

'God and the Wilderness – the Desert as Holy Ground' by Steve Finnie.

Opening video/music: 'Rain' by Faran Ensemble (YOUTUBE – 5.58 minutes).

Listen here: <https://youtu.be/GYt5Wy5h9vE>

Welcome + Introduction

Today's service invites us into the wilderness – especially the desert - as a sacred space where the divine is encountered and the soul is transformed.

The service was written by Steve, and he's asked the congregation to deliver it.

It will be in three parts, and includes some bible readings, appropriate music, and video clips.

The desert holds profound symbolic and historical significance across the three Abrahamic faiths, shaping their sacred narratives, theological insights, and spiritual practices.

These faiths, all forged in the desert are the majority religion of nearly 60 per cent of the global population.

Jews constitute the smallest percentage, at about 0.2 per cent.

Muslims are next at about 25 per cent, and Christians the largest at around 33 per cent.

We will also explore the desert as a spiritual metaphor, recognising that many of us experience seasons in life that feel like a wilderness – times of uncertainty, searching, or spiritual dryness.

The opening music was from the Faran Ensemble who use ancient instruments from Persia, Africa, and the Middle East. These include the oud; a traditional stringed musical instrument considered a predecessor to the lute and even guitar.

We start as always with the lighting of our chalice, as a symbol of our free religious faith.

Chalice is lit

Our opening words are taken from Psalm 63 – a Psalm of David from the Hebrew Bible.

Near the end of his life King David flees his capital Jerusalem seeking sanctuary in the Judean desert after his son Absolom attempts a palace coup. King David uses the metaphor of the desert to express his despair at his circumstances and pleading for God's comfort.

'You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you. I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.'

1st Hymn Number 33 in the GREEN book – 'Do you hear?'

Part A

In the first part of the service, we will look at the wilderness and the birth of Judaism.

Arguably the most important figure in Judaism is Moses, and the most significant wilderness is the Sinai Desert.

It is in this desert that Moses encounters God for the first time, appearing as a burning bush that is not consumed by the flames. Moses, once a prince of Egypt, had fled the country after killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. Seeking refuge, he settled in the land of Midian, where he married and became a shepherd.

Years later, God speaks to Moses and commands him to return to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of slavery.

This marks the beginning of the Exodus – a defining narrative of liberation and identity formation for the Jewish people.

The desert is not merely a geographical location; it becomes a spiritual landscape where Jewish identity, law, and the covenant with God are forged.

The Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness, guided by a pillar of cloud and fire.

In biblical terms the number 40 is symbolic – it represents a significant, transformative period rather than a precise count of years.

While God initially tried to build a relationship with humanity in the lush paradise of the Garden of Eden, that attempt failed.

So, God tries again – but this time in the harsh, barren desert.

The Exodus becomes a spiritual test, a journey of struggle, purification and growth.

In this wilderness God provides sustenance in the form of a miraculous food called manna, and water from rocks. The Hebrew word manna is said to derive from the people's astonishment when they first saw this food from heaven. Ma-hu means what is it in Hebrew.

Despite these miracles, the Israelites prove themselves to be a faithless and ungrateful people.

In the wilderness we witness both the highest and lowest points in early Jewish religious history. The high point is Mount Sinai, where the Israelites receive the Torah and Moses is given the Ten Commandments.

In Arabic Mount Sinai is called JABAL MUSA, the Mountain of Moses. Its exact location is disputed, with some proposing sites in the Sinai Peninsula and others in modern day Saudi Arabia.

The giving of the Ten Commandments marks a monumental moment in Judeo-Christian history.

It is the moment when a covenant between God and His people is solidified.

These commandments have significantly influenced the moral and legal frameworks of western civilization for thousands of years.

The first four commandments concern the relationship between humans and God, while the remaining six guide human interactions with one another.

The lowest spiritual moment in the desert came when the Israelites fashioned and worshipped the Golden Calf – a blatant act of idolatry, as Exodus 20 verse 23 states: do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver, or gods of gold.

To this day, the shofar – a ritual musical instrument used in Jewish ceremonies cannot be made from the horn of any animal from the bovine family – oxen, bulls, or cows. The preferred material is a ram's horn, linking back to this tragic episode.

Another key symbol from the wilderness is the Ark of the Covenant, which holds the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, a jar of

manna, and Aaron's rod. The Ark was originally kept in the Tabernacle during the Exodus period in the desert. This was a portable sanctuary – the dwelling place of God, which later evolved into the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Ark was perhaps the closest physical representation of God's presence on Earth.

