

Temporary : The Wilderness Experience

Deuteronomy 8:2-5

As we come to open the Bible this morning, we are embarking on a new sermon series for the next few weeks. It's a series I've designed to help us get our heads around what it means to do church this way over the coming months; or perhaps this is more helpful, how to **be church** for an extended period of time when we can't meet together face to face.

Over the next few weeks I want us to think about what church is, and how we participate in church, and how we can continue as members of our church in this different season. Because I know for some, the news that the Elders and I shared this week will be difficult news to receive. And can I say, it is hard news share. We would have loved to return to physical gatherings sooner, and we explored a number of options. But with our particular circumstances as a congregation, we have decided that the most prudent course of action is to hold off until **more** of us are able to gather as one body, and that means waiting for the Yount St renovations to be completed...

Now I know there will be all kinds of reactions to this news. Disappointment and sadness for some. Frustration for others. Relief for some who are nervous about going back into public spaces. There will be all kinds of reactions to this news.

But this is a *temporary* situation. And that's what I want us to think about over the next few weeks – how we can make the most of what is temporary in life, how we can embrace **this** temporary moment, and how we can take that thinking into the new building when finally get to return to worship face to face with one another.

So the theme of our series is *Temporary*. Why don't we pray, and then we'll get into the Bible together.

Our heavenly Father, you are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. You are eternal and you know all things. As we open your word today, help us to learn about you, about ourselves, and how this season fits into your eternal plan. Be with us by your Holy Spirit, speaking to us through the Scriptures, drawing us nearer to you and to one another. We pray all this in the name of Jesus, our saviour. Amen.

We live in a world where so much is temporary.

As one poet writes:

So much of this world is temporary.

Cuts, scrapes, bruises, hurt feelings.

New car smell, warm laundry, fresh-cut grass.

Morning dew.

Rain, sunshine, thunder storms, fog.
Ice cubes cracking in a glass of water.
Dusk, full moons.
Jet streams, clouds.
Vacations, backyard camp-outs, 'smores.
Ripe strawberries, cold milk.
First kisses, cravings, possibilities.¹

The author of this poem goes on to list a bunch more 'temporary' things – bubbles, bad haircuts, light bulbs. In amongst the trivialities, though, she lists something else that is temporary: *life*.

As human beings, we're a little bit like all those temporary things – the Apostle Peter says of humans in 1 Peter 1:24

*"All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall*

As humans, we might ache for permanence, and we might try to organise the world around us as if we are going to be here forever, but the Bible reminds us that we are like the spring flowers that blossom and then wither.

I don't mean to be depressing, just realistic. There is something beautiful about the spring flowers, and the seasonal grass, and there is something beautiful about the temporary nature of this lifetime that God gives us. As the teacher taught in Ecclesiastes

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens... (Ecc 3:1)*

So how will we embrace the season that we find ourselves in right now? How will we embrace the COVID-19 season (which by the way is going to confuse our grandkids, because they'll think that COVID happened in 2019, but that's for them to worry about ;-)

How will you make the most of this season of waiting, this season of distancing, this season that is different from anything we've ever known? How will you embrace this temporary moment, for however long it might last?

First, I think we have to recognise this COVID crisis as a season that God has put us in, rather than something that is unexpected or unplanned. No, if God is sovereign, then he has a plan

¹ <http://www.missdisgrace.com/2010/04/list-of-temporary-things-prayer-for.html>

and a purpose for this season, and I think it might be to give us an experience of *the wilderness*...²

We see the theme of wilderness throughout the Bible:

- Adam and Eve as they were banished from the Garden;
- Cain being sent into the land of Nod;
- Moses fleeing to Midian;
- David on the run from Saul, living in caves
- Jesus himself led into the wilderness to be tested for 40 days and 40 nights...

The wilderness in the Bible is literally the desert places and ravines and rocky outcrops, the barren and inhospitable areas of Palestine according to Jeremiah 2:6. But the wilderness is not just physically inhospitable, it also represents separation and alienation and wandering, and waiting on God.

Perhaps the most memorable example of the wilderness experience was the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years after they refused to trust God to lead them into the Promised Land.

And God used their wilderness experience to teach them important lessons, lessons which shaped them as a nation of God's people for generations to come.

So we have to ask, is this our wilderness moment? Is God trying to teach us something? Will he use this time to shape and mould and change us for the sake of the kingdom, perhaps in a way that will shape generations to come?

If that is his plan, I want to be listening to him.

