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Following the Guide: A Wilderness Theology of Youth Ministry

by

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Approved _____

Date _____

To the many guides and students who have journeyed with me up mountains and down rivers and encouraged me to chase more faithfully after Jesus. Thank you for your witness and the ways you have helped me see God with clarity. May you encounter God in fresh and powerful ways, and may you know his presence is near in all places, and at all times.

Abstract:

Scripture offers readers a unique characterization of wilderness spaces and provides us with a great deal of information about what to expect. This discussion traces various scriptural narratives of encounter with God in the wilderness, offering the reader a model for what a wilderness experience of God may entail, and then turns to more current conversation about wilderness youth ministry. The project traces current research of fields that are tangentially related to wilderness youth ministry and seeks to highlight the ways that they can enhance, alter, and confirm various practices within the wilderness youth ministry model. Furthermore, it serves to offer an explanation to both practitioners and participants in these programs, giving them a theological and scientific backing to help interpret and facilitate participant experiences.

Introduction:

“the wilderness has a way of revealing what you really believe about God.”

-Jonathan David Helser

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine with me what the wilderness looks like in your mind’s eye. Does the word bring to mind desolation, and barrenness—are you imagining a dry and dusty desert? Do you picture lush forests, towering mountains, and thundering streams; a place of beauty and abundance? Is it something else entirely? For many of us, there is a specific image that the word wilderness invokes, and the same can be true when we think of the idea of wilderness in scripture. Scripture’s witness and use of wilderness as a place and an idea is broad, frequent, and complicated; it is far more nuanced than we often imagine. After exploring the ways that scripture uses wilderness, I would like to make a case for wilderness as a unique and valuable place for youth ministry, pulling from sources as diverse as outdoor leadership programs, therapy modalities, and eco-theological thought. I am firmly convinced of the value and beauty of wilderness experience for youth from both a biblical and psychosocial standpoint, and there are many powerful implications for youth ministry.

I am here to serve in the role of a guide to texts and thought, inviting us to consider why we should value the wilderness. In the work of wilderness ministry, the guide is not a distant observer; they participate in the experience with the group, leading the way through all kinds of terrain and into unexpected experience. That is true here: we will sort through many ideas and views of wilderness, and I hope that it feels communal. In this space, the wise voices of commentators and researchers serve as markers on our maps; helping us to understand what we see. We will move through a series of scriptures, noting the ways that they teach us about what it means to be in a wilderness space. As we will see later on, the work of successful guiding

requires an unusual level of self-disclosure, so this project may feel more personal to you than you are used to in academic writing. For us to engage at the deepest level of this work, we must be willing to admit and examine what we carry into the wilderness, and to allow God to shape and change it. Wilderness spaces are in many ways liminal spaces, and this is a chance for us all to broaden our perspective of who God is, and what it means to encounter God in new ways and places. I hope you feel welcome: this is a work for many of us. It is a place for those of us who do wilderness ministry to deepen our understanding of the “why, and the how.” It is a place for anyone working with youth or adults to understand why it is that we might value wilderness spaces. It is a conversation for those of us who are skeptical—those of us who might feel that many camp or wilderness-type experiences are emotionally manipulative ploys to make us feel something.

One of the driving motivators for this project is an understanding that in many ways, the church has struggled with the concept of what it means to understand the wilderness texts and how to engage with wilderness spaces since the early centuries of her existence. We are shaped by the writings and teachings of the desert fathers and mothers; men and women who retreated into wild spaces to teach and find solitude to pray, and yet we do not often even recognize their contribution. There are hundreds of contemporary books that use wilderness as a metaphor, speak about the wilderness texts in scripture, or mention experiences in creation; and yet so often, even these sources resort to tired tropes. I believe that there is beauty yet to be unearthed in our understanding of the wilderness, and I also believe that there is so much to be learned from the many people who have wrestled with these texts and spaces over the centuries. Through the process of this paper, I hope to invite us into a nuanced view of the text, and of our own encounters with God in the wilderness. It seems to me that a central theme running through

centuries and cultures is the idea that the wilderness is a space of encounter with God; we should not plan to enter the wilderness without being fundamentally changed by it. There is a sense in which God's presence becomes unusually clear and unavoidable in the midst of wilderness spaces in order that we might listen and encounter.

Because of this sense that we encounter God so uniquely in the wilderness, I find myself more and more drawn to the physical space as a location for youth ministry. For many years now, churches have sent their students off to camps and wilderness ministries with very little thought given to any deep theological meaning or purpose besides community formation and fun. This is unsatisfying. We know that many students will report camps and wilderness ministries as the places where they made significant faith decisions, heard God speak, or even encountered the reality of who God was for the first time, and yet we cannot even tell one another why.

For this reason, I believe we must form a better theology of how to invite students away from their everyday lives, and into specific experience of God through creation, challenge, and community formation. Away from technology, away from typical rhythms of life, and away from their normal social circles, students are invited to engage with God and be still before God in unique ways. Just as the people of God, the prophets, Jesus and the disciples, and many others over the centuries have encountered God in the wilderness, we should not only hope, but expect, that the same can be true for students even now. By carefully cultivating a theology and an understanding of how to engage with students in these spaces, we are able to come alongside students and care for them well in the midst of often unfamiliar and challenging experience. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of God's work in the world allows us to get out of the way of the movement of the Spirit and allow God to do what only God can do, releasing a need to control or predict.

Frustratingly, there is a robust body of research and thought around secular organizations doing the kind of work that camps and ministries often value, and yet there remains very little writing from the church's perspective. Part of the aim of this project is to fill that gap—there is an incredible amount that we can learn from the research and thought of the secular industries examined here, but there's also a slightly different conversation at play. When we incorporate ideas such as faith development, spirituality, encounter with God, and more into the world of transfer learning, psychological research, and leadership development, something unique emerges. Most faith leaders do know this intuitively, even if it's not something our scholars and thinkers have historically given lots of thought too. My hope is that you gain new language in this work to explain your own experience, as well as grow in understanding of how to navigate and join the work God seems to be so clearly already doing.

Here is the truth: we each enter the wilderness--- both the figurative and literal spaces of it in our own lives--- with a certain perspective about God, but I would echo Jonathan Hesler. The wilderness does not always just create an encounter—sometimes it illuminates things that are already true. It is in these spaces that we are invited to wrestle with what we bring of our own belief, and it is also in these spaces that God will often shatter our own expectations of who God is, and what encounter with God and God's presence might do in our lives.

Wilderness as Trope

Christianity has long loved the metaphor of the wilderness. A quick Google search will turn up websites describing the “wilderness experience,” “how to follow God in the wilderness” and other titles that draw a direct link between experiences of struggle, pain, and suffering, and wilderness. When I searched “Wilderness Experience” the very first search result took me to a website that wrote the following:

A “wilderness experience” is usually thought of as a tough time in which a believer endures discomfort and trials. The pleasant things of life are unable to be enjoyed, or they may be absent altogether, and one feels a lack of encouragement. A ‘wilderness experience’ is often a time of intensified temptation and spiritual attack. It can involve a spiritual, financial, or emotional drought. Having a ‘wilderness experience’ is not necessarily a sign that a believer is sinning; rather, it is a time of God-ordained testing. A ‘wilderness experience’ is often linked to a “mountaintop experience”; that is, the struggle follows a success of some kind. The period of trial comes on the heels of a period of accomplishment or achievement.¹

Typically, in academia we don’t put much value in popular sources, however, in this instance it’s worth considering them because this particular trope finds much of its home in such sources. If you were to walk through the aisles of your local Christian bookstore, or to go down the rabbit hole of internet sources, many of them would reflect similar ideas about wilderness to the article quoted above. While they obviously aren’t talking about literal wilderness spaces, the idea that wilderness experiences are always dry or desolate serves as a popular theme in much Christian writing. Since we are shaped deeply by the material we consume, this matters more than we’d like to admit.

It is worth saying here that there is nothing inherently wrong with this metaphor. It is useful, and faithful to many scriptural accounts of wilderness. Metaphors serve a purpose in

¹ "What does it mean to have a wilderness experience?" Got Questions? <https://www.gotquestions.org/wilderness-experience.html>.

giving us images and language for things that we struggle to describe, and there is value in this particular image as a way of giving language to often hard-to-capture experiences deep within our souls and human experience. On the other hand, to reduce a space that features so heavily in the scriptural narrative into only one thing--only hard experiences, symbolic of suffering and desolation--seems overly simplistic and to not reflect the wholeness of scripture's representation of the wilderness space fully.

Interestingly, the website quoted above also touches on the other way the church has often thought about the wilderness—it mentions “mountaintop experiences,” which it would define as a “success” or “accomplishment or achievement.” It would be more accurate to say that we often think of “mountaintop experiences” as profound or particularly “loud” experiences of God's presence or closeness. In a sense, they are what people sometimes in youth ministry contexts refer to as a “camp high....” or, in other words, a particular experience of closeness to God or emotional response to a spiritual event or time of learning. While these experiences, especially in modern, western, Evangelical contexts can seem to be heavily emotionally charged, that doesn't necessarily invalidate them, and as we continue, that's important to keep in mind.

It is notable that the church's other use of the wilderness has been to highlight these kinds of experiences, or even to create them. We sing songs about with this kind of language—think of popular lyrics like “So I will praise You on the mountain/ And I will praise You when the mountain's in my way/ You're the summit where my feet are/ So I will praise You in the valleys all the same”² This particular song by the worship band Hillsong uses imagery of mountains and valleys to metaphorically embody both good and hard things in life, recognizing that God is

² Hillsong United, “Highlands: Song of Ascents” Words and Music by Joel Houston & Benjamin Hastings© 2018 Hillsong Music Publishing CCLI: 7122399

present in the midst of both. Many other songs echo this theme; a quick internet search will reveal that mountains and rivers and oceans serve as common metaphors of these “wilderness experiences” in much popular Christian music.

I write all of this not to say that either trope that gets linked with the wilderness is necessarily bad or wrong; but that they are just that, tropes. The reality is that the wilderness, both in scripture *and* creation is never all hard or all beautiful; the real wilderness, both desert and mountaintop alike, always carries elements of both. The desert can be a place of dryness, and death, and desolation, surely, but it can also be a place of life in unexpected places, vibrant color, and powerful beauty. Mountaintops can offer incredible perspective and breathtaking views, but they are also lonely and cold, and not places we can remain for any length of time. While the mountains are beautiful and vibrant, they carry their own danger and desolation, as well. I find that the wilderness stories in scripture are much of the same; stories of death and wandering also often carry intimate encounter with God, and God’s powerful redemption. In the same ways, stories of encounter with God in wilderness spaces also leave participants radically changed; sometimes only in positive ways, but other times, like Jacob, they walk away with a limp.

In many ways, this is the hope of this project: that we learn to consider the wilderness of scripture and our own lives with new eyes; that we learn to look for God and God’s provision in unexpected places. In the same breath, though, I hope that we come to understand that we cannot expect to pass through the wilderness without being fundamentally changed, just as those we encounter in scripture were. God’s presence will be near, surely, but we cannot experience it without our whole lives being upended. We each will experience our own wilderness journeys; sometimes desperately painful, sometimes exultant. I believe the great cloud of witnesses would encourage us to continue to put one foot in front of the other through both mountains and valleys,

but also remind us that sometimes the time in the wilderness is long, and that we will not emerge from it unchanged. Don't be afraid.

Wilderness in Scripture

In the first half of this project, we'll explore some of the key scriptural texts that have shaped my perspective of what scripture's vision of wilderness experiences. It is notable that you may not see all of the texts you are expecting—the English Standard Version of the Bible uses the word Wilderness 280 times in 266 verses,³ and to cover all of them would offer enough work for a lifetime. You may be surprised that some of the texts you expect to encounter aren't here—most notably, the story of the Israelite Exodus, and subsequent journey throughout the wilderness. If you find yourself wondering or sad that your favorite text isn't included, don't worry—these texts are here to serve as a model for wilderness experience, not as the sum total of all that the Bible has to say. I chose texts intentionally, with an eye towards including the various experiences of both men and women, as well as a goal to include stories across the arc of scripture's timeline. Some stories, like the Israelite exodus, are so huge and all-encompassing that to include them would mean the exclusion of every other text in a project this size. Other stories, such as some of the wilderness experiences of the prophets, are also significant, but we are constrained by space. It's important to note at this point that the exodus, especially, serves as a kind of blueprint for many of the other wilderness texts we will discuss, and it's worth

³ *Blue Letter Bible*, n.d. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/search.cfm?Criteria=Wilderness>.

considering the ways these texts echo both the goodness and challenge of forty years in the desert.

Another series of texts that aren't discussed at length in this section, but deserve a mention are the many times Jesus retreats to the mountains to pray and be alone with the Father. At times, the disciples are invited, and at times it's just Jesus, but the wilderness often serves as a place of refuge, rest, and connection with the Father for Jesus. This is an important model for us, and worth noting at this time.

Ultimately, these stories are here to serve as a map for the kinds of experiences we may have in the wilderness, as well as to bear witness to a sense of the depth and breadth of all that they may contain. They have served as helpful markers to me, and I hope that in your reading of them, you might also encounter and recognize God in both new and familiar ways.

Hagar:

There are few women in scripture whose stories have been used as many times and to speak to as many narratives as Hagar. While there are many readings of her story that are important, this particular reading is one that doesn't appear often, and that is a focus on the reality of her experience in the wilderness. Wilderness in this story is a place of fear, suffering, and even expected death; but it also becomes a place of freedom, encounter, and even a new life.

Hagar's story in Genesis begins in Genesis 16. We are introduced to her in verse 1 as Sarai's Egyptian servant, and then watch as she is given to Abram (who will later become Abraham, father of many nations) in order that barren Sarai might still have a child that is in some sense, hers. Hagar conceives shortly after sleeping with Abraham, and in the midst of new

life we see the first fracture in relationship. The Bible tells us that Hagar “looked with contempt on her mistress” (Genesis 16:4b) and in response, Sarai “deals harshly with her.” (Genesis 16:6) and Hagar runs away into the wilderness. Life in Abram’s household has become so intolerable for Hagar that the wilderness—with all of its uncertainty—is preferable.

