

**AUDIO SCRIPT #1 Introduction**  
***Desert: The Place of Breakthrough***

I'm Janice MacLean, Host at the Prayer Bench. I welcome you to this Study. I imagine you gathering where you are yet among others as a scattered community of faith. I invite you to hold one another in prayer as we begin.

We will journey deep into scripture to visit the landscapes that shaped the people of God. We will stop by the sparse desert, the turbulent seas, the mystery of mountains and the sanctuary of the groves. The ancient People of God were fashioned by their outward geography. We explore how these powerful metaphors of landscape call us to deepen our soul and cherish our place in creation

When I lived in Israel I came across the phrase, "The Land as Fifth Gospel."

It is based in the idea that **five** gospels record the life of Jesus. Four gospels you will find in the Bible and one you read in the land called Holy.

I sensed that when I lived in Israel. I had opportunity to exhaust myself as a tourist and then return to places to visit as a pilgrim. In this contemplative space I could feel the land in my senses speaking to a deeper part of me. I entered the gospel stories in a different way through the experience of being present in the land. I sat in many places where, by tradition, this bible story or that happened there. It wasn't important to me that the story *really* happened there. There was something about being in a place saturated in prayer that made it sacred.

Think about this quote. I came across it and try to practice it when I am in a new place. *"A visitor passes through a place; a place passes through a pilgrim."* (unknown)

This is not just confined to the "Holy Land." There is a sense that we come close to God and God comes close to us through many different landscapes. The Celtic people spoke of sacred space as the "thin places." - those places where you can almost touch the Presence of the invisible and the spiritual.

In thin places we become aware. We are present to the ground on which we stand and to the moment in which we live. This is living contemplatively.

There is a story about the hermit Anthony who lived in the Egyptian desert during the third century. One day a philosopher approached him and asked what he would do if

he could no longer read the scripture. To that Anthony replied: "My book is the nature of created things, and it is always on hand when I wish to read it."

We'll be looking at ways we can 'read the Book of nature' as we enter different landscapes.

Like the desert ...

Whether we live close to a desert or ever been there, we are a Desert-shaped people. So many things happened to the People of God in the desert.

I've been to the Negev Desert in Israel. We spent our time searching for the Spice Trail, a trade route from Egypt up through Israel into the Mediterranean ports in the north.

We were in the heart of the desert, walking around the desert floor. To our eyes there was nothing that looked anything like an ancient Spice Trail! Of course we were looking with eyes conditioned to super highways and paved paths.

Then, as our perspective adjusted and we let go of our pre-conceived ideas of what an ancient Spice Trail might look like, we saw options everywhere. There were paths crossing here, and possible ways there, all over the place.

We continued to look, becoming more quiet in this desert place. Then, we saw it. It appeared suddenly before our eyes, the subtle, almost imperceptible path of the Spice Trail. Springing forth! When we saw it, it was so clear, so defined, and so distinct.

We learned to look with desert eyes.

I often recall this experience. It reminds me that the desert is a place of breakthrough. In times of too few choices and times of too many choices, we are called to wait, to look, to listen, and in this stillness comes a way.

We have so many desert stories. Here are some of my favourites.

- The desert journey of Abram and Sarai to whom the call to journey was clear;
- The disturbing story of Hagar, calling us to compassion;
- Moses and the burning bush. Now this was really seeing God in the ordinary. Talk about seeing with desert eyes!

- A snake raised on a stick stuck in the desert floor - what most harms us can sometimes bring deeper healing.
- The Exile - marching through the desert leaving Jerusalem; all that was familiar coming to an end.
- Jesus in the desert facing temptations/challenges that defined his ministry.
- So many transformation stories where the desert is streaming with water, or the trees are dancing.

As we enter into desert stories there are so many metaphors for the soul journey: Loss and transformation. Temptation and risk. Vulnerability and hospitality. Simplicity and invitation.

I learned in the Negev the need to see with desert eyes. I wonder how we learn to see in our places of desert. The desert is so much more than a dry and barren landscape. It is a thin place of breakthrough. Be here. Wait. Listen. Watch.