21st March 2021 Reverend Huw Davies



The theme for the sermons in Lent leading up to Easter is ‘Finding Streams in the Desert’ and ‘Finding God in the Wilderness.

We’ve been started with Jesus and the baptism at the beginning of Lent. Thirty years old, he’d been a carpenter and a scholar, he’d been a brother and a son. Baptised by John and led by the Spirit into the wilderness and his life was to change.



His work was to change, his relationship with his family was to change, his ambitions were to change through his time in the wilderness there and over these last months you and I have been in some sort of wilderness.

Jesus faces himself; his money, food, materialism. He faces those things when he faces that temptation of bread and stone. He faces the world’s adoration and the temptation to be worshipped (and we all face that, our ambitions), seeking fame. The Temple, ‘throw yourself off the Temple tower’ questioned his personal identity, his self-worth, his belief in God and I think that during these months of this year all of these things have been touched for us as well as we walk through what might be called a wilderness where it’s not been charted before.



Whose job has not been challenged? Are you working at home now, are you working at the same job that you were 18 months ago? Is your ambition the same? Your sense of self-worth may well have been taken to a real challenging place as you’ve had to face what it’s like to be without some of the supports that you’ve had before. Lots of these things have changed for us, like who we are, and for some of us we’ve come out really well.



In recent surveys some people have said they’ve loved this change, working from home has been a great boon to them. For others who have lost their jobs or have found working from home it’s been very difficult. For some of us we’ve loved being stuck in the house with the same person all the time, for others it’s been no change, for others it’s been a real challenge. Do we feel closer to our children now that we did before? Two thirds of people say they do, but a third of people have said it’s been very difficult.

And so as we walk through the wilderness, seeing changes to our relationships, our ambition, our finances, our dreams, it’s sometimes strengthened, sometimes challenged. We’ve been learning from others from the Bible, because the Bible tells us that we can find encouragement from all passages of the Bible and I hope that some of these scriptures have now become fresh to you and new to you and also perhaps you’ve put them into your memory.



Paul writes in Timothy 3:16 all of scripture can help us with these things. Romans chapter 15 says that everything written in the past was written to teach us and to help us and to encourage us, so we might learn from them, even these obscure passages that we’ve looking at. Romans chapter 15 is the verse that the children have been learning at Sunday School: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you might overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” This scripture is to give us hope, to give us encouragement, and that grace and peace will come because he is “the God of all comfort and as he comforts us in our troubles, so might we comfort others in the comfort that we ourselves receive from God.” That’s why we have these scriptures, that’s why we’ve been looking at these stories so that you might pass them on and some of you have. I come back to these sermons, some of you have passed them on to others in your social media.



But the great thing, I think, that we’ve been finding out from these stories is that we have this treasure in jars of clay. We’re not the perfect people and we come to accept our weaknesses and to find strength within ourselves, this treasure that God gives us within these jars of clay. As Moses said earlier, “God, who am I that I should go and rescue these people?” and God says, Well, go in my name.”

We’ve looked at Abraham in Genesis chapter 12, worshipping one God instead of the many idols, leaving and going through the wilderness and finding that God is faithful to his promises as he will be faithful to you. We’ve read of Abraham’s two sons, Ishmael, the father of the Arab nations, Isaac the father of the Hebrew nations and so we’ve made some understanding of today’s politics in the Middle East. We find Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, in the wilderness ready to give up on life and then discovering that God is the God who sees, who sympathises and who rescues. ‘The God who sees me’ she calls him and this is true for us too. When you find your loneliness, when you find your quiet places in the middle of the night remember Hagar’s story, that she found God to be the God who sees me, who understands me.



We find Abraham the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob. Just putting some of the little bits of the story together that you may have heard from years gone by. We find that Jacob changes his name to Israel. Israel because he wrestled with God, he struggled with God. You and I might sometimes struggle with God and we understand through Jacob that this is natural and this is something that we all face, to struggle with our understanding of ourselves and our understanding with God. He wrestled with God and so God called his people the People of Israel. The people who wrestle with God. The People of Israel, Jacob’s twelve sons became the Twelve Tribes of Israel, if you wondered where that phrase came from, and they lived in the land that would become known as the Land of Israel, the People of Israel living in the Land of Israel. Before that it was the land of the Perizites and the Hivites and the Canaanites. So that’s where in history all those different names come from, from God the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. The People of Israel.



Joseph was the son of Jacob, sold into slavery by his brothers as we had that great story told by Jane the other week. After his journey through his own personal wilderness of favouritism, spite and slavery, false imprisonment, eventual vindication, he was able to tell us and encourage us that God is the gracious God who keeps his promises to his people. “They meant it for evil,” he says, “but God used it for good.” What a lovely thing to hold onto in our own personal lives, to write down and to put onto our fridge or onto our mirror in the morning, on our bathroom mirror. “They meant it for evil but God used it for good.” “All things work together for good to those that love him,” writes St. Paul in Romans chapter 8.



The family of Jacob, Israel, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, they joined Joseph in Egypt. At first under the protection of and favour of Pharaoh. And then the Hebrews and the People of Israel they grow in numbers and subsequently other Pharaohs feel threatened. They take them into slave labour to build the huge cities and pyramids of the Egyptians that you see today, built by the Hebrew slaves.



