

God in the wilderness

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After our twin daughters died, mothers from all over wrote to me. They had lost babies before birth, after birth, in childhood, and beyond. They wrote to me with love and compassion, empathy's impulse to reach out in shared suffering, even to a stranger.

And to a person, they all said the same thing:

God was with me so powerfully in the moments and days surrounding my child's death.

Later, my experience of God became the wilderness.

If this happens for you, I understand. I am here.

They knew well enough not to declare it would happen for me, having been on the bereaved receiving end of supposedly helpful declarations of How Your Grief Will Be and What Will Happen To You Because I Know Best.

They told me it might. They told me it could be hard. They told me not to lose hope. I read their words and was grateful for their compassion. Secretly I told myself it would not happen to me. God would not leave me to the wilderness.

Maggie and Abby died four months ago. The luminous, palpable presence of God that carried us through the early days of raw grief is gone.

I try to pray but I don't know how. The rote prayers that got me through the crushing moments of pleading and petition before the girls were born—Our Father, Hail Mary, [Memorare](#), repeat—still cycle through my mind. But they do not sink into my heart.

The deep surrender of [complete abandon into the heart of God that surrounded my whole being on the days of their deaths](#) is now a memory. Strong but distant.

I am not angry at God, not bitter or despairing. I am simply in a different place. It is the wilderness.

All those mothers were right.

I think back on times in my life when God felt absent. The cruel pain of perceived abandonment, the dark despair that everything I thought I believed was false. This is not the same thing. **Wilderness is not absence. God is here, too.**

But everything is different. There is an abiding presence, more subtle and mysterious. It has never left my side.

Wilderness is by definition a wild land. I will not romanticize it. The terrain is barren and harsh. Stripped of familiar landmarks. Disorienting and dark once the day's last slivers of light disappear. Lurking dangers unseen, even the shivering threat of death.

The wilderness is a powerful place and a potent symbol in Christianity. Where the Israelites wandered. Where Hagar fled. Where John began preaching. Where Jesus was tempted.

What I learn from their stories is this: even in the wilderness, God is not gone. I return to Exodus: the pillar of cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night, a steadfast promise to lead ahead and protect behind. I don't know what sense to make of the God-with-us in this wilderness, what shape or size, what element or direction. I only know that God is here.

The fact of this abiding—the fleeting moments of comfort, the growing acceptance of peace—is what compels me to keep going. We are being led from one place to another.

And this is what wilderness is. A passage between where (and who) we were and where (and who) we will be. We are not there yet. We do not know how long the wandering will last. We just keep going.

Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:19)

This is the surprising truth about the wilderness. **It is still a faithful place to be. It is still part of the way.**

There is grumbling and lamenting and despairing, of course. We are humans and we drag all this humbling humanity into the dark desert with us. But each new morning there is surprising manna left for us to gather from the ground. We have never been abandoned or forgotten. We are moving somewhere, changed.

The mothers who wrote to me from their own deserts were [ancient ammas](#) speaking wisdom to my hermit heart. And they were right. When we are in the wilderness, God is still there, too.

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