

## Coming Home: In the Wilderness<sup>1</sup>

Deut 8:11-20; Gen 2:15-17; 3:1-7

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Welcome to week 2 in our Coming Home series. This is an Advent series, and if you haven't heard of Advent, it refers to the four weeks leading up to Christmas. During these weeks we remember back to Old Testament Israel and their waiting or longing for God to send His promised Messiah – something that was fulfilled 2000 years ago when Jesus was born.

But Advent isn't just a "remembering past events" thing, it is also very much about where we as Christians find ourselves right now because today we are waiting for Christ's Second Coming, His victorious return where He will right the wrongs in the world and come to live with us forever. That's what Advent is about.

And as such Advent is **the** story of the Bible – God is making a way for us to be with Him again.

Now when we say this: "God is making a way for us to be with Him **again**", it means a couple of things. First if we are going to be with Him "**again**", that means we had to be with Him in the beginning. That's very important. And second, if we are going to be with Him "**again**" that means we aren't with Him now, at least not in the way we were created to be. That's also really important.

And we dealt with the first part of this last week when we spoke of creation and the Garden.

And the key thing that happened in the Garden was that people were uniquely made in the image of God and have His Spirit within us.

Now last week we said this language of being made in the image of God and having Him breath His Spirit into us is ancient idol making language.

So in Egypt, where the nation of Israel had been living when Genesis was written, people believed that when they carved wood or stone into the image of their gods these idols would be possessed by the spirit of that god making the idol able to do the things that particular god could do. So for example praying to an idol of Horus, the Egyptian god of war could lead to victory in battle.

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<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Pastor Mark Clark. <http://www.thisisvillagechurch.com/our-media/sermons/welcome-home-2-in-the-wilderness/>

And then the Bible adopts this same word “image” to describe how God made people. Unique in creation, Genesis describes people as “living beings”<sup>2</sup> in that we have been filled with the breath or Spirit of God. We bear God’s image. And last week we looked at two implications this leads to.

First, this gives people meaning. One of the chief questions humanity has been asking since the dawn of time is “Do I matter?” And Genesis says “Yes, all people have extreme value because unlike every other creature we have been crafted as containers for God’s Spirit – we bear God’s image. So Christians oppose things like abortion or euthanasia because these practices harm human life and all human life has infinite value. We are made in the image of God.

And second, because God’s Spirit is within us we possess His power. Now Horus was the god of war so his idol was thought to give power in battle, but YHWH is the God of all Creation, He has dominion over everything and so bearing His image means sharing that authority. That’s why Genesis 1 says:

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have **dominion** over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”  
(Genesis 1:26 NKJV)

So to be in dominion over our circumstances is human because this is what it means to image God – we do what He does.

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But there is something even more amazing than this. Bearing God’s image also means we are uniquely capable of communing with Him in a way no other creature can. And that’s what the Garden was about. Every day God would come down and hang out with Adam and Eve. He would walk with them and they would do what they were created to do – enjoy the presence of God.

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But then something happened – sin broke that relationship. People chose autonomy over obedience. And the consequences were separation from the presence of God. Adam and Eve got kicked out of the Garden and into the wild. And humanity has been in the wilderness ever since.

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Now today we are going to talk about what it means to live in the wilderness and how this fits into the Christian experience. You see while we were created for the Garden and we long for the day Jesus will right the wrongs of the world we live in, in the meantime God hasn’t left us to be victims of the suffering we experience. Instead God has a plan, even in the wilderness, God is making a way for us to be with Him again.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:7

And this is good news because this means it is possible for Christians to look like Jesus and live in His joy in the midst of difficulty and suffering. In contrast, different worldviews make this impossible.

So for example Hinduism says the wilderness we live in right now is the result of karma. And so if bad things are happening to you, it's because you deserve them – comforting isn't it! Now if you know anything about India most of the population is incredibly poor eking out a survival in the midst of all sorts of terrible suffering. But Hinduism says if you see someone suffering and are able to help, ultimately you shouldn't because if you do they will have to live this terrible life again – that's karma! Instead you should let them suffer – pay for their past sins – so that in their next life they can come back a step up.

