What happens in the desert?

Our reflection last week ended with the beautiful promise of God spoken through the prophet Hosea: *I will lure her into the wilderness and there I will speak tenderly to her.*

Those words, addressed to the Israelites over two and a half thousand years ago, are spoken to each of us today. In Christian spirituality we speak of the desert in two ways: those times of dryness and abandonment when God seems very distant and hope and peace are obscured by a ‘dark cloud’ of loneliness and emptiness in our spiritual lives, but also as that place of letting go of familiar patterns and certainties in order to empty ourselves, trust God, and be open to God’s future for us. It is this latter understanding that I continue to explore this week, and to do that, let’s pick up the story of the forty year wilderness wandering of Moses and the Israelites that we looked at last week.

As we saw, Moses was called by God but resisted. However, Moses finally agreed to take on the Pharaoh and ask for permission for the Israelites to leave Egypt. It was then that a struggle began. Pharaoh said ‘yes’, then ‘no’, then ‘yes’ again, and on it went. Each time Pharaoh said no, a plague followed - such things as boils, locusts, the river Nile turned red with blood. There were ten of them. Each time, fearful and worn out by the catastrophe that afflicted Egypt, Pharaoh relented, only to refuse again once that particular plague had passed. Finally, God took the initiative and readied the Israelites for their exodus as the last plague afflicted the Egyptians, the death of the first-born child in every Egyptian family. With the blood of the lamb they had been ordered to kill on the doorpost of every Israelite house, and their final meal in Egypt eaten according to God’s instructions, the angel of death passed over them, and they left.
Let’s take that struggle with the Pharaoh and let it speak to our lives, as we imagine it played out within. If we take this story as speaking about our lives, we see that it is about the great forces of life and death at play, the forces of good and evil. The repetition – there are ten plagues and the pattern is the same every time – shows us that we can become stuck in this tension between life and death, good and evil. We can get ourselves into an impasse where the repetitive ‘to and fro’ is the only movement happening within us and there is no real growth. When that happens we are unable to make a choice and to move forward into what is life-giving for us and it can become increasingly difficult to move beyond that. This kind of impasse is debilitating in that it saps us of our inner energy and deflects us from real growth and development.

In the story of the Israelites, eventually it is God who ‘acts’. God provides a way out of the struggle and into life. God saves the Israelites from death. The angel of death ‘passes over them’ and they then leave Egypt and cross the Sea of Reeds and enter the wilderness. In Christian spirituality we talk about this initiative of God as grace. Grace is God’s freely given love, help, strength – pure gift. We talk of moments of awareness of this as ‘graced moments’ when we glimpse something other, something life-giving that enlarges our horizons and gives us a deep sense of joy in that we recognize this is where life resides. Remember that beautiful hymn: Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see. But while grace is freely given, and breaks into our consciousness and through our hardness of heart and resistance, it is up to us to respond and not let the moment pass us by or remain simply a wonderful ‘moment’.

The Israelites had forty years in the desert. What did they experience there? God’s presence led them - a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They were fed by God. Every evening quails would appear and every morning the ground was covered with a fine, powdery substance which they called manna or bread from heaven. But in the desert they also complained bitterly. They complained about being hungry and thirsty. They looked back longingly to the fleshpots of Egypt and they forgot they had been slaves there. And isn’t this so true? How quickly we lose sight of what we deeply long for and need in order to live and thrive, and we become caught up in the desire for comfort and ease and, most importantly, immediate gratification. How quickly we become willing to run back, to retreat. It does indeed take strength to remain committed to what we know will ultimately be life-giving for us. The people thirsted for water and they complained against Moses and said, Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our livestock with thirst? (Exodus 17:3)
It is all too easy and is often compelling to seek and settle for immediate gratification. The Israelites weren’t bad people, they weren’t ill-intentioned. They were ordinary people, just like us, at once both strong and hope-filled, and weak and easily disillusioned.

Eventually they reached Mt Sinai and there again, their hope and patience faltered. When Moses went up the mountain to commune with God, they made a golden calf and danced and worshipped it. They created the calf out of what they had at their immediate disposal, they put in whatever they had of value. The golden calf was visible and concrete, whereas waiting for Moses and his revelation from God required patience and trust and an empty time, the emptiness of waiting. There is a great learning for us in this story: in our inner lives, we can remain with what we know, in familiar patterns and understandings, and that may satisfy for a while. But trusting in God’s promise of a deeper life and richer spirituality is a long-term affair! It means a slow, persistent growing into it. We don’t always see results, we see many backward steps, and yet we are invited to stay there in trust and commitment to the life God offers.

But the Israelites were not left there, for there at Mt Sinai, in the midst of the grumbling and the forgetfulness of the signs of God’s tender and caring presence, the Israelites were taken into a profound relationship with God - a Covenant - or more properly, the ancient Abrahamic Covenant was renewed and sealed by the giving of the Law. The Covenant is a loving bond and commitment which says, I will be your God and you will be my people. What this meant was that they were invited to follow the Law, God’s word, spoken in life-giving tenderness to them. They were asked to embrace it, love it, make it their delight and their way of life. And in the loving bond of this relationship, continuing to listen and obey, they would flourish.

This desert story has many elements to it and they are all part of our human story too: the recognition of life-denying patterns within us, the cry for freedom and fullness of life, God drawing near, graced moments, struggle, acceptance of the invitation, regression and seeking to return to old familiar ways, patience and perseverance, and the delight of the tender enfolding of God.

Our desert may literally be a place of solitude when we take time out to go away somewhere quiet, usually somewhere beautiful that is conducive to reflection, prayer and God-awareness. But the desert is also that inner space we create, wherever we are. We need both. There is great value in taking time to go away when we can, but we need the ongoing inner desert too. As is said in the Book of Deuteronomy (30: 11-14), The word is very near to you – it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. We need to create the desert in the midst of our busy, ordinary, daily lives, and really, that is about
creating silence, a space where we can listen to our deepest cries and longings, a place where we can let God speak to us, break through our defences and our reluctance, and embracing us tenderly, draw us into a loving and life-giving relationship. It is a relationship that will ask something of us. It will ask us to constantly empty ourselves - empty ourselves of our own agenda and ‘baggage’ and listen. It is an emptiness that is fullness. It is about confronting and emptying ourselves of the chaotic impulses which drive us away from the still point where God is waiting.

Here is a beautiful reflection by Ann Johnson from her book, *Miryam of Nazareth*. It speaks of everything the desert is. May Lent continue to be a graced time for you.

My soul opens before you, O God, and all that I am becomes acceptable in your saving love because you have asked me to look within myself with searching eyes.
Yes, from now on I know that I am truly blessed for you have helped me to do the difficult things. Holy is your name.
Your mercy reaches into the hearts of all people who seek inner knowing.
You are the Empowering One.
In your presence I can face my own darkness. You have annihilated the fear that made of my spirit a fortress and have led me to my true self ... open and undefended I walk beside the living waters of my soul in peace. You are my bread. My hunger for life and loving is satisfied when I am in your presence and in the presence of those who know you.
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