***Into the Wilderness***

**Introduction**

*Setting the scene: beige cloths to cover tables and notice boards, rope to follow*

*Story kit: desert bag, stone, angel, crown*

**Welcome to ‘Into the Wilderness’**

**Come and sit down here in a big circle so everyone can see.**

I wonder what a wilderness actually is?

The desert is a kind of wilderness.

*Open out the desert bag and start to spread the sand around*

The desert is a strange and dangerous place.

It is always moving, so it is hard to know where you are.

There is little water, so you get thirsty and you can die if no water is found. Almost nothing grows there, so there is almost nothing to eat

In the daytime it is burning hot and the sun scorches your skin, but at night it is very cold. When the wind blows, the sand stings when it hits you. People wear many clothes to protect them from the sun and the blowing sand.

The desert is a dangerous place

*Move the sand around to change the shape*

The wind blows harshly, and everything changes. People lose their way.

Some never come back.

People only go into the desert if they really have to.

It takes courage to go into the desert.

**We are now going to head off to find out about some people who went into the wilderness. Follow the rope to make sure you don’t get lost.**

**Come and sit down at the front. You can leave your coats here if you like, so you know where to find them later.**

After Jesus was baptised by John in the River Jordan, he was led by the spirit of God into the wilderness. He stayed there alone for 40 days and 40 nights.

*Hold up a stone*

He was very hungry. He was tempted to turn stones into bread to eat.

But Jesus said, “No! We need more than just bread to really live.”

Suddenly it seemed as if Jesus was on top of the great temple in Jerusalem.

*Hold up an angel*

He was tempted to throw himself off and let the angels save him, so everyone would know how special he was.

But Jesus said, "No! You should trust God, not test him."

Then, it was as if Jesus was on the top of a very high mountain.

*Hold up a crown*

He could see all the kingdoms of the world. A voice said, “I will make you king of all these if you bow down and worship me.”

But Jesus said, “No! You should only worship God. I am to be a king, but not that kind of king."

Over the last two thousand years people have followed in the footsteps of Jesus and gone into the wilderness – to find God, and to find out about themselves.

During the season of Lent Christians get ready to celebrate the great mystery of Easter. Sometimes they go into the desert, but often that is not possible. So often they remember the stories of people who went into the desert. Some Christians give things up or try to live simpler lives. Some Christians pray and try to make a desert inside their mind, so they can come close to God.

Now we are going to hear the stories of three people who went into the wilderness:

Mary of Egypt went into wilderness over the River Jordan, like Jesus.

Saint Brendan went into a watery wilderness.

And Mildred Cable went into the Gobi Desert.

**The Desert Mothers – Mary of Egypt**

***Setting the scene:*** wooden/bamboo screens***,*** blue cloth (across the entrance - River Jordan), bread on wooden plate, large chalice and grapes, driftwood cross (on the altar)**,** hessian, stones, grey cloth, logs and bark (to make a cave under the altar)

***Story kit:*** 10 objects and 4 pictures

icon pictures, Taverner CD and CD player

**Story**

Are you ready to come in to the wilderness? First you need to cross over the River Jordan. This is the same wilderness that Jesus went into. Come and sit around the cave.

Many early Christians came here, following in the footsteps of Jesus. They left the world behind, trying to get closer to God. They are known as the Desert Fathers and the Desert Mothers. They often lived in caves like this one. It was a hard life – there wasn’t much to eat or drink, and there were wild animals prowling around! (*point out lion)*

One of the Desert Mothers was known as Mary of Egypt because that’s where she was came from. She was born about 350 years after baby Jesus fled to Egypt to escape King Herod.

Mary thought that life in her home village was a bit dull, so when she was 12, she ran away to the great city of Alexandria.

***Object 1*** – ***musical instrument*** She stayed there for 17 years, working as a singer and a dancer *(shake instrument)* . She was never still. She loved partying and being with other people, but she didn’t care who she hurt along the way.

***Object 2 – wooden boat*** One day she met a group of pilgrims who were about to set sail for Jerusalem to see the True Cross that Jesus died on. Mary decided to join them, just for fun. *(‘sail’ boat)*

***Picture A – Holy Sepulchre interior***But when Mary arrived at the door of the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, something stopped her going. She tried three times, but an unseen force was holding her back.

