

*Faith in the Wilderness*

Psalm 63

A sermon by Pastor Wayne Ibara

Makiki Christian Church

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You may have wondered at some time how Scriptures are chosen for preaching each Sunday. Usually, I am the one to plan the preaching series. I ask Brad for ideas. Sometimes, a Discipleship Hour video series will guide us, like with *Celebration of Discipline* last year. At other times, we follow a particular book in the Bible. And sometimes we follow the lectionary, which is the prescribed Bible readings that much of the church throughout the world follows. The Psalms we are going through now, till the beginning of Lent, are taken partly from these Lectionary readings, and are partly the choice of the individual pastor preaching. My reason for selecting the Psalms, however, was to start the year with what the church has long considered its primary prayer book.

I like to start the New Year with some focus on prayer and spirituality. And as most of you probably know from your own Bible reading, the psalms are powerful and precious windows into the world of God's life. When we ponder and pray, chew and meditate upon the psalms, we are often rewarded with changed perspectives and new insights into who God is and what our relationship with God means.

Psalm 63 has been a gift like that for me, and I hope it can be the same for you. Before this month, I had not read or studied it to any special length. What made me choose it, though, was its attribution. You can see in the pew Bibles that at the very beginning, there is an inscription that says, "A psalm of David. When he was in the Desert of Judah." The NIV says "Desert," where other translations say "Wilderness." Either way, it's referring to the barren, desolate region to the east and to the south of Jerusalem, in which you find places like Masada.

What this inscription does is attribute the psalm to David—which may mean that David wrote the psalm, or that it was written about David, or from his perspective, about a particular episode in his life. I think these inscriptions—which don't even get a verse number—can be very helpful because they give us suggestions on a real world context for the psalm. And they help us hear what the psalm is saying, and what it may have to offer to us as well.

This prayer is of David when he was in the Desert of Judah. Perhaps, then, it can give us inspiration and encouragement particularly when we feel like our life has turned into a desert or wilderness.

Eugene Peterson, who put the Bible into modern language with *The Message*, started out as a student of Hebrew and the Old Testament. He wrote a book about David called *Leap Over A Wall*. In it, he places David in the wilderness for about a decade—the period when David’s fame as a soldier has created a rage of jealousy in King Saul, and David has to flee for his life into the wilderness because the king wants to kill him. This, even though David has on numerous occasions brought spectacular military victory to Israel, beginning, of course, with that famous encounter with Goliath.

Peterson pieces David’s story together and concludes that for much of his life as a 20-something, he was living from cave to cave in the Judean and surrounding deserts. The challenging question that comes to me is, if I were being hunted down by the boss I served well, and I had to abandon all the comforts of home to live on the lam and never enjoy the comforts of a soft bed and a roof over my head, a microwave to heat my dinner, a shopping mall to entertain me—if all the comforts of civilization were denied me unjustly, is this the kind of prayer I would pray?

*O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

*On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night. Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.*

For all of David’s faults—and they were considerable—I think we’re looking at the main reason why God could still say of David, “Here is a man after my own heart.” ***David had an unshakeable faith in and an unquenchable desire for God.*** When the heat was on, David didn’t suffer an emotional or psychic or spiritual meltdown. Instead, the heat of adversity—not to mention the heat of the desert—forged a stronger faith. David matured in his wilderness years, Eugene Peterson concludes. And as a company of outcasts, renegades and misfits flocked to him there in the wilderness, as the story in 1 Samuel recounts, God brought about something that has consistently been at the heart of God’s purpose. In David the individual, God refined David’s faith. And around David, God forged a community of faith. A proto-church, if you will, as Peterson sees it.

The lesson this picture offers us should be encouraging. Because it says that when things are going most poorly for us, God’s mission may actually be going quite well. And even growing in ways that it probably wouldn’t if we

*weren't* struggling so much. Put another way, when we are in a desert or a barren wilderness, God's life in us may have the perfect conditions to flourish. *What can make the world of a difference to us is how we're choosing to see the way things are.*

We've all seen pictures of landscapes where the light is far from perfect, and everything looks washed out or bland. In particular, barren wilderness or desert landscapes often suffer from this problem. So all you see are the monotonous browns, greys and other earth shades of the desert, looking very "blah." Flat. Dull. Photoshop, the digital image processing program, offers a different way of seeing what is there. It offers the ability to change color modes, which are set formulas for how devices interpret color data. Most of the time, print makers use what is called RGB or CMYK color. These initials stand for "Red, Green, Blue" and "Cyan, Magenta, Yellow and Black."

