

St. Francis of Assisi Lenten Mission Talk 1
Cliff Knighten, PhD

Introduction to Desert Spirituality:

The desert as both a geographical landscape and an archetypal or mythic space looms large in both the Jewish and Christian imaginations. As an actual *geographical landscape*, the desert is the place where certain crucial religious experiences took place. For example:

- Israel wandered in the desert for forty years. (Num. 14:32-35; Deut. 2:7; 8:2-4; 29:5)
- Moses encountered God in the desert in the form of a burning bush. (Exodus 3:2-ff.)
- It was in the desert that John the Baptist preached the coming of the Messiah. (Mark 1:1-8; see also Matt. 3:1-6 & Luke 3:1-6)
- Jesus began his ministry in the desert:

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted [NJB “tested”] by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12-13 NRSV; see also Matt. 4:1-11 & Luke 4:1-13)

Note: The Greek term translated “wilderness” here is ἔρημος (*erēmos*). It refers to an uninhabited or desolate region. It can also be translated “desert.” Here it likely refers to the arid region east of Jerusalem down to the Dead Sea.¹ We see here two essential aspects of the Desert Tradition: (1) temptation/testing/trial and (2) Divine assistance.

- Devout women (*ammās*) and men (*abbas*) from Syria, Palestine, and Egypt fled urban society in the third-fifth centuries C.E. to pursue a life of renunciation and prayer in the desert. The most famous of these *ammās* and *abbas* is the hermit St. Antony of Egypt (ca. 251-356 CE.). His story is told by Athanasius. Antony gave away all his possessions and retired completely to the desert.

When we think of the desert as a landscape, we think of descriptors like dry, barren, inhospitable, fierce, wild, and empty. There is little food and even less water in the desert. The desert is populated by wild animals. In this perspective, the desert is potentially dangerous.

Yet, as Edward Abbey observes in *Desert Solitaire*, the desert is also a place of beauty and spaciousness:

[I]t seems to me that the strangeness and wonder of existence are emphasized here, in the desert, by the comparative sparsity of the flora and fauna: life not crowded upon life as in other places but scattered abroad in spareness and simplicity, with a generous gift of space for each herb and bush and tree, each stem of grass, so that the living organism stands out bold and brave and vivid against the lifeless sand and barren rock. The extreme clarity of the desert light is equaled by the extreme individuation of desert life-forms.

¹ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 60-61.

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Love flowers best in openness and freedom.²

As an *archetypal or mythic space*, the desert has come to represent an interior spiritual sensibility. In this sense, the desert is a place characterized by:

- solitude
- silence
- simplicity
- vulnerability
- struggle
- testing
- purification
- encounter with elemental forces of both evil and good

This is the essence of the Christian desert experience: deep encounter with both our “demons” and Divine Grace. The practices of solitude, silence, simplicity, and others both facilitate this encounter and prepare us for it.

The desert as an interior spiritual sensibility is not meant to be a permanent abode (at least for most of us). The desert is meant to be *passed through*.

In the Christian tradition the desert as a place of testing and purification has come to be associated with both the *via purgativa* (the way of purification) and *via negativa* (the negative way).³ We will talk about the negative way and the apophatic tradition in the next talk. The way of purification is part of the classical description of the human Christian journey.

Contextualizing Desert Spirituality in the Christian Tradition:

Drawing on the work of Gabriel Marcel, one scholar describes the essence of Christian human existence “as that of *homo viator*, the human as ‘pilgrim’, ‘wayfarer’, ‘on the way.’”⁴ This is rooted in both the Jewish tradition of *torah* and *halaka* (root meaning: “to go” or “walk”) as well as and from references in the New Testament describing early Christians as belonging to “the Way” (e.g.; Acts 9:2; 18:26; 19:9; 22:4; 24:14).

In this sense, the Way is a root metaphor for the Christian spiritual journey. It represents the essence of the Christian spiritual journey through time.

²Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 31.

³ Douglas Burton-Christie, “Desert” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 231.

⁴ Boyd Taylor Coolman, “Spiritual Itineraries,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, ed. Edward Howells and Mark A. McIntosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 287.

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The paradigm for this journey has classically been described under the rubric of the *triplex via* variously translated as the “Three Ways,” or the “Three-Fold Way”:

Via Purgativa > Via Illuminativa > Via Unitiva

In this model, the Christian journey contains three constitutive elements: purification, illumination, and union. In other words, these elements reflect an ever-deepening relationship with the Divine Reality.

