey

This week is perhaps the most difficult one on our journey through the wilderness. Our journey through the wilderness of Lent began as we considered how the Holy Spirit of God calls us to the desert so that we might be transformed.

Worship in the Wilderness looks different from worship on the mountaintop - it might involve things like solitude, silence and fasting. But we also have to face the stark truth that wilderness worship might also involve some sorrow.

1) The dangerous desert

Many of us will not have experienced the desert. If we live in cities, we may have a romanticised ideal of what living out in the wilderness might involve. But in Bible times there was no such misapprehension. This is the Negev desert in the Palestinian West Bank, that I visited a few years ago. It is a hot, dry, inhospitable place probably not so different today as it was in Bible times. Not only were deserts lacking in food and water, but these were not the only dangers, as Tom Wright also explains:

“The wilderness became a haunt of wild animals, the desert offered criminals a place to hide and plot, and open spaces between towns and cities were lawless, dangerous places from which travellers would be eager to escape by scurrying into the next built up area.” Tom Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, p. 158.

For all these reasons, the wilderness was feared. For people in Bible times it represented the unknown, danger, failure and mortality.

We have not traditionally been good at talking about or reflecting on these kinds of difficult issues. But over the last year we have all experienced them in one way or another. We may not have physically been in the wilderness but we have all experienced struggles, fears, doubts, disappointments, anger and hurt as we have lived through, and continue to live through the issues caused by the Covid Pandemic. All of us will at some point be faced with the mortality of ourselves and our loved ones.

In normal times we become good at brushing these thoughts under the carpet, keeping a “stiff upper lip”, to “keep calm and carry on”. Even with God, we can come into church or to times of prayer, and try to pretend that everything is okay.

But this year it has become ever harder to do that and it is not a healthy way to be.

Would God want to hear about our struggles? Can we be honest with him?

2) Learning to Lament

Wilderness experiences in the Bible teach us that God *does* hear. He *does* care. In Exodus 3, Moses is hiding in the desert when he hears God say:

“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.” (Exodus 3:7)

Our God is not blind to our struggles or deaf to our cries. He does not consider it a lack of faith, an insult, or a sin if we choose to be honest with him. We can tell him about our doubts, how we feel about the state of the world, or even share when we feel disappointed with him. In fact, he wants his people to cry out to him in honesty and desperation. The Psalms are full of honest, raw complaint, sorrow and protest. Bible characters - from Hagar to David, from Jesus to Paul, pray heartfelt prayers of distress. These prayers are called “lament”.

Songwriter Michael Card describes the importance of the wilderness in teaching us to lament:

“You and I were created to wake up in a garden. Instead we open our eyes each morning to a fallen wilderness, a world where our omnipresent God seems disturbingly absent... God transforms us and leads us by His grace into a pathway back to His presence. This path is found in the language of lament. When we lack the language to articulate this forsaken, fallen struggle, when we long for the words to cry out our confusion and bewilderment, the Bible provides such a language for us... Lament is learned only in the wilderness.”

Michael Card “Worship in the Wilderness” DTS Voice, <https://voice.dts.edu/article/worship-in-the-wilderness-michael-card/>

3) Jesus meets us... and sends us

Lament will look different for each one of us. Some people will come and whisper a prayer. Others might shout at God. Some of us will sing a sad song, others might paint a canvas of our pain. Some of us will shake our fists, others will ask questions to try to understand.

We can see these different kinds of responses in our passages today. When Martha's brother dies she goes to Jesus with a theological question. Jesus meets her in that, he listens, he responds with a deep truth that she can place her hope in.

Mary is completely different. She has a question, but she mostly weeps. And so Jesus is moved deeply in his spirit and he weeps with her. Even though Jesus must know what he is about to do, he is profoundly sorrowful for Lazarus, and he is not afraid to show it.

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied. Jesus wept.” (John 11:33-35)

The story of Moses demonstrates another of God's reactions to sorrowful circumstances. Moses isn't mourning a death - his issue is the mistreatment of his people under the Egyptians. But he is also consumed with self-doubt at the mistake he has already made in trying to sort this situation out. God comes to Moses to tell him that he cares, he heals, and that at he is calling Moses to do something about it.