A divine weapon with supernatural power, it was believed to guarantee victory for the Israelites in battle. It was guarded by angels, and so powerful a force that even an accidental touch would strike you dead.

It parted the Jordan River, brought down the walls of Jericho, and caused both plague and fear amongst Israel's premier enemy, the Philistines.

Constructed at Mount Sinai under the direction of Bezalel, a skilled artisan, it seems to have been based on ancient Egyptian portable barques; boat shaped shrines which carried images of gods in religious processions.

It vanished after the Babylonian destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE.

Its final location remains unknown, giving rise to countless theories; buried beneath the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, hidden in Ethiopia, or did the prophet Jeremiah hide the ark in a cave somewhere in the desert to be revealed at the end of time?

In both religious and pop culture, the Ark has taken on legendary status, even being immortalised in the greatest adventure film ever, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Set in 1936, this film follows swashbuckling American archaeologist Dr Henry 'Indiana' Jones in his race against the Nazis to recover the Ark. Hitler was obsessed with the occult and religious artifacts including the Spear of Destiny – the Holy Lance or Spear of Longinus which was used to pierce the side of Jesus at the crucifixion.

In the film the Nazis are after the Ark to harness its power for world domination. In the end, they open the Ark; its power proves real – and devastating.

This film subtly reinforces the idea that some mysteries are beyond human control and should be left well alone.

There's a multitude of books, TV documentaries, and podcasts about the Ark, and it even makes an appearance in a video game called ASSASSIN'S CREED.

But the piece-de-resistance is a documentary-style TV show called Ancient Aliens which really must be seen to be believed. You can watch it on the History Channel. It explores and claims various unexplained phenomena, ancient myths, and historical mysteries, are linked to extra-terrestrials. One episode claims the Ark is an alien power source or weapon given to the Israelites by an extra-terrestrial species. It states the advanced electrical or radioactive technology around the Ark would have been beyond ancient humans building skills.

Of the 24 books in the Hebrew Bible (or what we used to call The Old Testament) Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers are set in the desert. Deuteronomy is set on the edge of the Promised Land, and the book of Joshua is a transitional one.

Several important Jewish festivals were first celebrated in the desert, Passover, and Sukkot.

Passover or Pesach is the celebration of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths is one of the three pilgrimage festivals for Jews and celebrates the wilderness period when they lived in temporary shelters called booths. If you ever visit Israel in Sukkot, you will see these booths, simple outdoor huts with a roof made of natural materials like palm branches or bamboo everywhere. You'll find them on apartment balconies, communal courtyards, even hotels have them for guests.

Many Jews celebrate this festival with a meal in the booths. The roof must allow you to see the stars but provide some shade during the day. It is a joyful festival, sometimes called Z'MAN SIMCHATEINU – the time of our rejoicing, showing that joy and gratitude are possible even in the wilderness – an important spiritual lesson.

The desert served as a sanctuary for many other biblical figures in the Hebrew Bible as well. David fled there to escape King Saul as well as his son Absolom. The prophet Elijah found refuge there when fleeing Queen Jezebel. And it is the backdrop for the story of Sodom and Gomorrah where Lot's wife famously turned into a pillar of salt.

To summarise, for Judaism the desert was not just a physical location – it was a crucible of faith, a place of testing, revelation, rebellion, and ultimately transformation. A people were born, a law was given, and a covenant was sealed.

2nd Hymn: mo.35 in the Purple Hymn Book – 'Find a stillness'.

Bible reading

Our bible reading is the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the New Testament Gospel of Luke 10 verses 25-37 where Jesus taught us to love our neighbour.

This parable was chosen as it is set in the wilderness of the Judean desert, linked to the next part of our service.

“And who is my neighbour?”

In reply Jesus said - a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.

The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. Look after him, he said, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.

Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, the one who had mercy on him.

Jesus told him, Go and do likewise.

Commentary

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho through the Judean desert was notoriously dangerous, making it a frequent site for robberies.

It was not advisable to travel alone, and most people travelled in groups for safety.

The characters in the parable—the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan—are deliberately chosen by Jesus.

Priests and Levites were the Jewish elite, respected and intimidating figures, expected to uphold the law, to be above reproach, to set an example.

Their failure to assist the injured man speaks volumes. They surely knew the man would die if they did nothing to help.

