

**In the wilderness of life it is the perseverance of the LORD that gets us through.**

“Carefully follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase, and may enter and take possession of the land the Lord swore to your ancestors. 2 Remember that the Lord your God led you on the entire journey these forty years in the wilderness, so that he might humble you and test you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. 3 He humbled you by letting you go hungry; then he gave you manna to eat, which you and your ancestors had not known, so that you might learn that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. 4 Your clothing did not wear out, and your feet did not swell these forty years. 5 Keep in mind that the Lord your God has been disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. 6 So keep the commands of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and fearing him. 7 For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams, springs, and deep water sources, flowing in both valleys and hills; 8 a land of wheat, barley, vines, figs, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey; 9 a land where you will eat food without shortage, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you will mine copper. 10 When you eat and are full, you will bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you.” -- **Deuteronomy 8:1-10** (CSB)

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This week I was struck by some interaction over Advent wreaths and what they and their candles should be called (pastor nerd). Fleming Rutledge: “giving names to Advent wreath candles: love, peace, etc. This "tradition" is about 20 years old with zero liturgical background. The ancient Advent words are Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell. I did not make that up.”

Episcopalians/Anglicans go hard...

I don't have a problem with love, joy, peace, hope - and have preached many series of Advent sermons following these true realities of the arrival of Jesus. But

at the same time I want to recognize the scent of our surroundings! The light is brighter when we refuse to ignore the darkness.

“We must reckon with the dark if we are ever to be truly embraced by the Light. We have to know we’re in trouble before we have the good sense to cry out for help. We have to feel our aloneness in order to open up to the wide arms of grace. We have to know we’re lost in bad country before we gain the good sense to follow the God who leads us home...[Scripture] reminds us that God takes us through the wilderness, not around it. This is good news since life will, sooner or later, carry all of us into the rugged, isolated, despairing badlands. Eventually, all of us will have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” Winn Collier

The wilderness is a significant biblical theme - and I think one tremendously appropriate for Advent. We see it in clearest terms in the exodus story (in our text today), but it continues to come through the prophetic books as exile and even the idolatry that brings it on, is seen as life in the wilderness. The promise is to take God’s people out of the wilderness - from the wilderness the way is made.

So for God’s people in his grand redemptive story, the wilderness is both a physical and spiritual reality.

For us the wilderness, while certainly different because of the first arrival of Jesus, can be the long road of sanctification. The long wait for breakthrough or restoration - of vocation, relationships, physical ailments. The monotony of going through the motions of life and work. The feeling of being alone in a barren place.

Anything in which you know or feel you are to be headed in a certain direction but each hill summited merely reveals another hill... more journey.

While it is never ideal, and it is not easy, I want to encourage us to avoid despising the wilderness. Because it does a work, it exposes us and it exposes God and what is uncovered gives us hope, love, joy, and peace!

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In our text, we have dropped into a pivotal moment for Israel. Their wilderness journey (extended because of disobedience) is coming to an end and Moses is

pressing them to remember the lessons of the previous 40 years. And in doing so we hear the why of the wilderness.

## **The Wilderness Exposes Us**

“Remember that the Lord your God led you on the entire journey these forty years in the wilderness, so that he might humble you and test you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. 3 He humbled you by letting you go hungry; then he gave you manna to eat, which you and your ancestors had not known, so that you might learn that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” --

**Deuteronomy 8:2-3** (CSB)

The wilderness is about humbling and testing.

I thought it was attendance that mattered, I didn't realize there would be tests!

This can unsettle us a bit because, especially in light of the new covenant, we can hope for the bright shiny blessing of an undisturbed life. We shape a faith that is secure as long as everything unfolds in preferred ways.

But when we are familiar with Jesus and his teaching, we can't miss the difficulty that will come as the world, the flesh, and the devil attempt to derail us. And more than these foes, we learn that while God doesn't tempt us to sin, he will test us in this life to humble us and increase our trust in him.

This is about what comes out where we are squeezed... that we would match the attitude of the missionary CT Studd, “Funds are low again, hallelujah! That means God trusts us and is willing to leave His reputation in our hands.”

Redemptive history tells the story of how God's people responded to trials, to the lack in the wilderness. Could God really be trusted to guide and provide? Where will food come from? How will our thirst be slaked? “Are we there yet?!”

Too often they looked back, convincing themselves slavery was preferable.

The wilderness exposes what comes out of you when you are in the rubble of a broken friendship, or a prolonged season of singleness, or a job that feels utterly

hollow? Some of us, like Israel, find ourselves “painting pictures of Egypt,” as Sara Groves puts it: we idealize our former life and pine for its comforts, forgetting how godless it was (Numbers 11:4–6).

Even when the land becomes home, however the people experience wilderness moments that reveal where they place their trust, how they take on life in their own strength...

“So that he might humble you and test you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commands.”

Exposing our hearts. Obedience set before them as response to his deliverance, guidance, and care rather than the activator of it.

These types of experiences through Scripture represent a progression of realizing, in all the wildernesses, that it wasn't about the people but about what they prize.

Which might not always be an uncovering of gold! Exposes who we really are... we don't love facades. The wilderness makes us vulnerable and honest - shows who we really are and that is who is loved.

The wilderness exposes our need for intervention - for another to take our place, and for a source of energy beyond ourselves.

“If Israel was ever going to stand in the promised land, with their hands full of bread, and say, “I know how to abound,” they would first need to walk through the wilderness, with God's word in their hearts, and say, “I know how to be brought low” (Philippians 4:12). They would need to learn how to look around at a wasteland of sand, and sing for joy to the one who gives and takes away.” Scott Hubbard

Advent and the wilderness brings us here. Humbled and learning to depend on God.