So if you are like Martha, wilderness worship is a place for you to be honest with God. To tell him how you feel, to ask him questions, to call out “how long, O Lord?” All of these things are okay with him, and he will meet you in your honesty.

Wilderness worship is also a place to weep, to just let it all out like Mary did. That is okay with God too. Jesus stands and weeps with you.

And, thirdly, wilderness worship might be a place where God shows you his heart for a situation, as he did with Moses. God may move you for an injustice or a need or a person. It may be that he impresses his sorrow for something on your heart, and then he sends you to go and do something about it, in his power.

I think the most important thing to remember is that whatever our feelings and response at this time, God is there with you. Amen.

Adaptred From *Worship in the Wilderness* by engageworship - visit engageworship.org/wilderness

Hymn: STF 247 I danced in the morning

I danced in the morning
when the world was begun,
and I danced in the moon
and the stars and the sun;
and I came down from heaven
and I danced on the earth,
at Bethlehem
I had my birth.

‘Dance, then, wherever you may be,
I am the Lord of the Dance.’ said he,
‘and I'll lead you all wherever you may be,
and I'll lead you all in the Dance,’ said he.

I danced for the scribe
and the pharisee,
but they would not dance
and they wouldn't follow me;
I danced for the fishermen,

for James and John;
they came with me
and the Dance went on.

I danced on the Sabbath
and I cured the lame:
the holy people
said it was a shame.
They whipped and they stripped
and they hung me on high,
and they left me there
on a Cross to die.

I danced on a Friday
when the sky turned black;
it's hard to dance
with the devil on your back.

They buried my body
and they thought I'd gone;
but I am the Dance
and I still go on.

They cut me down
and I leapt up high;
I am the life
that'll never, never die;
I'll live in you
if you'll live in me;
I am the Lord
of the Dance, said he.

Sydney Carter (1915–2004)

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Road, London N3 1DZ <www.stainer.co.uk>

Psalm 13 prayers of intercession:

How long, Lord? Will you forget me for ever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

We pray for those who feel forgotten and unseen, may they know that they are remembered and seen by you God.

Help us to partner with you to remember the forgotten.

Search our hearts to reveal those we hide our faces from, the outcast, the stranger or the homeless.

Change our hearts, that we may turn our faces towards these people and see them as your beloved children.

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

We pray for those we know who struggle with mental illnesses, anxiety and depression. We pray that there will be resources released to help, enough staff employed and finances given towards mental health services nationally.

Help us to be a friend and a listening ear to those who suffer.

Fill us with compassion and wisdom.

Ultimately, we pray for those who wrestle with sorrow, that they may know your victory over those dark thoughts which currently seem to triumph.

Look on me and answer, Lord my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,'

and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

We pray for those who might be considered

fallen by those around them: may they know your restoration and grace.

Help us to not judge or exclude your beloved children, but instead lift them up in prayer, and embrace them with the grace we know in Christ.

Thank you, loving Father God, for hearing our prayer. We exclaim together:

**But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me. Amen**

The Lord's Prayer.

Song / Poem

We have come to our Father
who knows us completely,
to pour out the prayers of our hearts.
You are faithful to listen,
full of compassion,
a friend when the journey gets hard.

*For to you all hearts are laid open,
so we come as we are when we sing.
From you no secrets are hidden,
so in worship we'll bring you everything.*

When our doubts overwhelm us,

help us to seek you,
to bring all our questions and fears.
Give us strength to be honest,
you know all our weakness;
Lord Jesus, you've cried these same tears.

When our prayers seem unanswered
and silence surrounds us,
then comfort us Spirit of truth.
For you never will leave us,
and never forsake us;
you promise that you'll see us through.

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Sending prayer

Thank you, gracious Father,
for the space to be honest with you today. To you all hearts are open,
from you no secrets are hidden,
so may we continue to talk openly with you as we go from this place.
Make us a people who listen to others, sharing their sorrows,
and spreading your comfort.
In the power of your Spirit, amen.

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