

Douglas Preston is a writer from Durango who wrote a book called *Talking to the Ground*

- He and his fiancé Christine were newly engaged when they came up with the idea of taking a 400-mile trip on horseback through the backcountry of the Navajo reservation
- It was certainly an unusual, if not risky, project to undertake just before getting married
- And to top it off, they'd be traveling with Christine's nine-year-old daughter Selene, whom he described as being "less than enthusiastic"  
"What!" she cried. "You expect *me* to ride 400 miles across the desert? Forget it. No *way*." She set her fork down with a clatter and planted her elbows on the table.

"You'll love it," Christine said. "It'll be the adventure of a lifetime."

"You want me to sleep in a tent for a whole *month*? What are we going to eat? I've never *heard* anything so horrible. Like, where am I supposed to go to the bathroom?"

When she heard the answer to that she burst into tears. "I am *not* going to *pee* in the *sand*," she wailed. "And I *hate* beans! *I'm not going* and that's *final*." (p. 32-33)

It turned out that the trip was pretty challenging for all of them, with some major meltdowns along the way

- They started in northern Arizona about 50 miles west of Monument Valley
- The high plateaus of that country are separated by deep canyons, and their first section of trail descended precipitously off the mesa
- They encountered hailstones the size of golf balls and blinding sandstorms, spent days searching for water of dubious quality, and set off down trackless valleys stretching on for dozens of miles

The sparse desert landscape had a powerful impact on the new Preston family  
Christine reached across the saddle and took my hand. I could see the same unease in her face that I felt in myself. "This landscape kind of shrinks you," she said, "makes you smaller and smaller until there's nothing left. I sit here and I feel like I'm going to disappear..."

I thought how true that was. The landscape did make us feel small and scared; it reminded us that in the end nature would not bend to our will. It was a place that challenged our version of creation; it questioned the very idea that we should, or even could, have dominion over all the earth. There could be no taming of this landscape, of these massive buttes, these

mountains buried in thunderclouds, these thirsty mesas and mute deserts. (p. 128-129)

Do you see the parallels to today's Gospel story?

- John the Baptizer left the comforts of his home village in the hill country of Judea to wander through the desert, and "the Word of God came to (him) in the wilderness" (*Luke 3:2*)
- After their encounter in the waters of the Jordan River, Jesus "was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil" (*Luke 4:1*)
- While they weren't so spoiled by civilized comforts, in their own ways John and Jesus were tested just as severely before beginning their ministries as Doug and Christine were before their wedding

The Hebrew word "midbar" can be translated as either wilderness or desert

- Besides referring to a desolate or deserted place, it also means "that which is beyond..."
- Beyond well-known towns and villages, families and occupations
- Beyond the grazing grounds of the sheep and goats
- Beyond the orderly confines of civilization, in a land rife with unknown dangers
- To pass into the wilderness is to go beyond our comfort zones, to lose our orientation, to become literally "be-wildered"

That's precisely where the season of Lent is supposed to take us

- Many of you heard on Ash Wednesday the prayer book's invitation "to the observance of a holy Lent" (BCP p. 265)
  - by self-examination and repentance
  - by prayer, fasting, and self-denial
  - and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word
- It's not just that Lent will take us there, but that we will choose to enter a country which lies beyond our ordinary daily lives
- Like John and Jesus and the Prestons, that we will let the Spirit sweep us off our feet, trusting we will return safely and grow spiritually

The desert wilderness is a place of extremes

- I'm not picturing the endless dunes of the Sahara or the Arabian peninsula
- The desolate areas of the American southwest and the Middle East share many characteristics
  - a very dry climate, with what little moisture there is often coming in violent storms
  - the rocky landscapes are disorienting and lack easy travel routes, so that it's easy to get lost
  - there are extreme temperatures and exposure—punishing winds with little shelter

- settlements are few and far between—“help” is usually not available—cell phone coverage is generally bad

Why is it that people choose to travel to the desert instead of taking their vacation in Hawaii or on the Mexican coast?

