

Opening - When Hunger Finally Gets Our Attention

To be human is to know what it feels like to be hungry. Most of the time, we manage that hunger with snacks, schedules, and distractions so we never have to feel empty for very long. But occasionally, hunger cuts through the noise and says, “Something real is missing here.”¹

Some of us know what it is to be in a *spiritual* wilderness like that; when the old certainties stop working, the prayers feel dry, and God seems quiet. We can fill that emptiness with busyness, with screens, with religious activity; or we can let the wilderness hunger do its holy work and make room for the Word of God.

Today we’re standing with Israel on the edge of the Transjordan, in the wilderness by the Jordan River, listening for a voice crying out after four hundred years of prophetic silence.

From Malachi to John - A Long, Dry Waiting

When Malachi finished his ministry, Israel was back in the land, the temple stood again, and Persia still ruled the world.² The priests could still trace their line back to Aaron, but the royal line of David sat in the shadows with no king on the throne.

By the time we open Matthew and Luke, everything has changed: Rome is in charge, Herod the Great, an Idumean, a descendant of Esau, sits on the throne, and high priests are now political appointees rather than sons of Aaron. The people are split into parties: Pharisees, insisting on strict tradition; Sadducees, accommodating to power and skeptical of the supernatural; and smaller groups like the Essenes, retreating into the wilderness with their scrolls, longing for God to act.

Historically, it was anything but “silent”; empires rose and fell, languages shifted, roads and synagogues spread, but prophetically, there was no new word from the Lord.³ Like a stage reset behind a closed curtain, God was rearranging the world for the exact moment “when the fullness of the time came,” and He would send His Son (Gal. 4:4).

Into that long, dry waiting, a voice finally breaks the silence; not in Jerusalem, not in the temple courts, but out beyond the Jordan, in the wilderness (Matt. 3:1-3).

The Geography of Hunger - Transjordan and the Jordan Wilderness

To feel the powerful force of John’s ministry, we must see the land. Biblical geography describes the Transjordan, the high plateau east of the Jordan River: Bashan to the north, Gilead, Moab, and Edom stretching southward toward the Aravah.⁴ Between those eastern heights and the central hill country of Israel lies the **Jordan River Valley**, a deep rift with layers: a narrow ribbon of lush growth right by the river, a scrubby, chalky zone beyond that, and then the steep limestone hills rising toward the heartland.⁵

In Joshua 3-4, the people of Israel camp on the *east* side of that river, looking across at a land they’ve never yet walked (Josh. 3-4). The river is at flood stage; everything about it screams, “You shall not pass” (Josh. 3:15).

¹ Paul David Bravard, “Transjordan & Wilderness,” sermon manuscript, Week 7, *400 Years of Silence* series.

² Ray C. Stedman, “The Four-Hundred Silent Years,” in *Adventuring through the Bible* (Palo Alto, CA: Discovery Publishing, 1966).

³ Stedman, “Four-Hundred Silent Years.”

⁴ Cyndi Parker, *Listen to the Land: Historical Geography of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem University College, n.d.).

⁵ Parker, *Listen to the Land*, lesson on the Jordan River Valley.

But when the priests step into the water carrying the ark, the Jordan piles up in a great heap upstream, and the people walk through on dry ground (Josh. 3:14-17). Then, Joshua had twelve men carry twelve stones from the riverbed and set them up at Gilgal, so that future generations would ask, “What do these stones mean?” and hear again what God did in the wilderness (Josh. 4:1-9, 20-24).

That river becomes a **threshold**, the line between wandering and home, between wilderness and promise.

It's no accident that when John the Baptist appears, he doesn't choose a synagogue or a city; he goes back to the Jordan, out in the wilderness, near the old crossing places (Matt. 3:1-6; John 1:28). He is standing at the border again, calling Israel to a new kind of crossing.

In biblical times, the Jordan was wider and wilder than it is today: a tangled, muddy corridor that animals and armies alike used as a north-south highway, and a natural barrier that demanded courage to cross.⁶ John chooses that liminal space between east and west, between wilderness and land, between past failure and future hope; to announce that God is on the move again (Matt. 3:1-3).

“A voice is calling,
‘Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.’”
Isa. 40:3,

Isaiah's promise of a highway in the wilderness becomes literal geography and living reality in John's ministry by the Jordan (Isa. 40:3; Matt. 3:3).

