

# Sunday between June 19 and June 25

## **Prayer**

God of the wilderness and the well,  
you hear the cry  
that others try not to hear.

When fear rises,  
do not leave us to it.

When truth is costly,  
steady us.

When the road feels harsh  
and the future feels vague,  
keep company with us.

You are not only God of safe rooms  
and settled lives.

You are God in the desert place,  
in the family fracture,  
in the hard word,  
in the courage that does not know  
how it will manage  
but keeps going.

Teach us to trust  
that no one is outside your care.

Teach us to live with honesty,  
with tenderness,  
and with a love stronger than fear.

Through Christ, who calls us into costly life,  
we pray.

## **Held in Hard Places**

Some weeks do not offer comfort in easy forms. These readings speak of conflict, survival, courage, and belonging. They hold stories of people pushed out, prayers from the depths, hard teaching from Jesus, and Paul's insistence that new life in Christ is not a surface change but a real dying and rising. Yet even here, grace is not absent. God hears in the wilderness. God stays near in trouble. God calls people into life that is honest, brave, and deeper than fear.

### **Threads to explore**

- God hearing the cry of the pushed-aside
- Courage in the face of fear
- Costly faith and truthful living
- New life beyond old patterns

### **Context**

Genesis tells the painful story of Hagar and Ishmael being sent into the wilderness, where abandonment and desperation meet the God who hears and makes a way forward. Psalm 86 is a prayer from someone under pressure, calling on God's mercy, strength, and steadfast love. In Romans, Paul speaks of baptism as dying and rising with Christ – a profound change of belonging and identity that reshapes how life is lived. In Matthew, Jesus

prepares his disciples for opposition and misunderstanding, calling them to courage, honesty, and a love that is not ruled by fear.

## **Connections**

These readings gather around the question of what holds when life is harsh. There is vulnerability in all of them – exclusion, danger, grief, social pressure, costly discipleship – but also a fierce insistence that God’s life reaches there too. They speak of a faith that is not polite avoidance, but trust in the middle of real strain. The connection is not neatness, but depth: God notices, God stays near, God strengthens, and God calls people into a way of living that cannot be reduced to safety alone.

## **Deepening the Word**

Genesis 21 is not an easy text, and it should not be made easy. Hagar and Ishmael are cast out into danger and uncertainty, and the story refuses to hide the cruelty of that. Yet it also refuses to leave them unseen. God hears the cry of the child. God meets the desperate mother in the wilderness. That does not make the injustice good, but it does reveal something vital about God’s character: divine attention is not reserved for the secure, the central, or the protected. God meets those whom others discard, and that meeting becomes the beginning of survival and future.

Matthew 10 is equally unsentimental. Jesus does not pretend that truth, justice, and faithfulness will always be welcomed. He speaks of conflict, resistance, and cost. These are difficult verses, especially where loyalty and division are named in the same breath. But the heart of the passage is not a celebration of conflict. It is a call not to let fear decide everything. Courage, in this reading, is not aggression. It is refusing to betray what is true, even when doing so is costly.

In everyday life, these themes appear wherever people are pressured to stay quiet for the sake of comfort, appearance, or peace that is not really peace. They appear in families carrying fracture, in people excluded because of

poverty, race, disability, sexuality, gender, migration status, or other vulnerability, and in communities where telling the truth risks backlash. They also appear in the quieter work of learning a different way to live: leaving behind ways of living shaped by fear, shame, denial, or self-protection, and learning instead a deeper, freer life. Paul's language of dying and rising is not about becoming disembodied or unreal. It is about a life so reshaped by grace that old powers no longer get the final say.

Be mindful that these readings touch on rejection, family rupture, violence, and fear. They may land sharply for people with experiences of abuse, estrangement, religious harm, or coercive control. Handle Jesus' hard sayings with care, and do not use them to sanctify harm. Keep the emphasis on God's presence with those under pressure, and on discipleship as truthful, compassionate, and rooted in dignity.

## Discussion

### *Matthew 10:24–39*

Jesus speaks with unusual bluntness here. He prepares his followers for misunderstanding and pressure, and calls them not to be ruled by fear. This is not about becoming combative or careless. It is about living truthfully, even when faithfulness has a cost, and trusting that God's care is deeper than what threatens us.

### *Questions:*

- What do you find most difficult or unsettling in this passage?
- What is the difference between courage and aggression?
- Where do you notice people pressured to stay silent for the sake of appearances or comfort?
- How does the story of Hagar and Ishmael affect the way you hear these readings?

- Paul speaks of dying and rising with Christ. What old patterns or fears might that challenge in us?
- How might truthful, compassionate courage take shape this week?

## **Call to Worship**

In the wilderness, God hears.

In the pressure of life, God stays near.

In the call to courage, God does not leave us alone.

So let us worship

with honesty,

with need,

and with trust in the One

whose care reaches hard places.

## **Adoration**

Holy God,

we turn towards you

with gratitude and wonder.

