

# Keep On Growing: Welcoming The Wilderness - 25th June 2023

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[ 0 : 00 ] So as Jane was saying, because some of you probably don't recognize me, my name's Ruth and I'm the curate here at St John's Community Church. I've been away for a little bit on maternity leave and this is like my second week back.

So thank you for all your prayers with that. I can feel them and they're much appreciated. So for the last few weeks, we've been talking about growth and growing in basically every single possible way you can imagine.

I think I first really tuned into this series when Ian was talking about AI and the potential exponential growth from that. Matt's had a few sermons about spiritual growth and growth into humility, growth into taking up the space that is yours and growth as a community.

So today I'm going to talk about the growth, the transformation, if you like, that comes from time spent in the wilderness.

Time spent alone, time spent in quiet, time spent in difficult situations. And we see throughout his ministry that Jesus makes a definite effort to go to places that are remote, that are wild and challenging, to pray and to hear from God and to work all the big questions out.

[ 1 : 19 ] We even see him seek out a space that's on his own when he's grieving his cousin, John the Baptist. And after the disciples are sent out, he brings them all out to recharge.

Sometimes we even see Jesus hiding from the crowd, choosing to walk past people and take some time to be alone. And sometimes we see the opposite.

So in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before he dies, Jesus begs his disciples, Please just stay awake with me and pray just one hour. And each time he asks, they end up falling asleep and he ends up praying alone.

Now, I know over the last few years, Matt has done some talks on whether we should see Jesus as an extrovert or an introvert, which are really interesting and you can find them on the website.

They're definitely worth a look. But anyway, I'm not going to talk about introvert or extrovert Jesus today, though it is really interesting. I find that most of us try and claim Jesus as whatever we are.

[ 2 : 22 ] So if we're introverts, we think that Jesus was definitely an introvert. And if we're extroverts, we think Jesus was probably an extrovert. But the truth is that whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, sometimes space, silence and loneliness are things that we can all benefit from.

Even if we find those things naturally uncomfortable, because we might be extroverts. So as someone who is an extrovert myself, not the most extreme extrovert, when we did the thing in church where we all lined up in a row, I was only kind of about here.

I remember Mark Tennant at the extreme end of that church and my husband here at the other extreme end of the introvert church. So I'm an extrovert. I get energy from people and I find sometimes being alone in quiet very challenging.

But perhaps, perhaps, it's actually easier to reap the benefits of being in silence and being alone if you are an extrovert, because you're more aware of the challenge.

Or at least that's been my experience. It's felt more explicitly like a wilderness. And often to grow spiritually, what we need is a little bit of some of the spiritual practices that we find very difficult.

[ 3 : 34 ] So if you find worship music really works for you, sometimes you probably need a bit of silence. If you find that writing your prayers down works for you, sometimes perhaps you need to pray in a group.

Because often that's where the challenge is spiritually, which disrupts us and takes us to somewhere new, makes it more easy for God to challenge and change us. Because it is really easy, and I know I do, to fall into spiritual practices that make us feel good, that make us feel comfortable.

And those practices are important, because they're how you connect to God on a daily basis. But I think it is also important to meet God where God is challenging to us, where we can remember that God isn't tame, isn't something you can put in a box and turn on when you want it to.

But God is wild and beyond our control and our imagining, where we learn to trust God's goodness and that God will provide for us, not because the ideas are beautiful, not because that's something we find comfortable, but because we have to trust in them, because there isn't any other option.

So I'm going to talk today about one of Jesus's big trips into the wilderness, into the silent, lonely wilderness of the desert, the big famous one.

[ 4 : 54 ] So this is the one where he goes out for 40 days and he's tempted. And this occurs just after Jesus's baptism. So it comes from this place of real joy.

Jesus had just been baptised, and as he was baptised, he hears the voice of God speaking over him, and God says, you are my son who I love, and I am so pleased with you.

And this amazing affirmation fills Jesus up with the Holy Spirit. And Jesus doesn't just go into the desert, he is almost forced into the desert by the Holy Spirit to pray for 40 days and 40 nights.

So we're going to just watch that section now. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil.

He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, if you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.

[ 6 : 06 ] Jesus answered, it is written, man shall not live on bread alone. The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

And he said to him, I will give you all their authority and splendor. It has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.

If you worship me, it will all be yours. Jesus answered, it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only.

