



1 Wild and wilderness!

By Aaron Jenkyn

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Theme: wilderness and wildness

MESSY CHURCH GOES WILD CHAPTER LINK: 7 – AND A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM...

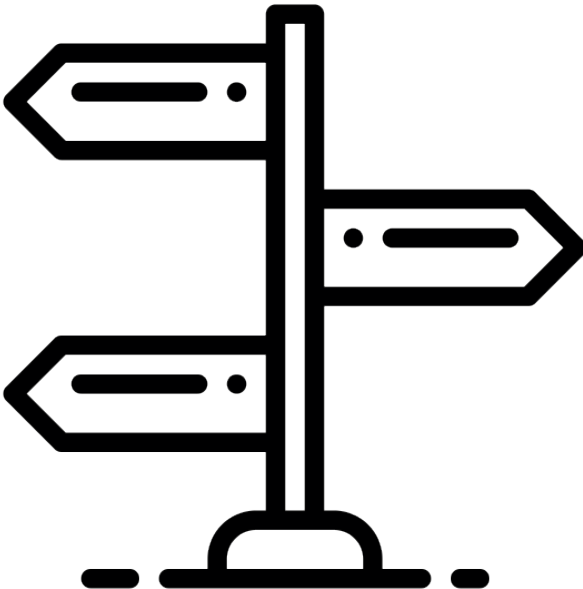
Aim: to explore different ways to enter into the wilderness to encounter God and explore the ways in which a time of wilderness helps us cultivate the wildness within.

Science advisors: Lucy Brierley and Dave Gregory

Messy Church values:

- Christ-centred – following in Jesus’ footsteps we enter into the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13) to draw closer to God, to find a sense of courage and resilience for the journey ahead.
- Hospitality – in the wilderness God provides what we need, both spiritually and physically. Our time together is an invitation to experience that sense of love and care, trusting that God will provide in the simplicity and beauty of the wilderness.
- Celebration – we celebrate the diversity of our experiences in the wilderness and our encounters with God. Hearing the wilderness stories of those who came before us and sharing stories of our own wilderness journeys.
- Creativity – the wilderness has inspired artists, writers and creative types since the beginning of time. These activities will inspire and challenge people physically and spiritually, opening doors to creativity and seeing things in new ways.
- All-age – being in the wilderness across generations is an incredibly rich experience, with each person able to contribute something unique and wonderful. These activities will bring people together to challenge people of all ages and to celebrate and encourage each other on the journey.

Section 1 On the move



1 Wilderness pilgrimage – a very simple walk to one place

In an indoor and familiar space:

(You might start at your church or in a home.) Introduce the idea of the wilderness with your own version of these thoughts: being in the wilderness gives us the opportunity to see things in a new way; it can help us find closure for major events in our lives or help us build courage to enter into the next big thing; a time in the wilderness can create space – space to wonder and ponder and pray, without the baggage of everyday life weighing us down.

Being in the wilderness is a bit different from just being outside in nature. There is an intentionality to being in the wilderness – being in the wilderness means stepping away from our everyday lives for a time, it could be for just ten minutes or an hour, a day or a week or longer. When you enter the wilderness, you leave everything behind, the distractions of daily life, the responsibilities for the people and animals and buildings and things you care for every day, your own thoughts and doubts and ideas of how things are supposed to be stay behind too.

By taking nothing, we create a space where we can encounter the Holy Spirit and find a sense of courage and resilience for the journey ahead. We're going to explore that idea today.

As you spend time in nature, whether on a local hiking trail, in the woods, along a community path or a walk around your neighbourhood, these activities and discussion questions will help you draw closer to God. If you think that you don't have any wilderness around you, then think again. Are there bits of grass sneaking up through the pavement? Are there birds nesting on the rooftops? Or a park bench on a quiet street? The wilderness is a place in which plants and animals and beings grow and survive on their own, completely dependent on God and nature.