Christianity says that's crazy! In fact in John 9 Jesus encountered some similar thinking surrounding a man born blind – you remember the story. The Pharisees asked Jesus “who sinned, this man or his parents?” But Jesus told them, the blindness this guy is suffering from isn't a punishment for sin – it's not anyone's fault – instead this is an opportunity to demonstrate the dominion of God. And so Jesus cured him alleviating his suffering. That's why Christians are serving in India and all around the world transforming the lives of the poorest of the poor.

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Another popular worldview in the West right now is Eastern Mysticism. And Eastern Mysticism says there is actually no such thing as wilderness or evil or suffering, it's all just a projection of your imagination. This is what Oprah teaches. So for example if you think negative thoughts you actually create negative things for yourself. Now like any lie there is a sliver of truth here, but taken to its logical conclusion this means everything bad in your life is your own fault – again not very comforting for anyone who isn't a billionaire.

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The most popular worldview in North America today is Secular Humanism. This belief says there is no such thing as God and so wilderness is just the product of random chance or science. So suffering is just bad luck. If you have read the Hunger Games books this is the perspective that is presented there.

Spoiler alert – if you are reading the books or watching the movies right now and haven't finished plug your ears because I'm going to give away the premise – all the hope that keeps humanity going turns out to be in vain – the odds are never in the favor of the weak. Because natural selection says the strong just kill the weak and so if one oppressor is taken out another will just step in to take their place. Talk about depressing – that's Secular Humanism.

But Christianity and Advent says something totally different in comparison. First of all we do believe wilderness and suffering is the result of sin but it is a consequence of sin not a punishment for it. That means bad things don't happen to you because you did something bad, bad things happen because our world is broken by sin.

But the Christian perspective doesn't end there. While other worldviews say if you are suffering God is turning His back on you, Christianity says in the midst of suffering God is with you. The story of Advent is the story of Emanuel – “God with us”. But God isn't just with us in suffering; He is sovereign such that in spite of the worst of it He brings His good plans for us to pass. The Bible says:

In all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. (Usually we stop there, but it keeps going) For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:28-29)

Some people make the mistake of thinking this verse means if you are a Christian everything turns out alright, but it doesn't say that at all. What this text tells us is that God uses situations that don't work out alright – wildernesses – in order to conform us into Christ's image – that's the “good” that God works in us.

So turn in your Bibles to Deuteronomy chapter 8. If you are using the Bible in the pew in front of you, you will find that on page 132. This is just one of many places we can see this worldview getting started.

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Here's the back story: After Moses led Israel out of Egypt the people were afraid to enter the Promised Land so they chose 12 spies to spend 40 days scouting Canaan instead of just obeying and going in.

And God responded “the consequences of not living in line with what I want for you are wilderness. The good life is where I want you to be, but if you won't obey the alternative is the desert.” And so Israel spent 40 years in the desert wandering around. And during that time a whole generation of people died out. That's a lot of wilderness. But even though the wilderness was a consequence of sin, God uses it to bring His children to a good place – a place where they trust Him.

And now in Deuteronomy 8 that 40 years is up, and Moses is speaking to the new generation who is about to enter the good place God wanted them to be all along, and this is what he tells them:

Let's pick it up in verse 10

[Read Deuteronomy 8:10-14]

Notice how Moses warns them that leaving the desert and entering the Promised Land actually has some danger attached to it. The danger is that good times lead people to forget God – that’s what verse 14 says.

Forgetfulness happens when we eat and are satisfied! Now this is majorly applicable to us today. Last Christmas our Advent series was called “Advent Conspiracy” and we looked at how North Americans are the richest people who have ever lived in the history of humanity. Everyone in this room fits somewhere between the richest 1% and 10% of all people. If you make just a \$1000 a month you are richer than 90% of everyone who has ever lived, and those of us who make \$50 thousand a year are in the top 1%. We are filthy rich.

And so Moses would say to us when your biggest problems are deciding what new vehicle to buy because your old one is giving you trouble, or you are wondering if you should get the new iPhone as opposed to the Galaxy S5 this is where forgetfulness of God thrives. Being rich is dangerous. (Just as a side note go with the Galaxy)

Now Moses says this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t appreciate the good things in our lives. Verse 10 says “When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord”, thank Him for the blessings, but he adds watch out because there is something you get in the wilderness that you don’t get in the Promised Land.”