PAUSE

So what is God doing when we find ourselves in the wilderness?

The first thing God is doing is checking the health of our hearts (Deut 8:2)

² Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.

God uses the wilderness experience to test our hearts. To humble us, to put us out of our comfort zone, to take away the illusion of control that we normally have in life, and he causes us to look deep inside ourselves at what really matters to us.

² <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-coronavirus-crisis-as-a-wilderness-experience/>

What has your heart been like during these 3 months of the coronavirus crisis? What have you focused on? What have you hungered and thirsted for? What fills your thoughts each day? What will God find when he looks inside your heart?

For the Israelites, the wilderness experience showed the state of their hearts. Rather than keeping God's commands, in Numbers (14:22) we read that they tested God 10 times instead. They grumbled (Ex 14-17, Num 11); and they committed idolatry (Ex 32; Num 25; Deut 9:7).

3 months is a short time compared to 40 years, but we need to be careful not to fall into the same patterns. It would be easy to grumble against God for withholding a cure, for prolonging the lock-down, for keeping us from family and friends, for not having a church building to go into...

The writer of Proverbs warns us to *Guard our lips* because
*Those who guard their lips preserve their lives,
but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.* (Prov 13:3).

God also warns us in Proverbs 4 to:
*guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.* (Prov 4:23)

Even after everything God had done for them, even standing at the base Mount Sinai while God was speaking the commandments to Moses, the Israelites convinced themselves that God had abandoned them. It was too long to wait 40 days for Moses to come down, so they made an idol, a golden calf, and they worshiped it saying '*This is the god who rescued us from Egypt...*'

It's not likely that any of us would worship a *literal* idol in place of God, but that doesn't mean our hearts are safe from more subtle forms of idolatry.

John Calvin famously said that the human heart is an idol factory.

Tim Keller, in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, identifies the way that we easily turn to idols, or false gods, in the hopes of gaining control, or security, or identity, or fulfilment. False gods that promise satisfaction, but always leave us lacking. Even with all the money in the world, you can't protect yourself from cancer, or coronavirus. None of us can make someone fall in love with us. Youth and beauty are fleeting. A church building won't make us the perfect church.

We need to guard our hearts from looking for satisfaction apart from God. In this wilderness time, with less distractions, let's give ourselves to examining our hearts. Allowing God to humble us where we need to be humbled.

That's the first thing that God does in the wilderness – he tests us.

Second thing he does in the wilderness is there in Deuteronomy 8 vv 3-4: ***God provides for us.***

³ He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. ⁴ Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years.

Throughout the 40 years, God fed his people in a place where there was no food to be found. He literally rained down bread from heaven (Ex 16:4), *manna* which landed on the ground every day for the people to collect. Just enough for one day – if they tried to keep it overnight, it got full of maggots and was inedible. God literally fed them day by day, so that they could learn to trust him to provide.

It reminds me of the exact opposite that we saw at the beginning of the corona crisis – people panic buying because we're so used to having days' or weeks' worth of food in the house, many of us anyway. For the wealthy, there was the frustration that money could no longer buy what we needed. It left us out of control in arguably the wealthiest country in the world. We expect to be able to get what we want, when we want it. Perhaps God was showing us that we should trust him for our daily bread, not the supermarket...

For the poorest amongst our society, for those without a stocked pantry, I've heard that this time has been very difficult. With soaring unemployment, food shortages, and not enough money to buy more than the next few meals, the emergency food distribution services in the Napa Valley have been very busy. God has certainly opened my eyes to the needs around us. Perhaps he's speaking to you today also. I'd love for us to be able to use some of what God has given us, to provide for the needy in our community. It's something for us to talk more about in coming months.

Again, look to the experience of the Israelites. They were in the desert for 40 years, and in all that time, their clothes did not wear out and their feet didn't swell. God provided for them in ways that they needed.

In the middle of this pandemic, how is God providing for you? The Israelites looked at the desert and doubted God's goodness. We might look at the pandemic and do the same.

But God is providing for us in all kinds of ways throughout this season. Whether it's access to healthcare, friends or family to speak to on the phone, whether it's the return of toilet paper to the supermarket shelves, or time to slow down from the normal pattern of work and school and life, God is providing for us in many ways.

Perhaps the most important way that God keeps providing for us is to remind us that we don't live *on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*

Because it was God's word that sustained Jesus during his 40 days in the wilderness, and it will be God's word that sustains our faith during this time of separation and waiting, this time in the wilderness.