***Object 3 – Mary icon*** Whilst she was waiting for the others outside the church, she looked up and saw a painting of Jesus’ mother, Mary.

Mary of Egypt began to weep, and she prayed that she might be allowed to go into the church. She promised that she would do whatever God wanted.

***Picture B – candles in Holy Sepulchre*** Mary did get to go into the church, and when she came out, she heard a voice telling her to cross over the River Jordan and find rest in the wilderness. So, Mary set off.

***Object 4 – bowl of water*** She stopped at the church of St John the Baptist. She washed herself clean in the River Jordan,*(scoop water)*  then went into the church to receive Holy Communion – the bread and wine; the body and blood of Jesus. *(point to the chalice and bread on top of the altar)*

Now she was ready to enter the same wilderness that Jesus had gone into.

***Objects 5 and 6 – three wooden loaves and sage branch*** Like Jesus, Mary was tempted. She was hungry – she is said to have lived for years on the three loaves of bread she took in with her, *(show bread)* and after that she survived by eating wild herbs *(show artificial sage)*. The bread must have been very dry! Would you like to taste a breadstick? *(hand round baskets of bread sticks – and offer free-from version)*

Mary was lonely - she was tempted to go back to her old life of having fun.

***Object 7 – lion*** It felt like she was being tormented by the wild beasts that lived in the wilderness. *(point to lion)*

But gradually, she came so close to God that nothing else mattered. Finally, she was at peace. One day, after 47 years of being alone, Mary encountered a stranger.

***Picture C - Zossima***Zossima was a priest who had come out into the wilderness during Lent, to get ready for Easter. He felt that something was missing in his life, and he longed to learn more about God. He was hoping to meet a wise and holy man, but instead he came across Mary.

***Picture D – Mary***After 47 years Mary’s clothes had worn into rags, and her long hair swirled around her like a bush.

Mary was shocked to see another person after so long, and she ran away, but Zossima followed and pleaded with her, and finally persuaded her to tell him her story. He listened, amazed. This strange old woman gave him everything he had hoped for, and more.

***Object 8 – battery candle*** Her love of God shone through and lit up his life. *(‘light’ candle)* He found the peace that had been missing.

Mary asked Zossima to meet her a year later at sunset on the banks of the River Jordan. She asked him to bring bread and wine so she could receive Holy Communion for the first time in 48 years.

Zossima came back a year later, just as Mary had asked. He waited and waited until the sky was almost black, but she still did not come. Just as he was about to give up, he saw her on the other side of the river.

***Objects 9 and 10 – chalice and bread*** As he watched, she walked across the water to join him. Zosima shared bread and wine with her, and agreed to meet her there again a year later.

When Zossima came back next year, he found that Mary had died, and she had left a message for him written in the sand, asking him to bury her. He began to dig, but he soon got tired.

***Object 7 – lion*** When he felt he could dig no more a lion came and helped him, and amazingly Zossima wasn’t scared. *(bring out lion)*

Zossima told Mary’s story to everyone he met. It was written down, and quickly started to spread. And people still tell it today. A lot of the story sounds too amazing to be true, but that doesn’t matter.

Over the years it has inspired many people who want to turn their lives around and have a new start.

From soon after the time of her death, people painted pictures or icons of her, to help them to say sorry and pray for change in their lives.

*Show the icon pictures of Mary*

***I wonder which one you like best?***

About 30 years ago, the composer John Tavener composed some music about Mary meeting Zossima. The music swoops up and down. Tavener called it a moving icon.

Here is part of it. *(play the CD)*

***I wonder how the music made you feel?***

**Creative activity**

There were probably hundreds of desert fathers and mothers living in the wilderness In the Holy Land at any one time. They didn’t see each other very often, but they left messages carved on rocks and drawn in the sand – Christian symbols.

Here are some of them: *show the pictures of the symbols*

Would you like to take a piece of card and choose a symbol (or some symbols) to scratch out, or design your own?