The Bible tells us that the first wilderness encounter Hagar has is with the “Angel of the Lord,” but we are meant to understand through textual clues that this figure is no one other than God.⁴ God asks Hagar “where have you come from and where are you going?” (Genesis 16:8) but then in response to her answer tells her that she must return to her mistress and submit. Rather than minimizing her personhood, though, God speaks to Hagar by name. Breaking with all expectations, God makes Hagar a promise: similar to the one made with Abram, Hagar is told that her offspring will be “so greatly multiplied that they cannot be counted for multitude.” Furthermore, she is to name the son she has conceived Ishmael “For the LORD has given heed to your affliction.” (Genesis 16:11.) God has heard her and will be good to God’s word.

At this point in the story that Hagar makes a startling statement. Genesis 16:13 says “So she named the LORD who spoke to her, “You are El-roi”; for she said, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” This is radical for two reasons: Hagar claims to have seen God, but Exodus will tell us later that no one can see God’s face and live. (Exodus 33:20) Secondly, Hagar is giving God a name; but she is unique in this—she is the only woman, and indeed, the only person in the Old Testament to give God a name. All other times, we are simply told God’s name. We don’t know what happens after this significant moment; only that Hagar returns and has a son and names him Ishmael as she is instructed. While it would be tempting to describe this next part of the story as simply a time of two women fighting, of female strife,

⁴ Terrence E. Fretheim, *Genesis* (NIB 1; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015) 452

painting this as a conflict narrative doesn't make a lot of sense. Everyone in this family is dysfunctional, and as Genesis 21 will go on to further demonstrate, they are caught in a complicated web of both their own plans and desire and God's plans. This story extends beyond the narrative of two women struggling with jealousy and power; there is more at work than perhaps even we can quickly see.

Genesis 21 returns us to the complicated family narrative that we were introduced to in chapter 16. Seeing Ishmael playing with Isaac, Sarah, formerly Sarai, goes to Abraham to tell him to send Hagar and Ishmael away so that Ishmael won't contest the inheritance that she feels is rightfully Isaac's. Some commentators note that Sarah's language in verse 10 is similar to Pharaoh's action in Exodus 12:39-- but that this is significant, because Pharaoh's actions will ultimately lead to Israel's freedom.⁵ Scripture tells us that Abraham was distressed by this "on account of his son," (Genesis 21:11b) but again, God intervenes in this family drama. God tells Abraham not to worry, that he is to do whatever Sarah says, because the covenant will be fulfilled through Isaac, but a nation will also be made through Ishmael, since he is also Abraham's son. Faced with this seemingly impossible choice, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert that Israel will later wander in after the exile. We are told that they are sent with bread and a skin of water, and yet this feels futile. What is the point, we might wonder, of the provision that will surely soon run out? It seems in some ways simply a prolonging of the inevitable—this, just like in the Isaac story—is a place where Abraham is commanded to send a beloved son to a seemingly certain death.

At the inevitable end of their resources, Hagar puts Ishmael under a bush, and moves away to where she can no longer see him. She knows that this end of water means that they will

⁵Terrence E. Fretheim, *Genesis* (NIB 1; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015) 488

die, and she makes it clear that she cannot bear to see the death of her son. It is at this point, again, alone in the desert, that God intervenes, and yet this time we are told God responds to the voice of the child. At this moment when all seems hopeless, we read that “the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.” (Genesis 21:17-19) Not only have they been saved, but they are reminded of the promise God had made, and divine provision appears. Interestingly, though, this provision does not appear out of thin air; instead the text goes out of its way to tell us that “God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.” This is a provision that was there the whole time; and yet it required a change in vision—divine intervention—to be seen.

The story ends with a reassurance—that “God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.” (Genesis 21:21-21) The wilderness that Hagar and Ishmael were sent to die in becomes a place of flourishing; a place where they experience God’s presence and provision. A place that Hagar first fled too out of fear, and where the pair would later be sent to die becomes a home; and to this place Hagar will continue in her unusual role and bring even a wife for Ishmael. God’s provision looks nothing like we might expect, and yet it is abundant.



One of the things about the wilderness texts that I find incredibly compelling is the profound encounters with God that each individual has. God appears in often surprising, intimate

ways, and this story is no different. As we consider the ways that God interacts with Hagar, who by all rights should not be someone that God wants relationship with; she is a slave, a woman, and an Egyptian, and in this early world of the Patriarchs, we have often been taught that those things are disqualifiers. Not so, and this story is incredibly clear about this fact.

Right off the bat in Genesis 16, we see God finding Hagar by a spring in the wilderness. Hagar gets asked where she has come from and where she is going, which is significant in multiple ways. God already knows the answer to these questions, and clearly knows who she is, because she is called by name—and yet in this instant she is given the opportunity to give voice to her own lament and suffering. Hagar is the first woman in scripture to be given the kind of promises that God makes with her, seemingly out of the blue—and there is importance to this! Not only does Hagar encounter God in this moment, she sees God—and lives. The name she gives God is El- Roi, which is often translated as “the God who sees” but just as much as God has seen her, she has seen God. It seems that the more we feel seen by God, the more we also see God; there is a mutuality to this expression of relationship, and it is only able to happen in this liminal space the wilderness affords.

So often, we are told that the God of the Old Testament is distant, reticent, and angry. We get told that somehow God changed—became more tender, less distant—in the person of Jesus, or sometime in the intertestamental period. What seems surprising, then, about this story is the fact that God is neither distant or harsh. Hagar is met in the midst of some of the most desperate times of her life, and God provides for her in unexpected ways. Instead of functioning as some far-away puppeteer, God comes so close that Hagar says she has seen his face and lived. In the promise made to her, God the text says that the boy is to be named Ishmael, “for the LORD has given heed to your affliction.” Furthermore, in the second story, Hagar is invited to participate in

her own rescue: God could have filled the water skin, and yet we are told that God “opened her eyes” and from the well of water she suddenly saw, she participates in her own rescue, and that of her son. God has not only saved her but invited her into the kind of work that God is about: redemption, lifesaving work, and the offer of new life.

In this story, the wilderness fulfills two roles. It is a place of death, certainly. Hagar runs away into it from Sarai, and seems not to have a plan, to only know that she cannot be with Sarai. Later on, in the second story, we understand that all characters—Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael, know that the departure to the desert is a veritable death sentence. Even though Abraham sends them with water and food, they are finite resources, and it’s clear from the beginning that they leave knowing death is imminent.

On the other hand, while the wilderness in this story is a place where death is expected, it is, in other ways, a place of unexpected life. It is a place where God gives a promise of a new life in the form of her son, and a new kind of relationship with the living God. In the wilderness where she expects to die along with her son, she receives divine provision. Genesis doesn’t tell us all the details of the end of their story, but what we do read is both mysterious and beautiful. The last two verses of the story tell us that “God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.” (Genesis 21:21-21) This place that was meant for their death becomes their home. In the wilderness Ishmael is brought a wife from his mother’s people, and in this new life it seems that they flourish. Wilderness in this story serves as a kind of liminal space: while it is a place of danger and isolation, Hagar also encounters God here in ways that she did not back in Abraham and Sarah’s household. She is sent into the

wilderness to die, and yet she doesn't—she and her son gain an entirely new life, and it is one that is consistent with the promise God makes with her.

In Hagar's experience we understand that wilderness itself does carry danger. It may, in fact, feel like a place of death or last resort. Even in those times, however, God meets us; inviting us to give voice to our suffering and allowing us to join in the work of redemption. God does provide for Hagar in the wilderness, and yet it seems notable that this provision is already there. She must engage in a new kind of vision—a new way of seeing, that the wilderness offers her here. It seems that it is especially important, then, for us to consider what this means for us; are there places of danger or despair in our wilderness experiences? Do we want to head out to the wilderness to escape, because what we are leaving feels intolerable? Perhaps. Just because we enter the wilderness for these reasons, though—being sent or driven—it does not mean that we will not be provided for. It does not mean that this will not become a space where we get to be honest and feel freedom to tell the truth of our experience. Sometimes, the reality may look like Hagar's--a time to open our eyes to see a provision that was already there.

Elijah and the Burning Bush

One of my favorite stories in the entire Old Testament is the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19. While we are often told the end of this story, it is the beginning that especially intrigues me; this is a wilderness story of running away and powerful encounter. In many ways, for Elijah, the wilderness serves to provide a clarity that time in normal life could not. Contextually, this story takes place right after Elijah's triumphant encounter over the Priests of Baal. He has called down the fire of God from heaven and demonstrated to all the Israelites at Mount Carmel that the God of Israel, not Baal, is who a force to be reckoned with. After fire falls from heaven and consumes

not only the offering on the alter, but the very wood, stone and dust, the people recognize that the LORD is God, and Elijah captures and kills the prophets of Baal. Furthermore, the drought that has plagued Israel has ended. It seems like this is a time of immense victory and assurance in the provision of God, and perhaps in a way it is; but when our story opens, we find Elijah fleeing for his life from Jezebel, the evil queen, totally distraught and fed up with his calling.

1 Kings 19 begins with Elijah a day's journey into the wilderness, sitting alone under a solitary broom tree. It feels as though this is in some ways an echo of Jonah, distraught over the people of Nineveh, also crying out to God in frustration and sadness. Elijah asks to die—the man taunting Baal's prophets and calling down fire of 1 Kings 18 has become suicidal, alone under a tree in the wilderness. This is such a remarkable change that some scholars have debated there being a missing text because the transition between “larger than life” Elijah in the confrontation with the prophets of Baal and then suicidal Elijah feels so abrupt. However, it seems like the general trend is to actually read them as continuous stories and understand that he is truly both of those things—in quick succession. It's possible that in his lament he has in mind Moses, who also complained to the Lord in the wilderness, that his burden was too heavy to bear alone and so he asked the Lord to let him die (Num 11:14-15).⁶

Elijah, worn out in his despair, lays down and falls asleep, and suddenly an angel touches him. There is a cake “baked on hot stones” and a jar of water. This provision is significant: Seow writes that “The Hebrew word used for “hot coals” is a rare one. It is found elsewhere only in Isaiah 6:6.... with which the [seraph] touches the lips of Isaiah in response to the prophet's expression of unworthiness to accept the Lord's commission. The word used for jar is also uncommon...it is found in two other passages, 1 Sam 26:10-16, and 1 Kings 17:8-16, the latter

⁶Choon-Leong Seow, *Kings* (NIB 3; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) 140

having to do with the Lord's provision for Elijah's needs through the widow of Zarephath."⁷

There is a sense that this meal is meant to imply other things—Elijah's need for God, but also the ways God is willing to step in and provide. He consumes the food and then lays down again, full, but still distraught. The angel returns to him a second time, touches him again, and tells him "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." (1 Kings 19:7) After he has his second meal, the text tells us that he "went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God." We are not told anything further about this mysterious wilderness journey, and the ambiguity gives us space to wonder. What was it that Elijah thought about as he walked through those days and nights? I would imagine that we can fill in this experience fairly accurately from our own; I know that there are times in my own life that have felt dry and long, and I imagine that this wilderness walk allowed Elijah to roll around the unfairness of his situation in his head, making and unmaking his arguments with God and himself.

Once he comes to Horeb, he finds a cave and spends the night. It is possible that this cave is the same/a reference to the cleft in the rock that Moses stood in as the Lord "passed by" in Exodus 32:22. The word of the Lord comes to him and questions "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 9:10) Presumably God already knows what Elijah is doing, and yet he is forced to restate what he is there for. He tells the voice "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." The term used for Elijah's zeal is "used most frequently for God's jealousy as regards Israel's loyalty...Elijah, in other words, is jealous on behalf of the Lord, and he is angry because he has

⁷ Choon-Leong Seow, *Kings* (NIB 3; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) 140

been left by himself to do God's work and because he is persecuted for it."⁸ It is this kind of anger and desperation that drove him out into the wilderness, and left him ready to die under a tree. Interestingly, though, God does not answer his statement right away. Instead, he is told to go stand on the mountain before the Lord because the Lord is going to pass by.

This part of the story is the part we are often more familiar with. The text says "Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces 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 a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:11-13) This repeated question forces Elijah to name what he is doing and why.

We might pause and pay attention to the way that God shows up. Gina Hens-Piazza notes that "the passage is theologically important as a counterpoint to the high drama of chapter 18. There the Lord is known in spectacular manifestations of fire from heaven and sudden rainstorm after a drought. Here, however, the point is made quite deliberately that God is not locked into any one mode of appearing"⁹ This also stands in contrast to Moses's similar encounter with God on a mountain. In Exodus, God covers Moses, so that he won't die. Here, Elijah covers himself to prevent himself from dying. God is not limited in his appearance in Elijah's life, and this seems like a word to us as well: we cannot expect to encounter God in only familiar ways,

⁸ Choon-Leong Seow, *Kings* (NIB 3; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) 142

⁹Gina Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*. (ATOC 16, Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.) 186

and yet so often, I think we treat God like a vending machine: we put something in, and will gain the same result.

God questions why Elijah is in the wilderness. This is, as Hens-Piazza notes, “A familiar voice repeating a familiar question.”¹⁰ Elijah answers with the same answer—that he has been zealous, and yet now is alone, being hunted. Elijah is fixated on “I’m the only one left,” which might feel kind of self-righteous—and yet he’s also been traumatized by the experience at Mount Carmel. His perception in this moment is real, but it may also be incomplete. He complains about the fairness or justice of God in a way that feels reminiscent of Jonah, and yet God responds to him in an unexpected way. Rather than telling him that he is free to go, or that he can go ahead and die or quit, God answers by telling him that he must leave again through the wilderness, to anoint a new king and to anoint Elisha as his successor. God, in a sense, seems to say “yes, you are this powerful prophet. Yes, you are really struggling. And you can still go back, even though you’re struggling.” God doesn’t let Elijah go just because he’s depressed and burnt out. Furthermore, God’s speech to Elijah is symbolically important in that it’s third time repetition. “The last reference in the passage to a ‘way’ is in verse 7, in reference to the way that would be ‘too much’ for Elijah without divine sustenance in the wilderness.”¹¹ This seems harsh, but I don’t think we should read it as such. God hears Elijah and provides for him powerfully; he just doesn’t free him from his commission even though it feels to be too much. Instead, God offers the hope of a new Israelite government, as well as a partner for Elijah. He will no longer do his ministry alone; and this is in direct response to Elijah’s complaint that he is the only one

¹⁰Gina Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*. (ATOC 16, Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.) 190

¹¹Choon-Leong Seow, *Kings* (NIB 3; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) 142

left. God, though, tells Elijah to return to the wilderness; it is in the wilderness that he will anoint new kings and a new prophet, and continue to demonstrate God's power over Baal.