Pack your bag:

To begin – provide bags, stash of soup cans, rocks or wooden blocks (objects should be heavy, but manageable in size – something you can write on or adhere masking tape to) and a supply of masking tape. Have participants tag the objects with the things that they are carrying with them – they're going to represent the burdens we carry every day, the messages we receive from ourselves, the world around us and the things that are getting in the way of connecting with God more deeply. For example: worries, heartaches, responsibilities, appointments, lessons and classes, jobs, school, budget and money concerns, wants, needs, pop culture messages, being different from everyone else, bossy parents, naughty siblings, nosy neighbours, bullies, school's too hard, etc.

Let people be honest and let them be private if they want to be; it is their burden. You can pre-tag some items to help people get started. Everybody should have a minimum of three to five items, more if they get into it. Give everybody a bag or box to carry the items on, it's okay

(good even) if the bags are heavy, burdensome, or unruly. You can laugh about it, people can even share their burdens with others, but make sure everybody takes all their burdens with them as you set out on your wilderness pilgrimage.

An obvious threshold place:

Walk together to a starting point, preferably the start of a hiking trail, park entrance, garden, woods, or other natural setting. Enjoy each other's company, notice the world around you as much as you can, but continue to carry the bags.

Once you arrive, pause at the threshold and talk about the ways that Jesus found time to connect with God the Father through spending time in the wilderness. Ask people if they remember any stories of Jesus out in the wilderness, on land or on the water. Jesus' encounters with nature often preceded or followed times in his ministry that were really challenging – healings, miracles, intense periods of teaching – as he waits for his death on the cross. At some of the most intense moments of Jesus' story we see him retreat to the wilderness again and again. Jesus is modelling for us how we need to restore, rejuvenate and refresh our bodies and minds from time to time, especially when we find ourselves facing hard challenges or significant losses.

Into the wilderness:

You might have a line, sign, arch or hula-hoop to represent entering into a time and place of wilderness. Just before participants cross the threshold, have participants lay down their burdens, literally leaving them on the ground or a table, as they take nothing and set off to explore the wilderness area alone. Describe the boundaries, if you need to. Let them know how long they have and invite them simply to explore and notice.

It might be that participants need a piece of paper and/or pen to draw or write down what they experience, or they might just wonder and pray, or explore this new area. Trust that whatever they are doing is what they need to be doing in that moment. Encourage people to enter into this exploration solo or in small groupings. There may be people who complain of being bored, or who might finish before the rest of the group; you might suggest they focus smaller, look down, closer to the ground to see what mysterious and wonderful things lie at their feet.

If your group is less comfortable outdoors, you could offer a scavenger hunt of noticing:

- How many colours can you see in the sky?
- How many colours can you see on the ground?
- What is the smallest living thing you see?
- What is the largest living thing you see?

- Can you hear the wind? What are three words that describe what it sounds like?

- Can you find:
 - Something soft
 - Something that feels rough
 - Something with stripes
 - Something strange/curious
 - Something old
 - Something new
 - Something that gives you hope

After a set amount of time, or when you feel the group is ready, call everyone back together using a bell or call.

Celebration

Talk about the experience – you might use the prompts below:

- What was it like to put down your burdens?
- What was it like to step into the wilderness alone?
- Is there anything from your scavenger hunt that you want to share?
- What were some of the things you did to help you notice the wilderness around you?
- As you return, are there burdens, objects that you can leave behind?
- Are there objects that don't carry the same weight as they did when you first started?

You might set goals for yourself to find ways to set down your burdens and visit the wilderness more often. You might check in with Messy Church families between sessions to see how they are doing with this challenge or begin your next session by checking in with each other.

Prayer

In chapter one of Mark's gospel, Mark writes that straight after Jesus was baptised, the Holy Spirit sent him out into the wilderness. Jesus went to listen to God without any burdens. Let's name the ways we've heard or seen God today in our wilderness. Whoever has this (stick... flower... stone or other object) gets to speak – either silently or out loud. Then pass it on to the next person. So... how have we seen or heard God today in our wilderness?

