

God is Our Shade

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A man has made at least a start on discovering the meaning of human life when he plants shade trees under which he knows full well he will never sit. —Elton Trueblood

Reading: Isaiah 25:1-5

The recent extreme, record-breaking heat here recently reminded me a little of my time living in Tucson, Arizona. I've never been able to connect much with all the talk in the Bible about the desert. The entire Bible is set in the desert—in the Middle East—Egypt, Israel, Palestine. *The God of the Bible is a Desert God.*

When scriptures talk about the Israelites “wandering in the wilderness” for 40 years, for example, it was talking about the desert.

Same thing when Jesus went to the wilderness to fast and to pray—he went into the desert. John the Baptist, Jesus' friend, lived in the desert.

The desert was a place to go to seek and to experience God. There were communities, such as the Essenes, who lived there. You might have heard about the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient texts that the Essenes wrote and preserved, discovered in the 1940's in a cave in Qumran. And you might have heard about the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers, monks who established communities in the desert.

Living in Tucson was the first time I experienced up close and personal what a harsh and dangerous place the desert can be. I don't care if it is a “dry heat,” 110 degrees is brutal. There's a law that any public establishment must give somebody some water if they ask for it. It is—quite simply—a matter of life and death. Human beings cannot survive in such a hostile environment without water and protection.

Of course, these days almost everyone has air conditioning now, and they drive around in air conditioned cars.

One of the things that I have noticed there was how people compete for the shady parking spots. Trees are such a rare commodity. And the “trees” here are usually small and scraggly, like mesquite trees, more like large bushes really. And so in a parking lot there are usually only about four spots that are under shade, usually at the four extreme corners of the lot. And they are always taken. It doesn't matter if you're old or have a walker or have a handicapped tag—people will take those spots and walk! Shade is a big, big deal. It is precious.

Back in the Midwest shade is nice. “Hey, there's a nice spot. What do you say we sit in the shade over there? O.K. Sure.” In the desert, shade is a much more serious matter. It is *wonderful!* “Oh. My. God. There's some shade. Can you believe it?” This is the Bible's view, too.

The prophet and poet, Isaiah, addresses God by saying,

*For you have been a refuge to the poor,
a refuge to the needy in their distress,
...a shade from the heat.*

*When the noise of the aliens was like heat in a dry place,
you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds;
the song of the ruthless was stilled.*

In the Bible, shade is amazing; it is life-giving. And God is like this shade from the heat. Relief from the brutal and harsh forces of life. Respite from the ruthless. Refreshment to those vulnerable to the elements, to the “poor and needy,” those who are beaten down by the relentless and oppressive ones.

As the Psalmist wrote,

*The Lord is your keeper,
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night. (Psalm 121:5-6)*

God is your shade. Protects you, gives you life, provides you relief.

You might remember the story of Jonah. Jonah hated the Ninevites, who were the enemies of Israel, responsible for great pain and suffering. God calls Jonah to preach to the Ninevites, and Jonah can't bring himself to do it. He hates them too much. So he does everything he can to avoid it, including drowning himself. Much to his dismay, he is saved, swallowed by a giant fish.

And so he ends up preaching to the Ninevites. And they listen! They repent. And it says,

When God saw how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamities God would bring upon them, and God did not do it. (Jonah 3:10)

And it said that Jonah was overwhelmed with anger. He wanted them destroyed, obliterated, punished. And there he was on a hill outside the city, seething. Then it says,

The Lord appointed a bush (apparently their trees were scraggly like bushes, too) to give shade over Jonah's head, to save him from his discomfort, so Jonah was very happy about the bush. (Jonah 4:6)

But then it says that Jonah chose to hang on to his anger instead of the relief and shade God offered. And so the bush died,

and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. (Jonah 4:8)

God is the only one who can provide shade from the oppressive climate of our own souls, the heat of our negative thoughts, that harsh internal environment that can cause us so much discomfort.

For human beings, life is like a desert, a spiritual wilderness, a wasteland. Where there is this constant pressure—we are exposed to some very harsh elements. What are these elements? Thoughts, anxieties, expectations, desires—they beat us down. They are relentless.