*(symbol pictures, small trays, scratch art kits)*

**Play activity**

Beige cloths/pieces of hessian, desert animals, linking camels, wooden people, stones, bark ‘caves’

**St Brendan the Navigator**

***Setting the scene on the balcony*:** blue cloths draped over the edge of the balcony, , brown cloth to cover table, cat in basket

***Story kit:*** 11 pictures

***Downstairs:*** LED trees and birds, green organza cloth

**Story**

*Picture 1- statue of St Brendan* Brendan was a monk who wanted to voyage across the sea. He lived in a time long ago, in about the year 500. Brendan wanted to travel to find the heaven that God has promised to his people. He called it ‘the Land Promised to the Saints’, the place where people live with God forever. It would seem strange to us today to seek God’s actual promise on an island far out in the ocean, to imagine that we could reach heaven with a boat.

*Picture 2 - satellite image of the earth* But nowadays we have maps of all the world and satellite images of the whole globe, and so we think we have seen everything that there is to be seen. In Brendan’s time, everywhere west of Ireland was a mysterious adventure, places unknown. It felt just as likely that the Land promised to the Saints might be out there, beyond the sea as it might be beyond the sky or somewhere else that we don’t know about.

*Picture 3- dark matter* We might think it is within dark matter or in another dimension. For Brendan and his fellow monks, the islands of Iceland and Newfoundland, and even America were their ‘dark matter’, their mysteries.

*Picture 4 – reconstruction of a curagh T*hese places were only talked of in the stories and songs, told by those who ventured out in their leather-skinned boats, with sails and oars, travelling far under the power of the wind and with the strength of the tides.

*Picture 5 – Brendan on his boat* So, Brendan and his monks set out on a big adventure in a small boat. They were all alone and the water stretched as far as they could see. They watched the waves where the curls of water met the sky and for them it was a kind of wilderness, a kind of desert.

*Picture 6 – being led by God* They were in the middle of a big emptiness, travelling to see what God had promised. They said their prayers every day, following the calendar of the church’s year. They kept Christmas and Easter and Pentecost, and all the days in between. They prayed something like this:

“You heavens, bless the Lord; Sun and moon, bless the Lord; Stars in the sky, bless the Lord; praise God above all forever!
Night and days, bless the Lord; light and darkness, bless the Lord; lightning and storm-clouds, bless the Lord; praise God above all forever!”

*Picture 7 – landing on an island* One day, they saw a small smooth island. They brought the boat close to the shore and jumped off onto the smooth land. There were no plants or flowers or animals here. They wondered if the whole island was one big smooth rock. They lit a fire so that they could boil some water and do some cooking. Suddenly the whole island began to move and shake and started to disappear under the sea!

*Picture 8 – cooking on the whale* They quickly jumped back into their boat just as the whole island went under the sea. And then they realised - this hadn’t been an island at all, but the back of an enormous whale!

*Picture 9 – travelling through the sea* They travelled on. Sometimes they were desperate to see land, so that they could find fresh water and food. They continued to pray each day, ‘Praise God above all forever!’ One day they saw a shoreline in the distance. They steered towards it, hoping to find a place to bring the boat in. They saw a river flowing down to the beach of an island. There were trees and grass and flowers. They managed to bring their boat safely ashore and move it up this river a little way. Now they were among the trees overhead and the flowers near their feet, and they began to hear a beautiful sound all around them.

*Picture 10 – tree full of birds* It was birdsong. As they looked carefully, they realised that the trees were full of many different birds, small and large, with different coloured feathers. All the birds were singing, and it seemed to Brendan that they were singing “Praise God above all forever, praise God above all forever!” just as the monks did every day. And so they named this island ‘The Paradise of the Birds’.

*Picture 11 – mist over the sea* They went back into their boat and travelled on. They had many more adventures and landed on many more islands. After seven long years, they sailed into a mist. At first it was dark. After they sailed on into the darkness, the mist became bright and quiet. Nobody spoke. Slowly a shoreline appeared like a shadow. They landed from their boat. There were trees covered with fruit, lush forest, a fresh water river flowing so large and free that they couldn’t cross it. They walked about the island exploring, but however far they went, they never seemed to have explored it all, and however long they walked, it never came to be night. They whispered to one another, “This is it! The land promised to the saints!”