Section 2 Adventure area in one spot

Mother Teresa, a woman of great faith, who was committed to helping the poor and outcast, once said:

'We need to find God and God cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees and flowers and grass – grow in silence. See the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence. The more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life.'

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

In the noise and restlessness of our everyday lives it can be hard to remember to pray, and when we do there are so many distractions! In our houses, in the city streets, at school and work, one of the distractions is the noisiness of life. Being in the wilderness allows us to set aside some of that noise and make the time to listen to God.

- What does it feel like to be in the middle of chaos and noise?
- How do you calm your heart and mind when things get noisy?
- What are the sounds that make up the noise around you? Around us today?
- What does God sound like for you?



1 Sound maps

- Begin by having participants make a list (or name) some of the sounds they hear every day. You might make a game out of it, by having someone replicate the sound and having others guess what it was. Or you might call out the name of something on the list and ask everyone to try and create the sound – this game is especially fun if you have little ones in your group.
- Once you have a list, have participants sit quietly for 30 seconds and lift one finger for every sound they hear. After the time, discuss the different sounds you heard.
- How many sounds did you hear? Did you hear more or fewer sounds than you listed?
- Next, take a piece of paper and a pencil. Fold the paper in fours. Open it up. Instruct participants to find a spot that they would like to spend some time in. From that spot, they will draw a map of all the sounds they hear. Try not to list the sounds, but to draw the sounds on the paper from the direction you think they are coming from (this forces the listener to go deeper into their meditation, to pinpoint a sound takes a lot of concentration). After ten minutes, call everyone back to the circle.
- Things to discuss: concentration, focus, shutting out the busyness and distractions of your day. How much more do we notice when we are focusing? What does it really feel like to listen to a place? How much more do we hear? When you are focusing, do the other sounds stop? What does it feel like in your body when you are noticing?
- Try it once more, but this time, pause and for a few minutes try to enter into a place of prayer, into a conversation with God. For little ones, or for participants who need more of a guided activity, you might provide coloured pencils and paper and encourage participants to write or draw a prayer incorporating their sound maps, experience, and encounters with nature. When you gather back together, you can invite people to share their offerings, or you might try this as a group, using a prayer or poem template.

Wonder:

- Which sounds that you listed were wild made and which ones were human made?
- How can you tell the difference? (And is there a difference?)
- What does God sound like?
- This activity helps us focus our minds and our hearts, to create silence within. Where else might you try to do a sound map? Do you think it would work in the city? Why or why not? What about in your home? Work? School?

2 Bat and moth

- This active game is based on the classic camp game 'bat and moth' which teaches people how bats use echolocation to catch flying insects in the dark, but I think it works well to demonstrate the focus and practise we need to find silence and listen for God in the wilderness. The people in the circle could alternate between being the distractions of everyday life and the soothing nature of the wilderness.
- Gather everyone who wants to play and get into a wide circle
- Select someone to be the 'seeker' & someone else to be 'Jesus'
- Blindfold the seeker. The goal of the game is for the seeker to find Jesus and tag him using only the call and response.
- To begin, the blindfolded seeker calls out by saying 'Jesus' and 'Jesus' responds by calling back the name of the seeker.
- Remember, every time the seeker says 'Jesus' the person playing Jesus must call back that person's name.
- To make the game harder and even more realistic, those in the wider circle can be given 'distractions' to call out whenever the seeker calls out for Jesus.
- Here are the original instructions: batsinchurches.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Bat-and-Moth-game.pdf
- Distractions: television, smartphone, texts, emails, work, school, deadlines, appointments, sickness, worry, money, too busy, too tired etc...
- If you do this, make sure 'the seeker' and 'Jesus' also get a turn in wilderness mode, where the circle of people are silent, or making gentle breeze noises or calming sounds.

Section 3 Activities to explore the wilderness



1 Binoculars

You'll need: toilet paper rolls (two per pair); string or ribbon; hole punch; decorating supplies such as markers, crayons, decorative paper or natural materials; glue.

