

Testimonies from Dave, Karen & Gemma - 19th September 2021

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Preachers: Dave Moss, Gemma Wallace, Karen Procter

[0:00] Now, today, we're not going to have a normal talk. Instead, we're going to be hearing from three amazing congregation members about the lockdown and what they've learned from it. Now, as a congregation, we've been in exile from our church building and from meeting as a community for a long time.

And we're slowly starting things up, all the things that we used to do, while keeping everyone safe. We've kind of been in the wilderness. The wilderness can be a place where God is very close and we learn new things about ourselves, each other and God.

But it can also be a time when we're under huge pressure and isolated. Or a time of retreat where we're forced to step back from the treadmill of life and look at the bigger picture.

It's a place where even Jesus was tempted, but it was also a refuge for the free slaves from Egypt. And in Hosea, we hear that in the wilderness, it is a place where God speaks tenderly to us.

So we're going to have three exciting speakers. And I'm just about to hand over to the first one, who is the lovely Dave Moss. Thank you. I don't know so much about the lovely, but there we are.

[1:11] Yeah, 18 months since the first lockdown. And I think the consequences of this global pandemic have hit hard.

It is all very hard. And it certainly hit me hard job wise as I work as a self-employed education advisor. My work suddenly stopped overnight.

And really, there's been very little since. And I suddenly had nothing. No social contacts because we were all asked to stay away from everything, as with all of you.

Suddenly nothing. And that was very hard. But God holds on to you. And I would say that the first thing I would want to say is that God has taught me things I needed to learn.

God has taught me things I needed to learn. And although I say I trust him, I've had to really, really trust him with regards to so many things.

[2:09] Money, employment, family, health, just about everything in sight. I've really had to trust him. And it's been far from easy. Far from easy. But he's always been there.

Whatever. Even when I don't feel that he is. He's always been there. The second thing is that God has taught me things about other people that I needed to learn.

And basically, just simply how beautiful they are. There's nothing complicated about other people. They just want you to be there for them very often. Just to listen.

Just to talk. Just to be someone to be honest with them. And there's nothing fancy about any of this. But people are people.

And I know it's an easy thing to say. But we've all felt really deeply and been thrown in so many different ways. And it's just been a joy to talk to strangers even as you go out for a walk and so on.

[3:12] The third thing I wanted to say is that God has taught me things about myself that I'd rather not have learnt. I always thought I was a stable person and a strong person.

But the reality is that I've been all over the place. I would certainly say I've had my fair share of mental health issues and so on. At the start of the pandemic, my son, COVID, and a friend, a vicar, died.

And we didn't know what we know now. And it really threw me. It really threw me. As of many other things since. And as with all the things, God drives you to look further.

So, you know, I particularly read this book. It wasn't easygoing. Finding Jesus in the storm. The spiritual lives of Christians with mental health challenges. And I felt that God's taught me so many things about myself there and about other people.

And about the way they feel. That perhaps I wouldn't rather have, you know, I've been comfortable not knowing. And also, God has taught me things about other people that I'd rather not have learnt too.

[4 : 22] And if I'm honest, I'm just horrified about where our society is. The level of injustice that's come out.

The corruption, exploitation of people. The gap between the privileged and the rich and the poor. And those who are just left by the wayside. It's just horrified me.

And I think I'd rather like to paint the rosy picture and be positive. But in reality, our society is not in a good place.

And finally, the thing that's really kept me going and I'm just so grateful for is this community of St. John's.

It's been my anchor, my steady guidance in the storm. I've appreciated the phone calls we've had. The talks online from Matt have just been on another level.

[5 : 24] Absolutely amazing. The music. I've just, I found it very difficult to listen to music. But listening to the St. John's worship group has just been brilliant.

It's all been downloaded. It's all in the car. It's wherever I've got my favorites list. It's been fantastic. And our house group, every week has met online.

And I've just been amazed at how we've been able to keep in touch. And how we've been supportive to each other and so on. And that's been my anchor. And I'm just grateful for that.

And we'll see how we go forward. I think we'd like to think things are going to be marvelous. But it's going to be a long ride, I think. Thank goodness we have someone to hold on to.

Thank you. Thank you so much, Dave.

[6 : 23] I'm just going to pray a little bit about what Dave has just said. So, loving God, we lift to you everyone for whom work and money has been a problem in this lockdown. Which is so many people here and so many people in society.

And we also offer you all the injustices in our current society. Loving God, we know that you are always on the side of the victim.

And that when your kingdom comes, all injustice will be righted. But we long to see that day now.

