

I have a special fondness for rough and wild landscape, not unlike what Philip is called to. Scripture refers to the road where encounter takes place as being a desert, and indeed it is, but less like endless sand dunes of the Sahara or the fictional planet in dune, and more like a rocky, arid place with sand, certainly, but also with rocks and sparse vegetation. Kind of like the deserts in some parts of the United States.

My husband could tell you my favorite place in the world is Arches National Park. He owes me another vacation there. The landscape is breathtaking, but also harsh. There aren't lush streams, no fruit trees or berry bushes. What you bring with you, is what you have. You take in your own water and food, and when it's gone, it's gone. There are no couches or beds to fall into, only rocks and sand, and whatever amenities you brought. It is a humbling place, a beautiful place, but also a dangerous place. It is not for fragile, or the dedicated indoors-man.

This is the landscape which Philip is called to with no notice whatsoever. One moment he is going about his day, and the next he is called away from friends, family, and comforts to paths far from home. And, at least at first, he has no idea why he's been called to the wilderness. He's traveling on a harsh road with no idea of the bigger picture.

Then he sees this chariot with this eunuch in it. And Eunuchs weren't exactly popular. They were men who had been castrated or who were born with genital defects prohibiting them from intercourse and procreation. This meant they were well suited for guarding the king's harems, and were often used in capacities where no question of paternity could be allowed, such as in royal families or other important individuals. Despite this usefulness, they were hated by nearly everyone. Josephus, a Jewish historian who is known for his accuracy, writes that no man should even speak to a eunuch. They could not become priests and good Jews could not become eunuchs.

Yet this is the person that God calls Philip too. Philip finds a man also in the wilderness, having traveled from Jerusalem where he had gone to worship. He has some knowledge of the scriptures but needs help and direction, which he isn't getting from any self-respecting Jew. So this eunuch is literally on his own, trying to discern the meaning of the scriptures.

Now Philip understands why he's been called to the wilderness. It is to help this eunuch learn of the gospel. Philip explains the scriptures, and even baptizes the man, who continues on his way, importantly, to carry the gospel to Africa. The reason Philip was in the wilderness was to give hope to this man, who had experienced such hardship.

Though nothing is known of the man within scripture, church father Irenaeus, writing in 180ad, called the man Simon and recounted his work once he had returned to Africa. His likely backstory is less hopeful, though. Eunuchs were often innocent young boys who had their testicles crushed so that they could not reproduce. This also meant that didn't produce testosterone. Their voices wouldn't change, and neither would their boys take the shape of a man. They often had fatty stomachs and small breasts. Lacking the proper hormones, they likely faced a whole world of mental and physical health problems. They didn't fit in anywhere, not even their own skin, though no fault of their own.

So of course the idea of an innocent being denied justice was appealing to him. Of course learning of the good news that we are all equal in christ was appealing to him. And so Philip gives great hope in the wilderness, and the eunuch receives such hope.

Sometimes we, too are called to the wilderness. We are called to abandon our comforts, or else are stripped of them. We face times of trials, or rugged terrains that can be hard to navigate. Often, we have no idea why we're there, either, though we may ask God why? Why me? Aren't I good person? Aren't I faithful? Why am I struggling? Or maybe, why God? Haven't I been through enough?

I'm not one personally to approve of warm platitude, or feel good slogans like your trauma made you stronger. We could debate the merits of that claim, but regardless, your trauma shouldn't have happened. So I would be the last one to say how great and beneficial the wilderness is. What I will say, however, is sometimes what we gain in the wilderness is beautiful. Sometimes the wilderness can make us trust god in a whole new and deeper way. Sometimes we come to know God better. Sometimes we learn about ourselves, or others, in ways we never imagined. Sometimes you'll receive hope in the wilderness, just as the eunuch did. Someone might speak words of comfort and grace to you which change your whole life.

Sometimes you will stumble into the wilderness, and you will need the words of comfort from another, as the eunuch did. Other times you might be there to give hope to another.

Not so many years ago we were all reeling from the covid pandemic. Whatever your thoughts on lockdowns were, we were mostly all locked in our houses. It was a rough time. There is only so much bread you bake. Some people lost jobs. Some people lost relationships. Some people saw their mental health decay. Important things were taken from a lot of people, such as weddings, baby showers, graduations, even births when family could not meet the new little one. Clara is a covid baby, and I remember wondering if her dad would be there to greet her. On the bright side, covid did give me an excuse to keep away some people who had invited themselves to her birth. We were all in the wilderness. But we were not without hope. And that time was not completely without beauty. I remember that first Christmas when every house in the neighborhood hung up Christmas lights to spread a little hope and cheer. I remember people working together to find supplies, like toilet paper and hand sanitizer and even meds. We received hope and we gave hope.

It could be argued that the modern American church is in a wilderness, too. Declining membership, declining money, and declining influence have taken a toll. But wildernesses do not last forever, there is hope there, and sometimes even beauty. Churches are finding new ways to work together, to reach people. They are reflecting upon the past and finding new and creative ways forward. We are still opening the scriptures, changing lives, and loving God. We are still making disciples.

Some of us may have walked in the wilderness, or maybe we're still there. I know that pain, and how hard that can be, but do not despair, don't give up hope. We may be in the wilderness, and we may never have an answer to the whys, but God is still God, and there is still hope to be had, hope to be received, and hope to be given.

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