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. If you are the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down from here.

For it is written, he will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully. They will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

[ 7 : 13 ] Jesus answered, it is said, do not put the Lord your God to the test. When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

So, we see Jesus going out into the desert. You can almost imagine the intense heat of the day, the drying wind across his face, leaving his skin dry and almost raw.

At night, when the temperature drops, you can imagine how cold it would be, ice cold. Dry cold, the kind of cold that makes every hair stand on end. When I've camped on sand before, I've always found that you can almost feel the numbness creeping all down the back of your body where you're lying, however many mats you may lie on.

And I wonder what Jesus was looking for in the wilderness. Was he looking for a deeper communion with God before his ministry started? He'd just been baptised, so that wouldn't be an unreasonable thing to look for.

Did he expect to stay feeling high on the Holy Spirit for the full 40 days in the desert? What did he expect from the God that he would meet deeply in the wilderness?

[ 8 : 32 ] The God that he is, but the God that he also encountered. Did he go knowing that that God was not tame, but wild and good, and so beyond our imaginings that any encounter with this wild God would disrupt him and change him?

And we see that in Mark's encounter, Jesus is driven or forced into the wilderness, overcome by urgency and a need to go and meet God there and ask all those questions which Jesus must have had.

I must say, in the other Gospels, the Spirit is a little bit gentler on Jesus and just leads him into there, but in Mark's, it's like he's forced into the wilderness. And I think when Jesus stepped into the wilderness, knowing he was going for 40 days to fast, he must have been expecting something of a challenge.

I mean, the example of the newly freed Israelites trapped in the desert for 40 years must have been in his mind somewhere. And while there were challenges, ultimately God was there for the Israelites in the desert.

And they needed the time to re-establish themselves as a free people, not slaves, to re-establish their relationship with God. The Israelites in the desert were tested, they were tempted, and they got it wrong sometimes, but ultimately they worked out who they are and how they were going to relate to God.

[ 9 : 51 ] So when Jesus steps into the loneliness of the desert and encounters temptation there, he can't have been that surprised. But I guess what I find really interesting is the way that Jesus is tempted.

So the temptations Jesus was offered and the way that they were phrased come in and they really seek to attack Jesus' identity as the Son of God and seek to undermine that amazing blessing that Jesus had received in his baptism.

They all begin with the question, if you are the Son of God, which is almost directly questioning, you are my beloved Son. So whenever we hear that question from Satan, it starts by attacking and trying to undermine the words of love, even though Jesus has just literally heard them at his baptism.

And to be honest, I think that that is often how the wilderness is. It can lead you to think and to question the big assurances in your life. And honestly, questioning them isn't always bad.

Sometimes you need the space to say, I'm going to ask a question about this, but the answer is that I am loved and I will remind myself why I'm loved. I'll remind myself that while it's difficult now, God has made these promises for me and I can still trust them.

[ 11 : 12 ] It gives you time to think, why am I secure in these things? And to take the time to remind yourself that you do know that you are loved and lovable, valued and a child of God.

And I think we look at the second temptation and that must have been one which really challenged Jesus because it offered him a shortcut. Because I'm sure for Jesus, the temptation of ruling all the nations in the world wasn't one of power, but that he could get a lot of things done that very quickly he could stop people hurting.

He could build a world that was more just immediately and some immediate suffering could be averted. That he could make the world more quickly in the image of the kingdom of God.

But the cost of that, of course, would be worshipping Satan. And I think we all get niggles like this too. Temptations to do things that are easy and quick and go around the corner rather than going through and doing it properly.

The temptation to make things like busyness an idol. I'm getting this done and I'm getting this done and I'm getting this done. Which helps you ignore the more important things. And for example, for me, sometimes the long to-do list can be an excuse of not praying first thing in the morning.

[ 12 : 24 ] And I feel that when it happens. Or the temptation to just cut one corner, go through this red tape just this once. And I know I get that sometimes. I mean, I work for the Church of England so you have no idea.

But the truth is that integrity counts. Prioritising things that matter counts. Not taking the easy, quick, cheap shortcut counts. And Jesus' third temptation is another one that we all meet in the wilderness.

It's a temptation that can affect us all. Jesus said, prove it. Prove that God loves you. Prove that God would save you. Put the relationship to the test. And we all do that sometimes with God, with each other.