So, loving God, please do act. And make our society a fairer and more equal one for everyone.

Amen. Thank you, Dave. That was wonderful. So, our second speaker, who's going to tell us about their experience in the wilderness of lockdown, is the lovely Karen Proctor.

Come on up, Karen. Morning, everybody. I'm going to start my story before lockdown.

[7 : 27] So that you know where I was going into lockdown. So, at the beginning of 2019, a whole year before lockdown happened, I was having a conversation with God.

And I said to God, I love everything in my life. I love my job, my family, my friends. I said, but I feel like I've got a very full plate. I said, I'm not prepared to let go of anything.

So, God, if there's a way to keep me incredibly busy and happy, then I'm up for it. So, a few months later, in August, I finished working at the charity that I'd been working for for just over four years.

And I didn't have a job to go to at the time. So, I took some time out and I sat down and I said to God, OK, I didn't want anything to change, but you did.

And so, help me to work out what it is that I'm going to do next, God. So, my parents had given us a book of, a whole bag full of resources.

[8 : 41] So, sorting through this book of resources, I found a book. The book is, it's an old book. It's called The Heavenly Man. It's written by a Christian preacher who is Chinese in a country where Christianity is largely banned.

And he's got a very powerful story. Very, very powerful story. It's a very moving book. And he talked that there had been times where he and God recognised that work had become an idol to him.

And in the book, when work became an idol, God sent him to prison. Fortunately, in my case, he just told me to stop going to work.

So that I could take a step back and realise what is important in life. How important is it? What we do with our time? How we reflect God in what it is that we do.

I did succeed in getting a temporary job in December 2019. I went to work for a large housing association based near Birmingham Airport.

[9 : 52] And so I would get up in the morning and battle through the traffic for about an hour to get to a very, very, very big business park.

And met some absolutely wonderful people. Being on a journey in between Christmas and New Year, the beginning of 2020, last year, I decided that I would read the Bible in a year.

I thought, I'm ready. This is it. I'm going to do it. And I use a Bible app called YouBible. And they often promote reading the Bible in a year at the start of the year.

So I downloaded the Bible study. It was written by Nicky Gumbel, who wrote the Alpha course. And when we went into lockdown in March, I was able to work from home.

So I no longer needed to get up in the morning and battle the horrendous traffic either on the motorway or through Coles Hill and seven roundabouts of queuing to get to my office.

[10:57] So I decided that I would get up in the morning and instead of commuting to work, I would switch from reading the Bible in the evening to reading the Bible when I got up in the morning.

And what a transformation it has made to my life to get up in the morning and spend time with the most important person in my life, which is God.

I feel that during that time, God had an awful lot of messages for me. And I feel that it was a real privilege and a real blessing for me to be immersed in the Bible every day.

I learned that it is okay for God to tell you the good things and the bad things. In Proverbs 3, he says, My child, don't reject the Lord's discipline and don't be upset when he corrects you.

And I learned that that is okay. That while we think we know a lot, while we think we know what's important, we don't necessarily. It has taken me a very long time to accept that God wants to move me in a different direction and he wants different things to be important to me.

[12:12] But he's very good at what he does. And I feel an amazing sense of peace in the quality of my life.

That while I was really happy with the things in my life before, I didn't have enough time to have the peace that I feel now in my life. So, working, so my contract was extended because it would have ended at the beginning of lockdown.

I was thinking, who wants to go into lockdown without a job? It's a very difficult time. So, I was extended and extended. And when the contract came to an end, I'd been for a lot of interviews, knocking on the doors and the doors were closed.

But I did have, I was offered another fixed term contract and moved to another housing association. And this contract is working from home.

So, the kind of benefits of knowing you're not going to be commuting and starting to have a daily walk in March, when we went into lockdown in March 2019.

[13:27] So, at lunchtime, I get up from my desk, I go for a walk around the beautiful Norton Pool. And I have things in my life that I've never had before.

You know, when you commute to work, you grab a sandwich, talk to a few people at lunchtime. It's very, very much about work in the workplace. So, I feel that on the journey that God's taken me on in this last year and a half, I've surrendered myself to God.

He's created space. He's created time. He knew that I loved him, but now he's created a way in which he fits into my life.

He's my priority. I get up in the morning with him as my priority. Reading the whole Bible, it's been a journey. I've struggled with the Old Testament.

So, you can be a Christian and not be immersed in the Old Testament, and that was me. I'd really, really struggled. And I think it's been a real opportunity for God to speak to me about all of the difficulties that the people in the Old Testament experienced, and how they overcome, and persistently through it all, how God was there for them.