***Wondering Questions***

I wonder which part of this story you like best?

I wonder how St Brendan and his monks felt when they sailed into the misty darkness?

I wonder if you have ever gone on an adventure and ended up somewhere unexpected?

**Creative activity**

I have got some little boats and oars. Would you like to decorate the boat to show something of Brendan’s journey into the ocean desert? You could draw pictures or patterns, write words from the story.

(bamboo ‘boats’ and ‘oars’, bowls of Sharpies, small trays)

**Play activity**

Downstairs – find the ‘Island of Birds’ (behind the screen) and hang up a bird on a tree.

**The Gobi Sisters**

*Setting the scene: archway and tunnel, ‘oasis’ (*trees, beige cloths, blue cloth), small wicker basket and jar, cart wheel, Gobi desert poster and poster board, A3 pictures of desert on foam board, melons

*Story kit:* grass basket, Chinese travel teapot and tea bricks,Chinese Bible, 16 photos

***Story***

***Sit on the rug in the prayer space*** A desert is a very dangerous place - it may be scorching hot all day and icy cold all night. It could be a vast expanse of water, or a rocky sandy place full of grit and tiny stones and hardly any water at all. In the desert, you need to trust your guides to help you find safe shelter and safe water to drink.

*Picture 1 – Mildred portrait* This is Mildred Cable. She was born in 1878. She was a happy little girl. She had a loving family, she went to a school she loved and a church where she learnt about the Bible and the stories of Jesus. She was very, very good at playing the piano and she thought this would be her life’s work.

When Mildred was grown up, there was a meeting one evening at her church. She heard about people from England working in China to set up schools and clinics. In those days, it took nearly nine months to get from England to China and life was very different there. People travelled by mule cart or on horse-back; there were almost no cars or trains and certainly no planes. Some of the English people had to come back to England because there was fighting in China and many people had been killed. Mildred thought that they were very brave.

She wondered if she could raise money to help with the schools and clinics in China, and she began to make a plan of how she could hold piano concerts to raise money. But then the woman who was speaking at the meeting looked straight at Mildred and said, “Why don’t you come and help us?” Mildred thought to herself, “No way - I’m not going to China!”

But somehow, she couldn’t get China out of her mind. She prayed about this, and after a while she became sure that God wanted her to work in China. Her father wasn’t pleased about this plan, but he could see that she was determined, and so he helped her. Mildred went to college and learnt Chinese, and Chinese ways of doing things, and also nursing.

*Picture 2 – Chinese scene* The day came when the fighting had stopped, and Mildred could finally travel to China. She and the other workers went to a great Chinese city. Mildred began her work and she loved it!

*Picture 3 – Chinese lady* She especially loved being with the Chinese people. Yet it seemed to her that all the people she met were frightened in some way and spent a lot of time keeping the spirits happy - the spirits of their ancestors (their family who died a long time ago) or even the spirits of certain trees or mountains. They made many gifts to these spirits to make their lives happier and easier. It was difficult to do this all the time.

*Picture 4 – desert grave* Mildred began to realise just how huge China is, and she wanted to travel further into the wilderness. She went with two friends, Evangeline and Francesca. They travelled until they got to the Great Gate. They knew that, once you go through the Great Gate, you might never come back.

*Picture 5 – donkey cart* They prepared all they could, with a good strong cart and a good man to take care of the mules and camels and load all the food and water and the Bibles that they took to give to the people that they met.

*Picture 6 – man holding grass* The things they took were carried in baskets woven out of strong desert grass. They even made water bottles out of grass.

*Unpack the grass basket to show the teapot, tea brick and Chinese Bible*

*Picture 7 – Chinese boy*  When they were ready and standing by the gate to the desert, someone asked them, “Why are you going out? This is the way of the lost boys. It is very dangerous.” Mildred answered, “But that is why we are going - to find the lost boys and tell them how much God loves them.”

And so, they went out into the Gobi Desert. Are you ready to set off? ***Go through the archway to the ‘oasis’*** *(carry the grass basket with you)*

*Pictures 8 and 9 – sandy and rocky desert* The Gobi desert was a very difficult place to be in. Mostly they travelled at night, so that they did not need so much water to drink. They walked about 30 miles a night and slept under the cart during the day.

