

## **Encounters in the Wilderness: Water from Rock, Food from Above**

Lent 3: Isa. 55, 1-9; Ps. 63, 1-8; 1 Cor. 10, 1-13

My experience of desert has been only peripheral. I've never made it to Mount Sinai and St Catherine's Monastery, but I've seen enough from the edge, from the air, from photography and TV to have caught a glimpse of the desert's two-sided power. It can be truly beautiful, magnificent and mind-expanding in its empty vastness; but also terrifying, humbling, as it shows up how fragile and dependent the human animal is.

The desert and wilderness are vital parts of the Bible story, a background to the biblical drama. Today's Epistle speaks of the water from the desert rock and manna as a gift of the Spirit; the Psalm – 'my soul thirsts for God, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water;' which suggests that is something in fairly common experience. Even the OT reading makes an allusion – 'Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters'.

From the wanderings of Abraham, through Moses and the burning bush – and the Exodus – the prophets and right up to John the Baptist, and of course Jesus in the wilderness for forty days; and then those early Christian 'Desert Fathers'... What does it mean?

The Bible distinguishes between desert and wilderness – the latter is semi-desert: some green for grazing in season, some tough shrubs for browsing by goats. But both terrains are seen as dangerous – the habitat of wild beasts and evil spirits. Little wonder that the devilish Tempter assailed Jesus there. Yet they can also be places of revelation, of encounter with God or angels, of miraculous rescue when all seems lost.

Think of poor Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant thrown out of Abraham's household because of Sarah's jealousy at Hagar's baby son. When all seems lost, she leaves the baby in the shade of a shrub and walks some distance as she can't bear to see him die. But then a divine voice says the child's crying has been heard, and suddenly she sees a spring of water to fill their bottles and get to some habitation, where the child grows up to be the founding father of the Ishmaelites.

Or think of Moses, minding his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness, and hearing the voice of God from the burning bush. It tells him to confront the great Pharaoh, demanding 'Let my people go'. A tough assignment, but now he knows that God will be with him.

Centuries later Elijah, fleeing for his life from the wrath of Queen Jezebel, walks a day's journey into the wilderness and, seeing no hope left, sits down under a broom tree and prays for death. Instead, an angel taps him on the shoulder and gives him food and water, and he goes all the way to Horeb (sacred Mount Sinai). You remember? In a cave, and the wind, the earthquake, and the fire... but then God speaks in a still, small voice – telling what he must do in God's strength. Another scary task – anointing two new kings.

And it was in the wilderness that John the Baptizer received his commission to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and the coming of one greater than himself. As Jesus was then baptized by John, he had his own revelation ('You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.') Immediately the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, where he was for forty days, 'tempted by Satan, with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.' Wilderness and desert as places of extremes; places to test you to the limit, but where, stripped of all the usual supports, we can allow ourselves to be supported by God and maybe hear his still, small voice.

And in more recent and our own times, explorers, castaways, prisoners in solitary confinement... have found both those extremes: when all seems lost, maybe hearing a voice, or sensing an invisible new companion; reaching a whole new level of consciousness; or maybe finding an inexplicable reserve of endurance or strength.

I think that many of us will have known how, even in the darkest times of our life, some unexpected blessing may emerge, as if it had been waiting for the moment. I have certainly known that, including in recent years – even to the extent of encountering angels bringing food – well, angels looking human! And it included the spiritual food of their thoughtful kindness.

God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, encounters us in many guises, often well hidden, or in darkness. Or is it that we hide from God? As those immortal words of Psalm 139 put it:

Where then can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.  
If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
Even there your hand shall lead me, your right hand hold me fast.  
If I say, 'Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me turn to night,'  
Even darkness is no darkness with you: the night is as clear as the day;  
Darkness and light to you are both alike.

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Dear Lord, help us to be more aware of your over-arching presence, and of your immediate presence – in those around us, and in the depths of ourselves. Amen.

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