

# THE WILD PLACES: WEEK 1

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## Introduction

By choice or by circumstance, we sometimes find ourselves in times and in places, in circumstances and in seasons, where we are out of our element, beyond our resources, and out of control. Let's call these the wild places.

Sometimes a journey into the wild places is deliberate. We swim in the ocean, we trek into the woods, we travel outside our comfort zone. We know these can be times of profound learning and encounter, opportunities to discover something new about ourselves, our neighbor, our world, even the divine. Other times we end up in wilds we'd never wish for. A loved one dies, a relationship or venture fails, a dream goes unfulfilled, disaster or chaos strike. These can be times that make or break us, that shape us or undo us, or both.

In the Bible's treasure of metaphors, these places are often connected to the place and experience of wilderness. People end up in the wilderness of nature and praise God for all they see and discover there. People, and whole nations and cultures, are also driven into the wilderness and need to come to grips with their greatest fears and most crippling habits. But again and again, these wild places are times and spaces of profound learning and discovery and formation.

This year, we hope that the Lenten<sup>1</sup> season will be for us all a profound time of learning and discovery and formation. This year's Bible guide won't examine a single, contiguous section of scripture as we so often do (Revelation last year, Romans three years ago) but will be more of a thematic survey.

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<sup>1</sup>*Lent* is from an Old English word meaning "spring". It's used to refer to the 6-week period before Easter Sunday. For centuries, Jesus followers have marked this period of anticipation for Easter through prayer, fasting, and giving. In past years, we've called this season the *40 Days of Faith*. We're putting that title aside for two reasons. One, it's our own in-house jargon that isn't familiar to those outside our church. "Lent" is part of our faith tradition and is still a familiar (if misunderstood) season in our broader culture. The other reason is that the 40 Days of Faith featured an encouragement to people to ask God for a big desire or need. Many individuals have experienced dramatic answers to their prayers over the years. But for others, this practice has been confusing or wearisome. Anybody is able to ask God for their heart's desire in any time or season. This year, though, we'll encourage that practice for those who are interested during our Advent season, the time before Christmas when we traditionally connect some of our deepest longings with Jesus' presence with us and our longing for Jesus to come again.

Each weekday we'll present you with a different passage, in the Common English Bible translation. On weekends, you can catch up on a missed day, review a favorite passage, or skip the guide all together.

- **Points of Interest** — a handful of comments, which include literary or historical notes as well as impressions, thoughts, questions, and reactions. These aren't meant to be exhaustive or authoritative, but simply to give you some more perspective to work with as you ponder the passage yourself. We try to name things you hadn't noticed but wish you had, as well as give voice to some of the questions and observations you did have but weren't sure what to do with.
- **A Direction for Prayer** — there will also be a prompt for prayer that you can use. These invitations focus on the prayers for others we encourage you to try during this season:
  - *For your friends and family:* Consider some of your favorite people, people you interact with on a regular basis, who don't seem to have much of a direct connection to God, but for whom you are very much rooting. What does this passage have to say to them, or to you about them?
  - *For your church or city:* How can we apply the passage corporately as a faith community? Or what does this passage say about or to our entire city?
- **Spiritual Exercise** — each week, there will a different daily spiritual exercise to try, inspired by the week's passages.

We hope Lent will be a season of spiritual formation for us – of engaging spiritual practice that increases our health and encourages the flourishing of the life of God in and through us. If you would like to engage in fasting or increased generosity, these are two traditions of spiritual formation that have been traditionally helpful during this season. See the [March 3<sup>rd</sup> sermon](#) on spiritual formation for more. Meanwhile, we'll be encouraging the spiritual practices of Scripture reading and prayer in community. Attend our Sunday services [and join a community group](#) for the season if you're able. You could also find a friend to touch base with on your own if you like. May your Lent be a place of warm encounter with God and with others, and may it be a time of rich learning, discovery, and formation.

## Monday, March 11

*We begin our guide with our longest passage – a poem of encounter and discovery in wild places.*

### Psalm 107 (CEB)

“Give thanks to the LORD because he is good,  
because his faithful love lasts forever!”

<sup>2</sup> That’s what those who are redeemed by the LORD say,  
the ones God redeemed from the power of their  
enemies,

<sup>3</sup> the ones God gathered from various countries,  
from east and west, north and south.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the redeemed had wandered into the desert,  
into the wasteland.

They couldn’t find their way to a city or town.

<sup>5</sup> They were hungry and thirsty;  
their lives were slipping away.

<sup>6</sup> So they cried out to the LORD in their distress,  
and God delivered them from their desperate  
circumstances.