In one way I'm thankful that God waited until *this point of history* for the church to be closed physically, because it means we have the technology to keep sharing God's word and meeting together virtually, in a way that I don't think we could have even 5 years ago. Even some of my pastor friends in developing parts of Africa have been able to use the internet to keep preaching throughout their lockdown.

So I'm thankful that God has chosen now to do this. I long for the end of it, but I'm embracing what God has given us in this season, and trying to work out how we can use this new technology to reach more people with Jesus than any of us could have imagined.

So that's the second thing in the wilderness – remember that God is providing for us.

The third and final thing that God does in the wilderness is **he forms us as his children**. Look at v5:

⁵ Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.

I think this is the hardest idea to talk about. Whenever we mention discipline, our minds go to our human experience of discipline, which is often negative, or even abusive.

God's discipline is not like that. God disciplines us because he loves us. Proverbs 3:11 teaches us:

*do not despise the Lord's discipline,
and do not resent his rebuke,
¹² because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
as a father the son he delights in.*

When my children were little, our discipline taught them to cross the road safely and to stay away from hot burny things. Our discipline taught them to brush their teeth, and how to be polite. We disciplined them because we love them.

And God disciplines us the same way. God delights in us, and he is conforming us the likeness of his son, Jesus Christ, and he shapes us and moulds us and disciplines us so that we'll grow up the right way.

For Israel, God used the wilderness experience to humble them, to teach them obedience, to teach them to trust him. It was a long period of discipline – 40 years. Hundreds of years later in the OT, God would again send his people out of the Promised Land in the time of the Exile, this

time for 70 years. When it comes to God, we are slow learners. We forget so easily. We need him to point us back in the right direction, and I'm so thankful that he disciplines us and restores us, rather than exiling us forever. Sometimes we need a sharp reminder to prevent us from something worse...

So if this is a time when God is disciplining us, as individuals, as a church, will you listen for his voice? I'm going to speak more about that next week, but for this week, how will you listen to God's voice this week? I'm so glad that you are listening to God's word right now. But what about the other 167 hours until we meet again?

Now is as good a time as any to start reading God's word. By yourself. With someone else. In a group. Or with a book to help you. Perhaps you have an area of your life where you know you need God's discipline. How will you let God speak into that this week? Wouldn't it be good to come out of this pandemic more in love with Jesus, more deeply trusting in God than before it started? Wouldn't that be amazing?

Because that would also be amazing for our church when the doors reopen. Imagine an old church, where there has been work going on behind closed doors. And when you see it again, you're amazed by how much it has changed. Yes, it's the old church but it's somehow fresh and invigorated and alive in a way that it wasn't before, and full of possibility. Imagine that same feeling in yourself – knowing that God has been at work in you, invigorating and refreshing and renewing you. I'd love to see that. We all would. That's the kind of thing that will bring people in the door. That's the kind of transformation story that you'll want to tell everybody.

All that from a wilderness experience... If that's what God is doing in us, I love the wilderness.

Let's pray.

Further Prayers

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Father, the one thing that unites all Christians in the past, present and future is the joyful assurance that the greatest thing that ever happened on our planet is the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Praise be to your name.

Father, you are our one true God and your gospel is for all. All peoples on earth were made in your image, we owe our life and breath to you and all are commanded to repent of their sin and turn to you. We see a picture of incredible unity and diversity in Revelation 7: 9, “ After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb,”

Father, forgive us for our sin, our sin against you and against others. We pray that we would not allow the barriers put up by sin to stand in the way of compassion and care for other human beings. We pray that Napa County, the United States and the world, will see miracles of reconciliation and lasting harmony, rooted in truth and in the paths of righteousness. We pray for peace — the fullest enjoyment of *shalom*, flowing down from the God of peace, and bought at an infinite price for the brokenhearted followers of the Prince of Peace.

We continue to pray for our country’s leaders. We pray for humility, respect, understanding, sensitivity and love.

And as the scourge of COVID-19 has now killed more than 100,000 people in our nation and as the virus wreaks havoc with our economy, and riots send lifetimes of labor up in smoke, and the fabric of our common life is torn, we pray that the compounding of sorrows will not compound our sins, but send us desperate and running to the risen Savior, our only hope, Jesus Christ.

We pray Lord for our Senior Pastor, Dan Bidwell and our Elders, Johnny and Robert as they lead your church here in Yountville. Work in the hearts of your people to be full of grace, understanding and humility as we seek to love each other. May we seek to bring you glory. Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!