

## THE DESERT

A Sermon by the Rev. Peter J. Lawson

Exodus 13:17-22

March 9, 2025

Mark 1:9-15

In the Bible, the desert plays a prominent role in God's redemptive purpose. It is a key piece in the drama of God's actions with his people.

In the OT we are told that the people of Israel were led through a desert for forty years before they were allowed to enter the land which God had promised them. After being delivered out of slavery in Egypt, God's people packed up their belongings and left that country to make the long trek to the land God had promised for them. This caravan came to a stop at the waters of the Red Sea. With nowhere to go, the people of Israel looked back and saw the Egyptian soldiers bearing down on them with horses and chariots. Death by drowning or death by the sword, is what the alternatives appeared to be. Then God opened the Red Sea, allowed his people to cross on dry land. Then we are told God closed those waters on the Egyptian soldiers when they tried to cross after them. Now they were truly free. The book of Exodus, describes how the people of Israel broke into song after the waters of the Red Sea closed on the Egyptian soldiers: "God has triumphed victoriously; the horse and rider thrown into the sea." Subsequent generations would sing that same song to commemorate this spectacular event. A defining moment. Victory.

And yet what lay before them after this crossing? Sand and rocks. This would be their terrain they had to negotiate for the next forty years. The desert would be the route they would take to get to the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey, the land where they could truly thrive as God's people. But it took them forty years to get there. The Bible makes it clear that God could have made it easier for them. The book of Exodus says God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer....God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness (Exodus 13:17). God could have taken them directly from Egypt right into the place where their destiny as a people was to be, but we are told that God deliberately led them by way of the desert instead. In fact, if you look at the map showing where Egypt is and where the Holy Land is you can't help but scratch your head that it could have taken forty years to get there.

In the NT we see again the desert coming into play in the life of Jesus. When Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan, we are told as he came up out of the water, the heavens tore open and the spirit descended upon him like a dove. And the voice of God came from heaven, saying, "you are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." No sooner does this great affirmation of Jesus occur, that the spirit drove Jesus into the desert. Just as the Israelites passed through the waters of the Red Sea and came up

against the desert on the other side, where they would wander for forty years, Jesus passed through the waters of his baptism and was led to the same place.

Now the desert is a place, overall, we would rather not be. Life is restricted to cactus and dry brush, lizards, and hard-shelled insects. I remember not long after Joyce and I were married we made a trip to Arizona, and for the first time I was able to encounter a piece of the desert. We rented a car and drove to some of the more remote regions of the desert, away from the towns and the city and people. At one point we pulled the car over to the side of the road, got out of the car, and took a walk among the rocks and the hot sand. One of the things you'll notice in the desert is how stiflingly quiet it is. The only thing you hear is the crunch of your feet on the surface, and if you stand still, you can almost hear the beating of your heart. If you ever want to go to a place to feel alone, the desert is a place to go.

Of course, there is also the heat, which not only beats down on you, but is also reflected up from the sand. It's like opening an oven door and the heat wafts in your face in waves. There certainly is a beauty about the austerity of the desert. There's something about the terrain which makes the sky appear bluer than anywhere else you might see it, but overall, it is an unforgiving, harsh place. So, within ten minutes we were back in the air conditioned car, and eventually to the comforts of civilization.

The desert took on an even greater significance for me when I was deployed with my Army National Guard unit as chaplain to Iraq in 2005. And while I was not there for forty years like the Israelite people, sometimes it felt that way. Because, in that setting, not only were you contending with the elements, harsh as they were, you were also contending with an enemy who knew the terrain and those elements, and how to use them to their advantage. When I consider what our soldiers were up against over there, I'm astounded that they performed as well as they did. I felt I could empathize with the Israelite people who lived in constant fear of enemies who harassed them in the desert, enemies who wanted to pillage them for food, enemies who wanted to make sure the Israelites stayed in the desert.

Certainly, we can understand why the Israelites complained about their time in the desert. They would say to Moses, in their lower moments, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in this wilderness?" (Exodus 14:11) Their thoughts were that it would have been better to continue groan under the yoke of slavery in Egypt than to have to contend with the desert.