<sup>7</sup> God led them straight to human habitation.

<sup>8</sup> Let them thank the LORD for his faithful love  
and his wondrous works for all people,

<sup>9</sup> because God satisfied the one who was parched  
with thirst,

and he filled up the hungry with good things!

<sup>10</sup> Some of the redeemed had been sitting in darkness  
and deep gloom;

they were prisoners suffering in chains

<sup>11</sup> because they had disobeyed God’s instructions  
and rejected the Most High’s plans.

<sup>12</sup> So God humbled them with hard work.

They stumbled, and there was no one to help them.

<sup>13</sup> So they cried out to the LORD in their distress,  
and God saved them from their desperate  
circumstances.

<sup>14</sup> God brought them out from the darkness and deep  
gloom;  
he shattered their chains.

<sup>15</sup> Let them thank the LORD for his faithful love  
and his wondrous works for all people,

<sup>16</sup> because God has shattered bronze doors  
and split iron bars in two!

<sup>17</sup> Some of the redeemed were fools because of their  
sinful ways.

They suffered because of their wickedness.

<sup>18</sup> They had absolutely no appetite for food;  
they had arrived at death’s gates.

<sup>19</sup> So they cried out to the LORD in their distress,  
and God saved them from their desperate  
circumstances.

<sup>20</sup> God gave the order and healed them;  
he rescued them from their pit.

<sup>21</sup> Let them thank the LORD for his faithful love  
and his wondrous works for all people.

<sup>22</sup> Let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices  
and declare what God has done in songs of joy!

<sup>23</sup> Some of the redeemed had gone out on the ocean in  
ships,

making their living on the high seas.

<sup>24</sup> They saw what the LORD had made;  
they saw his wondrous works in the depths of the sea.

<sup>25</sup> God spoke and stirred up a storm  
that brought the waves up high.

<sup>26</sup> The waves went as high as the sky;  
they crashed down to the depths.

The sailors’ courage melted at this terrible situation.

<sup>27</sup> They staggered and stumbled around like they were  
drunk.

None of their skill was of any help.

<sup>28</sup> So they cried out to the LORD in their distress,  
and God brought them out safe from their desperate  
circumstances.

<sup>29</sup> God quieted the storm to a whisper;  
the sea’s waves were hushed.

<sup>30</sup> So they rejoiced because the waves had calmed  
down;

then God led them to the harbor they were hoping  
for.

<sup>31</sup> Let them thank the LORD for his faithful love  
and his wondrous works for all people.

<sup>32</sup> Let them exalt God in the congregation of the people  
and praise God in the assembly of the elders.

<sup>33</sup> God turns rivers into desert,  
watery springs into thirsty ground,

<sup>34</sup> fruitful land into unproductive dirt,  
when its inhabitants are wicked.

<sup>35</sup> But God can also turn the desert into watery pools,  
thirsty ground into watery springs,

<sup>36</sup> where he settles the hungry.

They even build a city and live there!

<sup>37</sup> They plant fields and vineyards  
and obtain a fruitful harvest.  
<sup>38</sup> God blesses them, and they become many.  
God won't even let their cattle diminish.  
<sup>39</sup> But when they do diminish—  
when they're brought down by oppression, trouble,  
and grief—  
<sup>40</sup> God pours contempt on their leaders,

making them wander aimlessly in the wastelands.  
<sup>41</sup> But God raises the needy from their suffering;  
he makes their families as numerous as sheep!  
<sup>42</sup> Those who do right see it and celebrate,  
but every wicked person shuts their mouth.  
<sup>43</sup> Whoever is wise will pay attention to these things,  
carefully considering the LORD's faithful love.

## Points of Interest

- This is a poem of rescue, to be sung by “the redeemed” – people who God has found and helped while in all kinds of out of control situations. The theme of the song is God’s “faithful love” – that the love and help of God is available for all people, at all times, in all circumstances.
- As we consider the tight jams of this psalm, see if at least one describes a time in your past that is mercifully over. If so, thank God for rescue, however it came. Let’s also see if one of these situations poetically describes your own current wild place.
  - The desert wasteland – a time of hunger and thirst, where there’s not enough of what you need
  - Darkness and deep gloom – the hopeless, hard living that comes with addiction, oppression or any other form of being trapped
  - The distress that follows foolishness – the suffering and ill-at-ease sensation that comes with regret for what we have or haven’t done
  - Over one’s head at sea – what might have started as exhilaration is now out of control chaos that leaves you anxious or discouraged
- There’s a pattern in these stories: people notice the chaos, they cry out to God, they find God is with them, and God makes a way through and out of suffering.