There are so many things in this story that strike me, but one of the most significant is what we see in Elijah. We know him as the powerful prophet such as portrayed in 1 Kings 18, and there is obviously an element of that to who he is—but we also realize that he is lonely, depressed, and ready to die if nothing changes. As one commentary says, “In the wilderness, Elijah appears in conflict with himself and with his God. He flees for his life but seeks that his life be taken in the wilderness. He sleeps in response to despair.”¹² Much of his complaint focuses around what he expects his role to look like, rather than what is common for the prophets across all times and places. Speaking God's truth to power is never easy, and yet the weight of this responsibility and the accompanying persecution seems to be too much for Elijah. As Hens-Piazza says, “Fear, not fidelity to the Lord, governs Elijah's actions in this story.”¹³

I am struck by the fact that God sends Elijah on a journey through the wilderness before he even has a conversation. Nothing changes immediately for him in the long walk—when he arrives at Horeb, he is still despondent and sad. The wilderness will ultimately be a place of change for him, and yet the process is slow, and unexpected. Once he reaches the mountain, he goes to sleep. Hens-Piazza tells us something important in her commentary about what occurs next, writing

¹² Gina Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*. (ATOC 16, Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.) 194

¹³ Gina Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*. (ATOC 16, Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.) 191

Finally, he prepares (perhaps presumptuously) to encounter God as Moses did. Covering himself to save his life, he encounters only a “sound of sheer silence.” When he does hear something, it is the same word of the Lord inquiring again why he is in the wilderness. Prophecy cannot be carried out in the seclusion of the isolated environs of nature. Despite the threats to his life, he must go back. In the course of a threefold commission, Elijah is commanded to replace himself as prophet. Moreover, the word of the Lord makes it clear that Elijah is not the only faithful follower.¹⁴

As much as he has tried to run from the calling of God, he cannot escape it. Even though God is gentle and quiet in this encounter, the response is clear: he must return to the things he is running from, and he must face the fact that God will not release him from the calling he is overwhelmed by. Of course, this response is not without provision: God does provide for Elijah throughout the story, offering food and the promise of a companion. This is not God operating out of anger or frustration, but out of a desire to see Elijah live into the task set before him.



This story is a wilderness story, and yet the wilderness is no peaceful retreat. It is a place of powerful encounter with God, certainly, but it is not a place where a calling can be lived out. It takes a time of travel, and the initial escape, for Elijah to be willing to return to the work God has laid before him, and yet he cannot hide away in the mountains forever. The wilderness will be the place he both runs into and returns from, a place of ignoring a calling and journey towards a calling, as it is, I suspect, for many of us. I think that in many senses it takes the silence of the wilderness for Elijah to become honest; the repeated question from God hints at this. We know that he is conflicted in the beginning of the story, and this, I suspect, is the way that many of us

¹⁴ Gina Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*. (ATOC 16, Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.) 194

enter a wilderness story. In a lot of senses, the wilderness creates a clarity; a kind of silence that allows Elijah to sort through his experience and become able to hear from God. I suspect this is true for many of us, as well; it takes time and space way from our normal lives to give up our stubbornness and desire. We may expect to encounter God in the same ways we always have in the wilderness, but the wilderness offers Elijah something else: a God who hears him, allows him to lament, but ultimately will not release him from a calling. In the midst of that, though, God is faithful to give Elijah a time of re-entry into his life, as well as a partner; God has heard Elijah's complaint, and responds accordingly.

It is also worth noting that it would be irresponsible to not mention the reality of what we might call Elijah's seeming depression and suicidal ideation. He wants the wilderness to be a place of death, and while mental health is not a glaringly obvious feature of the Old Testament, his desire is not ignored by God. He is offered community in response to his deep sense of loneliness, and a lasting encounter with God that is so unlike the flashy one on Mount Horeb. God does not hesitate to be honest with Elijah, and Elijah is not released from his calling, but he is given new tools and resources, as well as an extended period of time away from the most immediate and overwhelming things to him. There is more to this story than perhaps meets the eye, and powerfully, God knows Elijah more than Elijah is able to know even himself.

Jacob Wrestles with God

Of all the many stories we read about Jacob, his encounter with God in Genesis 32 is one of the most important. Jacob is on his way to meet his brother Esau, and to see him again for the first time after their long separation. He is afraid that Esau will be seeking his life in response for Jacob's tricky behavior around their birthright, and he is right to be afraid. Nevertheless, he is on

his way to the meeting, hopeful for reconciliation. The text is very clear that Jacob is afraid; he has encounter with angelic hosts at the beginning of Chapter 32 that serve to echo another encounter he has already had, and to remind him of God's presence. This does not seem to be enough, and we read of Jacob experiencing a kind of vulnerability. He ends up praying to God; using language to "places God and himself in the flow of the generations" and both reminds God of what he has done, and seemingly trying to hold God to what comes next.¹⁵ Jacob is a complicated figure; chosen by God, one of the Patriarchs, but also a trickster, and a deceiver, always wrestling and working to get the best angle on something. His vulnerability gets exposed in a really profound way in this text; we see in the division of his company and possessions, and now this bargain-like prayer with God that he is very fearful and anxious about his meeting with Esau.

The night before their planned meeting, Jacob sends his family and all his possessions across the ford of the Jabbok. Left with nothing, he finds himself in the middle of what is suddenly a somewhat vulnerable and lonely place. There "a man wrestled with him until daybreak." (Genesis 22:24) While it does not become immediately clear when Jacob understands who his partner is, the text leaves us fairly certain that this wrestling partner isn't a regular man; it seems that this mysterious stranger is God. Commentators will argue over the identity of this figure, but I tend to land where Walter Bruggeman does: I do think this is God, based off Jacob's later statement, but I also think there's purpose in the ambiguity of the shadowy figure at hand. This is something other than the "promise filled aspect of Yahweh known in the daylight...Jacob must deal with the terrifying face of [God,] hidden in sovereignty."¹⁶

¹⁵ Walter Bruggeman, *Genesis* (Interpretation 1; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982) 263

¹⁶ Walter Bruggeman, *Genesis* (Interpretation 1; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982) 266

We are unsure if Jacob fully grasps who it is that he wrestles with as they struggle. They wrestle through the night and when the man does not immediately overcome Jacob, he touches Jacob's hip socket and Jacob's hip comes out of joint. Terrence Fretheim writes of this injury in striking terms, saying

Jacob does not become a victim of God, reduced to groveling or to nothing before the power of the Almighty. On the other hand, it attests to God's graciousness; Jacob has wrestled with God to the break of day, yet his life is preserved. So, the mark symbolizes both who Jacob is and who God is...The author does not report that Jacob let go of God or even that God has left him. The store moves immediately into the confrontation with Esau. In some sense this means that God and Jacob remain bound to each other, facing this future.¹⁷

At this point in the text, the stranger tells Jacob to let him go, for the day is breaking. Jacob refuses, however, saying "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." (Genesis 32:26) "The problem with the dawning light is not for God, it's for Jacob. If Jacob sees God's face in the light, he will die—and yet "Jacob is willing to risk death for the sake of the divine blessing."¹⁸ This is an echo of other stories: of Hagar, and Abraham, and even of the Moses story. Even so close to God's power, and the possibility of death, death is also possible at the hands of Esau. Jacob will not let go. There is too much riding on this blessing, and Jacob is willing to risk whatever it takes.

The daylight begins to break, and God asks Jacob's name. Then, in a stunning move, he both offers Jacob a new name and reveals who he has wrestled with the entire night, saying "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:27) Jacob, seemingly starting to understand what he has just

¹⁷Terrence E. Fretheim, *Genesis* (NIB 1; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015) 567-56

¹⁸ Terrence E. Fretheim, *Genesis* (NIB 1; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015) 566

experienced, asks for the name of the man. The text tells us the only reply he gets is “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him.” (Genesis 32:28)

It seems that this is the moment that Jacob realizes what he has experienced. We are told “So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.” (Genesis 32:29)



Jacob’s encounter with God is significant, but it is also unusual. In this encounter in the wilderness, Jacob gains a new name, and with it a new identity. There is a purposeful ambiguity Fretheim writes “God initiates and engages in the wrestling and ‘the one who strives with God’, Jacob, responds in kind. Jacob cannot struggle with God if God if God refuses to be so engaged. God’s giving this name, then, has implications for God as well as for Jacob. It affirms a divine commitment to stay with Jacob in the struggle. God will be caught up in this relationship. God’s promise (28:15) involves not a passive presence, but an active, engaged relationship.”¹⁹ God, as we have seen in all of our stories so far, bucks the stereotype of the distant, angry God we are often told exists in the Old Testament. This is a God that is uniquely engaged; so engaged, in fact, that he physically wrestles with Jacob. We might wonder why it is that God chooses this kind of encounter—and some commentators would argue that this is, at best, a disciplinary moment for Jacob’s past history of cheating and desire to move forward into the future on his own. However, I find that hard to read into this story: there seems to be no particular judgment or

¹⁹ Terrence E. Fretheim, *Genesis* (NIB 1; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015) 566-567

repentance of or from Jacob. It seems that God always challenges humans in ways that are in the best interest of those chosen, but also in ways that are relevant for their future.

Jacob's new name is significant for many reasons. It doesn't indicate a change in character, which might seem to challenge our ideas of what a wilderness experience should be. There is kind of revelation before transformation, or a way in which God seems to give Jacob a name he must learn to live into rather than one he already has embodied in its fullness. Fretheim says that "God gives the name to Jacob in recognition of who he has been and presently is, not what he becomes in the moment....it represents Jacob's strength and capacity for struggling well. If Jacob had not struggled and prevailed, there would have been no new name, at least not the name Israel."²⁰

We have to wonder what it is that Jacob was hoping for when he chose to wrestle with this stranger throughout the darkness of the night. Surely there were times when he must have been tempted to give up, or when the understanding of who his opponent might have been crept into the back of his mind. He holds fast, however, wanting a blessing that he believes this unknown assailant will offer. Walter Bruggeman writes that

Jacob had asked for a blessing. Perhaps he dreamed of security, land, more sons. But what he got was a new identity through an assault from God. He had been named Jacob—'heel/trickster/over-Reacher/supplanter.' Each of these is true, but not flattering. Now he is 'Israel.' The etymology of Israel is disputed. Perhaps it means 'God rules,' 'God preserves,' 'God protects.' But whatever the etymology, a new being has been called forth. He is now a man (and a community) linked not only to a nemesis of the night but to a promise-keeper of the day. Something happens in this transaction that is irreversible.²¹

²⁰ Terrence E. Fretheim, *Genesis* (NIB 1; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015) 566-567

²¹ Walter Bruggeman, *Genesis* (Interpretation 1; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982) 268

This is a new nation that comes, but not through any expected way. Jacob does not succeed in the usual manner; in a sense, it is as though he loses. Sure, he gains a new name—but Jacob also walks away with a limp; and this limp is just as significant as his new name.



In this story, the wilderness is a place of transition. Jacob is leaving behind the comfort and struggle of his life with Laban, but he is heading into a kind of unknown future. In a sense God is an assailant in the desert, almost attacking Jacob, but Jacob also gains an unusual blessing and a new identity. Wilderness is a kind of proving ground; Jacob must choose tenacity and to wrestle before he can gain a new identity, but he also is joined by God in a lasting and powerful way. God is powerful, but also merciful, choosing to meet Jacob at his level, and to engage in a way that Jacob understands. Jacob is intentionally alone in this moment, but God is not far. This wilderness space is a time between old and new lives, but it's also a time for Jacob to grapple with something. Many times, we also enter the wilderness in transition. We also bring things we are wrestling with, frustration, anger, and pain. It feels significant that the wilderness provides a space to sort through them: in this liminal space, we can wrestle until daylight if we need to.

Importantly, too, daylight does come. The wrestling does not last forever. God is merciful in the act of wrestling and with his presence; it does fundamentally change Jacob in physical ways and in terms of his identity, but Jacob also crosses the river to meet his family without the text telling us that God has left. I think it's important that this particular text doesn't expect too much of the experience either. Jacob does get a new name, but it takes him a long time to live into it. The wilderness offers the impetus for change, but it is in his return to communal life that

God will do a long and slow work to change him fully. This actually feels really encouraging to me: God does not just show up for a transformational experience and then disappear. Just as with Jacob, we may powerfully grapple with, and even see God in the wilderness, but it's okay, too, if the total transformation doesn't occur right away. Sometimes we might have to return from the wilderness to the things we are running from, bolstered by trust in the God who met us in the night, and willing to walk into that unknown future knowing that God has chosen to accompany us into it. There is space for both initial encounters, but also returns to what we know, bolstered by the new names we've allowed God to speak over us in the midst of a wilderness experience.

It is possible, too, that we might find ourselves literally transformed in the wilderness, and I want us to recognize that nothing is beyond the Spirit's reach in this space of encounter. Many of us can tell stories of students seemingly gaining new identities, and one of my own guiding experiences comes to mind here. My student started our backpacking trip complaining every step of the way to our first lake. Convinced that she didn't want to be there, that she wouldn't be able to finish the trip, we hiked the whole day to the sound of her loud insistence that she didn't want to walk another step, that the mosquitos were too bad, and that we were totally unkind to "make" her keep walking forward. Overwhelmed by the mosquitos that made everything feel like a circle of the *Inferno*, and frustrated at the way her complaint seemed to shift the attitude of the entire group, I found myself growing impatient by the end of the day and filled with dread as I put on my backpack the next morning. I found myself begging God to send me wisdom and patience and grace. In return, I heard words come out of my mouth in response to her complaints that certainly didn't feel like my own. Instead of reflecting the frustration I felt, they were patient, and gentle, and kind.

