

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 47 - SEPTEMBER 1996



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## A desert journey

Throughout the Bible we read about people finding God in bleak places where they expect to find only emptiness or even disaster. Sometimes these hopeless-looking places are called the wilderness or the pit. Sometimes they're called the desert.




In many scriptures a desert, wilderness, or pit is part of a physical experience but also pictures a kind of spiritual experience that often happens during the journey of life. The barren places represent the surprising places in which we often find God. That's why such scriptures are valuable.

## Surprised by God

Unavoidable circumstances or even God can send people to a wilderness. This happened to Moses and also to Jesus. They were on the way to something better—the Promised Land for Moses and a God-given ministry for Jesus—but getting to it required spending time in the wilderness first.

[Jesus] was in the wilderness forty days ..., and he was with the wild beasts ...  
—Mark 1:13

  
Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely [God] is in this place—and I did not know it!"  
—Genesis 28:16

Some people described in scripture deliberately go to desert-like places to escape from danger or misery, as Jacob did (Genesis 27-28). Then to their surprise they find God there, showing them how to return, survive the danger, and fulfill God's purpose for their life.



A recent experience reminded me that God can show up when I least expect it—even in a desert.

## Wilderness times aren't lost

I'm continually surprised at how long many of us wait in the wilderness before responding to God. When I look back at my own spiritual journey I can hardly believe how many years went by before I felt sure enough of God's reality and God's presence in my life to respond.

1965<sup>1949</sup>  
1980<sup>1983</sup>  
1992<sup>1996</sup>



## An unnerving experience

As a teenager I experienced what may have been God's call, but for years I did nothing about it. During a worship service at my church's annual Youth Week, the speaker asked everyone who was willing to give their life to Christ to come to the altar during the hymn "O Jesus, I have promised." I thought it was what everyone was supposed to do, so I went. No one else did. I was appalled.

Afterwards I was even more appalled to find that church staff members thought I had committed to what they called "full-time Christian service." For boys that meant being a clergyman and for girls it meant being a Director of Christian Education or a foreign missionary, and I definitely wasn't willing to do anything like that.

The experience was embarrassing but it was also very scary. What if, without realizing what I was doing, I had made a commitment to God that I wasn't willing to carry through on? For years I tried to banish the whole experience from my mind, and for a long time it worked.

## Waiting can be useful

Twenty years later a more compelling experience of God's presence came along. I suddenly found that without my knowing it God had put me in position to do what was needed for a child in the Sunday School class I was teaching when her mother unexpectedly died. For the first time, I realized that God was real, was aware of me as an individual, and might have things for me to do. But I still didn't start doing anything different. I didn't even tell anyone until years later.

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
—Isaiah 40:3

Maybe wilderness times when nothing seems to be happening are necessary. They evidently were necessary even for Paul, who waited fourteen years after his Damascus Road experience before getting into action (Galatians 1). God uses wilderness times to prepare us.



### An unusual Sunday

Four of us were spending several days together in northern New Mexico —my husband and I and another couple who for many years have been our good friends, fellow church members, and frequent traveling companions. It was Sunday, and on most other Sundays we all would have gone to church. But my husband and I had spent part of the week at a United Methodist Jurisdictional Conference and our friends had been visiting several different churches while on vacation, and we all were feeling “churched out.” We decided to go sightseeing instead.



We drove north into the edge of Colorado, and as lunchtime approached our friends remembered a surprisingly good meal they had had on a previous trip, at a little restaurant in a tiny town that we were fairly close to. We headed toward it.

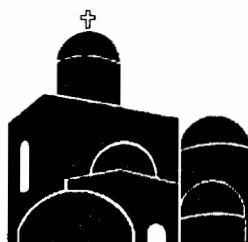
### A desert landscape



Although we could see hills and mountains in the distance, the area we were driving through was flat, rocky, and barren. The only plant life was a scattering of scraggly tumbleweed and a few cactuses. We kept passing signs alerting drivers to elk that might cross the highway, and in our guidebooks we read about all sorts of wild animals that supposedly were all around us.



As we got close to the little town we were heading for, we suddenly saw an intriguing building on top of a high hill. It was solid white, and it had several domes. It was very different from the adobe houses and dilapidated remains of barns that were the only buildings we’d been seeing. “I think I see a cross on top,” one of our group said. “Maybe it’s some kind of monastery,” said another. We couldn’t see any road leading to it, but we wanted to find one.



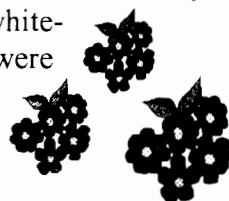
### “Turn at the clinic and the junk yard”

When we finished lunch we asked the restaurant owner about the unusual building. “It’s a shrine,” she told us. She also told us how to find the road to it, a few blocks away at the edge of town. “There’s a white clinic building on the right,” she said. “Turn left beside the junk yard across from it, then keep left and drive up the hill.”

Then she added, “But you really should walk up. The path starts just a block from here.” We rejected that suggestion in a hurry. We were dressed only for the air-conditioned car, the temperature outside was in the 90’s and rising fast, and there was no shade in sight. We drove.



When we got to the shrine we could hardly believe our eyes. It was a lovely building of gleaming white-painted adobe. Sprinklers were watering carefully placed plants that were blooming along walkways all around the building.



### A story in sculpture



When we got out of the car and started investigating, we saw why the restaurant owner had urged us to walk up. The path followed the Stations of the Cross traditional to Roman Catholic devotion—depictions of fifteen important events in Jesus’ journey to the cross after he was condemned to death (as told in Matthew 27-28, Mark 15-16, Luke 23-24, John 18-20, Acts 1:1-9).