Yet, there in the desert, God did formidable things with his people. There, God prepared them for the time when they would inhabit the land he was to give them. There God taught them what it meant to be a covenant people. It was while they were traversing the desert that God stopped them at Mount Sinai where Moses ascended, and they received the Ten Commandments. This further helped to define them as a people. Out there in the desert day after droning day, amidst the scarcity and severity, God pounded it into their heads what he expected of them. There in the

desert they were stripped of any illusion that they could sustain themselves without God's help and without God's guidance, something they had to be reminded of once they entered the Promised Land. They knew they could only make it by trusting God and God alone who would provide for them. People complained when food was scarce. God provided manna. The Israelites complained when water was scarce. God told Moses to strike the rock at Horeb and water came gushing out. Enemies harassed God's people, yes, but God protected them.

The desert is also where God prepared Jesus for the work God had in store for him. There we are told that Jesus came to terms with what God wanted him to do and the kind of messiah he would be. Would he simply give people what they were looking for, a messiah who would deliver them from all their troubles? Or, would God make Jesus walk the road that many of his followers would not be able to understand, the road of suffering, the road which would eventually lead to a cross? Would he cater to the wants and desires of the people, or to the will of the one who set him apart for this hard purpose? In the desert, cut off from everyone else, Jesus had to decide whether he would do what would make him popular, or whether he would follow the will of God.

It might surprise some of you to know that Christ needed time to discern what his future was to be, that he had very human doubts about himself and his capabilities. Jesus's relationship with God, even though he was the Son of God, was something which evolved over time. I believe that in the earlier part of Jesus' life he knew he had a special relationship with God whom he would call Father and that this God would have a unique destiny for him, but it took years for this to come to fruition. While living his life as a carpenter's son working in his father's carpenter shop God was shaping this calling for Jesus. Then the culminating moment came on the day Jesus was baptized God's voice said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," that Jesus knew without a doubt who he was. But it was not until the spirit drove him into the desert, where he was stripped of everything except himself and his heavenly Father, that he came to terms with what his mission would be. The picture we have of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, is one relentlessly obedient to the will of his Father. **THY WILL BE DONE.** That was the driving force in the life of Jesus. Not the will of the people, and not even his own will, but the will of his heavenly Father. This tenacious obedience of Jesus had its beginnings in the desert. And the result was often a misunderstood Jesus, a lonely Jesus, and a suffering Jesus.

There is a beautiful flower which grows on a vine in the Middle East and it is called the *Gloriosa Superba*. It doesn't grow in the lush green country side where the rains fall generously or on the river banks like so many plants in that region must grow by anchoring their roots in the moist soil. Instead, you find it in the desert at the base of a cactus. It sprouts at the base and winds its way to the top and then drapes over its thorny arms. This is where it blossoms. That is when it becomes the *Gloriosa Superba*. Certain beauty grows only where there is deprivation, not abundance; where there is austerity, not prosperity.

So, we know what this means. There are certain aspects of our faith which can grow only in the severity of the desert. There we confront who we are and more importantly who God is, stripped of everything and everyone else. There we discern what God wants and not what others are clamoring after us to be. Notice the words from the Gospel of Mark: "The Spirit immediately *DROVE* Jesus out into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12), following his baptism. It wasn't as though Jesus was baptized and while Jesus was making his way to wherever he was going, then he found himself in the desert, lost and confused, cut off from everyone else. The Spirit of God pushed him there, and Jesus deliberately allowed the spirit to take him to that place because he knew this was something God wanted him to do. The desert is the place we all must go; it's where the battle of the soul happens.

We are now in the season of Lent, the forty days leading up to Easter. This is the desert season in the life of the church. Every year we set this time apart because we believe that God still does great things with his people in this place. There God speaks to us in ways he often can't otherwise because our ears are tuned into so many other things. There we are reminded that we are not the self-sufficient people we think we are, and we must rely on a power greater than ourselves. During this season we are reminded that the desert serves a godly purpose. Carve out your piece of it and see what God can do.