*Picture 10* – Mildred at an innIf they were lucky, they reached an inn where they could stay.

*Picture 11 – an oasis* Sometimes they found an oasis in the desert, where they could get water. It was brackish and didn’t taste very nice - but the tea made it taste a bit better!

*Picture 12 – melons* Sometimes the Chinese people gave them melons, which were deliciously refreshing to eat.

*(Flick through the pages of the Bible)* Everywhere they went they gave out Bibles in the different Chinese languages. Sometimes they used stones to spell out messages about God’s love on the sand, leaving them for people to read as they passed by. Sometimes it was very cold and even snowed. Sometimes there were gritty sandstorms.

*Picture 13 – the ‘Trio’* For many years, Mildred, Evangeline and Francesca travelled across the great Gobi desert, setting up schools, helping with medicine and nursing, and always speaking about God’s love. They especially looked out for the lost boys. When they met people in the villages, they were told, “You white people all look alike to us - we can’t tell you apart!”

*Picture 14 – the ‘Trio’ labelled* So, Mildred always wore blue, Evangeline wore grey and Francesca wore brown - that way, the people knew who was who!

*Picture 15 – the ‘Trio’ drinking tea* After many years, they came back to the UK. They travelled around and told people all about China and their travels in the desert. Do you know, one day, they came to visit some friends in Cambridge, who were also great travellers, and they had tea in a house on Granchester Road in Newnham! Mildred, Evangeline and Francesca came to tea in Newnham, after all their adventures in the deserts of China. Once, they even went to have tea with the Queen in Buckingham Palace.

*Picture 16 – the palace oasis* And, once when they were in China a warlord let them stay in his oasis palace to have a rest. But they didn’t see themselves as being special or important. They just wanted to come alongside people, and share God’s love.

***Wondering Questions***

*I wonder which part of this story is the most important bit?*

*I wonder what the people they met in the Gobi Desert thought of Mildred, Evangeline and Francesca?*

*I wonder what sort of things we can do today to help people who live in desert lands?*

Now, you have chance to choose some Chinese tea to put in a little bag to take back with you, and to have some refreshment at the oasis.

*(Offer grapes and water)*

**Creative activity**

Filling organza bags with Chinese tea

*Organza bags, bamboo bowls of tea (green, white, black, Lapsang, Oolong, Jasmine)*

**Play activity**

Making words and symbols in the ‘sand’ with small stones

*Stones, hessian cloths, wooden bowls, sand trays*

**Creative Response**

**Sand art** – foil trays, funnels, scoops, bottles/test tubes, plastic bowls, coloured sand

**Desert collage** – cardboard sheets, glue, spreaders, plates/pots, natural bits etc.

**Choosing**

Blue and green and yellow shimmer stones, lion’s fur, blue ribbon, crosses, mandala buttons, sandpaper, fish, shells, sun/moon/star stickers, flowers, leaves/branches, birds (wooden and metal), Bible charms, horse/camel/donkey charms, musical notes ribbon, Chinese calligraphy cards, bread and wine cards, smooth stones, grape charms, praying hands, crowns, angels, rope, hearts

**Ending**

**Sometimes we travel with the feet [stepping action]**

**To make a journey with the heart. [beating heart action]**

Brendan travelled across the sea

To find the true place of God’s promise.

**Sometimes we travel with the feet [stepping action]**

**To make a journey with the heart. [beating heart action]**

Mildred went through the Great Gate

Out into the desert to share God’s love.

**Sometimes we travel with the feet [stepping action]**

**To make a journey with the heart. [beating heart action]**

Mary went out into the wilderness

To find a true place to be with God.

**Sometimes we travel with the feet [stepping action]**

**To make a journey with the heart. [beating heart action]**

Sometimes we look as far as we can

To learn to see our own thoughts.

**Sometimes we travel with the feet [stepping action]**

**To make a journey with the heart. [beating heart action]**

Sometimes we listen to new sounds

To learn to hear the voice of God.

**Sometimes we travel with the feet [stepping action]**

**To make a journey with the heart. [beating heart action]**

Give the children a slice of yellow onxy to take back to hang up in the classroom window.