Scripture: Exodus 2:15–22
Sermon: Wilderness, You and I / Translated by Melody Ouk

1. The well is everything

In my childhood, television programs like *Classic Cinema* or *Weekend Cinema* were the only gateways through which I could watch movies. Since these shows typically aired at 9:00 or 10:00 PM, I would often fall asleep halfway through and never manage to see a film to its end. During major holidays like the Lunar New Year (Seollal) or Chuseok, however, movies were broadcast during the day, which meant I could always catch some entertaining films then. Famous movies like *Star Wars*, *Superman*, and *Doctor Zhivago* were things I could only watch during these holiday periods. I also remember watching *Lawrence of Arabia* during one of these holidays. Set against the backdrop of World War I, the film depicts the British effort to expand their influence by liberating Arab territories then under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. The story centers on Lawrence, a British officer who spearheaded this liberation movement. Much of the film takes place in deserts and vast, open wilderness; as a child who had never experienced a desert, this movie helped me imagine what one might be like. One scene, in particular, left a deep impression on me: a long take showing Sherif Ali, a leader of the Harith tribe, approaching from the far edge of the desert on a camel. For a considerable stretch, lasting perhaps one or two minutes, the camera captures Ali, dressed in black, as he rides his camel toward the viewer. He begins as a mere speck in the distance, gradually drawing closer. At the other end of the scene, Lawrence and his guide, who belongs to the Beni Salem tribe, a group hostile to Ali's people, wait by Ali's well. Tafas, who is acting as a guide for Lawrence, realizes that Ali belongs to a rival tribe. He reaches into his pack for a gun, but Ali fires first, killing him. A shocked Lawrence asks, "Why?" to which Ali simply replies, "This is my well." Lawrence counters, "I have drunk from it," and glares at Ali—as if to ask if he intends to shoot him, too. Ali responds, "You are welcome." Decades have passed, and while I may no longer recall the rest of the film's plot, that long take at the well remains vivid in my memory. It was so striking. The fact that Tafas drank from a well belonging to Ali's tribe was the direct cause of his killing. When Ali tells Lawrence, "He was nothing. The well is everything," one begins to grasp just how profound the significance of a well is to desert tribes.

2. Moses, a Man Who Could Not Ignore Injustice

Moses fled in a frantic rush to escape Pharaoh's pursuit. His only way to survive was to find a place with few people, and the only such place was the wilderness. That is why he fled into the desert. The wilderness of Midian, where he sought refuge, would correspond today to the region near the Gulf of Aqaba, located south of modern-day Jordan and north of Saudi Arabia. His long, arduous escape took him from Egypt, across the Sinai Peninsula, and further south. The narrative in this passage unfolds by a well in the wilderness of Midian. As mentioned earlier, in such a wilderness, a well is everything. On that day, Moses was alone, sitting by the well. Still gripped by the fear that he might be pursued, he remained on guard, wary of anyone who might approach. In the distance, he saw seven young women arriving with a flock of sheep. The well was quite deep, making it difficult for the women to draw water. As a fugitive, Moses had no reason, nor the luxury, to involve himself in their affairs. However, a group of robust male shepherds appeared and drove the women away. Regardless of his status as a fugitive, Moses could not remain a passive observer; a fire for justice burned within him. This reveals that Moses was a man of profound integrity. Most people, upon witnessing an injustice, choose not to intervene—fearing that getting involved will only bring them unnecessary trouble. I recall that when I lived in China, people there often advised me never to meddle in the affairs of others. For instance, there is a well-known story about a man who helped an elderly person who had fallen, only for that same person to demand compensation for the injuries they sustained. There are countless such accounts where helping someone in distress ends up causing harm to the person who offered the aid. Consequently, the prevailing advice became: don't bother getting involved—just stand back and watch. It has been said that the only thing necessary for the triumph of injustice is for good people to remain silent. Moses, however, took the risk of intervening in an act of injustice to assist

the vulnerable. The Bible does not specify whether he acted simply because he could not stand to see an injustice, or if he was motivated by a desire to show off his masculinity before the seven women. It is even possible that he intervened deliberately to display his own charm, after all, that is simply how men are. It is an inherent, genetic trait in men to want to appear impressive in front of women. Regardless of his underlying motive, Moses certainly came across as quite dashing.