Perhaps they were afraid he was a decoy, a trap to lure them over to be robbed.

The one who did help and took this risk was a Samaritan, despised by Jews due to historical and religious animosities.

The Samaritan would have been shunned by Jewish society, possibly even by the injured man himself.

His actions, therefore, are striking, and emphasize that true neighbourly love transcends all ethnic and religious boundaries.

I'm sure we can all think of modern-day interpretations of this parable. Palestinians and Israelis for example, or Protestants and Catholics during The Troubles.

It's amazing that a parable written over two thousand years ago can still hold such a powerful message today.

It is a terrible name for a parable, as it is saying all other Samaritans are bad.

A bit like, the Parable of the Good Unitarian, like the rest of us are awful people, but it makes its point.

Music

We now have a short music break. The music is an acoustic ambient piece played on an aeolian harp.

It is music made by nature and not a man-made piece. It was created by the desert wind in the Negev desert in southern Israel.

My harp, played by the wind in the Negev desert (YOUTUBE – 1.55 minutes).

Watch it here: <https://youtu.be/rmP5XaNYlkl>

Part B

In the next part of our service, we'll explore the concept of the wilderness in Christianity.

In the New Testament the wilderness refers to the Judean desert, located in the eastern part of the Holy Land. It stretches from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and covers about 580 square miles. It's tiny, but vicious.

Remarkably, it's one of the most elevation-diverse deserts in the world, starting at over 800 meters above sea level and plunging to 430 meters below sea level at the Dead Sea - the lowest place on Earth.

This is a harsh, rugged, inhospitable and barren landscape – filled with wadis, cliffs, and caves – a place perfectly suited for spiritual testing, solitude, and isolation.

The Dead Sea itself has an almost apocalyptic landscape; its lifeless otherworldly appearance surrounded by strange crystalline shapes made of salt makes it alien terrain. The stench of sulphur can be so strong it makes you gag, and the sea itself is poisonous in its saltiness. It's pure malevolence.

The Judean desert features prominently in the New Testament.

Jericho, located nearby, is where Jesus met the tax collector Zacchaeus.

The road through this desert is also the setting for the Parable of the Good Samaritan which we heard earlier.

It's also the place where John the Baptist preached and baptised, including the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River.

And perhaps most famously, it's where Jesus was tempted in the wilderness.

At the time of Jesus, the Judean desert was a hub of intense religious activity, beginning with the Essenes – a Jewish sect during the Second Temple period. The Essenes rejected the Temple cult in Jerusalem which they viewed as corrupt. Instead, they withdrew to the desert to separate themselves from the world, awaiting what they believed was an imminent apocalypse and the coming of a messianic figure who would usher in a cosmic battle and the end of the world.

Sound familiar? If they existed today, we might call them a doomsday cult.

In the desert the Essenes formed a strict, ascetic community. They are widely believed to be the authors and custodians of the Dead Sea Scrolls - a collection of about 900 ancient Jewish texts discovered between the late 1940s and mid-1950s in caves near Qumran, their desert headquarters. Their community was destroyed in the brutal wars with Rome between 70 to 73 CE, and they disappeared from history until their texts were rediscovered nearly 2,000 years later.

In 1947, a Palestinian shepherd searching for a lost sheep stumbled upon a clay jar containing some of the scrolls. The dry desert conditions had perfectly preserved the parchment, papyrus, and even copper scrolls. This discovery is considered one of the greatest archaeological finds of the twentieth century - even surpassing the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922.

Today, you can view some of these scrolls at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, in a building known as the Shrine of the Book. Its white dome is designed to resemble the lid of the jars in which the scrolls were hidden.

We'll now watch a short clip about the Shrine of the Book.

'The Shrine of the Book' from YOUTUBE (2.12 minutes – rare Dead Sea scroll goes on display in Jerusalem).

Watch it here: <https://youtu.be/0Ldl6f9DTYw>

The Essenes are deeply relevant to Christianity. John the Baptist was likely influenced by them – and possibly even a member before beginning his own ministry. Though Jesus himself is not believed to have been an Essene, their values and lifestyle – especially their emphasis on asceticism and spiritual discipline – deeply influenced the early Christian monastic movement.

From the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, inspired by figures like John the Baptist and Jesus, Christian hermits and monks began settling in the Judean desert, founding monasteries – some of which are even active today.