- And to follow the Gospel’s metaphor, why do people choose to search their souls and change their lives during Lent?
- Let me suggest three reasons for the continuing fascination with spending time in the wilderness

### 1. Quiet

- The silence of wild places is very powerful, sometimes eerie and unsettling for me, especially when I’m alone
- I can remember abandoning a backpacking trip when the solitude became too much for me
- Yet the noisy background and busy-ness of our lives at home make it hard to hear the whisper of the Spirit in our hearts
- Being in the wilderness forces us to be quiet and teaches us to listen

### 2. Clarity

- The daily rhythms of life in the wilderness are completely different—the sun goes up and down—we eat when we’re hungry and drink when we’re thirsty
- There’s nowhere we have to be, and getting to Starbucks or watching a TV program is simply not an issue
- These changes can give us a sense of perspective that’s hard to find back home
- Ironically, we can often see our lives more clearly when we get away from them

### 3. Trust (*the big one*)

- In the desert we can’t take things for granted, even the simplest necessities of life like water and food
- In that harsh environment we’re forced into complete dependence on God
- Belden Lane writes that, “The God of Sinai is one who thrives on fierce landscapes, seemingly forcing God’s people into wild and wretched climes where trust must be absolute.” (*The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p. 43)
- John and Jesus were both tested in the wilderness, returning to their home country “full of the Holy Spirit” (*Luke 4:1*)
- What about us? Where do we stand in our journeys of faith?
- Are we ready to let go of control and trust in God?

Many of us remember traveling in the desert, but that's not what we're literally going to do in the next month

- Entering the wilderness is a metaphor for the spiritual life we're drawn into by the Gospel
- The fact is that we don't have to do anything special during Lent—our lives will go on and the weeks will pass by quickly
- But if you choose to embrace the invitations of the season, it will be up to you to decide what that means and how it looks
- What opportunities do you see in your life and family for growing spiritually?
- What barriers do you find to trusting more deeply in God's love and care?
- In what ways is your "comfort zone" not so comfortable any more?

Originally I intended to leave this conversation right where it stands, to simply invite you to think about the season ahead of us

- But I realized that it might be helpful to offer some possibilities or examples—please take them in that light, not as spiritual "shoulds"
  - Hopefully one of them will trigger an idea that will be just right for you during Lent
1. Consider setting aside some Sabbath time every week—if it's the same day and time each week that will help to establish a rhythm—there are no expectations beyond opening your heart and mind to God
  2. Take a step toward a more intentional prayer life—you can make a simple beginning by regularly giving thanks and asking for God's help—cultivate gratitude for the blessings of your life and think about the needs of others
  3. Engage in spiritual reading—the Bible is a good place to start: perhaps the Gospel of Luke or Isaiah or the Psalms—or pick up a book of Lenten meditations on the table in the Narthex
  4. Servant ministry: take a step outside yourself by helping people who are in need—pick up a booklet at the Samaritan Outreach table in the narthex for some ideas

When I tried to travel alone in the wilderness it was too much for me

- But I learned that it doesn't have to be that way—we have each other as companions on the journey
- Together we can follow John and Jesus in a search for quiet, clarity and trust in our lives
- By metaphorically stepping into the desert—away from familiar, watered gardens—we can discover a new spiritual vitality
- The more we offer and invest, the more we'll receive

Nine-year-old Silene faced challenges she could never have imagined on their horseback trip through the Navajo reservation

- “I can hardly remember what it’s like to live a normal life anymore,” she said. “It seems like years ago that we left. I think about my friends and school, and it doesn’t seem real anymore.” (p. 267)
- Near the end of their journey she caught Doug by surprise when she referred to him as “Dad.”
- Clueless as Peter in the Gospels, he replied, “Who, me?”
- “Who else?” she asked in amazement
- Then after a rain shower she handed him her bandana and asked, “Daddy, will you please dry off my saddle for me?”

That’s how it can be for us with God, if we can risk stepping out of our comfort zones

- Instead of a posture of rugged independence, we can deepen our faith, grow closer as a family, and learn to really trust in God
- Instead of a hurried “Our Father in heaven...”
- We can say it as it was originally written, “Abba (Daddy)...”
- “Abba in heaven, hallowed be your name.”