Each day, things grew slightly better, but she continued to make it clear that she was frustrated her parents had made her come, and that nothing we did was something she wanted to do. The fourth day of the trip, we found ourselves at a mountain lake surrounded by cliffs that we had carried in gear to climb on. This student at first decided she wasn't interested in climbing, but at the encouragement of friends she chose to cautiously and slowly make her way up a rock wall. I was sure she would go halfway at the most, and yet in awe, I stood in the alpine meadow and watched her climb higher and higher, reaching the top and raising her hands in victory and celebration. This one success changed the tone of the whole trip for her. What had felt like endless wrestling and pushback disappeared, and the girl who days before had been the loudest complainer started to enthusiastically encourage the other students, instead. That night, the group's pastor shared the gospel, and I watched in awe as she told us that she wanted to begin a relationship with Jesus. The very last day of our trip, I went to tell her goodbye and found her crying. When I asked her what was wrong, she told me that she was crying because she didn't want to leave, because it had been the "best week of her life." Somehow, in some way, the Spirit met her in this strange space, one that she had been resistant to enter and scared to engage. I can attest that what I saw in her, both then and when I ran into her a year later, showed someone who had a similar experience to Jacob: a new, sudden shift in identity, and a life that slowly was transformed in response to the work God had done in the sometimes painful encounter.

Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

When we think about wilderness stories, the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is not always one that comes to our minds, but it's an important one for several reasons. The story opens with an angel of the Lord appearing to Phillip and telling him "Get up and go

toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road)” (Acts 8:26). Notable here is the text’s unusual notation of where the road is, as well as Phillip’s immediate obedience. Phillip immediately gets up and starts down the road. As he was coming down the road, he encounters a man who the text tells us is “an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.”(Acts 8:27-28) This is notable for many reasons, but one observation Beverly Gaventa makes on this point is that his social class “only intensifies the impression that he is spiritually hungry and not materially impoverished.²²”

The Spirit speaks this time and tells Phillip to that he must go over to the chariot and stay near it. In this moment, Phillip gets sent running down the road, chasing after this man. He comes close to the chariot and recognizes what he is reading: it is Isaiah, the prophet. Hearing him reading, somehow, he knows to ask if the man understands what he is reading. The text says the eunuch responds, “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So, he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.” (Acts 8:31)

Sitting in the chariot, they work through a passage from Isaiah, describing the way the messiah would be led towards slaughter. The eunuch asks for clarification, asking whether the prophet talks about himself, or someone else. At this point, the text tells us “Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.” (Acts 8:35) This is a complicated passage to interpret, but Phillip works with what he has—a section from the prophet, a captive audience, and the isolation of the wilderness road, and there shares the good news. It feels mysterious and joyful, in a way; so little would lead us to think that these particular

²² Robert W. Wall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (NIB 10; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 143

men should be together, in this space, and at this time, and yet the Spirit has not led Phillip astray. He is meant to be here.

The men continue on down the road, and along the side they notice some water. The eunuch draws Phillip's attention to the water, asking "'Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?'" (Acts 8:36) The text tells us that both men enter the water, and there, in the middle of this in-between space on the road, Phillip baptizes him. We read that as they came out of the water, "the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing." (Acts 8:39) Mysteriously, the Spirit sets Phillip down in a town, and he travels about, preaching the gospel.



There are so many beautiful pieces of this story, and so many things that we can't neglect as we consider its message. Notable here is the fact that the eunuch is everything that suggests he "shouldn't" be the focus of such a lavish display of love and desire from God if we limit ourselves to narrow categorization. He is a foreigner, a different race, a sexual minority, doesn't live in Israel, wealthy, and extraordinarily powerful. He is representative of the kind of great financial and political power that the Kingdom doesn't seem to be about, and yet, here he is on a wilderness road encountering spiritual crises. It's especially interesting, because his crisis isn't about his social standing—he isn't oppressed, he's very powerful. He isn't neglecting to seek after God—he is traveling all this way to worship. Part of Phillip's job here is to "to clarify

membership requirements of those belonging to God, sometimes in ways that redraw Israel's boundaries to include the excluded ones."²³

In this wilderness encounter, God makes it clear that he cares about everyone—he cares so much, and so deeply, that God will go to any length, including sending an apostle running down the road, to make it clear that this man is welcome. Willie Jennings writes that

Philip preached to him an intimate sermon for one. This is a lavish act of divine self-giving that should not be explained by utility. Too often the eunuch has been interpreted simply as an instrument, as a necessary linchpin for evangelization and mission into the unknown parts of the world. Such ways of reading this story miss the joy that fills this scene and reflect a vision of humanity as nothing more than tools and a vision of God that has forgotten the extravagance of divine love. God has come for the eunuch precisely in his difference and exactly in the complexities of his life. He matters, not because he is close to worldly power and this a more appealing pawn. He simply matters, and he is being brought close. He will no longer be far from home. Philip while interpreting a text is performing another text, Isaiah 56:3-5. The eunuch is being brought into a future promised especially for him, one in which he will not be in the shadows or at the margins of the people of God, but at a center held together with strong cords that capture our differences, never despising them, but bringing them to glorious life and light.²⁴

This is an encounter filled with joy. This isn't just a proof-text for evangelism as it often has been used; this is a God who is saying that the man matters—just as he is. He is welcome. Even further, he is left “free in his joy.” Jennings writes “Disciples do need direction and guides, but first disciples must know their freedom in Jesus Christ. The church has often been too impatient and sometimes downright fearful of that freedom, choosing instead to quickly impose an image of the true, the good, and the beautiful example on those who have been made free by the Spirit.....God has broken the connection for him between identity and destiny, between

²³ Robert W. Wall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (NIB 10; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 142

²⁴ Willie James Jennings, *Acts*. (Belief, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.) 85

definition and determination, and inserted a new trajectory for his life. He is moving forward toward God through the Son and in the Spirit.”²⁵

Church, when will we pay attention to this? There is so much freedom found in Christ. When we encounter people in wilderness spaces, in places that are in-between, are we quick to tell them what their freedom needs to be like? Or do we celebrate that this Spirit of God can do all things—including breaking a human’s life trajectory and set them free into a new identity, a new future, and a new promise? This story is remarkable, and it isn’t to proof-text mission work. It isn’t to say that some people are in and some people are out. This is a story of God allowing to humans to be in a remote, desolate place at one time so that one might experience the joy of obedience and the work of a guide, and the other might be welcomed into a new life and identity in God’s family. In this wilderness, it is God’s agents, appearing unexpectedly, who simply listen to what they are told, and get to enact this beautiful story of welcome and redemption in return. Individuals matter deeply and profoundly to God, and it is not our responsibility or job to do anything but be willing and obedient to the Spirit’s leading.



This is a wilderness narrative, but not a typical one. This story is filled with strange encounters, the Spirit’s movement, and unlikely figures. Robert Wall describes the wilderness note in this story as a sign to us that this is a liminal space, where transformation might occur.²⁶ It is the exact kind of in-between space where anything is possible; and indeed, neither man is recorded as being surprised to suddenly be in one another’s company. Willie Jennings notes that “Phillip must move forward at the demand of the Lord. This is not precise direction, but Philip’s

²⁵Willie James Jennings, *Acts*. (Belief, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.) 86

²⁶ Robert W. Wall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (NIB 10; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 143

obedience is clear and that is all God needs to direct disciples—imprecise direction and clear obedience. His destination is a desert road, that place that is no place.”²⁷ Even though this isn’t a place that Phillip expects to be doing ministry, or even may particularly want to be, the wilderness is where God sends him—and as Beverly Gaventa points out, the command is itself important in its absurdity.²⁸ Why be in the wilderness when civilization is so much safer and more predictable? In this particular narrative, it is for encounter with God—but this encounter occurs in relationship, which is also telling. Even further, this is not an encounter that occurs in the temple. The man has already left and is on his way home. This seems especially significant in light of the work of wilderness ministry: is it possible that those who would not feel completely comfortable or welcome within the walls of a church are the exact people who God is looking to encounter in the in-between space of the wilderness? This is still a space where God is, certainly, but it isn’t the one we might first envision.

Phillip is brought to the wilderness for one reason, and that is for the salvation of this Eunuch. This part of the story always brings chills—but really, after all we have seen in the scriptural narrative, why should this be surprising? God is always going to great lengths to seek individuals out for relationship, and the eunuch is no differ. Even though everything about him seems to be surprising, the fact remains—God desires a relationship. Willie Jennings describes this encounter powerfully, writing

God is chasing after this eunuch. We can say this because Philip has been brought exactly to this point by the Holy Spirit. He must run behind the horses, because God will not leave this traveler alone.... Now at the command of the Spirit, the reading and the interpretation of holy word must always bend toward the communal, and it must ultimately issue in a joining. ‘I need a guide,’ he says in effect. The response of the

²⁷ Willie James Jennings. *Acts*. (Belief, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.) 82

²⁸ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (ATOC 16, Nashville: Abingdon, 2003) 141

eunuch to the question opens up the moment that God has been hoping and waiting for—Philip is invited to join the Ethiopian in his chariot.²⁹

It is an experience almost comedic in its timing, but part of the beauty of this wilderness space is that it leaves no doubt. No one else seems to be around, and the Spirit makes it abundantly clear to Phillip what he must do: this is the man God means for him to encounter.

In this wilderness encounter with the Spirit, we can be reminded of the prophets, like Elijah and Ezekiel, who are sent in accordance with God’s timing. The wilderness space offers a chance for there to be no questions about what God is saying or doing—but it’s also an encounter filled with joy.

The eunuch asks to be baptized, and in this movement, I believe we should see all the other people who have encountered God in wilderness spaces and walked into rivers in response. So often in scripture, these encounters indicate a transformation: we think of Israel, God’s people, walking through Jordan and the Red Sea. Jacob, the wrestler, fording the Jabbok with a new name and a new limp. Jesus, the Incarnate God, baptized and sent into ministry. Here, it is someone who is seemingly outside the kingdom, in an out-of-the-way place, who God desires so much that he sends Phillip to chase him down. Willie Jennings, again, notes about this place as they part—“There on the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza, from the near and known to the distant and unknown, Philip will again witness a God whose love expands over every road and transgresses every bordered identity. The Spirit is the Lord of the road.”³⁰ There is no place that God is not; scripture sings us this over and over again. Even in this wilderness space, this road in the middle of nowhere- God is here, and the eunuch is set free to a new life. May that

²⁹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Belief, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.)83

³⁰ Willie James Jennings, *Acts*. (Belief, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.) 82

also be true for us: may we meet the Lord of the road on any trail, river, or sidewalk we head down.

The Transfiguration

It wouldn't be a full discussion of wilderness texts without discussing the ultimate "mountaintop experience" -- the story of the transfiguration. While this story appears in more than one gospel, we'll take a look at the Matthew text (17:1-8), especially because it focuses the most on the physical setting that this encounter happens in, as well as for its detail in other areas. This story offers us a unique model of what it looks like to encounter God, as well as to come away from that encounter and return to our normal lives.

The narrative opens after Jesus has predicted his death and resurrection. The text tells us "Six days later," (subtly reminding us of creation),³¹ Jesus takes Peter, James, and his brother John, and leads them up to a high mountain, by themselves. Some commentators note that the high mountain is "symbolically a place where heaven touches earth"³² and it feels clear that this is both a lonely and desolate place, but also one where something beautiful is about to happen. Suddenly, Jesus is "transfigured"—his face and clothing begin to shine, and his clothes turn white. Moses and Elijah, reminders that the law and prophets are fulfilled in Jesus³³, appear out of nowhere. Peter, always quick to speak turns to Jesus and offers to build three dwellings—but this is perhaps a failure on his part to understand. As Stanley Hauerwas says, "Peter's suggestion... implies that he fails to understand that Moses and Elijah, God's good servants, now

³¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (BTOC, Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2015.) 154

³²Anna Case-Winters. *Matthew* (Belief, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015) 212

³³ Anna Case-Winters. *Matthew* (Belief, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015) 212

worship Jesus. Peter wants to build booths to commemorate this great event, but Jesus’s flesh is the booth of God’s presence. Accordingly, Jesus cannot be, as Peter wishes, confined to a location, but rather Jesus must go to Jerusalem, and the disciples must go with him.”³⁴ While this location matters, they cannot stay here forever.

Just as Peter is finishing his offer, a bright cloud appears and the same Voice that spoke at Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan comes down from heaven and says “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”(Matthew 17:5) In commentary that always makes me laugh, Fredrick Bruner points out that “even the evangelists knew that Peter was a talker. God cannot wisely wait till Peter is finished or his Voice will be indefinitely postponed.”³⁵ The disciples fall to the ground in fear; the combination of the voice and the cloud are too much to bear. Notably, the cloud announces the presence of God: it has appeared twice before to do this in the Hebrew scripture—once during the wilderness wanderings (Exodus 40:14-38) and again during the dedication of the first temple. (1 Kings 8:10-11).³⁶

God the voice is terrifying—but Jesus, ever their friend, touches them and tells them to “get up, and do not be afraid.” Fredrick Bruner notes that Jesus’s healing is often found in both touch and word—especially in the ten miracles of Matthew 8 and 9³⁷ and that this moment, where Jesus touches them and lifts them onto their feet may be one of the most important parts of the story. He writes that “Jesus shines not just to shine, not just to impress, not even in the final analysis just to make us obedient or trembling, but especially to help us up, to put us on our feet,

³⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (BTOC, Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2015.) 157

³⁵ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew 13-28*. (Matthew, 2, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007) 171

³⁶ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew 13-28*. (Matthew, 2, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007). 171

³⁷ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew 13-28*. (Matthew, 2, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007) 178

to enable us to breathe again so that we *can* be obedient to his Word, can ‘Listen to him.’”³⁸ This isn’t a theophany that is supposed to just leave us in terror; this is the Word made flesh and walking among us, lifting us back onto our feet again.

