

Sunday 23 August 2020

Finding compassion and transformation in the wilderness

Isaiah 51: 1-3

“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness
and who seek the LORD:
Look to the rock from which you were cut
and to the quarry from which you were hewn;
² look to Abraham, your father,
and to Sarah, who gave you birth.
When I called him he was only one man,
and I blessed him and made him many.
³ The LORD will surely comfort Zion
and will look with compassion on all her ruins;
he will make her deserts like Eden,
her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.
Joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of singing.

Introduction

Our passage today was written to a people in distress, who had been through terrible trials, and had almost lost hope. But it is a passage of transformation, of hope restored.

In these times of uncertainty, in the middle of a pandemic, when we don't know what the future will hold for us, let us hold onto these hopeful words that we *will* be able to sing once again with hearts full of thanksgiving.

Context

Our passage in Isaiah 51 is written to the people of Israel who were living in exile in Babylon. They had been torn away from their promised land, and the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. It was a devastating situation. The words we have read today speak of God's compassion and salvation for a desperate people all out of hope.

The prophet urges the people to remember who they are: the chosen and holy people of God. And to remember the promises that God has given them.

Verses 1 and 2...

Look to the rock from which you were cut
and to the quarry from which you were hewn;
² look to Abraham, your father,

and to Sarah, who gave you birth.
When I called him he was only one man,
and I blessed him and made him many.

These are helpful reminders for us too, when we feel out of our depth.

- Who does God say you are?
- What promises has God made to you?
- How has God blessed you and your family in the past?

Biblical examples of wilderness experiences

Our passage in Isaiah 51 speaks in the metaphor of a 'desert experience'. Of being in the wilderness, of wandering in the wastelands.

Last week, we heard of a mountain metaphor in Psalm 121, of looking up to the mountains and beyond and asking, "Where does my help come from?". And Izzy reminded us that God is not 'up there' at the top of the mountain, but God is closer to us than our breath, that God is as close to us as a shadow, protecting our vulnerable right hand. This week, we continue the same theme, moving from mountains to the wilderness.

A wilderness is a vast, uninhabited space. A desert is dry and arid, with little to support a comfortable life. A wasteland is a place where nobody chooses to live. It is full of dangers: the risk of exposure, of heat, of dehydration. There is no clear path, and you find few fellow travellers.

The Bible has many stories of people fleeing to deserts or being led into the wilderness. Often when they have come to the end of their own resources and strategies, and the only place left to go is into the inhospitable unknown.

Here are some examples:

- Hagar, pregnant with Abram's son, was treated so badly by her mistress Sarai that she ran away into the desert (Genesis 16).
- The Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt into the wilderness, where they wandered and camped for 40 years (Exodus 12-13).
- The prophet Elijah fled for his life from Jezebel into the desert (1 Kings 19).
- John the Baptist lived a wild life in the wastelands eating locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3).

The desert as a place of transformation

But the Bible also tells us that the desert is often a place where transformation happens.

Verse 3...

³ The LORD will surely comfort Zion
and will look with compassion on all her ruins;
he will make her deserts like Eden,
her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.
Joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of singing.

Isaiah speaks a message of hope and compassion, that even in such disastrous situations, God *can* bring new life:

- Making deserts like the Garden of Eden.
- Turning wastelands into a lush garden.
- Bringing a song of gladness out of the ruins.

Let's go back to the Bible characters who found themselves in the desert:

- In the midst of her distress in the wilderness, Hagar met the angel of the Lord, who called her *by her name*. Hagar in return gave a name to God: "You are the God who sees me", saying, "I have seen the God who sees me."
- In the desert, the Israelites received daily provision of food, protection, and direction by day and night.
- Elijah walked into the wilderness, exhausted, overwhelmed, afraid and ready to die. But there he encountered the *kindness* of God, with an angel letting him eat and sleep and eat again so he was ready for the journey ahead. In the solitude of the desert, Elijah was able to hear God in "the sound of sheer silence".
- The wilderness was John the Baptist's *place of freedom* to preach his radical and unpopular message of the coming Messiah.

In these examples, their harsh situations were not automatically ended. The cause of their terror was not necessarily removed. But their experience in the wasteland was often transformative to *how they continued onwards*.

- Hagar returned to her mistress, having a new sense of being seen, known and cared for by God.
- The Israelites learned to be the People of God as they sought their promised land. They had decades of miraculous experiences and learning to draw upon in the centuries to come.
- Elijah's zealotness and compulsiveness was softened, as he learnt to see God not just in powerful and mighty deeds, but also in a gentle whisper.
- John the Baptist met his Messiah, as Jesus walked out to where John was in the wilderness to be baptised.

Someone has said that this wilderness experience is like a swimming pool. When you enter the pool in the shallow end, there are lots of people, children having fun, it's busy and noisy. But when you are at the deep end, it's a different experience. Your feet can't touch the bottom. There are not so many people around you. And the sound is different. All the noise is at the shallow end of the pool; at the deep end, in the vulnerability, you can listen deeply and ask deep questions.

Personal wildernesses

The desert represents physically arid places, but also personal and spiritually arid places.

Where have you experienced 'wilderness'?

- maybe it was on a hospital ward in the middle of the night.
- or when your dreams and expectations came crashing around you.
- maybe you felt like you were on the outskirts of society.
- or a death, or a loss of a job or a relationship has left you devastated.
- or it's when you sit in silent prayer and hear nothing.

For me, my most significant wilderness experience was 10 years ago when I was newly married, and all my hopes and expectations of marriage and a happy family life were pulled apart. My husband started to relapse into his addiction to alcohol, and it spiralled out of control. Each month it got worse. The binge drinking increased, the bank balance went into the red, his behaviour became more paranoid and controlling, there were threats of violence, and soon the threats started to become realities. I felt utterly trapped in my situation. I could

not find a way to help him; I could not see any 'good' solution, or even any good way out. But I knew I couldn't stay. With the help of my family, I somehow found the courage to get to a safe place, and the clarity to make decisions. This situation challenged my understanding of love, of marriage, of forgiveness, of divorce. It forced me to re-imagine a new future. It opened me see other peoples life situations with more grace. It challenged my theology and my understanding of God. It challenged my concept of who I was and what was important to me. And it introduced me to people who had similar experiences to me, and I realised I was not alone.

My wilderness was a terrible experience. But looking back I can see there were angels who helped me when I was in the midst of it all. And I can see how I've changed, and how I'm growing as a result of that experience.

Conclusion: What is the significance of desert experiences?

A desert can be a place of learning, of growth, of fresh perspective, of encounter, of discovery. But let's not be romantic and sentimental about clouds with silver linings. The desert *is* a hard place, and there's a reason we are there. When we are in the desert it can be difficult to be comforted or reassured or to feel that we'll get through it. This is when we need the solidarity of friends, of sisters and brothers, who sit with us, and wait with us, and pray for us, and cry with us.

Isaiah's message is that even in the wilderness there is the possibility of hope and transformation. But sometimes we may not recognise this transformation until years later.

Now I look back and I can say that I survived, and I can see that I have changed because of my experiences. And that for me is a transformation, like a wasteland to a garden.