Jesus' time in the desert mirrored his own internal struggle, facing the trials and temptations of being human. In his book, *Jesus the Rebel*, peace activist and head of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, John Dear, interprets the Devil's three temptations of Jesus in the desert. He calls them the "demons of violence": despair, domination and doubt (from "Walking with Jesus into the Desert," by Janet Chisholm)

Temptation 1. The Devil: "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus: "It is written, one does not live by bread alone." This is the temptation to *despair*. "Jesus, are you really the type of person you claim to be? Prove it. Show some tangible results, be effective here and now." We can imagine Jesus contemplating quietly and listening for the voice of God. He responds that we are called to be people of hope—not to be successful, but to be faithful.

Temptation 2. The Devil: "To you I will give the glory of all the kingdoms and all authority if you will worship me." Jesus: "It is written, worship the Lord your God and serve only God." This is the temptation of *domination*. "Jesus, you can become a ruler, owner, and controller of others. Wouldn't you like to be in charge? To be like God?" Jesus responds with a call to service—to the love of enemies, compassion and justice—and to the worship of God alone.

Temptation 3. The Devil: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself from the cliff, God will protect you." Jesus: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." This is the temptation of *doubt*. "Don't you know, Jesus, that God can't be trusted? If you test God, you will see that God doesn't care. Look at the world; there is no moral order, no sanity." But Jesus holds fast and claims we can still trust that God loves us.

In the desert, Jesus faces these temptations and the human drive for power, prestige and possessions. And doing this, he comes away with an inner strength and peace to go out to proclaim God's love and justice and nonviolence for all people.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers also saw the desert as a place to enter a true relationship with God. It was a place to struggle against the "wild beasts" that attack us. It is where one faces and overcomes one's demons, such as sadness, anger and fear.

The desert is both external and internal. It is that place of the demon. According to Luke, Jesus said,

When an unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place. (Luke 11:24)

The desert is where we encounter unclean spirits—demons—wandering around.

Henri Nouwen said that "We cannot avoid going to the desert if we want to make God our only concern." Like Jesus, we must go there if we want to serve God. So it is that place where we identify the things that are holding us back from True Happiness. In most of life, the line between God and our

demons becomes blurred. “But in the desert,” writes Nouwen, “the true struggle becomes clear.” This clarity is important. Nouwen:

The desert might mean very different things for different people but by simply staying in the murkiness and ambiguity of our daily lives we come to know neither God nor the demon and our lives remain absurd or blind. We never come to see reality as it really is and we build up an inner and outer world of illusions. (Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers)

You know, our lives are filled with *oughts* and *shoulds*, with expectations of what we must do and be. And these expectations imprison us, they wear us down, and they create within us a *false self*. From the moment we are born until the day we are eulogized we are told that we find happiness in the approval and affirmation of others.

But here’s the thing: In the desert, all of this is stripped away. In the desert we encounter our failures and the prospects of losing everything. And then, there is only you and God, and the opportunity to experience genuine happiness and relief.

This reminds me of Meister Eckhart’s famous statement:

God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by a process of subtraction.

And so this is why the desert has this “double quality,” says Nouwen, “it is both wilderness and paradise.” The wilderness part is harsh; it’s a struggle; we’re unshielded from the elements. And the paradise is the peace and joy of God’s presence.

Desert Mother, Amma Syncletica, said

In the beginning, there is struggle and a lot of work for those who come near to God. But after that, there is indescribable joy. It is just like building a fire: At first it’s smoky and your eyes water, but later you get the desired result. Thus we ought to light the divine fire within ourselves with tears and effort.

God does not remove the unrelenting sun,
 God does not remove the constant flow of fear, anxiety and worry—those still beat down upon us all.
 God does not remove the pressures we feel.

But what God *does do*, I believe, is offer us
 moments of relief
 flashes of joy,
 brief awarenesses of gratitude,
 experience of loving and being loved, and
 rest in the shade that only God can provide.

God *does not*
 swoop down and carry us away,
 blot out the sun,
 abolish the human experience of struggle, of feeling pain, anxiety or worry.

But God gives shade—occasionally—and that can be enough.
Enough to refresh us, to sustain us, and to give us—what Jesus called—Abundant Life!