

## Called for Freedom

Isaiah 42: 1-9 & Matthew 3: 13-17

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Richard Rodriguez went searching for the God of the desert. In a fascinating, recent article in *Harper's*, Rodriguez wants to understand the connection between space and faith, the “ecology of monotheism,” as he calls it. Why is it that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have their roots in the desert, wilderness places of the Holy Land? Why is it that God revealed Himself in the desert? What is it about open spaces, wild, apparently empty spaces that speak to the presence of God or becomes the place where we hear God speak most clearly? Rodriguez went on a pilgrimage to the holy, empty spaces of all three faiths, primarily in Jerusalem – the churches, the shrines, the open space of the Temple Mount at the top of the city. He ventured out into the desert that sits right on the edge of Jerusalem, as if waiting to devour the city. He explored Qumran and the ancient ruins along the Dead Sea. A guide took him out into the wilderness, explained how to survive there.<sup>1</sup>

He found in the desert wilderness of Judea is what he calls “the concentration of God’s intention on this landscape.” Experiencing that landscape tells us something about who God is. That God chooses to reveal Himself in wild, open places tells us something about the God of Jesus Christ; Yahweh, the Wild-God Israel came to know intimately in the wilderness of the Negev, the God of Jesus Christ who was tested in the wilderness and baptized in the wilderness. The wilderness, the desert, wild, open spaces are the settings for *birth, renewal, and freedom*.

That’s why there’s something odd about the site where Christians remember Jesus’ baptism today. The traditionally venerated site is near Jericho. After the Six Day War in 1967 that location was declared off-limits to tourists. It’s still dangerous. Today pilgrims go to Yardenit, in Galilee, along the Jordan – a place with no historical or religious significance – where you can worship, have your baptism videotaped, and bottle murky Jordan River “holy” water (empty plastic bottles are available at \$1 a piece for you to collect your own). There’s nothing wild about the place. The sandy wilderness was the place of baptism, the place of encounter, the place where the holy *ruach* or Spirit of God rested upon Jesus and he discovered the call and purpose of his life, where he discovered who he really was.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rodriguez, “The God of the Desert: Jerusalem and the Ecology of Monotheism,” *Harper's*, January/2008: 35.

There's something about vastness – think of any broad, space, the vastness of the universe, the plains of Kansas or Nebraska, the expanse of the Chesapeake from atop the Bay Bridge – that openness, expansiveness that tells us something about God or maybe it's the openness that resonates something of what we know about God: *that God makes space for us and in that space there is freedom, new life and a future.* I remember how I felt God's presence looking upon the Sea of Galilee or the deserts along the Dead Sea, or in the wild, open spaces of Scotland, or standing on the Serengeti Plain in Kenya. *Space gives birth to life.*

The Hebrew word for spirit or breath – *ruach* – which moved over the primordial chaos before creation is an aspirant, a word filled with breath or air. The word is related to another Hebrew word, *rewah*, which means *breadth*, so that in the Hebrew experience *breath* and *breadth* are related. In the Hebrew experience *ruach* creates breadth or space. The *ruach* of God leads us out of narrow places into wide vistas, thus conferring life. *Ruach* can refer to a divine person and a force, but Jürgen Moltmann suggests that it is also a *spatial* quality, “the space of freedom in which the living being can unfold.” The vastness of open spaces reminds us that this is what God's Spirit does. Psalm 31: 8 affirms, “Thou has set my feet in a broad place.” And Job could say, “You also he allured out of distress into a broad place where there is no cramping (Job 36:16).” In the Kabbalistic Jewish tradition, a mystical form of Judaism, one of God's secret names is MAKOM, which means the wide space. God is known as a broad, open space for living – and brings us to those vast, broad, open spaces.<sup>2</sup>

You can almost feel it in Isaiah's vision of what Yahweh's servant will do, which Christians have come to see as a foreshadowing of Christ. Empowered by the *ruach* of God, this servant will bring forth justice – justice is the Bible's word for making all things right, the healing of relationships, releasing the captive, and the restoration of all things, it allows people to live and to thrive. *This servant will not further break that which is already bruised by life. This servant will not quench the dim flicker of light left burning within us. This servant will care for the bruised and wounded; create a safe place for them. He will not allow the light to go out, will not allow darkness to win over us, but will gently, carefully provide for the wick to burn bright. God's justice allows people to live.*

And then God provides a space for these vulnerable people. “Thus say God, Yahweh, who created the heavens and stretched them out” – see the spatial dimension of God's creative love? “Who spread out the earth and what comes from it” – see the earth as the space for God's people to live in? “Who gives breath to the people upon [the earth] and spirit to those who walk in it. I am Yahweh, I have called you in