[14:43] He came up with different solutions for them. Constantly forgave them when they get it wrong. And I think it's been an amazing spiritual journey for me.

Very much about learning to trust in God, because not knowing, you know, how long I'm going to have a job for. When you like to be in control and knowing that you have a job and you can make decisions and do things, when that's taken away, you really know that you're dependent on God. And that he's good and that he honours that. In Corinthians 9, verse 11, You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous.

And when you take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God. And I think I've really learned that. I need to allow Jesus and the Bible to build me up and sustain me, and then I can give out to other people the love that Jesus has shown to me in my life.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much, Karen.

[16:02] It's so good to hear about how God has made space in your life and brought you peace. We live in a society which tells us so many lies. It constantly tells us you're not enough, that you're not good enough, that you should be defined by your job, by what you have.

But that's not the truth. The truth is you aren't what you have. You're not what you do. You're not what you achieve. You are a beloved child of God. And it's a lot of work to claim and reclaim that sometimes.

But loving God, I really bless that everyone in this room will really be, feel that they are your child, and learn to have that as their most important identity. Amen.

So, our third and final speaker today, talking about their experience of the wilderness of lockdown, is the lovely Gemma Wallace. This is out of my comfort zone.

Thank you for smiling at me. I'm Gemma. I've been living in Chase Terrace and coming to St John's for 10 years now. Lockdown has felt, for me, like many, I suppose, a real roller coaster.

[17:14] I have had some terrible days. Homeschooling, feeling trapped, missing my family and friends, and some really special times. Outdoor runs of freedom around Chase Water with a brilliant playlist.

The gift of being local and getting to know our neighbours a lot better. And spending so much time with our kids, because they're quite a lot of fun, really. Although I have been forced to slow down, to silence the regular commitments and have a bit of an MOT.

This has been a really interesting exercise and an opportunity. As an extrovert, I like being with people. And as a result, the social distancing and restrictions have felt a bitter pill to swallow. I've had to adapt in how I experience and show my faith to find new ways of connecting. And some of these have included the rhythm of an early morning podcast, a just seven-minute Lectio 365 Bible reflection.

I've been reading books. I've been making pastoral phone calls. I've been listening to Matt's weekly YouTube sessions. And to be honest, sobbing most weeks at the final result of a talk, knowing the struggles and sleepless nights is taken to get there.

[18:38] Each week, he managed to hit the nail on the head of how I was feeling. Soaking in the worship from the amazingly talented band, that has brought me to my knees in gratefulness and wonder of a God who's journeying through this with us.

I have found God in nature and in the smiles of strangers. And I have also found him in collecting and delivering food for Ben would be a friend.

In a busy house, I've also learned to love and crave a bit of silence. A chance to mull things over in my head with God often, putting out a bit of washing and thinking, oh, the quiet.

Lockdown has challenged me to be increasingly present. And this hasn't always been easy. Many of you will know that I'm married to Matt.

It's a real privilege to be alongside him and to see under the skin of the church. But the reality of this last 18 months for him and the result for me supporting him has been really intense.

[19:56] In our house, we have had laughter. We have had tears. We have had good arguments.

We have had surprise gifts. We've had doorstep visitors. We've had late night discussions. And we've had sleepless nights. There have been times where I just haven't felt enough.

And where I've been snappy and moody and grumpy and unengaged and flat.

And then I'm reminded of God. And how much he loves me and his overwhelming love for me.

The dollop of grace available to me that I can come raw and unfinished, broken and messy. And I'm welcomed in. Going forward, this is the love that I long to show to other people.

[20:57] The love that hopefully shines out of me in all my cracks and imperfections. In my wobbles and my achievements. To show a faith that is alive and intentional.

And although, if I'm honest, having Sundays free was a bit of a welcome change. I am ready and I'm so excited to be back with you all.

I want to thank you for your love and support to me and to us as a family. Just those gestures and those check-ins. Those kind words and those prayers have kept us afloat in the best and the worst of times.

Above all, the simpler faith, which I think I've discovered, of the God in the small things and the everyday encounters.

It's one which I hope is here to stay. Thank you. Loving God, thank you so much for Gemma.

[22 : 12] And for the blessing that she is to so many of us. And loving God, we just really lift up to you all the sacrifices that the Wallace family have made over the lockdown. Fill them with blessing. Let them know that they're loved. And help them to claim their identities as beloved children of God. Because we need them and they are so wonderful to all of us. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.