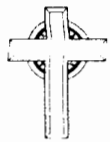
The events were portrayed by magnificent life-size bronze sculptures, the work of a local sculptor. Their climax was at the shrine, at the top of the hill—a huge sculpture representing Jesus’ ascension.

When we left, none of us felt the least bit bad about not having gone to church in the usual way. The gospel had been proclaimed, we had been with fellow Christians, and we had become powerfully aware of God’s presence. We had worshiped.

The shrine I describe here is at San Luis, in south-central Colorado. I think you’d like to see it if you’re ever in that area. If you go, I suggest that you walk up if you can. (But try to go at a cool time of day!)

## A dream-like message

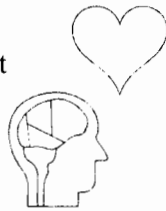
Sometimes a sequence of events in waking life conveys a message from God in the same way a dream occasionally does. The message is expressed in the same symbolic language that dreams use. It is the same language that often carries the meaning of art and literature, and in which the meaning of religious rituals and many scriptures is often conveyed, too. It is a picture-story language, in which numbers, shapes, colors, actions, and people carry meaning by bringing to



mind feelings, experiences, and beliefs that have been important not only in our individual lives but also in our culture, history, and tradition.

## A language that speaks to our depths

Actually, the feelings and beliefs that symbolic language calls forth aren't always brought consciously to mind. They don't have to be, to be effective. They affect us powerfully at a deep level even if we aren't aware of what is happening and aren't able to put it into words.



As I thought about finding the shrine in the desert, I realized that our trip pictured the journey that people make when they seek God. I thought about how I would have described the experience if it had been a dream (and how I would have understood its meaning).

When I did this I saw a compelling description of the journey to God . . .

**I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.**

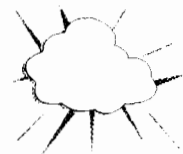
—Hosea 2:14

## The journey to God

I was in a desert (a bleak and barren place). Dangers were there, some of which I couldn't see, that could hurt or even kill me. (The cactus and signs about wild animals pictured these.)

Four of us were on a journey (the journey of life). There were two men and two women (a way of symbolically picturing symmetry and a healthy balance of masculine and feminine traits). My husband was driving, and we were with friends. I was a passenger. (This pictures the way I often tend to travel through life.) But I had the map and the guidebooks. (I'm equipped to find the right way.)

Suddenly we saw what seemed to be a house of God high above us (pictured by the shrine). (Like many appearances of God) it was totally unexpected and totally different from everything else

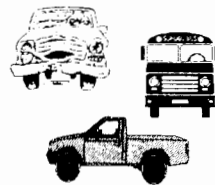


we'd been seeing. We saw no way to get to it, and we weren't sure what it was, but we felt drawn to it and went in search of it.

On the way, a Hispanic woman gave us tasty, nourishing food. She told us how to get to what we had seen. (We often get food and help from sources that seem foreign or strange to us.) She urged us to go by a hard way, but we took the easier one.



A white clinic was the landmark that showed us the road to take. (People go to a clinic to learn their true condition, to identify their sickness and find its cure. The clinic pictures the self-discovery, guidance, and healing that lead to finding God.) It was on the right. (Right often pictures consciousness. Looking honestly at ourselves and seeking help must be done consciously and deliberately.)



We had to turn to the left and go by a junkyard full of old cars, trucks, and school buses. (They picture ways of going through life and seeking knowledge—ways that were once useful but no longer are. Left often represents the unconventional way or something that happens without our awareness.)

The road was full of dips, curves, and bumps (as the road of life is), but we kept going, getting higher. Suddenly we were where God could be found (represented by the shrine). We continued on foot (the harder and more vulnerable way). The sun was beating down on us. (God's light can be fierce.) It was hot and many of the paths were uphill. But flowers were there, and water, and the house of God.

**The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom ...**  
—Isaiah 35:1

**I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.**  
—Isaiah 41:18

The story of Jesus' sacrifice for our salvation was there, too (the Stations of the Cross), told through the creativity of a man who came from the place that had looked worthless to us.

Savoring what we had seen,  
we drove back down . . .



### The journey of life

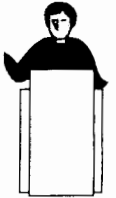
We make this kind of journey when we look for God. We get a vision of God's reality, but at first it's vague—it may be only a mere inkling—and we don't see any way to get to it. If we search, however, guidance appears, often from unexpected people in unexpected places. To find God we must look honestly at our real selves and become aware of our shortcomings. After each experience of God's pres-

ence we must go back to our everyday world, but what we've seen stays with us and makes us willing to do what God wants done in the world. The journey goes on. ❖

*Barbara*

Next month . . .

**What makes worship effective?  
What makes good preaching?  
How does using the lectionary help?**



**Connections** 9-96

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### A desert journey



#### Your responses are welcome!

Recent comments from new readers of *Connections* remind me that I haven't said lately that I welcome readers' responses. I do!



I get many responses, and I love getting them. I reply to nearly all of them. Getting to know *Connections* readers in this way is one of the most rewarding parts of writing *Connections*. It has led to new friendships, new experiences, and new insights. So please respond whenever you feel the urge. I'll be delighted to hear from you.

What I consider most important, however, is for you to talk with other church members about the topics I write about. That's what I hope *Connections* will help to happen.



**If you've just discovered *Connections*** and you want to start receiving it monthly, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want any of the 4 years' back issues that are available, add \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write to the address above, phone 817-773-2625, e-mail [bcwendland@aol.com](mailto:bcwendland@aol.com), or on the Internet, see <http://www.vvm.com/~bcwendland/connhome.htm>.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and I'm neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.