

A JOURNEY OF ENCOUNTER



Chapter 7: Wild incarnation - tidings of discomfort and joy Based on Luke 1:26-38 and 46-55

This month's content is written by Captain Vanessa Coleman, a writer, speaker and church planter based in Buckingham.

INSPIRE

Going into the wild is dangerous. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, 'If there isn't real danger then you aren't in the wilderness; you're in a park.'¹ God invites us into the wild; to go on a journey from which there is no coming back. We will be irrevocably marked by it.

In Chapter Seven of our 'Into the Wild' adventure, we meet Mary, a wild mother who goes to places no mother has ever gone before. She is invited out of the pedestrian, out of the ordinary, into dangerous territory. She faces fear, damage to her reputation and her security, and a dangerous physical journey into the unknown that pushes her to her limits.

Yet, just as she stepped off the edge of all she had ever known, Mary prayed a prayer of pure joy. What can we learn from her about finding exhilarating joy amid that which feels most wild and dangerous?

Read alone or with a friend, reflect on the discussion questions over the phone with someone or in an online small group / Bible study, try the prayer activities... and see what happens when you step into the wild.

If you'd like to receive regular updates throughout the 'Into the Wild' journey over the coming year, including invitations to our regular Zoom prayer gatherings, [sign up here](#).



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EXPLORE

Introduction

That first Christmas Mary faced the reality that she would be changed for ever by what was about to happen to her. She was leaving home, perhaps birthing unsupported and cut off from her community. It makes me think of new mothers in 2020 - the ones attending maternity appointments alone, the ones labouring and birthing with no partner to encourage and hold their hands, the ones who have received news of miscarriage without support. We are in wild and dangerous places.

That first Christmas was a trip into the wild for God himself too. Jesus left the safety of Heaven to go on an adventure into the wildness of Earth, of humanity amid chaos and oppression. He became a baby. Babies aren't aware of things; they don't know things or remember things in the way older children or adults do. Jesus entered his own place of 'unknowing'. That's a shocking thought, but it's reassuring when we think of making our own journey into the wild. God has been there, and he will be with us.

Context

Wildness is dangerous - but then so is comfort. Research is discovering more and more about the dangers of a sedentary lifestyle, about how we need to push ourselves into the uncomfortable in order to function well. A lifetime of staying snuggled up inside, eating too much of the calorie dense, nutrient poor foods we turn to for comfort, will not end well. We need to sweat, ache, get out of breath and eat plenty of fibre and vitamins if our bodies are to function fully. Comfort is not as safe as it makes us feel.

Perhaps we need to reframe the things that we think of as uncomfortable. The further north into the Arctic circle you go, the more positive people are about darkness and winter. We may feel miserable about the colder weather and the nights drawing in, but countries who live with almost constant darkness in winter have had to adapt their approach.

It's from those cultures that we borrow ideas like 'hygge' - cosying up in the dark with candles, blankets and connection - and 'there's no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong clothing'. Just as those ideas 'reframe' the dark and cold, we have the opportunity to reframe the wildness. The wildness is not just scary and bad; it's an opportunity for adventure, life and new discovery.



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When we feel threatened, it's because our minds are gathering information about the situation we're in and interpreting it in certain ways. Reframing means noticing what information our minds are gathering and re-interpreting it. When God calls us into the wild and it feels dangerous, we can learn to re-imagine it, so we see the dangers as possibilities and opportunities.

This summer I've discovered the joys of wild swimming. The horror of biting cold when you get in is quickly surpassed by the exhilarating endorphin rush that pushes all distractions and worries out of your mind, keeping you fully present in the moment. It makes me feel fully alive - so joyful. I've been attempting to replicate that exhilaration by ending my daily shower with a quick blast of cold. I am not a cold-water person, but if I close my eyes and imagine I'm under a waterfall on the beach in St Ives, I can reframe the experience. What could be awful becomes awesome.

Deepen

As we walk through dangerous, confusing, painful things, might it be possible to ask God to help us reframe our experiences, to help us see the adventure and the potential - even the joy?

Somehow, in the middle of her wild journey, Mary responds with joy and exuberance at what God can do. This is not often how we receive difficult words from God. Perhaps it's because she connects with the name Immanuel, 'God is with us'. Joy is more important this year than ever. Can we find joy in a simpler, pared-back Christmas, in the presence of Immanuel, God who is truly here to be with us?

Then comes one of the most famous and beautiful prayers in all of Scripture, Mary's 'Magnificat', Luke 1:46-55. It is a striking, revolutionary manifesto from a village girl living under foreign oppressors. It is a call for justice, and equality. It is a joyful declaration that Jesus' coming will turn things the right way round again, restoring equality, mercy and goodness.