The disciples look up and realize that they are alone again—no one but Jesus is with them. Instead of staying in the rarified air of the mountaintop, they come off the mountain—and Jesus orders them not to tell anyone about their experience until after he has been raised from the dead. The disciples are confused, asking why Elijah must come first, and he tells them that “Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also, the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.” (Matthew 17:17) The text tells us at this point, the disciples understand that he is referring to John the Baptist.



This is an important encounter with God, and what gets learned here matters. The first part of the encounter is terrifying to the disciples. Interestingly, these theophanies in scripture are “not usually occasions of ecstasy or uplift; they are ordinarily extremely frightening and, in a certain sense, humiliating. “The fear that arises from the nearness of God produces a fundamentally different behavior than that of the mystic or gnostic,” (Schlatter, *Der Evangelist*, 530) who tend to be thrilled or divinized by their spiritual experiences.”³⁹ There are certainly many for whom their wilderness theophanies are the experience of the mystic, but that isn’t the case for the disciples here. They are flat-out afraid, just like many of our other characters have been—fully expecting to die in this divine presence, almost.

³⁸ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew 13-28*. (Matthew, 2, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007) 179

³⁹ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew 13-28*. (Matthew, 2, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007). 178

The Voice, though, has no intention for this to happen. The Voice is here not to draw attention to the Father, although the Father is talking; this is the Father here to say that all attention needs to be on the Son because the Father is well pleased with him. One commentary makes this point explicitly, writing that “Although three transcendent figures are present, the heavenly voice charges the disciples to hear Jesus. As in the Shema (Deut 6:4) “hear” carries its OT connotation of “obey” and is the same command given with regard to the “prophet like Moses” whom God would send. The disciples fall on their faces in fearful response to the theophany as in Exodus 34:30, Daniel 10:9, and Hab 3:2 LXX.”⁴⁰ This is an echo of many of the Old Testament stories we’ve considered, and we are left with no doubt that Jesus is God Incarnate, fully God, and fully in control.

What’s significant here is that this Jesus is both full of glory and full of compassion. After the noise fades away, the cloud leaves, and there are no visitors; Jesus remains, and he lifts up his fearful friends. This is God in flesh and blood, and his first reaction is to tell his friends not to be afraid. Jesus has become the “tabernacle” (*skēnē*), the reality of God’s abiding presence with us.”⁴¹ Furthermore, this glorious presence of God isn’t distant, or accessible only to a few—Jesus is present with them. Interestingly, although the glory of the experience fades, Jesus doesn’t. No one can say it better than Bruner, who writes ““just as these first disciples came down from their mountaintop experience with the glorified Son of God, so disciples still must “come down” from their great encounters with God; but, note well, Henry adds, *Jesus comes*

⁴⁰ PHEME PERKINS, *Mark* (NIB 8; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 364

⁴¹ PHEME PERKINS, *Mark* (NIB 8; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 364

down with them, and so disciples can *talk* to him on the way down, as they do here, about their questions.”⁴²

What would it look like if we told the church—told students—told ourselves—this? We might have beautifully ecstatic experiences, or just profound encounters, but we will have to come down as well—and yet, the return doesn’t mean that God is no longer with us. Jesus embodies this reality; allowing the disciples to process the implications of what they have experienced and witnessed and accompanying them on a journey down the mountain and back towards suffering. This shouldn’t be a cause for fear; the kingdom isn’t brought about in victory and might, at least not yet. On this, speaking of the scribes who interpreted the scripture the disciples ask about, writes “They thought of both in terms of earthly glory and victory. They did not understand that the purpose of God in both was worked out in terms of lowliness and suffering. There is glory on the mountain of transfiguration, but it is a glory that meant suffering for the Baptist and would mean suffering for Jesus.”⁴³



One of the tropes that often gets thrown around when it comes to the wilderness is the idea of a mountaintop experience—and it is from this story, as well as Moses and a few other prophets, that it seems like that idea emerges. When most people talk about their “mountaintop” times, what comes to mind is spiritual ecstasy and closeness with God; not the fear that fills this encounter or the things that happen afterward. So often we expect encounters with God to be different from the way scripture actually explains them, but this story serves to remind us that

⁴² Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew 13-28* (Matthew, 2, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007). 181

⁴³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*. (PTNC, 1, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992) 444

there is sometimes fear and terror found in the glory of an unexpected encounter with the living God.

One of the most significant parts of this wilderness experience is that initially, it's so beautiful and unusual that Peter suggests that they stay on this mountaintop forever. He seems to understand that God's presence is there—and is drawn to this place of glory. It makes sense—who wouldn't want to be forever in a place where God's presence is? We often seem to feel this way, also—think of the times you've been on a retreat or in a particular experience and longed to stay in those feelings forever! Those are honest feelings; they just aren't realistic. What gets made clear to Peter is also what needs to become clear to us: even though this is good, they can't stay. Anna Case Winters writes that “There will be no dwelling upon the mountain top in ‘spiritual retreat’ from the world. Jesus and the disciples are very soon thereafter called to come down from the high places and minister in the valley where great need awaits them.”⁴⁴ At this point, we can't be surprised—this has been true of all the wilderness stories we've looked at. No one really gets to stay in the wilderness forever—whether it's a place of joy or suffering, sooner or later, they need to leave. The thing is, though, it's also important to point out that Peter isn't wrong because he wants something bad. “the problem is Peter's wanting to do something good, and each case, to do something good for Jesus. But our notions of good are often way off.”⁴⁵ It seems like the most good would be to stay in the presence—but the story of this wilderness time is that those experiences are temporary, and the return to the valley where the need beckons is inevitable.

⁴⁴ Anna Case-Winters. *Matthew* (Belief, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015) 215

⁴⁵ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew 13-28*. (Matthew, 2, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007) 170

The temptation of both the literal and metaphorical wilderness, especially when it is beautiful or a place of refuge, is always there. One of my favorite quotes, though, asks and answers this reality so beautifully—Willi Unseold writes

Why not stay out there in the wilderness the rest of your days and just live in the lap of Satori or whatever you want to call it?" And the answer, my answer to that is, "Because that's not where people are." And the final test for me of the legitimacy of the experience is, "How well does your experience of the sacred in nature enable you to cope more effectively with the problems of mankind when you come back to the city?" And now you see how this phases with the role of wilderness, It's a renewal exercise and as I visualize it, it leads to a process of alternation. You go to nature for your metaphysical fix- your reassurance that there's something behind it all, and it's good. You go back to where men are, to where men are messing up because men tend too, and you come back with a new ability to relate to your fellow man and help your fellow man relate to each other.⁴⁶

This is an appropriate test for both the disciples and for us in the midst of the wilderness- does it matter? Does what we saw, heard, or experienced impact us? Fredrick Bruner asks this in a slightly different way, writing "In this story the ascent to the heights of the mountain and "peak" experiences of encounter with God is followed by descent into suffering and service in the alley of need where God's calling beckons. Ascent and descent are inextricably bound for the followers of Jesus, just as they are for him."⁴⁷

We know wilderness experiences are impactful. Sometimes they do look like suffering and loneliness and being cast out—but then we read these stories and realize that as much as they are painful, they also become places of God's provision. Other times they are ecstatic and lavish—but those must end, and we must return to the work God calls us too, usually in the valley amidst suffering. Always, it seems, they serve as places of unique clarity: illuminating

⁴⁶ *Readings*. Garrison, NY: Outward Bound, n.d.

⁴⁷ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew 13-28*. (Matthew, 2, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007). 178

new truths about God, ourselves, and the work God might be calling us to. Many times, also, they are liminal spaces—times of transition, where we might encounter something that we would not otherwise see. What I hope we come to recognize is not to fear either; they are not flatly good, or flatly bad, and God's presence exists long after the powerful encounter. In these stories we have never seen or heard God leaving—after the deafening theophanies, or the sight of God's face, there is a sense and a reality in which God's presence stays with these fragile, sinful, fearful, broken humans.

Whether your wilderness experiences of the are good or hard, I hope this journey through these texts has revealed a new depth of importance to wilderness encounters, as well as a renewed sense that God's heart is for you, that these times of ecstasy and suffering both lead to intimate and gentle encounters with the creator of all things. I hope you have seen a God who reveals himself in many tender ways to people who seem to be on the fringes; often experiencing suffering or pain. I hope that in the days you have to walk back off the mountain or find yourself sloggng through the desert you are able to look to Jesus, who is with you, and find yourself feeling seen and known. 1 John 4:18 tells us that perfect love casts out all fear, and my prayer for you in the midst of the wilderness is that places of fear are replaced by the knowledge you are held in this perfect love, desired by the same God who provides water in the desert, snacks for a suicidal disciple, lifts his friends back to their feet, and sends apostles chasing after chariots.

Part 2

Why Wilderness?

As much as I love the chance to take a deep dive into the world of these Biblical texts, I am also a deeply practical person, and my theological training has given me an eye towards the practicality and longevity of theological study. There's always a portion of my mind that wonders if the discussions we have over text aren't relevant just to me and my academic colleges, but also to my middle-school aged student, elderly grandmother, or homeless neighbors, they might not really be that meaningful. With that in mind, I wanted to take the time in the second half of this project to develop a practical theology of sorts—why is the wilderness space important, and what does it do in us? Is there something that sets wilderness experiences apart from other kinds of ministry, learning, or encounter with God? I would argue that there is, but as it turns out, there is more than just a perceived experience. While the church has often struggled to put a “why” to questions of the importance of wilderness, the same has not typically been true in secular research. This section allows us to explore what other, wise voices have already demonstrated to be true and accurate, and to understand the ways that the church might learn and grow from their witness. I hope that we can consider this a kind of double witness to the work that happens in the wilderness: one ear tuned to the scriptures, especially the texts we've explored, and another listening to these voices giving language to something we may know experientially or intuitively.

At this point, it's also important to make an important distinction. For all the truly profound memories and experiences that happen in places like camps, backpacking trips, and

retreats, I would also want to acknowledge that there are many spiritually manipulative or inappropriate activities and experiences that occur in those spaces also. A place alone does not make for an encounter with God, and many of our methods of traditional youth ministry have done more harm than good for folks; especially when they heavily emphasize things like “feeling God,” “hearing a word,” creating spaces for “camp highs” and more at the expense of other realities of a life of faith and belief. For people, both adult and student, who do not experience a particular described feeling as their reality, they can find themselves feeling like outsiders, broken, or even like God does not desire relationship with them.

This is a tricky subject--- experience is important, certainly, and we want to encourage young people to trust their feelings in some ways—and yet feelings are not all that there is, and our faith or experience of God should not, and cannot, rest on feelings alone. People will naturally tend to either experiential or intellectual leanings in their faith, and neither is inherently wrong. One of my professors, Dr. Rick Steele, will always say that “All theology is corrective,” and the aim here is to chart a theological middle ground- one that says that place and experience are profoundly real, meaningful parts of many of our faith journeys, and yet they are not all there is. God is as present in a tenth-floor apartment bedroom in the middle of a city as he is ten miles into the wilderness on a mountain peak, and our experience or feelings—or lack thereof—are not a marker of his nearness.

With that said, there is undeniably a narrative within scripture as well as the community of faith that does teach us that there is something valuable about leaving our normal lives behind and either journeying or being cast out into the wilderness, as we have seen. It is this reality that prompted ancient figures such as the Desert Fathers and Mothers to leave behind all that they knew and journey out into places where nothing remained except for them and God. It is the

movement that prompted believers to value camps, to seek God in desolate spaces, and to choose to go away in order to better hear from God. I want us to consider this “why.” Whether you are a youth pastor trying to make the case for camp and retreats to your churches elder board, a person involved in wilderness youth ministry trying to make sense of what you see, or just a person who has been profoundly impacted by what you experienced in the wilderness—or even a skeptic, who feels that these are expensive, pointless times of emotional manipulation, this section is for you. I’m so glad you are here!

A brief history of Christian camping:

While this project is particularly looking at wilderness youth ministry, which is really its own sphere of camp ministry, it’s important for us to understand where this kind of work emerged from. With that in mind, we will go ahead and take a moment to examine the origins of Christian camping, and some of the thought that goes into it today. It’s important to note that this isn’t an exhaustive history; notably the work of many ancient monastic believers is an important factor in this movement. We know that camping did not begin with America, and that there are many traditions throughout the world who have a rich witness to the nature of wilderness experience in their spiritual life. If I had more space, I would want to especially emphasize too the many ways that camping has, and remains inequitable, and the decided impact of a student’s race, gender, and socio-economic status on their experience. It’s also notable that the history of Christian camping is sorely under-documented, and it’s challenging to find credible and helpful sources for that reason. Much of the available writing is from many years ago, and there is a significant lack in the amount of modern writing on the history and purpose of Christian camping

Organized camping (separate from a nomadic or wilderness-based lifestyle) has existed in some form since at least 1000 B.C. when the Egyptian would take young men out into the wildness to teach them.⁴⁸ We know that Greek societies would use camp life to incorporate people into their communal lifestyles as well. However, camping as we come to know it didn't come fully into practice until the 1900's, when it began to flourish.⁴⁹ It's important to note that the beginnings of Christian camping are hard to separate from the beginnings of the secular camp movement, since they in many ways encouraged and grew one another.

Camping its earliest in the Christian context in the west as part of camp meetings. Camp meetings were a place for people to gather together and experience Biblical teaching, as well as fellowship with others and a time in nature. In the 1700's and 1800's, rural families would gather from all over the countryside in a centralized location- often someone's barn or field or tent, to spend several days listening to a traveling preacher teach.⁵⁰ Historians think that the first camp meeting occurred in 1799 on the banks of the Red River in Kentucky.⁵¹ These camp meetings both aimed to start new churches and to minister to and evangelize in areas with already existing churches. As adults learned, many camp meetings also set aside a time for children to also meet, although those meetings didn't have any sort of entertainment, as that would have been considered rather sacrilegious.

⁴⁸ Cully, Kendig Brubaker. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Education*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963. 76

⁴⁹ Cully, Kendig Brubaker. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Education*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963. 76

⁵⁰ Badke, Jim. *The Christian Camp Counselor: Becoming a Camp Counselor after Gods Own Heart*. Crofton, B.C.: Qwanoes Pub., 1998.