You are the One who notices crying

in the wilderness

and does not turn away.

You are the God whose mercy is not fragile,

whose love is not frightened,

whose presence is not confined

to tidy lives or peaceful stories.

In Christ, truth comes among us without disguise.

Compassion speaks plainly.

Love does not flatter fear  
or bless what crushes.

And still your Spirit keeps breathing courage  
into anxious hearts,  
strength into tired people,  
and hope into places that others have written off.

So praise rises to you –  
not because life is simple,  
but because your faithfulness is deep,  
your mercy is wide,  
and your care does not fail.

## **Confession**

Holy God,  
there are things we hide.

There are truths we make too small,  
wounds we do not want to touch,  
and fears we let organise our lives.

We confess the ways  
we settle for false peace –  
peace that avoids difficulty,  
peace that leaves harm untouched,  
peace that protects us  
while others pay the cost.

We confess the old habits that keep hold of us:  
self-protection,  
resentment,  
silence,  
and the wish  
to be safe more than faithful.

Meet us there.  
 Not with condemnation,  
 but with the grace that tells the truth  
 and leads us further in.

Raise us into a deeper life.  
 Loosen fear's grip.  
 Teach us the courage  
 to love honestly.

## **Intercessions**

### *Optional response*

Hear us, God of mercy.  
**And hold us in your love.**

God who notices the wilderness cry,  
 there are cries in this world  
 that are easy to ignore  
 unless we choose to listen.

So hold those who are pushed aside –  
 people made unsafe, disbelieved,  
 priced out, driven out,  
 or left to manage alone.  
 Let protection grow around them,  
 and let justice find a way through.

Hold those whose homes or families  
 are marked by fracture, fear, or estrangement.  
 Bring wisdom where choices are hard,  
 safety where danger is real,  
 and companions for those who feel cast out.

Hold those living under pressure –  
 those who are exhausted by work,

by paperwork, by waiting,  
 by illness, by scrutiny,  
 or by having to keep proving  
 what should already be recognised.  
 Give relief, good support,  
 and people who respond with care.

Guide your church,  
 wherever it is tempted  
 to choose reputation over truth,  
 comfort over courage,  
 or niceness over justice.  
 Make your people steadfast, humble, and brave.

And receive the prayers  
 we do not know how to say fully,  
 the ones still caught in the throat,  
 the ones carried in the body,  
 the ones too raw for words.

Hear us, God of mercy.  
 And hold us in your love.

## **Thanksgiving**

For every place  
 where water appears in the desert,  
 thanks be to God.

For every time  
 someone is heard instead of dismissed,  
 thanks be to God.

For grace that does not wait  
 until we are sorted out,  
 for Christ who meets us in the real,

and for the Spirit who keeps opening life beyond fear,  
thanks be to God.

For people who tell the truth with tenderness,  
who protect people made vulnerable,  
who widen belonging,  
who keep showing up,  
who make survival a little more possible,  
thanks be to God.

For all the signs that love is still alive –  
in courage, in honesty,  
in prayer, in small acts of solidarity,  
in hope that refuses to disappear –  
thanks be to God.

Receive our gratitude,  
and keep reshaping our lives  
in care and truth.

## **Blessing**

When the road is hard,  
God is not absent.  
When truth feels costly,  
Christ stays near.  
When fear speaks loudly,  
the Spirit still breathes courage.

Go in honesty.  
Go in compassion.  
Go in the deeper life of grace.  
And trust that you are held  
by the One who receives every cry.

## Visual

- Place a simple jug or bowl beside an empty cup, as a sign of thirst, provision, and God making a way in hard places.
- Display the words: “God hears in the wilderness,” somewhere visible and plain.
- Create a small focal point with a pair of worn shoes or sandals and a cloth bag, suggesting a journey taken under pressure and the cost of discipleship.

## Creative

- **Wilderness Prayers:** Invite people to write or speak one place of difficulty or uncertainty, and hold it in prayer without trying to fix it.
- **Water in the Desert:** Offer paper drops or cards where people can name what helps life return in hard times – rest, truth, friendship, justice, safety, hope.
- **Courage Cards:** Give out small cards with words such as steady, heard, brave, held, truthful, or beloved.
- **Truth and Tenderness:** Invite people to reflect on how truthful compassion might take shape in a difficult situation, using writing, drawing, or quiet conversation.
- **Hidden Prayers:** Provide a basket or box for anonymous prayers that can remain private but still be held by the community.
- **New Life Markers:** Offer smooth stones or paper circles with the words rise, breathe, trust, or begin again as reminders of grace reshaping life.

## Meditation

*Based on Genesis 21:8–21; Romans 6:1b–11; Matthew 10:24–39*

Find a posture that your body can live with  
for a few moments.

Let your breathing be exactly as it is.  
You do not need to calm it perfectly.  
You do not need to arrive polished.

There are wilderness places in every life.

Places where someone has been sent away.  
Places where the future narrows.  
Places where fear says,  
“There will not be enough.”