John the Baptist holds a pivotal role in Christian history. He is seen as the forerunner of Jesus, fulfilling the prophecy from Isaiah 40 verse 3, 'a voice of one calling in the wilderness. Prepare the way for the Lord'.

His message like the Essenes was a call to leave the corruption of the world and return to God in the desert.

His lifestyle was a radical rejection of materialism and luxury. Clothes made of camel's hair and a leather belt, locusts and honey as food. His entire being was a living sermon.

John's baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River marks the beginning of Jesus's public ministry.

This event is foundational to Christian theology, as all three persons of the Trinity are present.

God the Father – the voice from heaven.

Jesus the Son – being baptised.

The Holy Spirit – descending like a dove.

Immediately after his baptism, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days and nights of fasting and testing – a period of spiritual preparation before his ministry began.

The number 40 as stated earlier is symbolic and used throughout the Bible, echoing the 40 years the Israelites wandered in the Sinai. During this time, Jesus is tempted by the Devil with three offers. Three is also an important number in the Bible.

Turn stones into bread – power over hunger.

Throw yourself from the Temple – power over nature and protection.

Worship Satan and rule the world – power over earthly kingdoms.

Each of these temptations reflect the Jewish expectation of a Davidic Messiah – a powerful, political leader who would free them from Roman rule and restore Israel. In essence, the Devil is offering Jesus the role of that messiah on a plate.

Control hunger.

Display miraculous powers.

Rule all nations.

But Jesus resists. Unlike the Israelites in the desert, he remains faithful, obedient, and fully reliant on God.

The desert continues to play a central role in Christian spirituality.

From the 3rd century CE as Christianity became favoured in the Roman Empire, many believers chose to withdraw from society to live in the desert seeking lives of solitude, silence, and spiritual depth. These were the Desert Fathers and Mothers. This ascetic lifestyle becomes the new form of martyrdom as persecution of Christianity ceased.

They laid the foundations for Christian mysticism, for the emptiness of the desert invites vision, real, or hallucinatory.

Key figures included Anthony the Great, often called the Father of Monasticism. Pachomius, who founded the first organised monastic communities with shared rules – like the earlier Essenes.

Unlike individual hermits, these were structured communities of faith and discipline.

In summary, the Judean desert remains a place of spiritual significance – a landscape where prophets were formed, where battles of the soul were fought, and where the silence of the wilderness continues to echo God's voice.

We'll now watch a short clip of St George's Monastery in the Judean desert. It gives a vivid sense of the landscape where Jesus's wilderness temptation would have taken place.

Amazing St George's Monastery in the Judean Desert – AERIAL DRONE – YOUTUBE – 2.11 minutes.

Watch it here: <https://youtu.be/iYTArcznE4>

3rd Hymn: No. 21 in the Purple Hymn Book – 'Come and Find the Quiet Centre'

Part C

In the final part of our service, we'll explore the concept of the wilderness in Islam, and lastly, as a spiritual metaphor.

Islam emerged in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century CE.

The prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca, a desert trade hub, and received his earliest revelations whilst living among Bedouins, traders, and city dwellers in this harsh and unforgiving environment.

The desert became a cradle of revelation - a space for divine communication - as the Quran, Islam's holiest book was revealed.

It was in the Cave of Hira, in the mountains near the desert outside Mecca, where the Prophet would often retreat to meditate and pray.

Another significant connection between Islam and the desert involves Hagar, the concubine and wife of the Prophet Abraham – known in Islam as Ibrahim. By divine command, Hagar and her son Ismail (also known as Ishmael) were left in the desert by Abraham. Her desperate search for water led to the miraculous appearance of a life-saving spring - the Well of ZAMZAM – which ensured their survival.

It's a similar story to the Israelites being sustained by water from a rock in the Sinai.

And then, of course, there are the Five Pillars of Islam, which include the pilgrimage to Mecca.

For Muslims, this desert pilgrimage – known as the Hajj – is the most important spiritual journey of their lives.

Islam emphasises egalitarianism; all people are equal before God, regardless of race, wealth, or social status.

This can be seen in the clothing worn by men during the Hajj pilgrimage. The men wear two simple, white, unstitched cloths to symbolise purity, equality, and the renunciation of worldly distinctions.

In a desert region where everyone faced the same harsh and unforgiving conditions, community solidarity and hospitality become an essential tool for survival.

In summary, the desert in Islam like in Judaism and Christianity is a place of trial, faith and divine communication.