⁵¹ Todd, Floyd, and Pauline Todd. *Camping for Christian Youth: a Guide to Methods and Principles for Evangelical Camps*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977.

As the camp meeting movement drew to a close, other forms of congregational assembly took their place. As denominations grew in the United States, organized camping began to extend throughout the denominations. Lloyd Mattison writes

The first church camps grew out of denominational assemblies. Like the assemblies, youth camp programs were built around daily preaching services. However, about the time the camp-meeting era was closing, another camping movement began to form. It became known as organized camping. Organized camping developed a decentralized camping philosophy that emphasized small camper groups led by a counselor. This philosophy led ultimately to changes in church-sponsored camps that produced Christian camping as we know it.⁵²

Ultimately, this organized camping was the foundations of the modern camp movement; especially in the format we picture it in these days. As church camps began to grow and form under the leadership of people such as Fredrick Gunn, George Hinkley, and H.W Gibson, amongst many others, YMCA, and Boy Scout and Girl Scout camps grew as well.⁵³ By 1966, the American Camping Association reported around 8,000 resident camps in the United States, with another 3,200 day camps, bringing the total number to over 10,000.⁵⁴

Modern church camps tend to fall under the umbrella of the Christian Camps and Conferences International (CCI) which is the new name for what used to be the Western Camps and Conferences Association (WCCA), which was started in 1949 under the Mt. Hermon Conference in Northern California.⁵⁵ This gathering came because of a man named Walt

⁵² Mattison, Lloyd D. *Christian Camping Today: a Complete Handbook for the Short-Term Staff*. Wheaton, IL: H. Shaw Publishers, 1998. 30

⁵³ Graendorf, Werner C., and Lloyd D. Mattison. *Introduction to Christian Camping*. Duluth, MN: Camping Guideposts, 1984.

⁵⁴ Graendorf, Werner C., and Lloyd D. Mattison. *Introduction to Christian Camping*. Duluth, MN: Camping Guideposts, 1984.

⁵⁵ Mattison, Lloyd D. *Christian Camping Today: a Complete Handbook for the Short-Term Staff*. Wheaton, IL: H. Shaw Publishers, 1998. 30

Warkentin, who had just begun Hume Lake Conference Center, which still exists today. As membership in the WCCA grew, this became a nationwide organization, hence the name change to Christian Camps and Conference Centers of America, and then as it grew to extend beyond national boundaries, became the CCI.

Modern camps tend to follow several different models, which the CCI has done some work on. Camps can exist as Resident Camps, where campers come to a fixed location and spend a length of time- from a weekend onwards, typically, experiencing camp life and that kind of faith development. Conference Centers host large groups who often bring their own programming, while retreat centers typically serve slightly smaller groups. Day camps are normally for children, and involve activities during the day, with campers returning home at night. Finally, wilderness camps exist to take students on trips that often challenge youth and take them into wilderness environments.

As we consider the ways such camp experiences have influenced youth, the amount of research that lists camping as a positive and constructive—even transformative—experience is rich and numerous. The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy, in an article on the effects of summer camp on the resilience of at-risk youth writes that

Engagement in structured leisure occupations has been found to increase self-esteem. The development of positive identities and feelings of self-worth contribute to character strength which may ultimately buffer children against mental illness (Catalano et al., 2002). Since youth living in poverty may not have social or financial resources to engage in a variety of leisure occupations, summer camps may provide an environment that promotes skills critical for resilience.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Merryman, Marybeth, Amanda Mezei, Jill A Bush, and Marcie Weinstein. “The Effects of a Summer Camp Experience on Factors of Resilience in At-Risk Youth.” *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* 1, no. 1 (2012).

This kind of link between a camp experience and mental health is extra significant, but there are also spiritual benefits to be considered as well. Even just looking at the effects of a Christian camp experience in the church context, children who attend summer camps often note increased church engagement, more frequent personal faith practice, and greater self-confidence as examples of long-term impact from camps.⁵⁷ Beyond those experiences, and salvation experiences, one surprising effect of camp can be an increased willingness to engage in relationships with adults in a church context following a camp experience that contains healthy interactions with adult staff.⁵⁸

Ultimately, the advent of church camps has provided a space for youth to experience faith development in ways that they might not otherwise experience in a typical church setting. It allows for unique evangelistic methods for both churched and unchurched youth, as well as a remarkable and meaningful setting for spiritual experience. Growth of the camping industry has also required the church to think about the specific spiritual needs and practices of youth, which becomes an extraordinarily important, and often underrepresented benefit.

Wilderness Leadership Programs:

Camps are an important factor in the world of wilderness ministry, and their influence on the way we do ministry, as well as the nature of their history cannot be ignored. There's another significant type of program, though, that has heavily influenced wilderness youth ministry programs, and that would be the wilderness leadership sector. Many people are familiar with the work of secular organizations such as Outward Bound, or the National Outdoor Leadership

⁵⁷ Sorenson, Jacob. "The Fundamental Characteristics and Unique Outcomes of Christian Summer Camp Experiences." *Journal of Youth Development* 13, no. 1-2 (2018): 183–200. 189

⁵⁸ Sorenson, Jacob. "The Fundamental Characteristics and Unique Outcomes of Christian Summer Camp Experiences." *Journal of Youth Development* 13, no. 1-2 (2018): 183–200. 190

School (NOLS) and the programs that they provide, even if they are unconnected with the church in any way. Organizations like these tend to offer short and semester-long programs, although some can last up to a year, that provide students with the opportunity to grow in leadership skills, technical outdoor knowledge, and community formation. Certain colleges and universities will offer semesters in these programs similarly to the way that they offer study-abroad trips, and those programs may also include extra educational components, whether that is leadership skills, outdoor science skills, or some other related discipline. While conventionally these programs are targeted at college-aged folks, many offer opportunities for people ranging in age from middle-school to grown adults to grow their outdoor skills, be challenged, and to grow in leadership and confidence. These notably differ from guided trips in their emphasis on leadership skills, growth of knowledge, teaching, and desire to advance participants in technical and “soft” skillsets.

Beyond being quite similar to many outdoor youth ministry programs, there is a ton that the church can learn from the way these programs are run. They typically operate in a hugely researched and evidence-based format, and many set the industry standards around what is considered safe and normative when working with youth outdoors. Furthermore, a huge amount of studies that have been conducted on these programs, especially those done by the large organizations of outward bound and NOLS. These studies, which we will discuss below, have a ton to offer the church, and bring to light some important, evidence-based, and peer-reviewed research. They fill many gaps that anecdotal evidence often leaves and highlight both strengths and weaknesses to the model that many of us are familiar with. Before we get any further, I do want to note one piece of terminology that might show up a lot in the following pages. Many of these studies use the abbreviation “OAE” to indicate “Outdoor Adventure Experience,” and for most of this discussion, we will follow suit. It’s also worth noting that this is a cursory look at a

field that really has produced a great deal of scholarship over the last decade or two, and that for those who are curious, a lot more can be found! Please feel free to further pursue studies and texts quoted here—they are all cited in the footnotes, and many of these studies can be accessed for free through Google scholar.

When it comes to outdoor leadership programs; there are really two glaring question. The first is “Do they work?” which, as you might imagine, prompts us to ask, “what do you mean by work?” What most people mean is this: “Is there some intrinsic value to these programs, many of which can be relatively expensive to run and participate in, beyond getting kids and young adults outside and in the mountains to have fun?” The second question, which really in many ways relates to the first, is “what, exactly, do they do?” What most folks mean by that, especially those in the industry, is “do they do the things we think they do?”

The answer, surprisingly to both questions, seems to be yes. As we consider the idea of intrinsic value, some really interesting things come to light. While of course getting students outside and into nature is intrinsically valuable on its own, it turns out that many more benefits emerge from OAE’s. One of the marked benefits of experiences like this turns out, exists in the social connections found. My own experience working with a wilderness youth ministry has demonstrated this reality—a trainer once explained a trip to me as something that “shortens the relationship continuum” and both experience and sociological research seem to indicate that this is true. Put simply, students in OAE’s are able to build and develop intense, but often lasting, relationships, and an increased sense of closeness to peers and facilitators in really shortened amounts of time. Many times I have heard fellow guides wonder if this is due to intensity of the experience, lack of outside distractions, or simply the fact that when everyone smells as bad as

you do, you start to worry less about other external factors and focus on bigger-picture issues: it seems that the research bears up this hypothesis to a great degree.

One study discusses this in respect to backpacking trips. Researchers exploring the relationship between shared challenge and social connectedness wrote that:

The challenge that came along with the experience served as an important mechanism for bringing the students closer. For many of the girls, getting through a long hiking day or overcoming homesickness was made possible by the social support of their peers. One junior said that during a hard hike, she had to remind herself that ‘the only way we’re going to get through this or enjoy it all is if we do it together as a group’. Several students from each grade cohort noted how singing songs, sharing inside jokes and simply venting frustrations helped get them through difficult hikes and homesickness. The group served as both a means of support and an opportunity for connection.⁵⁹

Notably, the fact that the experience brought difficulty also brought about connection in the peer group studied. Students gained a deeper sense of connection, but also enjoyment, when they participated as a group, and took turns both encouraging and venting with one another. We explored wilderness texts that did carry difficulty, and while a long hike or a lot of bugs may not be difficult in the truest sense of the world, it is important to note that they can serve as metaphorical representation of student’s experience elsewhere. Just as many of our biblical texts told the stories of humans facing despair, fear, abuse, or loss, these students are encountering the same thing: this research tells us that there is power in experiencing challenge in community, and empirical value to shared struggle with one another.

This is consistent with a lot of other research, but it’s also worth noting that the level of challenge matters here. This is a level of moderate challenge, that allowed students to dig in and have to lean one another, but it wasn’t so challenging that group dynamics broke down and

⁵⁹ Richmond, D., Sibthorp, J., Gookin, J., Annarella, S., & Ferri, S. (2017). Complementing classroom learning through outdoor adventure education: Out-of-school-time experiences that make a difference. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 18(1), 36-52. doi:10.1080/14729679.2017.132431

became “every woman for herself.” Facilitators can often aim too high with challenge in OAE’s, and a desire for bonding is not an excuse to make students pointlessly suffer. The study notes this, exploring the reality that there is a point where people are pushed so far past their limits they break down. This is not what we are looking to do, and I want to emphasize the role of the guide in making sure that avoidable suffering is, for the most part, avoided.

Something important about the social connectedness experienced on these trips is an ability to see one another in new light. Whether participants went to the same school, belonged to the same youth group, or did another activity together, several studies highlight the fact that students began to “see” each other differently. One study tells us that “Interviewees remarked on how the shared OAE experiences facilitated social bonding among students and improved rapport between students and faculty. This included students who look forward to the trip as well as those who would rather not leave the comforts of home. The OAE experience allowed students to see their peers in a new light and the challenges of the expedition often brought members of the group closer.⁶⁰”

This can be a hesitation for churches as they consider camps or wilderness youth ministry activities, but it’s something that both facilitators and staff bringing students ought to hope for and see as a gift. More and more, youth pastors will note that they struggle to build community or a sense of connectedness, and this is something important wilderness experiences can help develop. There is a chance in these spaces to “see and be seen” and to connect through shared experience in a way that the four walls of a church may not readily afford. I think of the story of Phillip and the eunuch here; they had no business being in the same place at the same time, and

⁶⁰ Richmond, D., Sibthorp, J., Gookin, J., Annarella, S., & Ferri, S. (2017). Complementing classroom learning through outdoor adventure education: Out-of-school-time experiences that make a difference. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 18(1), 36-52. doi:10.1080/14729679.2017.1324313

yet the unusual nature of their location allowed them to connect and ultimately the salvation of the eunuch. This seems like something for us to pay attention to: are there ways we can joyfully welcome the transient nature of the felt connections we experience in the wilderness?

Experience or felt sense of connectedness and social behavior isn't just positive in a moment; it actually has lasting benefits for youth. A variety of studies have demonstrated this importance over the years, some noting that "Related research highlights the importance of social belonging, self-confidence, self-efficacy and other factors on student attitudes toward school, effort and, ultimately, academic achievement (Dweck et al., 2011; Snipes, Fancsali, & Stoker, 2012; Yeager & Walton, 2011). Collectively, these psychological factors and related behaviors are sometimes referred to as noncognitive skills as they cannot be measured directly by traditional academic assessments".⁶¹

At this point, you may find yourself wondering why we need to take kids into the wilderness for them to experience these kinds of lasting social and psychological benefits. Isn't the norm of youth group, sports teams, school, and other parts of typical adolescent life enough? Interestingly, this doesn't seem to be true. In the same way that one of the studies above noted an increase in social connectedness in experiences of challenge in the wilderness, it turns out that there may be something to the fluid and informal nature of OAE's that allows for greater learning, and more lasting cognitive benefits in adolescent minds. Part of the value of wilderness experience seems to lie in the fact that times of learning are built into everyday activity, and the seeming lack of structure helps students relax and buy in. One study on outdoor leadership programs notes that "nonformal settings encourage youths toward different motivational patterns

⁶¹ Richmond, D., Sibthorp, J., Gookin, J., Annarella, S., & Ferri, S. (2017). Complementing classroom learning through outdoor adventure education: Out-of-school-time experiences that make a difference. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 18(1), 36-52. doi:10.1080/14729679.2017.1324313

in the social domain, their social climates helping to establish more personally meaningful relationships with peers and contribute to shared goals in valuable ways. This stands in contrast to settings such as school, where opportunities for positive peer social interaction and meaningful contributions to collaborative tasks often are more constricted”⁶²

These social benefits are good, but they aren’t the only things we see emerging from OAE-type programs. Another notable benefit seems to lie in the change in sense of self that many students experience, which can play out in increased confidence, deeper knowledge of self and values, and many more ways. This is significant to the life of the church, because we deeply desire for students to become more and more the humans God has created them to be, and to be better able to participate in the body of Christ, but also understand their own gifts, talents, ideas, and callings.