## A Direction for Prayer

Pray that, by Easter, our church will be filled with stories of encounter, discovery, and rescue, people learning things of great value, and experiences of God with us, and God’s help for us.

## Spiritual Exercise of the Week

*Honest Prayer and Requests for Encounter, Discovery, and Rescue* – This week, you are invited to name a place in your life where you are out of your element, beyond your resources, or out of control. Tell God about this. How is it that you want to experience God’s faithful love with you? What do you hope to learn in this season? How is it that you would like God to rescue you?

## Tuesday, March 12

*We'll spend the first two weeks of Lent reading passages from the wilderness narratives that sit between Israel's deliverance from slavery and their arrival in the Promised Land. The founding stories of this people of faith include rescue and promise, but also the chaos and confusion of wild places.*

**Exodus 15:22-27 (CEB)**<sup>22</sup> Then Moses had Israel leave the Reed Sea and go out into the Shur desert. They traveled for three days in the desert and found no water.<sup>23</sup> When they came to Marah, they couldn't drink Marah's water because it was bitter. That's why it was called Marah.<sup>24</sup> The people complained against Moses, "What will we drink?"<sup>25</sup> Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD pointed out a tree to him. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

The LORD made a regulation and a ruling there, and there he tested them.<sup>26</sup> The LORD said, "If you are careful to obey the LORD your God, do what God thinks is right, pay attention to his commandments, and keep all of his regulations, then I won't bring on you any of the diseases that I brought on the Egyptians. I am the LORD who heals you."<sup>27</sup> Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees. They camped there by the water.

### Points of Interest

- The Shur desert lies to the northeast of Egypt. It's a dry place on the road away from the fertile Nile delta. The word "marah" means bitter. The final place, Elim, is likely connected to the ancient Canaanite root word for god, "El," meaning this name for this oasis might mean something like "Land of the gods." Coming out of a hard and dry season of life, it's easy to lose our way in bitterness before we reach the land of God.
- I find Moses and God's reactions to bitterness to be interesting. Moses is stressed out, as leaders usually are when managing bitter or angry people. That's normal. God is not stressed out. God recognizes that embittered people need to taste something sweet, and God's glad to provide that.
- Let's notice the bargain God does and doesn't strike. God doesn't criticize them for their bitterness or tell them to never again feel embittered. God says to them in this wild, empty place: Follow me, do what I say. I know the way out of here. I am the one who heals you, again and again, as I just did. God's response to our problems is healing, not judgment.
- The people have the good sense to not just fuel up at the oasis and move on, but to camp out for a while. In busy, hectic times, it seems to me we rush on from most of our sweetest experiences of relief, without pausing to enjoy and savor a bit. Life is a journey – we always keep moving – but there's time and space to camp out a bit and enjoy the best parts.

## **A Direction for Prayer**

Pray for any of your friends or family who seem lost or embittered, that the God who heals would drop that tree of sweetness into their lives, bringing the kindness and relief they need.

## **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

*Honest Prayer and Requests for Encounter, Discovery, and Rescue* – This week, you are invited to name a place in your life where you are out of your element, beyond your resources, or out of control. Tell God about this. How is it that you want to experience God's faithful love with you? What do you hope to learn in this season? How is it that you would like God to rescue you?

## Wednesday, March 13

### Exodus 16:1-12

<sup>1</sup>6 The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Sin desert, which is located between Elim and Sinai. They set out on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left the land of Egypt.<sup>2</sup> The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert.<sup>3</sup> The Israelites said to them, “Oh, how we wish that the LORD had just put us to death while we were still in the land of Egypt. There we could sit by the pots cooking meat and eat our fill of bread. Instead, you’ve brought us out into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death.”

<sup>4</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, “I’m going to make bread rain down from the sky for you. The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day. In this way, I’ll test them to see whether or not they follow my Instruction.<sup>5</sup> On the sixth day, when they measure out what they have collected, it will be twice as much as they collected on other days.”<sup>6</sup> So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “This evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt.<sup>7</sup> And in the morning you will see the LORD’s glorious presence, because your complaints against the LORD have been heard. Who are we? Why blame us?”<sup>8</sup> Moses continued, “The LORD will give you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning because the LORD heard the complaints you made against him. Who are we? Your complaints aren’t against us but against the LORD.”

<sup>9</sup> Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole Israelite community, ‘Come near to the LORD, because he’s heard your complaints.’”<sup>10</sup> As Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned to look toward the desert, and just then the glorious presence of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

<sup>11</sup> The LORD spoke to Moses,<sup>12</sup> “I’ve heard the complaints of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat. And in the morning you will have your fill of bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.’”