Look at verse 15

[Read Deuteronomy 8:15-16]

Now there are two things that we can’t miss here. First God is with Israel in the wilderness. During the 40 year “time out” in the desert with venomous snakes and scorpions God wasn’t sitting up in Heaven smirking and saying “now I’ll give you what you’ve got comin’” Instead He went and lived with Israel in the desert. Verse 15 says “**He led you** through the vast and dreadful wilderness.”

Remember the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. Remember the Tabernacle. This was God doing time out in the desert with His consequence enduring children. When we suffer God isn’t absent. That’s good news for wilderness walkers! Amen?

But there is something else here that we can’t miss. Notice that the wilderness isn’t being wasted – it is actually the means to the biggest blessing people can acquire. While Israel endured thirst and snakes and scorpions God provided for them in ways they had never experienced before.

God made water come out of rocks and manna fall from the sky – that’s not normal! In Hebrew the word “manna” means “what is it?” Israel got up one morning and there was this shiny stuff on the sand that was sweet. And they looked at each other and said “what is it? And it stuck. And six days a week for 40 years just enough manna fell that a million people didn’t starve. And on the sixth day God would give them just enough for two days. God was providing their daily bread.

And verse 16 says it was when Israel was forced out of their comfort zone into a place they had to rely on God – have you ever been in a spot where you have had to rely on God? – something really good happened. God used this to “humble and test them so that in the end *it might go well* with them.”

Friends, ending well is what ultimately matters. Following Jesus isn’t a sprint, it is a marathon. And God’s promise is that He is committed to building endurance in His children. He wants us to win. He wants it to go good for us in the end.

Now this doesn’t mean we get answers for “why things happen the way they do in our lives.” Think of Job asking God why he was suffering near the end of his book. And God responded to him with questions instead of answers. God says:  
 “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? (Job 38:4-5)

And I can just picture Job’s face as the coin drops. “Um, I wasn’t there.” Oh, you weren’t there. That’s because you’re a creature. You don’t get to understand everything that happens in the world. That’s the Creator’s job, that’s My job. Your job is to trust that I’m bringing something good out of the middle of this.

So the Bible doesn’t tell us why suffering happens, but it does tell us that God is with us in the midst of the suffering. Our God is Emanuel. Our God says:  
 “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” (Hebrews 13:5)

And that’s good news for wilderness walkers. So that’s how God brings good out of the wilderness we experience, but now I want to shift to talk about where all this suffering comes from.

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Turn with me back to the Garden, back to Genesis chapter 2 starting in verse 15.

[Read Genesis 2:15-17]

God says “check this place out, it’s awesome and really tasty. You can eat that, you can eat that, you can eat that, you can eat that. You can eat everything... except this one thing. Don’t eat that.

Now when Nikki and I make up rules like “don’t touch that”, what do you think the very first thing the three little monkeys who have made their home in our house do?... They touch it.

And God made us and so He knows what we are like, and so it didn’t surprise Him when Adam and Eve checked for a moment when they thought He wasn’t looking and went for the one thing He told them was out of bounds.

Looking at this many people have asked why would a loving God put that one tree in the Garden at all? If He knew we were susceptible to temptation why allow temptation to exist? Is God just toying with us?

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Well let me ask you, are parents toying with their kids when they make up rules like don’t play with water by the electrical socket or don’t climb on the stove? Now, they make these rules because they love their kids and want them to be happy.

And friends, God is the same way. He isn’t just trying to make sure the fun quotient doesn’t get carried away, in fact He is working towards the very opposite place – He wants us to be the happiest we can be.

So God says I made this world, I made sex, I made relationships, I made prayer and when you do things the way I made them to work that is when you will be happiest. And so God put the tree in the Garden so obedience would become a viable option for Adam and Eve. And as long as they said “no” to the Tree they lived in perfect harmony with God and each other.

Friends obedience isn’t a bad thing. Obedience isn’t a matter of restriction, obedience is the path to joy.

