

“Food in the Wilderness”
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“You give them something to eat,” says Jesus.

Jesus has gone out to the wilderness and the crowds have followed. In English, *wilderness* means something untamed or an untamable nature. In Greek, the word has quite different implications. It implies devastation and depopulation. In Hebrew, the word is even more powerful. The first word people usually learn in Hebrew is *dbar*. It means to speak a word. *Midbar* means to be without words. What could be worse than to be without words?

This biblical story in Matthew is not a simple story about God’s abundance in the middle of neediness. This story has echoes of so many other bible stories in it. People in Jesus’ day couldn’t hear this story without hearing all of these biblical echoes.

The exodus story is probably the most powerful story in the Jewish tradition. God leads God’s people out of slavery and into the desert wilderness where there is nothing. No food, no trees, scarce water. But everyone knows that God provided manna each day. Manna enough for just each day, nothing could be saved for the next day because manna would rot, but the Israelites had to trust that there was manna each morning.

The other story of a wilderness time that no Jew could forget was when Babylon destroyed the city of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The city was depopulated; people were killed, or left to starve or taken into exile. The book of Lamentations in the bible is a powerful witness to the mourning that accompanied the devastation of God’s city, Jerusalem. Psalm 37 tells us that the writer sat by the banks of the river of Babylon and had no words for the grief that filled his heart. The people could only sit by the bank of the river and keen and mourn for the devastation they were enduring.

What had driven Jesus out into the desert wilderness? We know that when Jesus first heard his call and was baptized on the river Jordan he went out to the wilderness for the first time. He faced his temptations and then returned to begin his ministry. Now in Matthew’s gospel he has once again gone to the wilderness. Why?

Jesus and the crowds have just learned of the death of John the Baptist. John is a powerful figure in Jesus’ life. His unjust execution must have been a terrible blow for Jesus. He probably wanted to be alone to grieve. I don’t know. Why did the crowds follow him? Were they mourning the loss of John the Baptist as well? Did they simply follow Jesus? A hike out into the place that is depopulated with no people, a place of devastation, a place that is so lonely that there are no words to be had seems like a strange place for a day’s hike.

We need to remember that Matthew’s gospel was written at about 70 AD. It was only a few years after Jerusalem had once again been torn down and burned. A place that

was still a place of devastation and a place of hungry people mourning the loss of loved ones. A place that had been beaten to a literal pulp by the Roman Empire.

Perhaps for a people still grieving the loss of their temple and the loss of so many loved ones, the new loss of John the Baptist just made them all feel like they were out in the desert. The wilderness matched the depth of their pain.

“Give them something to eat,” said Jesus. Even in the desert of isolation, loneliness, hunger and despair, God feeds and nurtures and cares for God’s people.

Remember Genesis, when God created the world, He created it by speaking. It was God’s *dabar* that brought the beautiful cosmos into being out of chaos. God did the work of creating by speaking to the world not yet formed; speaking the way a mother speaks to her baby not yet born. When the world heard God’s voice it emerged out of chaos and rose up into order, beauty, and mutuality; each part supporting and being supported by every other part. Every part came out of the soil and returned to the soil, nurturing it into future life. All this happened because God spoke a word *dabar* of creation.

In this scene from Matthew’s gospel the people and Jesus are in *midbar*, a place away from words, the place that has not yet heard and responded to God’s call to order and mutuality, a place that has not yet lifted itself up to nurture life. No wonder the people are hungry. Jesus’ act of providing food is a seed around which nurturance can crystallize even