The desert's vastness and solitude symbolise spiritual purification and closeness to God, a theme echoed in the rituals of the Hajj pilgrimage where millions of Muslims journey to reconnect with their faith in this sacred landscape.

And lastly, is your faith journey feeling like a desert – has your spiritual fervour dried up?

What steps might you take to get back on track?

Running away to live as a hermit in the desert might sound dramatic – and honestly is not the best advice for the congregation, especially based on our average age.

There are gentler, more practical ways to reconnect with your spiritual path.

For most of us attending church in person here in Plymouth, life in a relatively large city means we're surrounded by constant noise. Traffic, music blaring, construction everywhere. We are bombarded day and night – emergency sirens, noisy neighbours, drunken students stumbling around at all hours, shouting and swearing. It's relentless.

Steve said that during the lockdown of 2020 his normally lively city centre neighbourhood became uncannily silent. He said he found it slightly unsettling, which can happen in a city where noise is the norm.

He once stayed at a relative's house in the countryside in Scotland where it was so quiet, he could not sleep. It felt so alien and eerie.

But it's not just the physical noise. It's the digital noise that surrounds us. Phones and emails buzzing, social media apps demanding attention – even in church, phones ping and ring.

To find your way back spiritually, you need to create the right conditions.

Primarily, this means cultivating quietness - removing distractions.

Silence is essential for deep reflection.

Just as geography and environment shaped religions – from the desert monotheism of the Abrahamic three to the animism of forest-dwelling peoples, your environment will shape you.

To quote our last hymn – 'come and find the quiet centre, in the crowded life we lead.

Clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes, that we can see'.

The quieter you become, the more you can hear – your inner voice sharpens.

In the silence, we often find what's been drowned out. Spiritual awakenings happen here.

So, how can you quiet the noise?

Consider a technology detox.

Cut back on watching the news – it's often distressing. A quote from TWITTER that Steve liked was:

‘Sometimes I have to turn off the news and put on a serial killer documentary so I can relax’.

Take a break from social media for a few days or a week, especially if you're a TWITTER or INSTAGRAM addict.

Try reading a short passage from a spiritual or religious book each day.

Sometimes a single passage speaks directly to your heart – just like a church service can sometimes.

Meditation can also help bring calm and clarity.

Nature is a wonderful healer. Take a walk outside – the fresh air and natural beauty can be deeply uplifting, even in winter. Nature is like a sacred text – the resilience and cycles of life offer comfort and hope.

Listen to the birds, observe the trees, sea, or rivers – ask yourself – what is nature teaching me?

Even sitting in a garden can be relaxing, as sometimes you need the silence of plants to recover from the noise of humans.

If you are able, consider a pilgrimage or a retreat. Whilst longer trips can be costly, even a day trip to places nearby like Buckfast Abbey, Exeter, or Truro Cathedral can refresh your spirit.

Try some small behaviour changes.

Be like a happy dog – joyfully greeting everyone you meet (easier said than done, I know).

Perform a small act of kindness daily for a week or month, expecting nothing in return.

Acknowledge everyone you encounter with a smile, or a simple hello. You might be the only person they speak to all day.

Music can be a spiritual gateway. Sing or listen to songs that move you deeply.

YOUTUBE is a treasure chest to utilise in this scenario.

If you feel comfortable, consider sharing your experiences with the congregation.

Maybe in the future, we could hold a community service where we share personal spiritual exercises.

You're not alone in your journey. Quiet the noise, open your heart, and rediscover your path.

Closing words

From the 1st Book of Kings 19 verses 9 to 13 in the Hebrew Bible.

We are doing well on the Bible quotes today, aren't we??!! Brownie points for us.

The prophet Elijah has fled into the wilderness to evade his arch enemy Queen Jezebel who has vowed to find and kill him. He travels to Mount Horeb in the Sinai desert; the same place God spoke to Moses in a burning bush.

Elijah encounters the Lord in the desert, but not in the manner he expects.

'And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind.

And after the wind, an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.

And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.

And behold, there came a voice to him and said – what are you doing here Elijah?'

Thank you for listening

Chalice is extinguished

Our closing video is not a piece of music but a clip from BBC Stories called Is this the most extreme baptism? It is set in the wilderness in the Tigray region. Not recommended for those with a fear of heights.

YOUTUBE 2.00 minutes - Is this the most extreme baptism? (BBC Stories).

Watch it here: <https://youtu.be/saLJNsKuabs>