I was especially interested to see some research indicate that many participants grew in their sense of ability to manage challenge, which translated back into life at home. I know that this has been profoundly true in my own life, and as I think back over what wilderness ministry has done in me, this is a key theme. I have seen myself grow from fear to courage and seek greater and greater challenge as each positive experience has reinforced a sense of confidence and courage. Even negative experience has prompted me to dig in deeper, rather than quit—and I think some of this truly does lie in the uniqueness of wilderness experience. I think of a river trip I was on last summer, where a middle day brought some of the biggest whitewater I had guided to date. I knew cognitively about the rapids, and the day that they were on, and knew I had the technical skills to guide them safely, but as the day for them drew closer and closer, I found

⁶² Mirkin, B. J. (2014). Group Social Climate and Individual Peer Interaction: Exploring Complex Relationships on Extended Wilderness Courses. *Research in Outdoor Education*, 12(1), 58-79. doi:10.1353/roe.2014.0004

myself more and more fearful. The morning of that day dawned, and I found myself in my sleeping bag wishing I didn't have to get up, so that I didn't have to get in my boat and row towards the rapids that scared me. Of course, I got up and did chores around camp, and as I rowed through the canyons deep in the Idaho desert, I found myself alternatively praying for courage and reflecting on other challenging experiences I'd faced and survived. I caught myself silently chanting "the only way out is through" with each stroke of my oars, and as I reflect- I think that's part of the power. Many times, the option in the wilderness to give up or skip out on a challenge doesn't exist in the same way it might in our normal lives. I alone was responsible for safely guiding my boat through that whitewater, and strangely, that knowledge gave me courage and peace as I approached. Many times in our lives we have the option to quit, turn aside, or let someone else take over, but in the wilderness, this reality may not exist.

I was filled with peace as I approached the top of the first rapid, and by the middle knew everything would be fine. I found myself yelling and cheering as I rode out the huge waves in the bottom, but my cheers turned into tears of joy at the bottom as I reflected on how much I had grown, and was filled with both thankfulness, confidence, and courage. Pushing through the challenging experience allowed me to approach the rest of the day from a place of confidence and excitement, and I ended that trip with so many aspects of self-knowledge that have followed me this entire year. While my story, is, of course, anecdotal and simply one person's experience, it seems that the research on this topic backs me up. Researchers write that "Understanding they could manage challenge reinforced student beliefs regarding the value of trying new things. Part of an individual's identity is connected to how they view the world and a conception of the

potential opportunities that lie ahead in their lives.”⁶³ In this sense, I am drawn back to Elijah (1 Kings 19:4-18; see Part 1), despondent and convinced he could not continue on in the role God had called him too. We saw God meet him in his fear and despair, but also not release him from the challenge he was experiencing: instead, God assured him and supported him in managing the challenge, which in turn gave him the ability to head down the mountain and back to the work God had for him. His sense of self, which had been destroyed, was restored in the encounter with God’s presence.

My experience in a moment of challenge affected my sense of self, but interestingly, also allowed me to interact with the students I was guiding with more confidence, which also emerges as a theme in wilderness research. Research shows that students often are especially moved by the combination of relationship and challenge. One study tells us that “Creating a level of trust within the group encouraged students to take personal risks, work with others, make consequential decisions and manage adversity—building self-efficacy in leadership⁶⁴ This kind of experience allowed students to better manage adversity; which is notably also an important factor for resilience. While resilience is somewhat of a buzzword these days in psychology and youth development, it’s also an undeniable predictor of mental health risks and long-term success in students and adults alike. It seems that there is value in allowing students to feel freedom to voice their own fear and concern, but we also see that in spaces of trust, students will

⁶³ Richmond, D., Sibthorp, J., Gookin, J., Annarella, S., & Ferri, S. (2017). Complementing classroom learning through outdoor adventure education: Out-of-school-time experiences that make a difference. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 18(1), 36-52. doi:10.1080/14729679.2017.1324313

⁶⁴ Richmond, D., Sibthorp, J., Gookin, J., Annarella, S., & Ferri, S. (2017). Complementing classroom learning through outdoor adventure education: Out-of-school-time experiences that make a difference. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 18(1), 36-52. doi:10.1080/14729679.2017.1324313

manage adversity better, which is also consistent with what we saw in Elijah. When his trust in God was restored, he was able to face something that had felt initially impossible.

Another significant aspect of OAE's is their ability to encourage spaces for self-reflection. This feels like one of the most notable things for the church to pay attention to; because it turns out that this can become a make-or-break part of OAE's, but the reality is not all programs seem to value this kind of time. Much of the impact of this reflection comes down to the way that these spaces are facilitated for students, and this is really dependent on individual programs and guide's ways of doing things.

Research in this area is robust, and it offers some fascinating insights. We see that A crucial outcome of these wilderness trips appears to be the emergence of a shift in perceptual awareness which encompasses more than the acquisition of knowledge about a specific type of physical environment. Again, the evidence suggests that the processing of environmental perceptions has generalized to include individuals' feelings about themselves. Accompanying this response, the data from the current participants' journals also suggest that a non-control-oriented approach to life and to one's surroundings has developed through the course of this experience. This orientation is perceived both as being quite comfortable and as being harmonious with what has come to be understood as an awesome physical reality.⁶⁵

What this particular study is naming is so powerful—the act of processing environmental input gained in the context of a wilderness space generalizes to a person's perception of them self—and it may include an increased knowledge that they are not in control, but instead of producing fear, this offers a sense of harmony with something that is so much larger and more awesome than simply self. The same study goes on to say that “the experience of compatibility, the harmonizing of one's own capabilities and inclinations with the opportunities and limitations present in the physical surroundings, is particularly important..... The richness of this experience, the satisfying quality of functioning within a supportive physical setting, often leads

⁶⁵ Talbot, J. F., & Kaplan, S. (1986). Perspectives on wilderness: Re-examining the value of extended wilderness experiences. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 6(3), 177-188. doi:10.1016/s0272-4944(86)80021-4

individuals to deeper levels of personal understanding, and to convictions that the ways in which they conduct their lives in their ordinary surroundings should also be different.”⁶⁶ Individuals are able to both internalize their experience, and to create convictions that impact their external reality.

I want to pause here, because the importance of this space can't be overstated for the church. This is exactly what we see in the scriptural narrative, and it is profound. The texts we have looked at time and time again show people who find themselves alone in the wilderness having direct, intimate, and powerful encounters with a Living God—and the same can be true for students we work with in these places. The power in these experiences doesn't lie in someone giving a really good talk, hauling along their ultralightweight ukulele to sing worship songs, or saying exactly the right thing in a moment of struggle. These things are good, but they are not the ultimate, and they are not limited to faith-based programs. Furthermore, this is not at all what we see in the biblical text. Instead, the power lies in the fact that people find themselves alone in desolate and vast spaces, and in that aloneness have time to be face-to-face with their own selves and with God. If you hear nothing else in this whole work, hear this: the witness of cloistered monks, runaway prophets, slave women in the desert, eunuchs next to a river, and Christ himself on a mountaintop—when we are alone, with no distraction, we are often better able to hear from and encounter God. Sometimes all we need to do is create or discover that space.

This is a theology of a middle ground, though, and there is no magic chant for an encounter with God. For as many times as I can swear I've heard God's whisper on a mountaintop, there are many more where I've sat in periods of extended solo time bored,

⁶⁶ Talbot, J. F., & Kaplan, S. (1986). Perspectives on wilderness: Re-examining the value of extended wilderness experiences. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 6(3), 177-188. doi:10.1016/s0272-4944(86)80021-4

distracted, frustrated, or simply too tired to gain anything meaningful. We shouldn't treat solo times and periods of reflection as something magical, but we should approach them with expectation and care. If we are intentional in creating these spaces as facilitators, they have the opportunity to be meaningful; but if we don't encourage reflection and solitude, there is no opportunity for their benefits to be displayed.

Much of a healthy ability to navigate these times comes down to the ways that we frame them. If we are intentional in our study of wilderness scripture, we see that people arrive in the place of encounter in all different states. Some, like Hagar, have no choice but to flee; and expect to die in the process. Others, like Elijah, find themselves in the wilderness because they have nowhere else to be, and seek release from their normal responsibilities and callings. Still others are like the eunuch—expectant but chased down by God and God's people in unexpected ways. As the church, we might consider inviting students to come to these times expectant of God's presence—but be honest about the many forms that this may take.

Solo times of reflection should not carry a particular agenda. Students should be encouraged to journal, think, rest, nap, pray, talk out loud, or anything else that makes sense in the space they are in. If facilitators set it up in a way that they can be expectant of an encounter with God but also not disappointed if it just turns into a long nap, that can go a long way. Framing of these times matters, and the research shows the same is true even just in framing self-reflective activities and exercises in the wilderness. One study notes that "Transfer of learning has been challenging to document (Furman & Sibthorp, 2012). By embracing programmatic elements that are under practitioner control, OAE can afford high-quality discrete experiences that may foster subtle, yet critical, dispositional shifts in participants. OAE practitioners should continue to provide opportunities for reflection, a challenging yet supportive environment,

opportunities to succeed through perseverance, and a program that can adjust to a student’s individual needs.⁶⁷” The larger study addresses the fact that while OAE’s can be short, that doesn’t mean that there isn’t a transfer of learning that affects students in lasting ways. Part of that transfer of learning, however, comes down to the instructor’s willingness to use the modalities we’ve discussed—including reflection, challenge, and opportunity to succeed.

Wilderness therapy programs:

Another area of research offering a lot of empirical data on the value of wilderness time for youth is the field of wilderness therapy. Wilderness therapy programs have historically been somewhat unregulated, and it’s important to note at the outset that there are some programs that have fostered unhealthy, unsafe, and even abusive practices in the name of working with “troubled” youth. Those are not the programs we are referring too in this particular work, and we would strongly reject such practice. Instead, this is referring to the evidence-based practice of adventure therapy, sometimes also known as AT, or wilderness therapy, which, although sometimes hard to define, is defined as “the prescriptive use of adventure experiences provided by mental health professionals ... that kinesthetically engage clients on cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels.”⁶⁸ Many adventure therapy practitioners and proponents would further point to seven key elements that distinguish it from both leadership or camp-type programs, and other therapy modalities. They are “(1) engagement in action-centered therapy; (2) the use of an unfamiliar environment, situation, or stimulus; (3) creation and maintenance of a climate for

⁶⁷ Sibthorp, J., Collins, R., Rathunde, K., Paisley, K., Schumann, S., Pohja, M., . . . Baynes, S. (2014). Fostering Experiential Self-Regulation Through Outdoor Adventure Education. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 38(1), 26-40. doi:10.1177/1053825913516735

⁶⁸ Norton, C. L., Tucker, A., Russell, K. C., Bettmann, J. E., Gass, M. A., Gillis, H. “, & Behrens, E. (2014). Adventure Therapy With Youth. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 46-59. doi:10.1177/1053825913518895

change; (4) the application of activities/intervention as continual assessment tools; (5) a focus on small group development and creation of a caring community; (6) a solution-focused approach to therapy; and (7) a shift to therapist as facilitator from therapist as expert to allow for greater flexibility in the therapeutic relationship.”⁶⁹ These are significant elements, and I want to recognize that they must come at the hands of a licensed practitioner to count as therapeutic. However, all OAE’s utilize many of these elements to some extent, and I want to discuss the specific nature of wilderness therapy because it encompasses some of the most robust peer-reviewed research on these kinds of experiences and practices.

While this is still a relatively young field, Psychology Today says that there are currently “more than 100 Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare programs in the United States serve[ing] more than 10,000 clients and their families each year.”⁷⁰ This dramatic influx of programs has led to an increase in research, as well as findings around the ways this practice is effective, and those we will discuss below.

There are more and more studies offering hope that there is real and lasting benefit to certain needs within the context of Adventure therapy. One large study found that “wilderness programming was equally effective for adjudicated adolescents, those labeled as ‘normal’ and ‘at risk’, and those with physical, behavioral, and emotional problems or handicaps. ... The statistical results indicated that the average adolescent who participates in an adventure program is better off than 62.2 percent of adolescents who do not.”⁷¹ It’s significant that this kind of programming is useful for all kinds of adolescents, but it’s also notable that this kind of

⁶⁹ Norton, C. L., Tucker, A., Russell, K. C., Bettmann, J. E., Gass, M. A., Gillis, H. “, & Behrens, E. (2014). Adventure Therapy With Youth. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 46-59. doi:10.1177/1053825913518895

⁷⁰ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brainstorm/201712/why-wilderness-therapy-works>

⁷¹ Rutko, E. A., & Gillespie, J. (2013). Where’s the Wilderness in Wilderness Therapy? *Journal of Experiential Education*, 36(3), 218-232. doi:10.1177/1053825913489107

programming has shown benefit with students with Disruptive Behavior Disorders and conduct issues, as well as reducing recidivism within the juvenile justice system.⁷²

Another set of studies found that there were larger post-treatment reductions in substance use in students who had participated in Adventure Therapy programs as compared to typical inpatient or community-based settings, and continued to maintain these decreases over time, which is especially significant in suggesting that the reduction was not just due to lack of access to substances in-program.⁷³ It's also notable that a common conversation in wilderness programs has been about their increased client engagement and interest compared to community-based programs, but studies have actually begun to support this. One study used a qualitative measure of motivation to change and found that "the majority of youth were unmotivated to change, but despite this resistance, they demonstrated increased readiness to change at discharge."⁷⁴ This is an interesting similarity to what a lot of the research around wilderness leadership programs has also found that regardless of initial buy-in, students tend to demonstrate a notable change post-wilderness experience. I think this is particularly notable for churches and ministry programs as they consider the students they work with; while they are obviously not and should not think of themselves as, wilderness therapy programs, the idea that students may have transformative or useful experiences even if initially resistant is notable. I am reminded of a few of the wilderness stories we studied in scripture as well. I'm thinking especially of Jacob, who took a long time to

⁷² Norton, C. L., Tucker, A., Russell, K. C., Bettmann, J. E., Gass, M. A., Gillis, H. “, & Behrens, E. (2014). Adventure Therapy With Youth. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 46-59. doi:10.1177/1053825913518895

⁷³ Tucker, A. R., Javorski, S., Tracy, J., & Beale, B. (2012). The Use of Adventure Therapy in Community-Based Mental Health: Decreases in Problem Severity Among Youth Clients. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 42(2), 155-179. doi:10.1007/s10566-012-9190-x

⁷⁴ Tucker, A. R., Javorski, S., Tracy, J., & Beale, B. (2012). The Use of Adventure Therapy in Community-Based Mental Health: Decreases in Problem Severity Among Youth Clients. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 42(2), 155-179. doi:10.1007/s10566-012-9190-x

grow into the new name given in his experience, even though it took a night of wrestling to bring him to that place.