3. The Snowball Effect of Kindness

A single act of kindness can change the course of our lives. Moses not only protected some women from rough, rude shepherds, but he also kindly watered their flocks. With the help of this strong man, the young women were able to finish their task much faster than usual. Their father was puzzled to see them return home earlier than expected. "Why have you returned so early today?" he asked. "Well, Father, a handsome Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds who were harassing us. He even drew water for us and gave it to our flocks!" "Is that so? Where is he now? Did you just leave him behind? What have you done? You shouldn't have left such a kind man! Go back, bring him here, and offer him a meal." While Moses's act of kindness was simply a display of chivalry, it became the turning point that saved him from a life of isolation in the wilderness. It is worth noting that his kindness served as a bridge, connecting him to a family, and eventually, an entire people. We should never underestimate the small acts of kindness we show to others in our daily lives. Sometimes, an act of kindness can turn into a "snowball," leading to significant, far-reaching consequences in our own lives. The kindness and goodwill Moses showed provided him with a foundation for survival in the wilderness. Although he had spent 40 years in the Egyptian royal court, it seems he had faced subtle discrimination and contempt there. Otherwise, he would have had no reason to flee after killing an Egyptian. Perhaps what he truly needed was the care and warmth of a family. Through a small act of kindness and goodwill shown at a well, he was fortunate enough to establish a family of his own. Incidentally, the name of his father-in-law, Reuel, means "friend of God," while the name of his wife, Zipporah, means "female bird." The scripture can be seen as the story of Moses finding a new "nest" in the wilderness, guided by a "friend of God." An important lesson from this passage is that a life of kindness and righteousness is invariably rewarded.

4. A Well Found in the Desert

*The Little Prince*, published by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900–1944) in 1943, begins as a monologue by an airplane pilot. After his plane breaks down, the pilot makes an emergency landing in an uninhabited desert. One morning, while resting after attempting to repair his aircraft, he encounters the Little Prince. Before arriving in this desert on Earth, the Little Prince had nurtured a seed that had suddenly drifted onto his own planet—a seed that eventually grew into a flower. Often feeling a deep sense of loneliness, the Little Prince came to love this flower. However, the flower was demanding and prone to constant complaining. Disappointed, the Little Prince decided to leave his planet and set out on a journey. Earth was the seventh planet he visited, and he happened to land in a completely deserted, uninhabited region. In this desert, the Little Prince runs into a snake and remarks on how lonely the place is. The snake replies that places where many people gather can be just as lonely. This observation serves as a crucial key to understanding the work: it suggests that the root of loneliness is not the absence of people, but the absence of love, or more precisely, the absence of meaningful connection. Seeking human companionship, the Little Prince climbs to the top of a high mountain and calls out, "Please be my friend; I am so lonely..." but he hears only his own echo: "I am so lonely... lonely... lonely..."

It is worth reflecting on what the "desert" signifies in this story. By definition, a desert is a place so scorching and barren that it cannot sustain human life. That is why a desert is a lonely and desolate place. But if a place, even one crowded with people, is just as lonely and desolate because no one there has any real connection to anyone else, couldn't that place also be a desert? The pilot and the little prince discover a well. It does not look like a

typical well found in the middle of a desert. Instead, it is equipped with a pulley, a bucket, and a rope, much like a well you might find in a village.

The pilot remarks, “The well we found was unlike those in the Sahara, which were little more than holes dug into the sand. This one, however, resembled a well in a village. Since there was no village here, I assumed I must be dreaming.” These words from the pilot carry a profound meaning. He notes that the well resembles one found in a populated village. It suggests that the well they encountered might not belong to the Sahara Desert at all, but rather to the world we live in, a place where everyone feels lonely, yet no one wishes to form a connection with others. A place where, despite being surrounded by countless people, we fail to truly encounter anyone.

Reading the poem “The Desert” by Hortense Vlou helps clarify the pilot’s intent:

> In that desert, he was
> so lonely
> that at times he walked backward
> just to see the footprints he had left behind.
> – From “The Desert” by Hortense Vlou

In other words, no matter how many people may be present, any place where there are no genuine connections or meaningful encounters is, in essence, a desert.