Optional – these ‘play’ binoculars will not magnify objects. You could borrow an assortment of binoculars for people to look through.

What to do: to assemble the binoculars, attach the two toilet paper rolls together using glue or string. Draw designs on the rolls, or if you want, you can use decorative paper to cover them. To do this, wrap the paper around the width of the binoculars and trim off the excess paper. Secure with glue. Finally, use a hole punch to punch holes ½ inch from the outside top edge of each tube. Attach a length of ribbon or string long enough for you to carry them around your neck.

For older members, experiment with the concept of Inuit snow goggles (canadashistory.ca/explore/first-nations,-inuit-metis/inuit-snow-goggles). These were designed for a snowy wilderness. Do they work? The principle is to cut a very narrow strip in a set of otherwise solid spectacles so that the field of vision is reduced, as is the amount of ultraviolet radiation reaching the eyes. Try making a version from wood or card and testing them out in your wilderness.

Use your new binoculars or goggles to explore your surroundings. Play ‘I spy’ with others in your group or sit down in a quiet spot and look around. What do you notice?



Big thinking: while the binoculars you have made will help you focus on an object or a small area, unlike proper binoculars and telescopes, they do not have lenses so they won't make far away things look closer so that you can see them in greater detail. Inside each side of a pair of binoculars are lots of different lenses and prisms which bend and twist the light from the object you are viewing. The lens at the front of the binocular where the light enters turns the image of the object upside down. Inside the binoculars, the light passes through several prisms to turn it the right way up. But, when you look through the binoculars, the lens in your eye turns it again, so that the image on the back of your eye – the retina – is upside down again! Your brain flips the image the right way up so that you do not see the world upside down!!



Big question: binoculars are a tool that help us see a different perspective. Even these pretend paper ones can help us to zero in on things that we may otherwise overlook or help us see things we encounter every day in a new way. Being in the wilderness helps us see things in a new way too. Jesus needed to get out into the wilderness from time to time, to get away from distractions and to come close to what mattered most to him. So, how important is it for us? Is it good sometimes to ‘blinker’ ourselves so that we take time to notice what we would otherwise miss?

2 Fire

For a demonstration you will need: bow drill; pump drill; magnifying glass; fire steel; dry twigs and kindling ; approved campfire pit; water (for safety).

You might have one person overseeing a campfire at this station, with a second person doing a demonstration of these fire-starting methods. For many this will be very exciting to watch and could be a complete station.

But if you are up for it, and if your space allows you to do it safely, you might consider giving everyone a chance to start their own mini fire.

You'll need: cotton balls; Vaseline; clam or other shells (cleaned and saved from a meal); fire steel or fire striker (you can purchase fire steels at most online retailers – e.g. Amazon – or outdoors supply stores).

Caution: this activity involves creating fire. Make sure you carry out a full risk assessment. It would be wise to have a fire extinguisher or fire blanket at hand to prevent accidents.

What to do: give each person a cotton ball and a shell with a dab of Vaseline in the centre (this will later help hold the cotton down). Tease out the cotton fibres and smear Vaseline on to the fibres then place in the middle of the shell. One at a time, strike the fire steel so that the sparks ignite the cotton. For some it will come quickly, for others it will take more effort: encouragement goes a long way at this stage, don't forget to cheer everyone on! Once the cotton is lit, it will flare up, and then die down quickly. For safety, place the used shells into a bowl of water before discarding or reusing.



Big thinking: combustion is a more scientific name for burning. For combustion to occur, you need three things: heat, oxygen and fuel. This is called the fire triangle. Heat could be from a spark, match or lights – or even sunlight focused using a lens. Fuel could be wood or paper – anything that burns. Here it's the fibres in the cotton wool. The third side of the triangle is easy to find, because oxygen is in the air we breathe, so as long as there is air around you, you can make a fire.

