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God and Fierce Landscapes¹ (Job 38: 1-7, 39: 1-12)

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Tonight the liturgical Season of Creation invites us to focus on the theme of wilderness – or, in the Australian context, ‘outback’. And I wonder what images and associations that word ‘wilderness’ suggests to you? Perhaps you think of particular kinds of landscape – deserts, mountains, remote forests, canyons, hidden valleys, the polar reaches. Or perhaps what comes to mind are thoughts of risk, tracklessness, non-domestication, adventure... And it might be interesting to reflect on this question – if you imagine yourself going into wilderness of some kind, is the feeling in your gut predominantly to do with desolation, danger – even dread; or are you drawn, enticed, wanting to get out there and away?

Awareness of wilderness is pervasive in the biblical tradition. Literally and metaphorically, wilderness landscapes exert huge shaping pressure on the Judaeo-Christian image of God and the story of God’s people. From Moses leading his sheep to the back side of the desert to encounter God speaking untameably from the bush, to the Israelites travelling fearfully and ever-doubting through the wilderness of Sinai, to Elijah faced with the sheer silence of God on Mount Horeb, to Jesus tempted in the wilderness, it’s where much of the action is set. Wilderness in the bible is often experienced as a place of god-forsakenness – the Israelites complain that God has abandoned them to die in the desert. Yet it’s also the place where God is most nakedly encountered and where faithfulness is forged.

So tonight, I want to reflect a bit more on wilderness in the spiritual life, before asking what this might mean for our relationship to the wild places of our world.

¹ The phrase ‘fierce landscapes’ is drawn from Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

According to theologian and spiritual director Belden Lane, a large part of what's spiritually so significant about wilderness is to do with its 'indifference' to us. Wilderness is not reducible to our interests. There's a sense in which this is true, ultimately, of the whole natural world – but in cultivated fields populated by woolly domestic sheep we're more likely to be deluded about the extent of our control and our centrality in the scheme of things. It's harder to maintain such illusions when we're out in the desert or mountaineering or traversing rugged, unmapped terrain. When God wants Job to realise that his demands, even his sufferings, are not at the centre of the world, he draws Job's attention to wild places and wild creatures: 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? 'Is the wild ox willing to serve you? ... Do you have faith in it that it will return, and bring your grain to your threshing floor?' (Job 39: 9, 12). Like the vastness of ocean and the night sky, the enormous independent existence of wilderness relativises our human drama, reveals the futility and pettiness of so many of our preoccupations. Apparently when the bodies of some of the early polar explorers were discovered, frozen to death in the Arctic, they were carrying with them sterling silver cutlery with very heavy handles, engraved with the family crests and initials of individual officers.² But the Arctic did not care about such distinctions.

The indifference of wilderness can be experienced as painful, even hostile or threatening. And indeed, it can kill us – as those polar expeditioners and the early white explorers of Australia discovered. The wilderness, filled with dangerous creatures, beyond habitation, marked trails and ready supplies, really is a place of peril. Yet paradoxically, its very indifference answers one of our deepest needs – which is the need to be released from our solipsism, from being stuck at the centre of our own lives. Andrew Harvey, an English pilgrim and scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, has written of his search for spiritual enlightenment while walking in the mountains of northern India, preoccupied by his emotional state and constantly taking his spiritual temperature ('am I there yet?'). Gradually, however, the 'vast grandeur of the land drew him beyond

² Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1982), p.36.

himself', and he realised in a very deep way that it was none of it was there *for him* – it existed whether he was there or not, and would continue long after he had gone. Like Job, he realised his insignificance and was finally liberated from [quote] his 'frantic quest for self-fulfillment'.³ Paradoxically, precisely then, did he find his true place and experience the world as his home. 'We are saved in the end', he wrote, 'by the things that ignore us'.⁴ It is the 'inattentiveness' of the wilderness to human anxiety, says Belden Lane, that provides 'an inexplicable healing'.⁵ This is what *he* describes as the 'solace of fierce landscapes'.

And perhaps this explains how it is that deepened encounter with God so often occurs in the wilderness – not only in the biblical story, but in all the major spiritual traditions. Such encounter is a direct corollary of being emptied of self-importance and self-obsession. Meeting God becomes possible because of the displacement occasioned by being benignly ignored, and so properly humbled, brought to silence and real presence. For this reason, suggests Lane, people 'seeking new vitality in the spiritual life continually retreat to wild and undeveloped landscapes, seeking new meaning along the outer margins of familiarity'.⁶

This is certainly a strong theme in the contemplative or apophatic tradition in Christianity; from the monastic flight to the desert in the 3rd and 4th centuries, to the propensity of later monastic communities to live in remote forests and on mountain-sides, right through to Thomas Merton in his hermitage in the woods of Kentucky. In Australia, it's the outback that many have experienced as the spiritual heart of this land. Poet Les Murray wrote: 'In Australia, God is a vast blue and pale-gold and red-brown landscape.'⁷ And David Tacey has remarked: 'one of the central paradoxes of the Australian experience (is) that what seems a defeat to the ego is also a liberation and

³ Lane, *Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p.54.

⁴ Lane, *Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p.54.

⁵ Lane, *Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p.57.

⁶ Lane, *Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p.47.

⁷ Cited in David Tacey, *The Edge of the Sacred* (Melbourne: Harper Collins, 1995), p.7.

release for the soul. The otherness of the land both “enraptures and defeats us”, it both “stuns and spurs us”.

Yet – having said this, I’m conscious of there being yet one more paradox here. I’ve said that wilderness is spiritually significant because we can’t tame it, control it – it humbles the ego-ic self, and so enables our encounter with God. Yet, to leave things here could imply that what’s most important about wilderness, is still what it does for us – even if what it does for us is to ignore us. Belden Lane points out the irony here. We can be so focused on the spiritual meaning of wilderness, a meaning we bring to it, that we neglect the thing itself.

He reports that when the American poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘declared in 1836 that “every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact”, he sent people racing to the woods, anticipating the voice of God in the call of every thrush. But too often they paid scant attention to the songbird in their anxiousness to hear some transcendent message. They returned home full of nothing but themselves, their pockets stuffed with metaphors’, having failed utterly to attend to ‘the specificity of particular landscapes’.⁸ In other words, we can colonize wilderness imaginatively even more easily than we colonize it materially.

So while wilderness can be an important site for spiritual growth and encounter with God, it’s important to remember that’s not what wilderness is for. And if we approach it like that, we’ll not only defeat our spiritual intentions but miss what’s actually there. We are invited to let the world be, to let it reveal itself and to love it ‘for nothing’. It seems to me that the disposition of non-attachment is both an effect of the wilderness on us, and a condition of our truly encountering it. Because, perhaps above all, wilderness reveals the radical givenness of the world – all those waterfalls tumbling down with no one to hear them, the flowers that ‘bloom unseen’, the sheer scale and profusion and otherness of the created order. Wilderness, its givenness, its indifference,

⁸ Lane, *Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p.17.

its beauty, rightly provokes our wonder and awe and praise. For which, thanks be to God.