5. How to Form Relationships: Lessons from the Fox

The most moving exchange in this book is the conversation between the Little Prince and the fox. The Little Prince bursts into tears in a garden filled with countless roses. He is deeply saddened by the realization that the single rose he left behind is no different from any of the many roses before him. It is then that he encounters a fox in the garden. The fox teaches the Little Prince how to form relationships, specifically, the concept of "taming," which is a vital skill for surviving in the desert. The fox explains that to "tame" someone means to become the one and only person, or the one and only fox, out of a vast multitude. It means that by entering into a loving relationship, two beings become truly special to one another. Let us listen to what the fox has to say. “If you tame me, my life will be filled with light. I will come to recognize your footsteps among all others; the sound of any other footsteps will send me scurrying back into my burrow. But yours—yours will be like music, calling me out into the open. And look over there, do you see the wheat fields? I don’t eat bread, so wheat is of no use to me. The sight of it stirs no emotion at all. That is a truly sad thing. But your hair is the color of gold, how wonderful it would be if you were to tame me! Every time I would see the golden grain, I would think of you. And I would listen for the sound of the wind as it brushes through the wheat fields…”

The fox wanted the prince to understand that the single rose he had left behind on his own planet was, in fact, something truly special. He wanted to show the prince that the arguments and the sulking, the friction between him and the rose, were all part of the process of being “tamed.” The fox says to the little prince, “Now, I will share my secret with you. It is a very simple secret: one can only see things truly with the heart. What is most important is invisible to the eye. It is the time you have devoted to your rose that makes it so precious.” Perhaps what Saint-Exupéry intended to convey is that something becomes precious only through the relationship one has forged with it.

6. In the beginning, there was a relationship

Moses faced the risk of becoming a castaway in the desert. He felt profound loneliness, a loneliness akin to that experienced by the pilot and the Little Prince when they met by a well in the Sahara. Yet, it was through that very well that a relationship began to form. What is the theme of the first chapter of *The Church We Meet Again*, the

book you are currently discussing in your small group meetings? It is: “In the beginning, there was a relationship.” This phrase is drawn from the work of the Jewish rabbi and philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965), specifically his book *I and Thou* (*Ich und Du*). *Ich* is the German word for the first-person “I,” while *Du* is the second-person “You.” Buber describes a world devoid of relationships as a world of the third-person “it.” Those who live amidst a multitude of people yet feel as though they are in a desert are, in effect, dwelling within this world of “it.” Buber argues that a relationship can only emerge when the third-person “it” is transformed into the second-person “you.” This is much like the concept of “taming” that the fox describes to the Little Prince. The Little Prince was only able to love the rose on his own planet once he realized that it was not merely an “it”, just one of countless roses, but a “you,” a rose that held a unique and special meaning for him. When the first-person “I” enters into a relationship with a third-person “he” or “she,” a second-person “you” is born—as if by a miracle. In this way, a “world of objects” is transformed into a “world of meaning and value.” Moses experiences this miracle in the middle of the desert.

He was a man so deeply acquainted with loneliness that he named his firstborn son *Gershom*—a name formed by combining *Ger* (meaning "stranger" or "sojourner") and *Sham* (meaning "there"). To Moses, the wilderness was merely "there", a third-person "world of objects." Yet, God granted him the blessing of a relationship in that very place. Even the daughters of Reuel, the priest of Midian, initially referred to Moses in the third person. As verse 19 recounts: "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even drew water for us and watered the flock." Note the phrase "an Egyptian", he is nothing more than a stranger, a third party with whom there is no connection. However, their response to his kindness, offering him hospitality, forges a relationship. The moment this relationship is formed, the place is no longer a desert. It is no longer merely a "world of objects." We are all sojourners living in a strange land. In a very literal sense, we are enduring life in a place much like a desert. God desires for relationships to take root within this desert. Today’s passage teaches us that it is small acts of kindness and goodwill that create such connections. There are many lonely people around us, brothers and sisters who are battling profound isolation and solitude. For them, this world is even more parched and barren than a desert. Moreover, winter is a season that only intensifies such loneliness and isolation. Please reach out to those brothers and sisters who find themselves isolated by the various trials and tribulations of life. Does the rebuke that Reuel, the father, gave his daughters not sound as if it were God speaking to us? “Where is the man? How could you leave him behind? Go, invite him to share a meal.” This is a request from God the Father, urging us to enter into a relationship with others. To God, you are not some distant “third person,” but a “second person”, someone standing right before Him. God reached out to us first. Romans 5:8 tells us: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” It means that when our relationship with Him was broken because of our sins, God reached out to us. Even now, God says to us, “You are My son; you are My daughter. I loved you so much that I willingly let My Son be nailed to a cross and die. I desire to have a relationship with you.” If you find yourself doubting God’s love, could it be because, for you, God is still just a “third person”, someone with whom you have not yet established a personal relationship? We all need to love God and allow ourselves to be “tamed” by Him. Furthermore, I hope that we might also become “tamed” by one another through the hospitality and kindness that God desires. For in this world, which can often feel like a desert, the strength we need to go on will be found precisely through the “you”—the person standing right before us.