We pray things like, just this once, God. I'd really like to see this happen immediately, God. Just give me this and I'll give you that, God. And we also do that in our relationships.

You sometimes see people who are in a cycle of a bad relationship. And they say, I need you to prove that you love me by forgiving me. So I'm going to do something that hurts you a bit just so that we can see that you love me by you forgiving me.

[ 13 : 30 ] Or if you love me, you'll do this thing for me that I'm asking for. And that's not healthy, is it? But it's something that everyone falls down to when they don't have that easy security. It will undermine your relationships and ultimately stop you from being vulnerable enough to enjoy them.

Because the truth is, if you're testing people, you're not trusting them. And often it is when we take time off into the wilderness that big issues and questions which we haven't had time to think through

come to the surface.

It's also in the wilderness that we can encounter doubts that we thought we'd put to bed. Difficult narratives that go around our head when there's nothing else there can resurface. But these questions are always there in our lives anyway.

And if we don't take time to go to lonely places and think about them, to pray about them, to offer those deep, difficult questions to God, then they're just going to be there in the background, undermining things.

So taking the time into the wilderness to face those questions, face those doubts, and think, what is it that I really think here is important. It's freeing, even if it's difficult.

[14:40] Because wilderness means stepping out from what you can control or are used to. And that's a really important part of faith. Because honestly, stepping beyond the normal anchors and safety nets in normal life and remembering about our vulnerabilities is important.

Sometimes when we've got a safe rhythm of life going, there can be a temptation to make our image of God smaller and more compatible with the way that we're currently living, a bit more like us.

And in the rhythms of life, we can reduce God to a picture of God who is manageable, easy to understand, easy to live with. We can try and make God to be safe like us.

And putting God in a box is a really easy thing to do. It makes sense. I mean, the universe is so huge and so complicated, so how much more huge and more complicated must God be who made it?

And of course, that God isn't always safe or easy to relate to. Any attempt to describe God or pin him down will miss the mark. So for me, stepping out on a journey, stepping away from my usual practices and prayers and patterns of living, and even stepping away from the images of God that I find comfortable, takes me to a place where I can hear voices that might want me to change more clearly.

[16:00] It lets me ask the questions at the depth of my soul and explore and ultimately reaffirm what it means for me to be on the path I'm on and to be God's child in this moment.

And when we look at where it takes Jesus, ultimately, at the end of this difficult journey in the desert, Jesus is fulfilled. He's answered Satan's questions. He knows that he is still God's loved son and asserted how he's going to do things.

He's going to do things the right way, even if that takes more time, even if it's costly. And he goes out of this desert so sure of his identity that the first thing he does is he goes back to the temple and he picks up the scroll of Isaiah and he reads, And that's this really beautiful, clear vision of what Jesus, who Jesus was and what Jesus was doing on earth.

And I like to think that this understanding of who Jesus was was there from the very beginning of Jesus's life on earth. That it was reflected in the Magnificat, that song which Mary sang when Jesus jumped in her womb.

It's a song I like to imagine that Mary sang to Jesus throughout her pregnancy. That it was a song that he was almost born singing. This song of justice, of turning the tables, of the righteous coming up and the hungry being fed.

[17:34] So if wilderness and silence offer us an opportunity to open that box of questions, at the back of our head, to put to bed cycles of testing our relationships and to remember who we are as loved children and God, valued and valuable precisely because God loves us, made us who we are and showed us how loved we are through Jesus's ministry.

Well that's all well and good but where can we find wilderness? How do we look for it in a day-to-day life which like yours might be very full? Certainly mine has filled up before and this is a question I've been wrestling with recently because last year, I don't know if you remember, but in January, the church closed so I got on my bike and I cycled down to Canterbury on a kind of fulfillment of a pilgrimage that I'd been doing before.

I had a blurry map, no exact dates, no plans or a sense of where I could sleep. It was a fantastic gift. It was challenging and raw and very, very, very cold and God filled and helped me work out who I was and move towards becoming the priest that I feel God is calling me to be.

And above all, in a number of scrapes that I had, which I'm sure you've all heard about, I became completely reliant on the kindness of strangers to charge my bike batteries and redirect me down the road and help scoop me up out of the mud.

This reminds me that I'm called to rely on others, to rely on God and not myself, to do things with people rather than telling them and I can't and I shouldn't ever try to do it all by myself.