The Hebrews grow in number. Egyptian Pharaohs make life harder for them. As you read the story in the Old Testament, they build the cities made with bricks and then the Pharaohs say, “Well, you can make our own bricks now”, and then later on they say, “Well, you can go and collect the straw to make your own bricks to build the cities”, making it harder and harder for the Hebrews, hoping to keep the numbers down but the numbers grew. Pharaoh instructed the midwives to kill all the baby boys at birth, but baby Moses is hidden by his mother in a basket in the bulrushes, adopted by the Queen and brought up as a prince. You know these things, perhaps you’ve heard the stories before, but when we hear of the Passover and the awful things that happened that night, remember that for years Pharaoh had instructed the midwives to kill all the baby boys at birth in the Hebrew nation, as God rescues his people through the Passover which we’ll address in a week’s time.





Moses grew up as a Prince of Egypt. One day he sees a Hebrew slave being beaten. He intervenes and kills the slave driver. Moses flees for his life into the desert, into the wilderness, and it’s there that he finds that his life has been turned upside down, just like yours, just like mine. Within a few months everything has changed, the world that he knew as stable has suddenly shifted. Within a few months what he held on to, his ambitions, his wealth and his family, it all collapsed, all changed, and our lives have changed, maybe not collapsed but they have changed. For him, he becomes a fugitive, a refugee find comfort with the Bedouin family he marries, becomes a herder of sheep and goats and it’s years and years like that until he meets with God at the burning bush as we read this morning.

Exodus 3 verses 1-15

What do we learn from Moses and what does he share about discovering God in the wilderness, what we sometimes think of as a desert time? I’d say that three things have helped me in the story of Moses’s life. To realise that God is discovered in the unexpected places. I’m not sure where you may have discovered God in this last twelve months but he has been speaking to us sometimes on Sundays, sometimes in relationships, sometimes as you’ve delved within yourself. Sometimes in the circumstances of life and in the things that have come to you, opportunities. Sometimes in the kindnesses of strangers, sometimes in opening our minds to the fact that Christians are not the only ones who have the take on goodness and kindness.



God has been discovered by us in unexpected places as he was with Moses at the burning bush. Recognise it, stop by! Moses could have passed, it says that he was going to pass but took a few moments and he listened. He discovered that God revealed himself as the great “I am”, the One who was and is and always will be. The one who is always present, the one that Hagar met when she lay down to die and God revealed himself as the one who sees and gave her water to drink. The one who revealed himself to Jacob and to the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The one that says ‘I am present with you today in your family, in your home. I was with you last week and I will be with you next week.’ The past is history and the future is a mystery, as they say, but today is called the present and it’s the gift, the gift of Jesus being the great “I am” who comes to be with us. We discover that God is the God who doesn’t let weaknesses ever have the last word. Whether it’s in Exodus; in chapter 3 we discover God saying to Moses, “I want to use you to rescue the people”, and Moses saying, “No, not me, I stammer, I stutter, I can’t find the right words. Find someone else to do it”, and God says, “No, no, no, you’re the man that I have chosen.” Read it in Exodus chapter 4.

We find the same with Gideon in chapter 6 of Judges. He says the world isn’t what it should be and God says to him, “Then you change it”, and he says, “No, not me, I’m the smallest of the smallest tribe, I’m the smallest family, I can’t do this, I don’t have the strength for it, I don’t have the wisdom for it”, and God says to him in Judges chapter 6, “You go with the strength that you have and I will go with you for this job, for this task”, and I wonder in this time what is God putting in front of you? Is he saying, “You recognise these things could be better, should be better, should be different, go and make a difference”, and as you listen for his voice find the courage that Moses found, that Gideon found, that Isaiah found when he felt that his unworthiness, his sinfulness, was a barrier to being used by God. And the angel comes and touches his mouth and says, “There! I have cleansed it, I have made you clean from the altar of God”, Isaiah chapter 6. Or maybe, like Peter, you feel that during these difficult times you haven’t actually been all that you wanted to be but, like Peter, you had great ambitions to walk strongly in your faith and yet now feel that your faith has been tested and found wanting. That’s how it was for Peter in Luke chapter 22 when Jesus says, “Peter, I’ve prayed for you, I stand with you, I will be there for you once you have come to your senses again. I want you to get back up on your feet and to strengthen your brothers.” We read that story in John chapter 21 verses 15 – 19.

Jesus the great “I am”. it’s the title that Jesus gave to himself, it’s the title that you’ll have heard him say. ‘I am the bread of life. I am the water of life.’ But more than that, in John chapter 8, he actually says ‘before Abraham was I am’ and it’s there that the people take up stones to stone him because that is the name of God, the One who was and is and is to come. The Book of Revelation speaks of that, of Jesus Christ.



And so this points us with all these promises: the God who keeps his promise forever through Abraham; the God who rescues me and sees me through Hagar; the God who never gives up on us and who rescues us and who uses us; as Joseph says making everything work to good.

We’ve come all the way through this desert that we’ve walked together, into the promised land, into the land that God gives to us. As we come out of lockdown, as we come into a new year, I wonder how we will discover this land ahead of us, different to what we’ve known before, perhaps with more freedom than we’ve known before! This epic story of Easter that we have ahead of us, this epic journey that we’ve walked together from Christmas a few months ago, through Jesus’s birth, through his baptism, through his ministry, we come to Easter, Jesus’s death and resurrection.



I hope it’s been a joy for you walking through the wilderness together this Lent as we’ve taken scriptures that have helped and encouraged us. That we’ve discovered that in the Old Testament we find strength as well as in the New. All Scripture is given to us for our encouragement. I hope that you’ve discovered that what was written in the past is there to give us encouragement that we might have hope and my prayer for you has been, and is, that the God of hope will fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him so that you might overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. May God bring to life his word in you and may you find the encouragement that people of old found comes alive in your life over these next weeks and months as we come out of lockdown and into a different land. May we explore it together and may God bless you. Amen