Wilderness teaches us that it is not our ability to persevere that gives hope - hope is not in the sojourner but in the God that brings us through.

**The Wilderness Exposes God**

“He humbled you by letting you go hungry; then he gave you manna to eat, which you and your ancestors had not known, so that you might learn that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. 4 Your clothing did not wear out, and your feet did not swell these forty years. 5 Keep in mind that the Lord your God has been disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. 6 So keep the commands of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and fearing him. 7 For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams, springs, and deep water sources, flowing in both valleys and hills; 8 a land of wheat, barley, vines, figs, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey; 9 a land where you will eat food without shortage, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you will mine copper. 10 When you eat and are full, you will bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you.” -- **Deuteronomy 8:3-10** (CSB)

What is being proved in the wilderness is not individual stick-to-it-ive-ness, it is God who is being proved.

Exposing that his word is vital for life. That he can keep you and provide for you like manna in the morning and clothes that don't wear or fade. That his way is better. Because he pours out blessings of abundance - where you will be full and rejoice in him.

The wilderness exposes that all of life is the steadfast love of the LORD. We might not know every turn on this road but we can learn that every path exposes the God who loves us.

“All the Lord's ways show faithful love and truth to those who keep his covenant and decrees.” -- **Psalms 25:10** (CSB)

### **Psalm 136**

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
2 Give thanks to the God of gods. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
4 He alone does great wonders. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
5 He made the heavens skillfully. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
6 He spread the land on the waters. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
7 He made the great lights: 'His faithful love endures forever'.

8 the sun to rule by day, 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
9 the moon and stars to rule by night. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
10 He struck the firstborn of the Egyptians 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
11 and brought Israel out from among them 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
12 with a strong hand and outstretched arm. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
13 He divided the Red Sea 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
14 and led Israel through, 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
15 but hurled Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
16 He led his people in the wilderness. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
17 He struck down great kings 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
18 and slaughtered famous kings — 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
19 Sihon king of the Amorites 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
20 and Og king of Bashan — 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
21 and gave their land as an inheritance, 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
22 an inheritance to Israel his servant. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
23 He remembered us in our humiliation 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
24 and rescued us from our foes. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
25 He gives food to every creature. 'His faithful love endures forever'.  
26 Give thanks to the God of heaven! 'His faithful love endures forever'. --

**Psalms 136:1-26 (CSB)**

Over and over again God proves his perseverance in the wilderness moments. His ready provision for his people. His protection for his people. His diligence in maintaining a remnant for his glory of those who recognize their need for him and trust in him for all of life.

The wilderness also exposes his plan for redemption and restoration. Through the redemptive story, hope shifts from a land to a person. To a king, to the embrace and cherishing of dwelling with God.

The wilderness leads to the arrival.

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. 2 “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and announce to her that her time of hard service is over, her iniquity has been pardoned, and she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”  
3 A voice of one crying out: **Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness;** make a straight highway for our God in the desert. 4 Every valley will be lifted up,

and every mountain and hill will be leveled; the uneven ground will become smooth and the rough places, a plain. 5 And the glory of the Lord will appear, and all humanity together will see it, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” -- **Isaiah 40:1-5** (CSB)

John the Baptist prepares the way in the wilderness. Jesus goes into the wilderness for us to face temptation. Taking on our experience. Our hunger, our exhaustion. The uncertainty of wandering. Of waiting. And he gets through the same way we do... relying on the Spirit's help, trusting.

He is exposed as the One - trusting in the word of God, rejecting lies. He brings liberty to the captives, grants the favor of God to the lowly.

His life to rescue wanderers in the wilderness. He is the manna that sustains us (John 6), he is the water that hydrates us (John 7). And it is his perseverance on the cross, in his resurrection, and his upholding of the universe by the power of his word that matters!

It is his perseverance that keeps you, that brings you home.

“If you are in Christ, God has not brought you into this desert to starve you. He has brought you here to teach you that man does not live by bread alone. Your life, your hope, and your joy are not hidden away in some elusive land of plenty, but in the Christ who died and rose again to save you for himself — the one who is your life, your pleasure, your milk and honey, your all.” Scott Hubbard

And because the LORD has been exposed for who he is, a faithful, loving God, the one and true King and redeemer Jesus, we can live through the wilderness straining forward empowered by his Spirit, anchored in his promise.

During Advent, we are invited to face the realities of hurt and pain around us in the wilderness — and to begin again. When we hear the voice calling in the wilderness, when we discover God revealed there, we become bearers of God's gift of hope revealed in the Christ Child at Christmas.

Don't despise the wilderness, the light has come and is coming again. His faithful love endures forever.

Depend on the perseverance of Christ for you. Rest in his finished work for you, and his active work in you, and keep walking. While you go remind someone else and help carry their things along the way.

**In the wilderness of life it is that perseverance of the LORD that gets us through.**

“So here we are, waiting. Some of us are waiting alongside a grim diagnosis. Some of us are waiting while our family teeters on the brink. Some of us live in persistent anxiety, a low-grade fever of fear and tension. Some of us think where we are is all we’ll ever know. Some of us have surrendered hope. Some of us have forgotten the God who makes a way through the wilderness...

“But God has come to us once in Jesus, and God will come to us in Jesus again. God has led the people through the wilderness once, and God will lead the people through the wilderness again. And again.” Winn Collier