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<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 43.

righteousness” – that is because God desires to be in relationship with us – “I have taken you by the hand and kept you.” Noted Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, sees in this text some of the most mature testimony in the Old Testament, asserting that Yahweh creates in such a way that brings about new outcomes for God’s people, that provides hopes. “In this testimony, the world is characterized, according to Yahweh’s intention and action, as a hospitable, viable place for life, because of Yahweh’s will and capacity to evoke and sustain life.”<sup>3</sup>

And the expansiveness of God’s creative Spirit continues through the servant. This is what he will do, “Open the eyes that are blind, ...bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison whose who sit in darkness, I am the LORD, that is my name...See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; ...” What’s all the more remarkable about this vision is that Isaiah wrote this text to Israel *during* its exile and captivity in Babylon. But God will allow a space. *The dungeon is neither definite nor defining*. Something new will emerge.

Jean Vanier tells a prison story. Vanier is the founder of l’Arche, a network of communities that provide safe, comfortable places (like Noah’s Ark) for people who are severely disabled, abused, and abandoned by society. As a Christian, Vanier believes that to care for the least of these is to actually minister to Christ. He tells the story of preaching to prisoners in a high security prison in Kingston, Ontario. He told the prisoners about the type of people l’Arche welcomes, men and women who have witnessed so much pain, failure, dejection, so much suffering, of their broken childhoods. As he shared his story, he knew he was talking about *their* story. At the end of his talk, one of the inmates got up and screamed at him: “You, ...you’ve had an easy life! Then starting at age four he offered a long litany of the things he witnessed or were done to him – which I can’t recount in this context. *Brutal*. All leading to his first arrested at age thirteen. “If anyone else comes into this prison to talk about love I will kick his bloody head in.”

Vanier didn’t know what to say, so he prayed silently as this man verbally attacked him. And then he said, “It’s true what you say. I have had an easy life! It’s true, I do not know what you have lived. But what I do know is that everything you have just said is important. People outside this prison often judge you without knowing your pain, your story, your childhood experiences. Will you allow me to tell people outside what you have just told me today?” “Yes,” he replied. “You may have things to tell us, but one day you will be getting out of prison and perhaps you will

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 145-146.

need to know and hear things about life outside the prison.” When the question time was over, Vanier went up to this man and shook his hand. He asked for his name and where he was from. He was surprised to learn that the inmate was married. Vanier asked, “Tell me about your wife.” Then this man, who had been so violent, who had seemed to have such hatred in him, broke down in tears.” He has a wife in Montreal, in a wheelchair, whom he hadn’t seen in two years. Vanier says, “I was in front of a wounded, vulnerable little child, weeping, crying out for love and tenderness.”<sup>4</sup> “A bruised reed he will not break, a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” Such is the love of Christ at work in the world that continues to make space for people, even in the places of our confinement.

Where are your dungeons? What are your prisons?

God desires and ultimately sent his Servant in the form of a Son to release everyone from those tight,  
confining places in our lives where we cannot see,  
from all that constrains and constricts us,  
from those places or circumstances  
    where we cannot breathe or that suck the life out of us,  
    in order to set us down in a vast, broad place where there is no cramping,  
    places where we sense the expansiveness of God’s love for us,  
    places where we can breathe  
    and stretch our limbs  
    and feel our hearts expand,  
    places where we know the infinite freedom of God,  
    a God who seeks to plant us in places where we can be born  
    and born again  
    and again  
    and live  
    and be vital  
    and be a blessing to the world.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Vanier, *Befriending the Stranger* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: “When the heart expands and we can stretch our limbs, and feel the new vitality everywhere, then life unfolds in us. But it needs a living space in which it can develop. Life in the Spirit is life in the “broad place where there is no cramping” (Job 36:16). So in the new life we experience the Spirit as a “broad place” - as the free space for our freedom, as the living space for our lives, as the horizon inviting us to discover life.” Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 178-179.

Perhaps we can think of baptism in Christ as our *entrée* into the space of God's liberation and release – God's hospitality makes sacred space for us to live as one of His children and in love we make space for others to live and thrive.

That's what a church is – a sacred space of belonging,  
a place for the bruised and wounded and vulnerable,  
a safe place,  
a place of peace and kindness,  
where people can live and thrive,  
which extends the freedom of God  
to all who wish to share in its life.

We become more and more the *spacious* church of God when we remember  
the same *ruach* of God that rested on Jesus  
is now,  
because of *our* baptism,  
resting upon us – upon *us*, in *us*.  
Amazing.  
Amazing.

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