Do not force an image if one does not come.  
Simply notice whether there is anywhere in you  
that feels dry, tense, or tired.

Now receive this gently:  
God receives the cry in those places too.

Not only in the confident prayer.  
Not only in the brave voice.  
God receives the cry that comes out cracked,  
angry, exhausted,  
or barely formed at all.

Stay with that a moment.

Then notice what fear tries to shape in you –  
silence,  
self-protection,

the wish to disappear,  
the urge to become distant.

And into that place  
let Christ's deeper, truer invitation come:  
do not let fear  
be your ruler.

Not because danger is unreal.  
Not because pain is small.  
But because grace  
is making another life possible.

A life that is less ruled by old reflexes.  
A life that dies to what diminishes love  
and rises towards what is honest and free.

Breathe in: "Hold me in mercy."  
Breathe out: "Lead me into life."  
*Repeat*

If that is all you can pray today,  
let it be enough.

When you are ready, return gently,  
carrying this truth:  
you are held,  
and fear is not the whole story.

## **Performance**

*A spoken piece: "Not Ruled by Fear"*

There are many ways fear tries to run a life.

Sometimes it shouts.  
Sometimes it whispers.

Sometimes it dresses itself up as wisdom,  
as caution, as respectability,  
as “keeping the peace.”

Sometimes fear says,  
Do not tell the truth.  
It will cost too much.

Sometimes it says,  
Stay where you are.  
Even if it hurts.  
At least it is familiar.

Sometimes it says,  
Do not notice that person’s pain.  
If you do, you might have to change something.

And then there is Christ –  
not making fear smaller than it is,  
but refusing to let it rule.

He speaks hard words, yes.  
But beneath them is a deeper invitation:

Do not hand your life over  
to what frightens you most.

Do not let threat become your theology.  
Do not let danger become your deepest truth.

Because God is still God  
in the wilderness.  
God is still God  
when families fracture,  
when futures wobble,  
when courage feels costly.

And grace is still grace  
 before you are ready,  
 before you are brave,  
 before you know  
 how to live this well.

So perhaps discipleship  
 is not first  
 about being fearless.

Perhaps it is this:  
 to be known by God,  
 to be held in mercy,  
 and slowly, stubbornly,  
 to become less ruled by fear  
 and more shaped by love.

## **Practice**

### *A small practice of courage*

Choose one ordinary moment each day this week that already belongs to your routine. It might be while you are at the sink, unlocking your phone, waiting for the kettle, preparing to leave, or turning out the light.

Pause for one breath.

As you breathe in, think: "Hear me, God."

As you breathe out, think: "Steady my heart."

Then notice one fear, pressure, or tension that is present today. You do not need to solve it. Simply name it honestly.

Ask yourself: What is one small way I can live from courage rather than fear today?

Keep the answer simple and realistic. It might be telling the truth kindly, asking for help, setting a boundary, checking in on someone, taking a practical step towards safety, or refusing to join in harmful talk.

At the end of the day, notice what helped you feel steadier, and place that in God's care.

## Digital

- Post a simple question: "What helps you stay truthful when fear is loud?"
- Share a text-on-image line: "God hears in the wilderness."
- Invite people to name one word they associate with courage or care.
- Post a short reflection: "Faith is not the absence of fear. It is learning how to live without the rule of fear."
- Share a community prompt: "What is one practical way to make life safer or kinder for someone this week?"

## Explore

These readings can be difficult, so it helps to keep the focus clear for people who are new to faith. They show that the Bible does not hide painful realities like rejection, fear, or conflict. But they also show a God who hears people in distress, stays near in trouble, and invites people into a deeper life than fear. It can help to say that faith is not about pretending life is easy. It is about learning that we are not abandoned, and that love can still shape how we live.

## Discover

- Genesis tells of Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, where God hears their distress and makes a way forward.
- Psalm 86 is a prayer for help, strength, and God's steady love in hard times.

- Romans speaks of dying and rising with Christ, and of belonging to a new kind of life.
- Jesus speaks honestly about fear, truth, and the cost of discipleship.
- Together, these readings show God's presence in struggle and the possibility of life beyond fear.

### **Reflect**

Many people know what it is like to feel pushed out, anxious, or unsure what comes next. These readings suggest that God meets people there. They also suggest that faith is not only comfort. It can mean learning a new way of living – one that is less controlled by fear, more rooted in truth, and more open to love.

### **Connect**

You might recognise this in everyday life when someone finds the courage to speak honestly, when a person gets support in a difficult time, or when a community chooses safety and dignity over appearances. These are signs that grace is active in the real world.

### **Think**

- What kind of fear most often tries to organise your choices?
- What might it mean to be shaped more by love than by fear?

### **Do**

Choose one small act of courage today. Tell the truth kindly, ask for support, step away from harmful talk, or do one practical thing that makes life safer for yourself or someone else. Afterwards, pause and notice what it feels like to choose love over fear.