Combustion is an exothermic reaction. It releases energy stored in the burnt material into the surrounding environment. This reaction sends out mainly thermal energy but will also produce light and even sound energy. Fire can be very dangerous in the wilderness. People being careless with campfires or lightening from thunderstorms can cause huge forest fires. With the world warming due to climate change these are becoming much more common, bigger and dangerous to people, animals and plants. The smoke can cover entire countries and make it difficult for people to breath.

? **Big question:** creating a fire without a lighter or matches is no easy feat. Success in this task creates a huge sense of achievement, as it requires a great deal of focus, perseverance, problem solving, patience and adaptability. It is a hugely empowering experience to light a fire on one's own and the reward is both physical (warmth, light and food) and deeply spiritual. That sense of finding the light and feeling the warmth after being in the dark, that is what it can be like to find God in the wilderness. What did it feel like to make fire? If it was a challenge for you, what did you have to do to keep going? What finally worked? What helped? What didn't?

3 Needle and water compass

You'll need: large sewing needle; magnets (the stronger the better)*; wine corks sliced into 1cm round; medium-large bowl; water; pliers; store bought compass or access to the compass on your mobile device.

What to do: each participant will need a magnet, a needle and a piece of cork. Begin by stroking the needle the length of the magnet about 20 times. To do this, hold the needle between your fingers (careful of the sharp point), and then holding the magnet in your other hand, wave it along the needle and then back in a circle to the start. Next, carefully push the needle through the cork. To test your compass, place it in a bowl of water. It should align itself with magnetic north. You can check it against a purchased compass or the compass on your mobile device. You might want to paint a small spot of nail varnish on the end of the needle that points north (or south if you are in the southern hemisphere!)



Big thinking: ever wondered how a compass works? Well, the earth is one big magnet and can affect other magnets around it. Like all other magnets, the earth has a north and south pole and between these poles you get a magnetic field. Opposite poles attract, so the north and south poles of different magnets will stick together and so the same poles of a magnet repel each other. You may well have tried pushing two magnets together – sometimes they stick together, other times they fly apart.

In a compass, there is a magnet. The north pole of this magnet is attracted to the south pole of the earth, while the south pole of the magnet is attracted to the north pole of the earth. Now that is a little confusing, but as long as you know if the magnet in the compass points north or south, you can find your way around. Although, what is even more confusing is that every quarter of a million years, the earth's magnetic field flips and the north and south poles of the earth's magnet change places. Scientists are still trying to puzzle out why this is.



Big question: explorers use a compass to help them find their way and avoid getting lost. In survival situations you can use a compass to make sure you are heading in the right direction, towards safety, even when there are no forged trails or signposts. Being in the wild helps us to reset our soul compass and reconnect with God, our magnetic north. Sometimes in the wilderness it might not feel as if you know where you are going, but if you keep following God, you will get to exactly where you need to be. (You might tell the story of Abram and Sarah's march in the wilderness.)

4 Map making

You'll need: a few examples of different types of maps (like ancient ones of the world with Jerusalem at the centre or a different orientation from North at the top, Australian Aboriginal maps of the land or sky); natural materials; compass.

If you are making 'journey sticks' you will also need sticks, string or sticky tape.

What to do: discuss the different ways people have tried to map their wildernesses. Talk about why they needed to create a map... what did they decide to put at the centre... what was important to them to make a note of... what does that show about their values?

Talk about different ways you could map the wilderness you're in now. What matters to you? Or do you want to mark on it what matters to someone else? What's at the centre? What's it for? What could you make it out of if all you have are these natural materials?



Alternatively, you could make a journey stick. On your journey, invite people to collect objects along the way that catch their eye. Please be careful not to pick wildflowers or pick anything that is sharp. Also, pick up a stick or give people one you have already collected. When you arrive at the end, get people to stick the objects they have collected on to the stick using string or sticky tape. What kind of map is this? Could someone else follow it?