Think of an astronaut walking on the moon. He’s happy as long as he stays inside his space suite. But as soon as he thinks, boy this suite is so bulky and restricting, I want to be free! That’s when the misery is going to start for him. True freedom happens when we play by the rules.

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And God wants us to enjoy true freedom, but the Devil wants to destroy us. Look at chapter 3 verse 1.

[Read Genesis 3:1-5]

Now notice what the Devil does here. He addresses Eve and says something that is mostly true but a little bit false – he specializes in baking cookies that are 99% pure ingredients and 1% arsenic. And he does this because while Jesus comes to bring life, all the Devil wants is to steal, kill and destroy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John 10:10

And so he exposes Adam and Eve to something they don't have. Up until now they were totally satisfied, they were walking with God, enjoying all the provision of the garden and hanging out naked with each other – that sounds great!

But Satan comes along and says to Eve don't be satisfied with what you have, there is something you don't have. You don't know the difference between good and evil and you could get it if you just do this one thing God doesn't want you to do. And so Eve eats. Look at verse 6

[Read Genesis 3:6]

Satan convinced Eve that obedience to God was holding her back... Have you been tricked into believing that if you obey you will have less than you otherwise would? That's the work of the snake. Now the crazy thing is that Adam is right here the whole time. He isn't off in some other part of the Garden praying while this whole temptation thing happens. He is right there like a dumb ox.

Hey Adam, what do you think we should do? "Huh? I don't know. Mmmmm fruit..."

If you have ever been offended by shows like the Simpsons that depict men as unintelligent and passive you have to know the inspiration comes from right here.

Adam was supposed to be the leader and protector. God gave Eve to him and Adam named her. He called her woman. But here instead of protecting what he had been placed in leadership over he is standing there passively watching as his wife gets talked out of obedience and into autonomy! Men are you leading your families to Jesus?

And the relationship between creature and Creator fractured. In that one moment we lost the presence of God.

God had to kick them out of the Garden, but even here He operates with grace. Look down at verse 21:

[Read Genesis 3:21-24]

Adam and Eve don't deserve anything good from God. They broke the only rule He gave them proving their deep desire to throw off His image and do things their own way. But God responded by clothing them and then protecting them from the only thing that would make our separating from Him permanent – eating from the Tree of Life. That's grace!



And so often our gut response to this is anger at God. We say “Boy God over reacts. All they did was eat a stupid apple.” Or we look at the story of Noah and say “I can’t believe God killed all those people!” Or we look at Israel and their 40 years in the desert and say “Boy, that’s severe punishment for a bit of doubt.” Or we look at Romans 9 where God says Esau I hated but Jacob I loved” and we say “boy God sure was mean to Esau.”

But all the time the point is absolutely the opposite. None of us deserve any grace from God at all. We are all desperately wicked, treasonous traitors of the King of the Universe. We deserve execution. We deserve hell. And yet in spite of what we deserve God clothes us and protects us. He stopped Adam and Eve from destroying their souls with the Tree of Life. Instead of killing everyone He saved 8 in the Ark. He walked with Israel through the desert, and chose Jacob even though he was just as bad as Esau.

And when we come to Him God forgives our sin and then walks with us through the consequences we have brought upon ourselves and He brings something good out of them. Like Deuteronomy 8 said, He uses them to humble and test us so that in the end it might go well with us. That’s grace.

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I want to leave you with two things today. First obey. Make the decision to live your life in a way that honours God, because that is where you are going to find true joy. God made us and He knows how we work best – and the way we work best is when we are in line with Him.

So in your car ride home today challenge each other by asking “How could we better honour God with our lives?” There’s room for improvement here for everyone.

And second, are you in the desert today? If yes, look for what Jesus is saying in the midst of the wilderness. I don’t know how dry and thirsty it is for you right now. I don’t know how many venomous snakes are lurking around but Jesus does. Jesus knows the wilderness – He spent time there – and He wants to walk with you and use it to conform you to His image.

So brothers and sisters obey and let Jesus mold you in the wilderness, humbling you and increasing your trust so that it will go well with you in the end.