But there is another color mode called LAB or "Lab." "L" stands for luminosity or lightness; "a" and "b" stand for nothing. Its creators took a different tack when they put it together. It offers a radically different way for digital programs to treat the same data in a picture. Take the dull, bland wilderness landscape image and do a very slight, very subtle and often, very quick adjustment in Lab Color, and you suddenly see things in the picture that weren't there before. Contrast is enhanced. Color is more saturated. It just looks like a better picture. Often times, suddenly, that dull wilderness doesn't look so bad.

The point I'm trying to make is that we do have a choice in our way of seeing. We can go with what is often our natural, inherited, learned way of seeing things, or we can try a different way. It is sometimes called seeing with the eye of faith. With it, life in the wilderness can start to look very different. Maybe even a bit the way David came to see things.

Faith is a mystery. Faith is a gift. Why do some people rise to the surface no matter how rough the seas of their circumstances, while others, afflicted with far less, immediately plunge to the depths of despair? Why does adversity or time in the wilderness destroy some but cultivate greatness in others? I'm not sure that anyone but God can tell us. But if I had to guess at one important factor, I'd guess that the way we see our circumstances is a key part of the puzzle. And what is even more intriguing and hopeful is that seeing things from a faithful perspective is something that *can be learned*. It is something that we can cultivate in ourselves and in our church.

And in fact, this is a practice that we have been working at for a while. Perhaps it started years ago when we began to change our Bible study questions. Instead of asking, "What does this passage say to me?" we began to ask, "What do we hear this text saying to us as a church, as a congregation?" The New

Creation process was a deliberate exercise in paradigm-shifting our orientation as a church organization to a church as organism, the Body of Christ. Another change we made was getting off of Robert's Rules of Order and majority votes for our annual meetings. The church in the New Testament seems to operate with a different framework, and we've shifted toward that model instead, where consensus and Christian house rules, rather than Robert's Rules, govern.

The Witness Board has taken some gratifying new initiatives lately, leading us in a "Backpack Project" for homeless adults and children, as well as opening up to the whole church the decision about our hosting of video-conferences for prison inmates on the Mainland and their families here. You can also see in the proposed budget for this year that a significant part of the Witness Budget--\$6,000—is earmarked for Family Promise, a program that works to get homeless people back on their feet. These new initiatives were born out of discussions in which the members of the Witness Board together wrestled with a new way of seeing the church and their role in it.

The English Ministry Council is also being energized by a pursuit of new questions and a new way of seeing. What does it mean for us to live out our Vision? How can we encourage new ways of seeing the opportunities we have to cooperate with God in our life together as well as in ministry and witness beyond the church? An EMC Retreat has been scheduled for February, at which one of the sessions will raise the question of how we see our church's story. An article from the internet put the question provocatively and humorously. Many traditional churches see themselves as the Titanic, on a doomed voyage. New ministries and efforts amount to rearranging deck chairs. But what if we change the image? Picture our story as the voyage of the Mayflower—faith-full and headed for a new land and an unpredictable future.

In this New Year, in this the 103<sup>rd</sup> year of existence for Makiki Christian Church, can we find the faithful desire in our wilderness of the world to long for God, to dream of new beginnings and faithful continuings, to listen for the promptings of the Spirit and to follow Christ as a pilgrim people?

What is our desire? What is the motivating fire in our hearts that keeps us getting up in the morning?

Psalm 63 offers an image of the desire of David's soul. *O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you...in a dry and weary land where there is no water.* When was the last time that we thirsted for God in that way?

But it is important to ask this question without guilt or condemnation. Feeling guilty or ashamed won't make us more thirsty for God. We can't change the way that we feel. But we can begin to change the way that we choose to see.

And if we simply hold the mirror of the psalms to our own souls, perhaps we can begin to see the choice to be made, and we can begin to choose differently than perhaps we have been accustomed to choosing. There is a different way to see the wilderness or even the desert. Wherever we may be, we are in the perfect place for our desire for God to be renewed and reforged.

We were previewing a future Ray Vander Laan video in staff meeting last week, in which Vander Laan was emphatically charging all his hearers to run the race of faith with all our hearts, not half-heartedly. He was speaking to them in the ruins of an athletic stadium in present-day Turkey. The video raises the question: Why is it for most Christians that we can easily get more excited about a sporting event or even a good sale than we usually get about our faith or serving God?

In contrast, there's David. Here's a man who ran all-out for God. He didn't run perfectly. God knows he had his low points. But in the midst of the wilderness, in the furnace of the desert and in the heat of adversity, his heart still sang for God's blessing and love. *Because your love is better than life.*

May we all find ourselves shaped by this example. And as we come to see our circumstances with an eye of faith, may David's song become more and more our own as well.