Sects, Scrolls, and Apocalyptic Yearning

By John's day, Israel's wilderness was not just geographical; it was spiritual and political. The Pharisees tried to survive the silence by building fences of tradition, convinced that holiness meant stricter rules and better boundary lines.⁷ The Sadducees tried to survive by partnering with power, keeping the temple running, staying close to Rome, trimming talk of resurrection, angels, and anything too disruptive (Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:8). And then there were **wilderness people** like the Essenes, who withdrew to the desert near the Dead Sea, copied scrolls, and waited for God to judge a corrupt priesthood and a faithless people.⁸

Those scrolls, hidden in caves above the Dead Sea and rediscovered in our time, are full of apocalyptic longing: prayers for God to rend the heavens, to cleanse the temple, to send a faithful Teacher of Righteousness.⁹ They remind us that when systems grow anxious and corrupt, some hearts ache for a holiness deeper than performance and politics.

John is not precisely an Essene, but he is a **wilderness man** (Matt. 3:4). He wears camel's hair, eats locusts and wild honey, and preaches repentance out where no one stumbles across him accidentally; you must *go out* to see him (Matt. 3:4-5). In a world of sects and parties, of Pharisees and Sadducees, of zealots and quietists, John does something strange: he calls everyone; *all* Judea and all the district around the Jordan; out into the wilderness to start over (Matt. 3:5-6).

⁶ Parker, *Listen to the Land*, Jordan River Valley lesson.

⁷ Matt. 3:7; Stedman, “Four-Hundred Silent Years.”

⁸ Vermes, Géza. *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*. Revised ed. (London: Penguin, 2012), 1QS.

⁹ Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 1QS & 1QM.

If we put it in Parker's terms, John is inviting the people to step off the well-worn north-south roads and into the wild Jordan corridor, where the land itself says, "You can't control this; you can only receive what God does here."¹⁰

John's Message - Hunger, Stones, and a New Crossing

Matthew summarizes John's preaching in one line:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2).

Luke fills out the scene for us: in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, with a list of governors and high priests, "the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness" (Luke 3:1-2).

Notice that the word of God doesn't come to the emperor, the governor, or the high priest; it comes to a strangely dressed prophet by a river (Luke 3:1-2).

And John goes "into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). He quotes Isaiah 40 as his job description: a voice in the wilderness, preparing the way, lifting valleys and lowering mountains, straightening what is crooked and smoothing what is rough (Luke 3:4-6; Isa. 40:3-5).

When the Pharisees and Sadducees show up, perhaps to inspect and maybe co-opt this new movement, John does not greet them politely (Matt. 3:7). "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore, bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt. 3:7-8).

Then he strikes at the heart of their religious security: "Do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham" (Matt. 3:9).

Out there by the Jordan, those words about **stones** ring with memory. The people know the story of Joshua's twelve stones, raised as a witness that God cut a path through the river when there was no way forward (Josh. 4:4-7, 20-24). Now John says, "Don't rely on your history; don't trust your religious pedigree; God can take these river stones and make a new people if He has to" (Matt. 3:9).

John's wilderness preaching exposes every false full-ness; full of ourselves, full of our systems, full of our excuses, and invites a **holy emptiness** where real repentance and new life can begin.

From a Friends' perspective, this is what holiness looks like: being gathered by the Light into a stripped-down, honest place where we stand together under the searching word of God.¹¹ Holiness is not a sectarian badge; it is a community willing to step into the wilderness and tell the truth about our sins, our fears, and our misplaced loyalties so that grace can reorder us in love.¹²

Thomas R. Kelly speaks of living from the Divine Center; a life where outward compulsions no longer rule us because the presence of Christ has inwardly simplified us.¹³ The wilderness by the Jordan is that kind of simplifying place for Israel: away from the temple politics and the crowded streets, they can finally hear the one thing needful: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2).

¹⁰ Parker, *Listen to the Land*.

¹¹ Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2007).

¹² Spencer, *Holiness*.

¹³ Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).