Big thinking: in the new city of Milton Keynes in England, the roads are set out in a grid. Some roads run east-west, while others run north-south. The east-west roads are called horizontal or 'H' roads, while the north-south are called vertical or 'V' roads. Each road has a number, starting with V1 in the east and H1 in the north. But they also have road names like you would find in many older towns. If you ask people directions to the city centre, some people will say 'go along Monks Way until you reach the Grafton Street and then turn left'. Others will say, 'go along the H3 until you meet the V6 and then turn left'. Hopefully you will end up at the same place! Perhaps people interpret the maps of the city in different ways because some are good at maths, while others are good at languages! Scientists who study the brain – neuroscientists – are still trying to figure out why some people prefer one type of map or another. It appears to be related to the way our brain cells – neurons – are wired together in part of our brains called the hippocampus near the bottom of our brains. It is involved in helping us to process information that our senses tell us about the world around us and helps us to map out our surroundings. All animals with back bones (vertebrates) have a hippocampus in their brains. So maybe your pet at home is good at making a mental map of your home and garden! And perhaps even better than reading maps then you!



Big question: are you the sort of person who likes to go where nobody else has gone before or would you prefer to have some sort of map to show you what to expect along the way? What sort of person was Jesus? Did he have any sort of map to follow?

5 Climbing a tree (or a ladder)

You'll need: step stools and ladders of various heights; and/or good tree climbing trees.

Caution: make sure you complete a full risk assessment including the possibility of falling, provision of suitable protective head gear and availability of a first aid kit.

What to do: climb trees and talk about how it feels – either as a confident climber looking down on things or someone who is a reliable holder of the ladder or encourager from their wheelchair looking up at someone in a tree or up a ladder.



Big thinking: apes like chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans spend some of their life on the ground and some climbing trees. Their hand and feet are more flexible than ours to help them grip the trees. Spending some time in the treetops provides protection from predators and gives them access to food sources. While humans can still climb trees, they are better at walking on the ground and using tools. But, climbing trees or going up a hill provides a different view of the world and perhaps helps us to see things from other creature's point of view. That helps us to understand their needs in a better way so we can protect their environments and homes.



Big question: going out into the wilderness can change your perspective – in other words, it can help you see things from a different angle. God took Moses out into the wilderness and spoke to him from a burning bush when he wanted Moses to change direction. What changes are you negotiating in your life? Is God saying anything to you through the wilderness?



6 Poustinias

A poustinia is a small, sparsely furnished room where one goes to pray and fast alone in the presence of God. The word 'poustinia' has its origins in Russian, meaning 'desert'.

You'll need: sticks and natural materials to make a den or a two-four person camping or pop-up beach tent; hammocks; a sleeping mat and pillow and blankets' large battery-operated candles (optional); a dustpan and brush or string and natural materials to make a small besom.

What to do: create your poustinia to be used as a place of rest by all who enter. Feel free to get creative, using whatever materials you have that feel comfortable and cosy. Invite people into genuine rest. To do this, you might need more than one poustinia so as to not rush people through. You might invite people to sweep away their worries before resting (e.g. 'use the broom to sweep away what is bothering you and give it to God').



Big thinking: our life is spent around so much stuff. Spending time in the sparsely furnished 'poustinia' is helpful because it is like spending time outside in the wilderness and among nature. Did you know that spending just two hours a week outside, in nature, can have amazing benefits for your mental health? When you feel safe outside in a nice open and green space, your body reduces how much of the chemical cortisol it produces, which is associated with how stressed we feel. As it reduces, this can help lower your blood pressure and help to make you feel less anxious. All in all, improving your mood and helping you increase your self-esteem.

But what's truly phenomenal about the power of nature is that its positive effects are not just restricted to your mental health. In fact, spending two hours a week outside can also have positive effects on your physical health too. Being outside, around trees and green plants, can help to boost your immune system, which helps you fight off any illnesses. It also helps your body to speed up how quickly it heals itself when you have an injury!

The outdoors is even beneficial to the development of a child's brain. Studies have shown that free play, in a natural space, can help a child establish better social and problem-solving skills. Nature can also inspire creativity, and when a child is outside with other children or adults, they find it easier to establish social bonds.