### Points of Interest

- God’s newly freed people leave the oasis named after the god “El” and enter the desert named for the Canaanite moon-god Sin. (The connection to the English word for missing the mark or bad living is entirely coincidental.) The God of Israel proves again and again to not just be another tribal god. This Divine Mother/Father/Creator/Guide can be found everywhere and anywhere, even in places dedicated to or known for other gods.
- It’s easy to get a little judgy about these stories of constant grumbling and complaining, unless we notice the time. It’s been forty-three days on the road, on foot in a hot, dry land without enough water or food. I’d be pretty whiny myself!
- In hard or confusing times, it’s easy to lose perspective. Forty-three days of trouble, and they wish they had died. That, or they wish they could return to what their life used to be; they fondly remember the occasional big, fireside meal, forgetting they were enslaved!
- The hangry (hungry + angry) people lose perspective both in romanticizing their past and in blaming God. I think we see two temptations we all face in hard times – fantasy for a life we wish we had but that doesn’t exist, and fear that God or life or the universe is out to rob us of the good we wish we had, or that others have now. This loss of perspective only compounds our pain. The people aren’t just hot and hungry, they’re also alienated and bitter.

- Once again, Moses is understandably, predictably stressed and defensive. God is not. God devises a rain-bread-from-the-sky and fat-birds-gather-at-twilight plan to address the hunger of the people God loves.
- God attaches a learning opportunity to God's provision. In hard times, God is interested in taking care of us, but also teaching us. We'll examine this lesson more tomorrow, but it seems related to learning to live in the present, trusting that each day God will again give us what we need.

### **A Direction for Prayer**

Pray for the most hungry and angry and lonely and tired residents of your city, that God will provide for them the relief they need this day. After this prayer, ask God is God would like to help gently reframe your perspective of your own life circumstances in any way.

### **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

*Honest Prayer and Requests for Encounter, Discovery, and Rescue* – This week, you are invited to name a place in your life where you are out of your element, beyond your resources, or out of control. Tell God about this. How is it that you want to experience God's faithful love with you? What do you hope to learn in this season? How is it that you would like God to rescue you?

## Thursday, March 14

### Exodus 16:13-30

<sup>13</sup>In the evening a flock of quail flew down and covered the camp. And in the morning there was a layer of dew all around the camp. <sup>14</sup>When the layer of dew lifted, there on the desert surface were thin flakes, as thin as frost on the ground. <sup>15</sup>When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” They didn’t know what it was.

Moses said to them, “This is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. <sup>16</sup>This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Collect as much of it as each of you can eat, one omer per person. You may collect for the number of people in your household.’” <sup>17</sup>The Israelites did as Moses said, some collecting more, some less. <sup>18</sup>But when they measured it out by the omer, the ones who had collected more had nothing left over, and the ones who had collected less had no shortage. Everyone collected just as much as they could eat. <sup>19</sup>Moses said to them, “Don’t keep any of it until morning.” <sup>20</sup>But they didn’t listen to Moses. Some kept part of it until morning, but it became infested with worms and stank. Moses got angry with them. <sup>21</sup>Every morning they gathered it, as much as each person could eat. But when the sun grew hot, it melted away.

<sup>22</sup>On the sixth day the people collected twice as much food as usual, two omers per person. All the chiefs of the community came and told Moses. <sup>23</sup>He said to them, “This is what the LORD has said, ‘Tomorrow is a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. But you can set aside and keep all the leftovers until the next morning.’” <sup>24</sup>So they set the leftovers aside until morning, as Moses had commanded. They didn’t stink or become infested with worms. <sup>25</sup>The next day Moses said, “Eat it today, because today is a Sabbath to the LORD. Today you won’t find it out in the field. <sup>26</sup>Six days you will gather it. But on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be nothing to gather.”

<sup>27</sup>On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather bread, but they found nothing. <sup>28</sup>The LORD said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to obey my commandments and instructions? <sup>29</sup>Look! The LORD has given you the Sabbath. Therefore, on the sixth day he gives you enough food for two days. Each of you should stay where you are and not leave your place on the seventh day.” <sup>30</sup>So the people rested on the seventh day.