Speaking of wilderness leadership programs, it's also worth pointing out that they are the initial seeds that Adventure therapy has grown out of. Both share certain similarities, and pull heavily from educational philosophy—ones study notes that the particular learning cycle of “action, reflection, and integration” is especially useful and that “the application of experiential education in therapeutic settings provides direct, hands-on adventure experiences that engage clients as active participants in the therapeutic process, elicit motivation from clients, provide exposure to real and meaningful natural consequences, and provide opportunities for reflection and transfer of learning. Within experiential education, all of these qualities are key ingredients that help clients more fully engage in, reflect on, and integrate in the treatment process (Gass, 1993).”⁷⁵

This particular cycle is an important component of why wilderness therapy programs seem to be particularly effective, but it isn't the only one. One important component seems to be the struggle that can come in outdoor environments. Instead of the struggle being overwhelming, the ability to work through things in a supportive environment with trained adults as well as peers seems to contribute to several things. A study done in 2013 found that “Through successfully facing and accomplishing these challenges within a succession of increasingly difficult tasks, participants chart their way toward higher self-esteem, an internal locus of control (Wilson & Lipsey, 2000), a greater sense of self-efficacy (Russell, 2003), and a more resilient

⁷⁵ Norton, C. L., Tucker, A., Russell, K. C., Bettmann, J. E., Gass, M. A., Gillis, H. “, & Behrens, E. (2014). Adventure Therapy With Youth. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 46-59. doi:10.1177/1053825913518895

identity⁷⁶ Notably, struggle isn't inherent only to adventure therapy programs. Wilderness leadership programs and wilderness youth ministries also can encourage similar results but must be careful to navigate the facilitation thoughtfully. A lot of the research in both kinds of programs places much of the success on the instructor, and one study points out that instructors need to be trained to be considerate, good listeners, and emotionally intelligent. Within certain contexts, self-disclosure from instructors and emphasis on the shared experience can also encourage positive outcomes and experiences with students participating.⁷⁷

The good news is, within the context of wilderness ministry programs, instructors may face a great deal more freedom in personal connection with students than therapists in an adventure therapy program. While professionalism and appropriate boundaries are still paramount, there is an acceptable level of self-disclosure, especially around personal experience, and faith, that gets to exist for facilitators of wilderness youth ministries, and this is something programs need to consider when they train staff. Research shows that instructor behavior can significantly impact student experience.⁷⁸ and while this shouldn't be a source of fear or stress, it should be emphasized. It is a privilege to get to work with young people, and they are worthy of care and empathy. The same study found that “the more the group felt their instructors exuded

⁷⁶ Rutko, E. A., & Gillespie, J. (2013). Where's the Wilderness in Wilderness Therapy? *Journal of Experiential Education*, 36(3), 218-232. doi:10.1177/1053825913489107

⁷⁷ Jostad, J., Sibthorp, J., Pohja, M., & Gookin, J. (2015). The Adolescent Social Group in Outdoor Adventure Education: Social Connections That Matter. *Research in Outdoor Education*, 13(1), 16-37. doi:10.1353/roe.2015.0002

⁷⁸ Jostad, J., Sibthorp, J., Pohja, M., & Gookin, J. (2015). The Adolescent Social Group in Outdoor Adventure Education: Social Connections That Matter. *Research in Outdoor Education*, 13(1), 16-37. doi:10.1353/roe.2015.0002

considerate behaviors, the more individuals felt affect toward other members in the group.”⁷⁹

Sometimes there is an attitude that adults will participate in their own relationships in youth ministry and students can engage in relationships only with each other, but the research in wilderness settings doesn’t support that idea. Later on, the same studies wrote that

One of the important characteristics noted was empathy, which they identified as the ‘instructors’ ability to listen to their [students’] concerns and make them feel validated and understood’ (p. 22). Other categories that relate to these findings include role modeling and creating a supportive learning environment. One possible reason for this finding may stem from the role modeling behaviors that are essential for OAE instructors (McKenzie, 2003). When students see and feel their instructor show appreciation and support, they may be more likely to replicate these actions toward others, which in turn can lead to a greater affective state for individuals. A number of studies in OAE have shown that students are more successful when more social support is provided by their instructors (Draper, Lund, & Fisher, 2011; Sibthorp, Furman, Paisley, Gookin, Schumann, 2011).⁸⁰

It can feel counter-intuitive to some proponents of old-school methods of wilderness work that focus on challenge and pushing students to lean into empathy, but this is a space where we all can learn from both students and the research done on them. We just spoke about the importance of challenge and its impact on student experience, but we must also temper that challenge with empathy and a desire to validate and care for students. The behavior we model directly impacts groups experience.

This makes sense even as we consider the biblical models we’ve observed. A key component of wilderness experience is intensely relational encounters with God, and we know that as humans created in God’s image, we’re designed for relationship. When people are in

⁷⁹Jostad, J., Sibthorp, J., Pohja, M., & Gookin, J. (2015). The Adolescent Social Group in Outdoor Adventure Education: Social Connections That Matter. *Research in Outdoor Education*, 13(1), 16-37. doi:10.1353/roe.2015.0002

⁸⁰Jostad, J., Sibthorp, J., Pohja, M., & Gookin, J. (2015). The Adolescent Social Group in Outdoor Adventure Education: Social Connections That Matter. *Research in Outdoor Education*, 13(1), 16-37. doi:10.1353/roe.2015.0000

moments of stress and challenge, they deserve to be heard, encouraged, and cared for. Just like Elijah, receiving a snack and a nap, or Hagar being given water, sometimes the best thing we can do for participants is provide tangible support and care.

Researchers also find themselves considering the specific influence of wilderness spaces. Obvious answers include the opportunity to engage in relational behavior in spaces that people can't easily leave, challenge, and the opportunity to problem solve. Other studies point to the fact that students may be more responsive to therapists in the midst of shared experience; they often report a sense of being cared for and engaged in the face of continual and non-confrontational support.⁸¹ Feelings of discomfort and vulnerability may elicit therapeutic opportunities in the moment, which can have positive impact on a desire to move into change.⁸²

Most significant, however, is the idea of abstract and intangible change. A study in 2013 discusses this in a really beautiful way, talking specifically about data gathered from a series of Outward-Bound courses. The authors write

positive change in Outward Bound courses is thought to occur through the skilled use of “metaphoric education.” He claims the metaphoric model is more efficacious and lasting than conventional psychotherapeutic approaches that rely on the intellectual capacities of the listener. The activities and challenges encountered throughout wilderness programs represent, in many ways, the personal real-life struggles faced by students. It is this symbolic representation that is thought to create a link between present experience and existing life-challenges (Bacon, 1983). To the extent that these activities offer an alternative resolution and sense of accomplishment, adolescents are enabled to experience themselves in new, more positive ways. Empirical evidence suggests a similar process is also present in families with engrained patterns of interacting.⁸³

⁸¹ Rutko, E. A., & Gillespie, J. (2013). Where's the Wilderness in Wilderness Therapy? *Journal of Experiential Education*, 36(3), 218-232. doi:10.1177/1053825913489107

⁸² Rutko, E. A., & Gillespie, J. (2013). Where's the Wilderness in Wilderness Therapy? *Journal of Experiential Education*, 36(3), 218-232. doi:10.1177/1053825913489107

⁸³ Rutko, E. A., & Gillespie, J. (2013). Where's the Wilderness in Wilderness Therapy? *Journal of Experiential Education*, 36(3), 218-232. doi:10.1177/1053825913489107

You may have wondered why it's worth spending so much time talking about secular models of wilderness work that aren't directly youth ministry, and I would point to this quote as an especially significant piece of research that the church would do well to pay attention to. This is something that many folks who are involved in the wilderness will be able to intuitively point to, but it's really significant to see this idea that many of us have experienced played out in peer-reviewed research. The idea of an alternative resolution, as well as metaphor, is especially significant in its ability to spark lasting change, and it stands out that this particular process allows students to link their temporary wilderness experience with already present life-challenges.

In Conclusion:

It has been my great joy and honor to sit with these texts and research, and it feels like there is still so much to say and consider as we end our time together. My hope is that this work isn't an ultimate, but that it opens the doors for new conversations between two major schools of work and thought. I know that the texts we explore have a lot to offer as those in wilderness ministry seek a theological "why" for the work that they do, and I also recognize the ways that the work of secular researchers helps give language and guidance around best practice, or things we may have experienced and not understood. I am more and more deeply convinced of the value of the wilderness. In this space I see a God who is clearly revealed, who deeply desires relationship, and who chooses to meet people in their need and vulnerability. I see what the wilderness reveals in us: our choices to complain or trust, remain or return.

People often experience transformation or discover more of who they are in the wilderness, and it seems clear that both secular research and scriptural text bear witness to this.

Wilderness experiences have a unique ability to break down barriers, build community, reveal human character, and allow us to care and be cared for. In the space we come into, away from the noise of our everyday lives, we are able to filter through our experience and discern what God might be leading us into. We talked at length about how the wilderness experience isn't a magic one; these are not spaces we can control or manipulate. Part of the beauty of the wilderness is that it simply is: the more human involvement, the less it is true wilderness. We have to learn to trust, then, that much of our role as guides and facilitators is to simply enter this space. Many times, we come not knowing what to expect, and truly not knowing what people carry with them. It is an exercise in trust--- will we connect? Will we be safe? Will we hear from God? I don't know that we can force these things: I think the more we grasp for control, the more we will be disappointed. In this, I am reminded of the question that John the Baptist asks gathered crowds in Matthew 11:7—"what did you go out into the wilderness to see?" This is an important question for us, as well. What are we going out into the wilderness to see? Are we trying to prove that we can do it, that we can face challenge? Are we hoping to hear from God, something profound and loud? Are we entering despondent and despairing, beyond hope that God will do anything or be anywhere? What do you go out to the wilderness to see?

The truth is that we will see many things, and that our wilderness experience may hold both mountaintop and valley moments. The other reality is that God is present; never distant. There is nowhere we can run away from God, and the nature of our physical location does not impact this. Encounter: this is the other question. I think of God, appearing to Jesus and the disciples, who fell to the ground in fear. Sometimes, encounter with God is going to look like that, leaving us shaken. The truth of that story, too, though, is that Jesus is also there on the mountaintop, ready to pick his friends back up and reassure them. Jesus does not remain on this

mountain, as much as Peter may think this is a good idea. Instead, Jesus and the disciples must descend, and this is true for us as well. We will journey out into the wilderness, and we will also return to the reality of our everyday lives. I hope that in both experiences, you consider two things: one, our first quote from Jonathan Hesler—what does the wilderness reveal about what you believe about God? Pay attention to this in your experience. Is it consistent with what you know to be true, and what you see witnessed in scripture?

Secondly, I'd like us to return to Willi Unseold. What is the final test of the efficacy of our wilderness experiences? It is in our return. Back among our everyday lives, has anything been changed, revealed, renamed, transformed, or grown in us? What has emerged? I hope that you do not leave the wilderness despondent. It is a gift to be on the mountaintop, certainly, but you do not walk down alone. Jesus is with you; and the texts bear witness to this. God accompanies Hager back to Sarah, Elijah back to from Horeb, Jacob past the river, Phillip throughout the towns he preaches in, and the disciples off the mountain. You are not alone. In the end, I remain thankful for the witness of these wilderness spaces: God meets us, and we can encounter God. God cares for us and will provide. God desires relationship with us and will meet us at our level. And finally, in the sum of all things, God is doing a great work, and there is nowhere we can go that God is not or will not chase us down. Mountain or valley, desert or river, city sidewalk or our own homes: God loves you, and desires to be near you. This is the witness of the wilderness stories, and what a great gift it is. We have heard from many guides in this journey, and they have borne witness to the work that God does in the minds and hearts of people in the midst of challenging spaces, places of beauty, and life in community in the wilderness. We've watched the ways that these spaces are uniquely equipped to do different work than we might often encounter in churches or schools or therapist's offices, and it seems to

me that these are signposts on the map leading us towards more work God is doing in the world. I hope that we come away from this encouraged and reassured, challenged and convicted, but most of all, that we would continue to ask for eyes to see and hands to be a part of the work and calling God is leading us towards.

For further research:

Part of the joy, but also challenge, with this project has been that it feels like every new avenue of research has only opened the door for more questions, thoughts, and ideas. There are a thousand things I'd like to talk about, but this is a finite project, and time is limited. As I consider areas of inquiry and thought I'd like to pursue next, three particular things stand out.

From the lens of spirituality and biblical interpretation, I'd like to spend a lot more time with the work of the desert fathers and mothers, as well as other monastic traditions that practiced a certain degree of "going away." There is so much wisdom to be found in this particular tradition, and these are people who intimately know the experience of solitude and divine encounter. I would love to consider what they offer our texts, as well as their ideas of general experience. I also think that the mystical traditions branching off of these movements provide a lot of importance and would love to consider them more deeply.

I'd also like to consider more deeply the work of Indigenous theologians. Western theologians have not often known how to talk about our relationship with the land and the earth, and there are many areas of thought and inquiry that I think are worth pursuing within non-western traditions.

Finally, I'd love to talk about how our experience in the wilderness affects our view of Creation. There is a growing body of eco-theological work that I find incredibly compelling, and

I'd love to lean into it to understand how we might encourage people to better care for and about the world God has made and called good.

Thanks:

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- Finally, church, you're messy and hard, and sometimes we all disagree, but you are also beautiful and bear faithful witness. I am grateful to be a member of the Body, and for the ways the church has shaped and formed me. I hope we continue to encourage each other on to faithfulness, and I'm grateful for our collective task of seeking God more clearly. I hope that in all that we do, it comes from a place of love and faithfulness, and a desire to join in the work of redemptive love God is actively doing in the world.

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