Big question: in the Bible there is a story of a prophet named Elijah. Elijah found himself in the wilderness after a big event in his life. You can read about it in 1 Kings 18–19. During this time God showed up for Elijah in a big way, but afterwards, Elijah found himself exhausted. This can happen sometimes after such big life changing events. Soon Elijah found himself a bit scared and depressed. This can happen to all of us, especially when we are tired, burned out, anxious and afraid. Elijah was being called into the wilderness for a time of rest and renewal. Elijah rested – when he found a way to be still, he found God once again. Sometimes we are called into the wilderness for adventure, and sometimes we are called into the wilderness for rest. Which do you think you are being called into?



7 Manna in the wilderness

You'll need: a campfire or camping stove; means of cleaning hands; bowls; flatbread ingredients (flour, salt, oil); an old skillet or frying pan.

What to do: make and eat small flatbreads together. There are countless easy recipes online.

As you make and eat them, talk about the travels of the Hebrew people in the wilderness, when God sent manna from heaven. (As 'manna' means 'what on earth is that?', if someone's flatbread goes wrong, you can say it's very appropriate!)



Big thinking: did you know that some historians think that cooking was invented by humans over 2.3 million years ago! But why do we cook certain foods and not others? You could have eaten the ingredients you used to make the flat breads, but raw flour, salt and oil probably don't taste too nice!

We cook some foods to make them safer to eat. Raw food, like chicken and eggs may contain harmful bacteria that may make us ill. The three most common are campylobacter, salmonella and listeria monocytogenes. Cooking foods at high enough temperatures will kill the bacteria and make them safe to eat. Most bacteria will die when exposed to temperatures over 70oC.

We also cook food to make them easier to digest. One great example of this is starchy food like pasta and cereal. To digest starch and turn it into glucose, your mouth and intestine must create a chemical – called an enzyme – called amylase. This enzyme is very efficient at helping your body digest starch but cooking carbohydrate-rich foods helps to start this process even before the food has reached your mouth. Essentially making it easier for your digestive system to harvest the healthy glucose which we need to help power all the cells in our bodies!





Big question: the Hebrew people were told only to gather enough manna for the day and to trust there would be more the next day. What do we trust God to give us every new day?

8 Make a maze

You'll need: sticks of different lengths; a large flattish space.

What to do: lay out a maze on the ground, making pathways between sticks. See how many dead ends you can include in it, but make sure there is a way to the exit! Invite people to explore your maze and find their way through.

 **Big thinking:** today, we are all used to using GPS SatNavs on our smartphones to find our way around. But before these had been invented (only 20 years ago!), how did we find our way around? Back in 2014, three scientist – John O’Keefe, May-Britt Moser and Edvard Moser – won the world’s top science prize (the Nobel Prize) for medicine for discovering that the brain has an internal GPS system. They studied rats finding their way through a maze. When rats were in one location, certain cells in a part of their brains called the hippocampus were active. When they were in a different part of the maze, other cells were triggered. These ‘place cells’ help the rats remember the layout of the maze. They also found ‘grid cells’ which made a latitude-longitude grid to help the brain navigate more accurately. The hippocampus also helps us to store memories, and the pictures of places we store in our minds may also help us to find our way around and why it can be difficult in an unfamiliar place or one without any landmarks.

 **Big question:** being lost in the wilderness is no joke, even if it’s fun to be lost in a maze. The Hebrew people had God as their guide as a fiery pillar by night and a cloudy pillar by day. How do the people in this group listen or look for God’s guidance every day? Try asking them.



9 Make a wilderness

You'll need: natural materials – sticks, twigs, leaves, stones, grass, seeds, playdough, chalk (optional).

What to do: what would be your ideal wild place to get away to? Would you love to spend a week in a jungle? Up a mountain? On an island? In a wild wood? See if you can make a miniature version of your idea of the best wilderness ever. Make sure you include where you're going to sleep (a treehouse, a tent, a cave).