Conclusion

This year, 2020, hasn't just been the year of Coronavirus, it's been the year of:

- George Floyd, 'I can't breathe' and Black Lives Matter
- Extinction Rebellion
- Marcus Rashford battling the government over child poverty
- Stacey Abrams registering 800,000 voters to give them a voice in a democracy that has left them unheard



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This has been a year of exposing injustices and dysfunctional power dynamics that impact our environment and how we treat each other. And it won't end when the clock strikes midnight on New Year's Eve. It's uncomfortable, it's dangerous, it's wild, but we are being given the opportunity to reimagine a world that works for more than just the most privileged.

John 1:14 tells us that, 'The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood' (MSG) Jesus put on flesh and moved in - into the misogyny, white supremacy, rampant capitalism, ableism and exploitation,

And we welcome his presence as he stirs us both to pray and to use our physical bodies to create change. Like Mary, we are invited to be part of birthing a new future where the mighty are brought low and the hungry are filled with good things.

A truth to hold on to

Immanuel - God is with us.

Challenge

- Do something you normally find difficult or scary and ask God to help you find the joy hidden in it.

WATCH

This month, Stephanie Chagas-Bijl tells us her story of pregnancy and giving birth in Pandemic 2020 and Lizette Williams shares some of the struggles of being a parent in lockdown. But they've both found joy amidst the discomfort.

[Watch these videos here](#)

DISCUSS

- Which experiences have been the most difficult, painful or dangerous for you this year? Did any of them bring surprising joy?
- Is there an experience you would like God to help you 'reframe' - something which felt negative at the time but which you'd like to be able to see from a different perspective?



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- What are the things you resort to for comfort? Are they life-giving or do they restrict you?
- Is there an adventure God is calling you to that may be difficult but energising?
- Are there justice issues God has put on your heart to pray for this year?
- Jesus came into the world and put on flesh, embodying and acting out his justice. Is there a way you can embody and act out your prayers by taking practical action?

PRAY

1. Wildness reflection

Reflect on these poems about wildness and ask God to show you the wildness inside you.

As the tamed horse
still hears the call of her wild brothers
and as the farmed goose flaps hopeful wings
as his sisters fly overhead,
so too, perhaps,
the wild ones amongst us
are our only hope in calling us back
to our true nature.

Wild ones
who have not been turned to stone
by the far-reaching grasp of the empire
and its programme of consumer sedation,
the killing of imagination.
Where, my friends,
have the wild ones gone?

Joel McKerrow

'Come to the edge',
He said. They said,
'We are afraid'.
'Come to the edge',
He said. They came.
He pushed them, and
they flew.

Christopher Logue

Poems from Day 29 Meditation from Northumbria Community's *Celtic Daily Prayer* published by Collins. Used with permission.



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2. Breath prayers

Good breathing exercises are one of the things women are taught as a way of managing pain during labour. As we ride through the pain of the things we are birthing, spiritually and maybe even physically, the ancient spiritual practice of 'breath prayers' can help relieve stress and distress, and remind us of the nearness of God.

Saying a breath prayer means praying a word or short phrase that you can express in the time it takes you to breathe in and out once.

Try breathing slowly and deeply as you pray:

BREATHE IN: Jesus

BREATHE OUT: fear

IN: peace

OUT: worry

IN: hope

OUT: despair

IN: courage

OUT: apathy

IN: love

You could also pray a simple phrase over and over again with each breath, for example 'God is love'. Or you could use the breath prayer which monks have used for many centuries, 'Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me, a sinner'.

3. Write a Magnificat

Mary's prayer is a beautiful blend of faith and longing. It lists some of the things she knew about God's character and some of the things she longed to see God do.

Write your own Magnificat, blending the truths you have learnt about God so far in your life with the longings you have in your heart for what you want to see changed in our world.

4. Advent and Christmas prayer rhythms

It is hard to plan anything much at the moment, but why not be intentional about your prayer-life over Advent and Christmas. What kind of prayer rhythm would you like to have? What can you do to keep connecting with the truth of Immanuel, God is with us? What might you do to make spaces for joy?



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Here are some ideas:

- Buy yourself an Advent candle and commit to lighting it each day, stopping for a few minutes of prayer as you watch it burn down.
- Look for some Advent/Christmas prayers or reflections to help you think about this special time of year.
- Create a 'Reverse Advent Calendar'. Write out, on separate pieces of paper, 24 things you want to do to bless others and to make the world a better place. Place them all into a bowl or box. Each day, draw one out, pray it and do it. (This activity works well with families too.)

WEBSITE AND CONTACT EMAIL

For resources and sign up: www.salvationarmy.org.uk/resources/into-the-wild

Email Prayer Network: saprayernetwork@salvationarmy.org.uk



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