### Points of Interest

- The miracle of this wilderness begins with bread and meat, but especially bread. There’s more than enough for each person, a whole omer (which is about eight cups worth – that’s a lot of bread)! The root of this magical food means “what?” in Hebrew; I love that they name this bread “what-is-this.” So there is food for hunger of the belly and mystery and beauty for hunger of the soul. Lest we forget, our stomachs and our hearts, our bodies and our imaginations both need feeding.
- Another part of the magic of God’s food is how it interacts with space and time. Aggressive gatherers can’t overfeed, and folks that struggle to keep up – the physically disabled, the young, the old, the easily distracted – still have enough. And this food’s sell-by date is always today. It can’t be stored up for the future. How much of our life is robbed by our obsession with the future? God’s interested in nudging us back to today again and again. This is the day in which we’re alive. This is the day.
- The other miracle of this wilderness is called the Sabbath, which means rest. Rest has got to be one of the least strategic activities in wild places. Out of control? Lost in the wilderness? Overwhelmed? In chaos, duress, or confusion? To not do anything, to simply

rest seems counter-intuitive. But rest is part, maybe a seventh part, of what people in all places – wild places included – need. In this story, God bends the laws of biology and physics to make this point, and to invite people to walk into the gift of rest.

### **A Direction for Prayer**

Pray that the people of your church will learn to be people who know how to rest, that in the middle of a stressed out, under-slept, over-caffeinated, busy world, you would all embody the joy of peace.

### **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

*Honest Prayer and Requests for Encounter, Discovery, and Rescue* – This week, you are invited to name a place in your life where you are out of your element, beyond your resources, or out of control. Tell God about this. How is it that you want to experience God’s faithful love with you? What do you hope to learn in this season? How is it that you would like God to rescue you?

## Friday, March 15

### Exodus 17:1-7

<sup>1</sup>7 The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the LORD commanded. They set up their camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.<sup>2</sup> The people argued with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses said to them, “Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the LORD?”

<sup>3</sup>But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?”

<sup>4</sup>So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me.”

<sup>5</sup>The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel’s elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd’s rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go. <sup>6</sup>I’ll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink.” Moses did so while Israel’s elders watched.<sup>7</sup> He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites argued with and tested the LORD, asking, “Is the LORD really with us or not?”

### Points of Interest

- The trials of the wilderness continue, and again everybody but God is angry and stressed and up in arms. We’re not meant to stand apart, but see ourselves in this. The trouble and chaos of our wild places are not signs that our life has gone astray or is failing; they are signs that we are alive. Every life includes the chaos and hunger and need of the wilds.
- God works through Moses and his leadership team to provide water, water reminiscent of the abundance of the Nile. Just as we long for refreshment in our wild places, God longs to refresh. The New Testament (1 Corinthians 10 3:4) creatively, mystically represents God’s regular refreshment in this rock, imagining the water-flowing rock following the people of God, and naming that rock to be Christ. Whatever the nature of our faith in or connection to Jesus, it’s meant to feel like steady water in the desert.
- Moses calls the place Testing and Quarreling (“Massah and Meribah”) because he remembers the stress of the arguments and the testing of his leadership. God calls this place The Mountain of the Sun (“Horeb” relates to the word for sun). A beautiful, mighty thing has happened here. Again, the power of perspective. What would it take for our very places of testing and quarreling be transfigured into seasons of beauty and light?
- As we continue in the wilderness narratives, we’ll note that we skipped a verse that foretold it would be like this for forty years. (Exodus 16:35 – “The Israelites ate manna for forty years, until they came to a livable land.”) The journey from Egypt to Canaan is not that far – it’s a multi-day trip, not the voyage of a lifetime. There’s a great deal of meaning to this forty-year span, just as there can be a myriad of ways of seeing the symbolism of our forty days of Lent. The scholar Wes Howard-Brook notes, “This length of time is a

round number symbolizing both a *lifetime* and a *pregnancy*. . . . Manna, in this sense, is akin to amniotic fluid and mother's milk. It comes directly from YHWH's (the Hebrew name for God, translated "The Lord") 'body', i.e. creation itself, to feed Israel *in utero* and while nursing." (*Come Out, My People*, 150).

Could the troubles and opportunity of your own wild place be a microcosm for your while life?

What is the gift God wants you to know in your life? What is the lesson God wants to teach you for you to pass on?

Could your current wild place, with all its troubles, also be a season of preparation for new birth?

What life is God growing and nurturing in you, currently unseen, that in time may be yours to share with the world?

### **A Direction for Prayer**

Pray that by any of your friends and family that are mired in long, joyless quarrels. Pray that God shines into this dynamic by shining light and providing help in whatever not-enough feeling or experience is behind the quarrel in the first place.

### **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

*Honest Prayer and Requests for Encounter, Discovery, and Rescue* – This week, you are invited to name a place in your life where you are out of your element, beyond your resources, or out of control. Tell God about this. How is it that you want to experience God's faithful love with you? What do you hope to learn in this season? How is it that you would like God to rescue you?