Big thinking: when we look at a 'wilderness' it can be tempting to see it as a waste of space and resource. We want to put order into it and use it to benefit our lives. Over the past 50 years so much wilderness has been lost as cities around the world have grown and we have cut down forests to make more farmland. There have been a series of satellites launched since the 1970s called Landsat which have continually observed the changes human are making to the Earth and how much wilderness we are destroying. You can see some of these beautiful pictures at earthobservatory.nasa.gov/world-of-change/PadmaRiver.

Wilderness areas also make the world more secure and robust to climate change. So much of our farmed land is made up of a single crop – called a monoculture ecosystem. But wilderness areas have a much wider range of plant and animal species – a diverse ecosystem. This can often withstand changes in weather and climate patterns much better. If one type of plant finds it hard to grow as the climate changes, another may be able to flourish maintaining a good habitat for animals and other plants. Also, the diverse ecosystems of wilderness areas are more able to absorb carbon dioxide than farmland so helping to stop climate change getting very bad.



Big question: what's good about being with other people and what's good about being on your own? Listen to the people around you talking about this – does anything surprise you? 'Church' is meant to be a group of people who might all be very different but who all want to love Jesus and know it's best to learn to do that together. How can we maintain the diverse eco-system of the church?



10 Wild wear

You'll need: invite everyone to bring an old plain white t-shirt, blouse or baseball cap and have a few spare items for those who forget; a range of seasonal materials you could use to dye fabric (blackberries, beetroot, grass, elderberries, dandelion flowers, bought flowers of various colours); bowls; sticks or spoons; paintbrushes; water

Caution: please be careful what wild plants you collect. Check out the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland's code of conduct (bsbi.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/Code-of-Conduct-v5-final.pdf) for picking, collecting, photographing and enjoying wild plants.

What to do: to dye fabric permanently with natural dyes, you'll need to follow instructions from somewhere like diynatural.com/natural-fabric-dyes, but there may not be time or the right sort of numbers for safety at your gathering to do this. So this is more deliberately staining clothes that you know will fade in the wash. Let people experiment with the materials, mixing them up in different quantities with water to make 'ink' then painting wild designs on the clothing. Leave to dry. Invite people to wear their creation next time, if they dare...



Big thinking: the dyes you use change the colours of the clothes. The different colours produced by dyes are down to the way the chemicals in the dye reflect light. Yellow dyes reflect more yellow light than red dyes, which reflect more red light. Nature has a whole raft of different colours, some of which are hidden away. In season climates, in the spring and summer the leaves of the trees are green due to a chemical called chlorophyll which enables them to use sunlight to make food. When the colder autumn nights come, the chlorophyll breaks down and the leaves begin to turn yellow and orange, a colour of another chemical that is always there in the leaves – carotenes – but whose colour is masked by the strong green of the chlorophyll. Carotenes is the same chemical that makes carrots orange. As the process continues, sugars collect in the leaves and create another chemical, anthocyanins, which makes the leaves turn red. By the way, do you know carrots have not always been orange. Long ago they were mainly white and yellow, but farmers in the Netherlands selectively bred carrots to make them orange.



Big question: you've made your mark on your t-shirts... how has the wilderness left its mark on you today? Is there something you've picked up that you don't want to be 'washed away'? How will you remember it and reflect on it in the weeks ahead?



Section 4 Celebration

Tell the story of Jesus in the wilderness (Luke 4:1–13) (though Mark’s version includes wild beasts, which is fun). Act it out together and have fun imagining how it would have been if Jesus had been sent out into your particular wilderness.

Ask for one-word responses to finish the sentence: ‘In the wilderness, I think Jesus found...’ Pray for the safety of the wild places of the world and the creatures and people that live in them. Invite people to name any that are special to them.

Song suggestions:

- ‘We are marching in the light of God’ – Wonder, Love and Praise #787
- ‘I, the Lord of sea and sky’ – Wonder, Love and Praise #812

Section 5 Eating together

If possible, eat something that's come from the place where you are now, either growing in the wild that you foraged together under expert supervision or grown in someone's garden. If not, popping corn is pretty wild.