Wilderness, Anxiety, and Faithful Presence

Bowen Family Systems Theory reminds us that when anxiety runs high, systems tend to polarize into camps, cling to rigid rules, or seek quick fixes to quiet the tension.¹⁴ That sounds a lot like the religious landscape around John: Pharisees tightening control, Sadducees cutting deals, wilderness groups withdrawing into purity enclaves.

John himself is remarkably **differentiated**.¹⁵ When people ask if he is the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet, he says clearly, “I am not,” and locates himself simply as “a voice” (John 1:19-23).

He resists becoming the center of the story; he keeps pointing to “One who is coming after me” who is mightier, whose sandals he is not worthy to remove (Matt. 3:11-12).

In anxious times, that kind of clarity is a gift.

He doesn’t try to manage everyone’s anxiety; he names reality, calls for repentance, and refuses to play any of the parties’ games (Matt. 3:7-10).

For us, wilderness may not mean the Judean desert; it might mean burnout, loss, illness, conflict, or the slow unraveling of the stories we told ourselves about how life would go.

Friends’ holiness in such a moment looks like **faithful presence**; refusing to numb out, refusing to join the blame-games, and instead standing still enough to listen for the Word of the Lord in the dry places.¹⁶

Brené Brown notes that we prefer to anesthetize vulnerability rather than feel it, but when we armor up against pain, we also numb our capacity for joy and connection.¹⁷

The wilderness of the Jordan invites Israel, and us, to lay down the armor, come out from behind our religious and social personas, and admit how hungry we really are for a word that can change us.

Practicing Wilderness Hunger Today

So how do we *welcome* wilderness hunger instead of running from it?

1. Come out from the crowds.

People “were going out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan.” (Matt. 3:5).

They left the familiar patterns to meet God in an uncomfortable place (Matt. 3:5-6).

For us, that may mean carving out real silence, stepping away from constant noise, or taking a literal walk outside to pray with an open heart.

2. Name your stones.

Israel’s stones at Gilgal were testimonies to what God had done; John warns against turning stones into idols of heritage and presumption (Josh. 4:20-24; Matt. 3:9).

What are the “stones” you rely on; your background, your successes, your tribe, your theological correctness; that keep you from fresh repentance today?

3. Let repentance be concrete.

When the crowds in Luke ask, “What shall we do?” John gives practical answers: share your tunics, be fair in business, stop abusing power (Luke 3:10-14).

¹⁴ Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

¹⁵ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

¹⁶ Spencer, *Holiness*; Kelly, *Testament of Devotion*.

¹⁷ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham, 2012).

Wilderness holiness is not vague guilt; it is specific change, expressed in justice, generosity, and integrity (Luke 3:8-14).¹⁸

4. **Listen together.**

In Friends' tradition, we don't just listen alone; we gather in stillness, expecting Christ to speak by His Spirit through Scripture and one another.¹⁹ Wilderness hunger can either isolate us or deepen our communal listening; we are invited to the latter.

Conclusion: When the Word Steps into the Water

John's ministry reaches its climax when **Jesus Himself** steps into the Jordan (Matt. 3:13-17). The One for whom the highway has been prepared walks down into the muddy river where sinners have confessed their sins and been plunged beneath the waters (Matt. 3:13-16). In that moment, the wilderness is no longer only a place of hunger; it becomes the place of revelation: the heavens open, the Spirit descends like a dove, and the Father's voice declares, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." (Matt. 3:16-17).

The four hundred years of prophetic silence end not with a thunderclap from the temple but with a soaked, humble Messiah standing in the river at the edge of the wilderness (Matt. 3:1-17). God's answer to apocalyptic yearning is not a new sect or a new scroll, but a Son; a living Word who joins us in the wilderness and leads us through death into life (John 1:14; Heb. 1:1-2).

So, where is your Transjordan tonight?

Where do you feel stuck on the wrong side of the river, staring at an uncrossable gap?

Where is the wilderness hunger in our congregation, in our community, in our world?

Friends, **wilderness hunger makes room for God's Word.**

If we dare to go out, to listen, to repent, and to wait, the same God who made a way through the Jordan and who sent John to cry in the wilderness will meet us in our dry places with the living Word, Jesus Christ.

(Isa. 40:3; Josh. 3-4; Matt. 3:1-17; Luke 3:1-6).

Amen.

¹⁸ Spencer, *Holiness*.

¹⁹ Spencer, *Holiness*.

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