[ 19 : 08 ] But nowadays, nowadays it's not so easy just to disappear off on a bike for an undetermined amount of time because I've got Amara and even though she's almost always with me, there are still spaces where it feels lonely in my life.

Those aren't the spaces that I'd think of so it's not like a planned trip on a bike. But there are times when things are challenging and those are the little wildernesses of my life where I can feel that God is almost palpably there.

I think you don't need to go on a big trip to find God in challenging places. The truth is that we all have lonely or hopeless feeling moments. So perhaps the challenges and it is difficult and I definitely don't do this very well all the time but to see these lonely stretches, these difficult challenging times as like little mini wildernesses that you're walking through to see if you can glimpse the wild and untamed God there in the depth of your deepest despair and most desperate doubts.

We may not all be able to go on a big trip into the wild but the wild is already in our lives because God who made us is in our lives. We just need to take the time to be in those difficult spaces to rest in Holy Saturday to take the time to be there in that wilderness rather than avoid it.

So for example and I realise this is a difficult issue for a lot of people so this is just my journey please don't take anything from what you should do in this from me but we've got it sorted now but the early stages of breastfeeding are not fun.

[ 20 : 47 ] I think many of you will know that it's something that's natural but as you may know it does not come naturally despite the fact that everyone thinks it will and for a while for me because Amara would choke a bit on the milk she became quite scared of eating and would often cry with fear when approached by me and that was awful especially in the middle of the night when you're on your own and the baby is crying because they're scared of you.

I mean I always expected having a daughter that I would have to teach her to face frightening things and overcome difficulties but I didn't expect her to be frightened of me and I didn't expect her to have to face any fears when she was two months old and I remember feeling desperately alone and vulnerable in that and those times late at night desperately trying to appear more calm than I was so I wouldn't frighten her more and make it more scary and it was a challenging place but I went to go and see one of my friends who is also a priest with a baby and she helped me reflect on it she bought me this icon of God feeding the world so I don't know if you can see it but it's a picture of Jesus breastfeeding with the words take, eat this is my body and I did find this helpful it's not an image that you'll all find helpful but I found it helpful because it helped me think about how desperately deep and extraordinary God's love is for us so deep that in the face of rejection God doesn't turn from us or turn on us but instead keeps the door open and keeps reaching out to us not tame not doing what we ask not leaving when we want him to but God offering everything that God is to us completely and I found in those moments in the middle of the night that God was still there kind of still overhanging like a bird of prey in the sky watching and there affirming me for being a mother for whom all parts of motherhood don't come naturally or easily affirming me as someone who God has called even as my life changes and I remember sitting up at night and the verse that came to me that kept coming to me is a bit where Jesus is talking to Simon Peter just after Simon Peter has rejected him and saying Peter do you love me and Peter replying of course I love you and Jesus just saying feed my sheep

I don't know why that verse came to me and perhaps it was because I was praying if you love me God why is this so hard and I was also praying that Amara would know that I loved her even though everything was hard and I guess that was me testing and challenging God in a way just like Jesus resisted doing in the wilderness but in all of that what I felt was Jesus saying feed my sheep and I think that was about my whole life you know my calling to be someone who loves other people to be a good Christian to be a person of love in the world to do my best when things are challenging obviously God didn't have an explicit answer about breastfeeding we worked that out slowly ourselves very helpful if they did but Jesus did have an answer for me about who I am and about whether or not I was worthy of love in those lonely moments and I guess in that wilderness I felt God whisper back to me reminding me who I am where I'm going who I'm called to be that I am loved that I am a child of God that didn't really make it easier at the moment but those lonely nights helped me remember my identity in God because sometimes you can think oh I'm doing this

because of this or because I want to do that but sometimes it's important to have God really  
reground you in your identity so perhaps there are some awful lonely moments in your life too  
moments where you feel alone or afraid or overwhelmed

I really do believe that those lonely moments can be a gift though it sounds terrible saying it at the  
front here a gift because if you see those lonely moments as little wildernesses places where you  
can encounter that overwhelming wild untamed God who defies all attempts to put God in the box  
then those places can be places of encounter with God places where you can ask and answer for  
yourself difficult questions like am I loved and am I lovable by remembering that above all we are  
each and every one of us one of God's most beloved children with whom God is most pleased  
Amen Amen Amen