

## **The Desert Psalm 63 Mark 1:12-13**

Yes, we had plenty of rain, overcast skies, and cold temperatures mixed with a few sunny days. Don't worry, in a few months it is going to be summertime. It's hot and humid, dry. Regardless of what season it is, we need to understand that being a follower of Christ is a never-ending process of spending time in the desert.

Many years ago, while attending Courage to Serve Retreat in Stoneville, NC, right before the Lenten season begin, another pastor and I wondered if there's a difference between spiritual practices and spiritual disciplines.

So, I held them in my hand and pondered. "Practice" is something we repeat so we acquire a skill or proficiency. Piano practice. Baseball practice. Soccer practice. The word "practice" comes from the Latin word for work, in Greek to do or see. It involves both being and doing. Lenten practices like prayer, fasting, and almsgiving come from a grateful heart focusing on God so we may serve others.

A discipline, on the other hand – sounds a bit more rigorous. It involves repetition developing knowledge. It comes from the Latin word for "instruction." It encompasses learning and relates to the word disciple. A disciple is a follower. Someone teachable. When I think of the Lenten discipline of self-examination, we discover what to resist and what leads us away from the love of God and neighbor, so we will change our direction back to God.

Discipleship requires both practice and discipline. Both take us to the wilderness.

So, let's go to the desert? Right? Most of us would say, "No way." Yet, if you travel in the desert, you will find treasures from your journey. Quaker theologian Richard Foster in his famous book "Celebration of Discipline", refers to the spiritual disciplines as journeying through the desert leading to "doors of liberation." Inward disciplines, like prayer fasting, listening for shepherd's voice, outward disciplines, like living in simplicity and service, give us new eyes to see.

Alan Jones' book "Soul-Making-The Desert Way of Spirituality" speaks of the opportunities in the desert. In the desert, he said, "silence and a feeling of

deadness seem to go together." To be utterly silent can feel like death. Silence connects our soul with our tears and emptiness and begins the dance with our soul. Silence, tears, and deadness are catalysts for discovery and moments of conversions.

Staying in the desert is both a spiritual practice and discipline – it's something we're all called to do. Discipleship is soul-making. Soul making is a continual internal process, never complete. A place where we acknowledge Christ as Lord, surrendering to God. The wilderness is a place where we learn more about Jesus and more about ourselves.

In the desert, God tested his chosen people. After Paul's conversion, he disappears into the desert for three years. When he emerges, the Holy Spirit instructs him. Paul accepts his call to go to the gentiles and communicate the good news boldly. Ponder for a moment Paul's ending affirmation and beginning question: you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. His original question: Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

Sometimes, we find ourselves in the desert, like Jesus. Sometimes it is not an invitation or escort. It's not a suggestion. Jesus was driven into the desert by the Spirit. Jesus said, "I am sending you the Holy Spirit who will teach you. The Holy Spirit sees the desert as a necessary, life-forming, and life-shaping experience. The desert tears you away from a past life. It's a jolt into solitude, into the challenge of silence and bleakness of tears. It also opens a new life evoking the wonder of the Holy.

Remember, after the desert, there is the glorious moment of Jesus' baptism. A moment he emerges from the waters of the Jordan River to see a vision and hear a voice, a moment when his identity seems assured. He sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove; he hears a voice say, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you, I am well pleased." You would think it would be clear sailing from there. All should go well.

But there's are more deserts ahead. All seems to be going beautifully. We are making progress, achieving successes; we're happy and comfortable when life falls apart. We find ourselves in a desert. In a wilderness not of our own making, certainly not of our choice.

To understand what can happen to us in the desert, we must read the rest of the story. We listen to Jesus's teaching about a kingdom of justice and love. We see him caring, healing, and serving others. We see him suffering and dying on the cross doing God's will. "Not my will, but thy will." In the desert, God's made his chosen people, made Jesus, made Paul and early Christians, makes us empty vessels, so we are transformed into temples of God's Spirit for others to see.

In the desert, in solitude, we confront our inner demons. We do that internal spiritual warfare. We find solitude's clarity and wisdom where we face ourselves in the desert.

No wonder desert's silence scares us. We might hear our voice. We might encounter this unknowable God in the vast emptiness of a desert, hearing the tears of a soul crying out for answers.

God speaks in the desert.

It's unlikely we will find the knowledge, the answers we are seeking, in a world bombarding us with sensory overload. We are bombarded by sounds and by busyness. Our television sets are on for company. We listen to music in the car, when we walk or even sleep. We listen to music when we shop, while we wait, even when we get our teeth cleaned! Even when we are listening to sermons, distractions come. Silence is unfamiliar to us. Silence makes us uncomfortable.

We seek to fill the void of silence. Look how difficult it is for us to sit silently in church! It's a universal problem of our age. Silence is just not on our menu. And yet – what happens when we find ourselves in the desert. We don't choose it. We're driven into the desert by life: the loss of a job, a farm, a business, a personal loss of a loved one – a husband or wife, a child, a sibling, a best friend. A collapsing marriage, friendship, whatever it may be, they will drove you into the desert?

What then -- What does our culture tell us?

It tells us to ignore the desert – to pick ourselves up -- to get back into the game, get over it – have a drink – pretend it never happened, or laugh it off.

If we avoid the desert experiences, we're left with embitterment, angry, guilt, or self-absorbed. The wild animals of loss, grief, anger, bewilderment won't let us go until we are driven to the desert.

When we can accept our desert times as Spirit-driven, they prepare us for an unexpected future.

Stay in the desert. Practice the desert, learn from the desert that you belong to Christ. You are God's temple, and God's Spirit dwells in you. Our lives are re-shaped by our desert experiences – when we live into the demands of the desert, our lives can be re-focused, sharpened, clarified. We can discover what's important in our desert times. We will find what we are seeking that words cannot express.

Perhaps it best said about a motorcyclist seeking something in the desert who moved away from busyness into solitude,

" I rode along in the California desert, and I worked through feelings of awe from the desolate landscape and the naggings of my inner tumult. Just a few miles in the park, everything I'd been feeling came to a head. One the way, I noticed the morning light hugging the land, the gorgeous colors of the terrain, the scale of the mountains, the dipping valleys- my simmering pot boiled over. I stood on the side of the road taking everything in, and I cried.

But it wasn't a sad cry. It was something else, a release. Being in that beautiful desert space told me that right then, right at that very moment, I could forgive myself. I was exactly where I needed to be, and it's was okay."

In the desert, you exactly where you need to be and it's OK.

If I am silent long enough, I hear the blessing of the wilderness journey expressed in a song. "Take time to be Holy.' It a wilderness song, and it's OK.