The British writer Evelyn Underhill expanded this basic model to include **five stages** which she called the “Mystic Way”:⁵

1. **Awakening:** “The awakening of the Self to consciousness of Divine Reality. This experience, usually abrupt and well-marked, is accompanied by intense feelings of joy and exaltation.” This is the stage of baptism, initial conversion, or “first fervor.”
2. **Purgation:** “The Self, aware for the first time of Divine Beauty, realized by contrast its own finiteness and imperfection, the manifold illusions in which it is immersed, the immense distance which separates it from the One. Its attempts to illuminate by discipline and mortification [lit. “to kill” or “put to death”] all that stands in the way of its progress towards union with God constitute *purgation*: a state of pain and effort.” This is the disciplined practice of seeking to conform one’s life to the Gospel. In classic Roman Catholic spiritual theology this is the ascetical life. This stage also corresponds to St. John of the Cross’ dark night of the senses.
3. **Illumination:** “Responding to the intimations received in that awakening, ordering itself in their interest, concentrating its scattered energies on this one thing, the self emerges from long and varied acts of purification to find that it is able to apprehend another order of reality. It has achieved consciousness of a world that was always there, and wherein its substantial being – that Ground which is of God – has always stood.”
4. **The Dark Night of the Soul:** “The consciousness which had, in Illumination, sunned itself in the sense of the Divine Presence, now suffers under an equally intense sense of the Divine Absence: learning to dissociate the personal satisfaction of mystical vision from the reality of mystical life. As in Purgation the senses were cleansed and humbled, and the energies and interests of the Self were concentrated upon transcendental things: so now the purifying process is extended to the very center of I-hood, the will. The human instinct for happiness [read: Freud’s “pleasures principle”] must be killed. This is the ‘spiritual crucifixion’ so often described by the mystics: the great desolation in which the soul seems abandoned by the Divine. The Self now surrenders itself, its individuality, and its will, completely. It desires nothing, is utterly passive, and is thus prepared for *Union*.” This is a deeper purification that corresponds to John of the Cross’ dark night of the spirit.

⁵ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 165-ff.

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5. **Union:** “The true goal of the mystic quest. In this state, the Absolute Life is not merely perceived and enjoyed by the Self, as in Illumination: but is *one* with it. This is the end to which all the previous oscillations of consciousness have tended. It is a state of equilibrium, of purely spiritual life; characterized by peaceful joy, by enhanced powers, by intense certitude.”

Some implications:

1. Deepening self-knowledge is required throughout the way through. (St. Teresa of Avila)
2. “God perfects people gradually, according to their human nature, and proceeds from the ... most exterior to the... most interior.”⁶
3. “The soul never remains in one state, but everything is ascent and descent.”⁷
4. This process has both linear and non-linear aspects.
5. Desert spirituality is most prominent in Stages 2 and 4.
6. A model is a simplified representation of the reality it seeks to describe (and explain); however, it matches reality in some important ways.

Contemporary Example: Henri Nouwen on the Desert Tradition:

Many contemporary writers have discussed the desert experience. Among the most articulate is Henri Nouwen. Nouwen discusses the desert experience most fully in his book *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* where he aptly describes desert solitude as the “furnace of transformation.”

Some excerpts:

The desert is the place that “I get rid of all of my scaffolding: no friends to talk with, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain, no books to distract, just me – naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived, broken – nothing.”⁸

Of course, we resist this *nothingness* with a vengeance.

Nouwen explains why: “It is this nothingness that I have to face in my solitude, a nothingness so

⁶ John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2.17.4.

⁷ John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 2.18.3.

⁸ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 27.

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dreadful that everything in me wants to run to my friends, my work, and my distractions so that I can forget my nothingness and make myself believe that I am worth something.”⁹

Without the distractions of everyday life, we are faced with the reality of who we are in our finitude, dependence, and weakness. For most of us, according to Nouwen, this initiates a life project in which we seek to prove our worth: “The struggle is real because the danger is real. It is the danger of living the whole of our life as one long defense against the reality of our condition, one restless effort to convince ourselves of our virtuousness.”¹⁰

However, if we remain in our solitude, two things happen. First, we eventually encounter our “demons.” Nouwen writes:

As soon as I decide to stay in my solitude, confusing ideas, disturbing images, wild fantasies, and weird associations jump about in my mind like monkeys in a banana tree. Anger and greed begin to show their ugly faces. I give long, hostile speeches to my enemies and dream lustful dreams in which I am wealthy, influential, and very attractive – or poor, ugly, and in need of immediate consolation. Thus I try again to run from the dark abyss of my nothingness and restore my false self in all its vain glory.¹¹

Second, the disturbances eventually abate: “The task is to persevere in my solitude, to stay in my cell until all my seductive visitors get tired of pounding on my door and leave me alone.”¹²

Nouwen concludes this discussion with a warning about this struggle to die to the “false self”:

This struggle is far, far beyond our own strength. Anyone who wants to fight his demons with his [or her] own weapons is a fool. The wisdom of the desert is that the confrontation with our own frightening nothingness forces us to surrender ourselves totally and unconditionally to the Lord Jesus Christ. Alone, we cannot face the “mystery of iniquity” with impunity. Only Christ can overcome the powers of evil.¹³

Concluding thought:

St. Augustine: “Our entire task in this life consists in healing the eyes of the heart so that they may be able to see God.”

Tomorrow evening, we will take a more poetic look at this process.

⁹ Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 27.

¹⁰ Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 28.

¹¹ Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 27-28.

¹² Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 28.

¹³ Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 28-29.

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