

**2 Advent
December 9, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation;
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus;
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

The Second Sunday of Advent is when we hear the story of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus. Every Second Sunday of Advent ... year after year ... from one of the three Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke ... year after year we hear this story of John in the wilderness.

So, why the wilderness? Why such a barren and desolate setting? If you have any experience in real estate, you know the mantra: "*Location ... location ... location.*" Location is key. The place where we stand ... the terrain we occupy ... the space from which we speak ... these things matter.

I've never seen John the Baptist featured in an Advent calendar or a Christmas display, but all four Gospels place him front and center in Jesus's origin story. John's gaunt austerity is the only gateway we have to the swaddling clothes, angel's wings, and fleecy lambs we hold dear each Christmas. As baffling as it may seem, the holy drama of the season depends on the camelhair cloaked, locust-eating baptizer's opening act. So again, why the wilderness? And, what do we know about wilderness in our own lives?

Personally, I've been in a few wildernesses in my own life ... emotional, and spiritual wildernesses. When my son, Christopher ... at 12 years old ... he was horribly injured when the car he was riding in hit a pine tree at 70 miles an hour. As he lay in Intensive Care in a coma my life moved into a wilderness. He had severe head injuries, broken bones, a body cast for five months, and rehab facilities in four states. Christopher's life was in jeopardy ... and I was totally impotent to do anything about it. I thought I was supposed to be strong, yet my life was turned upside-down, and I faced a territory with no recognizable landscapes ... and no road map out. I was not sure about what the word "faith" meant any more ... I was medicated for depression ... and I lived in that wilderness for several years. The powers I had depended upon ... internally and externally ... seemed to disappear, or they just responded apathetically.

I know many of you have been in similar wildernesses ... the tragic death of a loved one ... a life-threatening illness ... a huge betrayal of trust ... living with your own or a loved one's mental illness or addiction. There are many heartbreaking experiences in our lives that send us into the wilderness. This wilderness is a territory where nothing that seems to give us life. Yet in the end ... after what seems like forever we realize that somehow we seemed to have survived, yet the life we now live now has been changed forever. But, sometimes, the life we live after the wilderness has a wholeness to it that could not have happened without our experience of being in that wasteland. That is certainly true in my own case.

So, what can we learn from John's wilderness? In this short prelude to the story of Jesus what can we see that might help us in our own wildernesses?

The reading from Luke's gospel begins by telling us ... very specifically ... when and where John the Baptist heard the word of God:

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness."

That is seven positions of wealth, power, and influence in just one sentence. Seven centers of authority, both political and religious. Seven VIPs ... Very Important People ... occupying seven Very Important Positions. But, God's word doesn't come to any of them. Who does it come to? It comes to John, son of Zechariah. And, where is John? He is in the wilderness.

Perhaps the first wilderness lesson, then, is a lesson about power and security. The Gospel highlights a startling juxtaposition between those who experience God's speaking presence, and those who don't ... between those who "hear" the "voice" of God, and those that don't. In Luke's account, emperors, governors, rulers, and high priests ... the folks who wield power, and live comfortably and securely ... don't hear God, but the recluse out in the wilderness does.

What is it about power and comfort and security that deafens us to the word of God? Maybe Tiberius, Pilate, Caiaphas, and Herod can't receive a fresh revelation from God because they all presume to hear and speak for God already. After all, they're in power ... they have a comfortable life. Doesn't that mean that they automatically embody God's will? And, if not ... well, who cares? They already have pomp, money, military, political might, and the weight of religious tradition at their disposal. Maybe they don't really need God anyhow.

And, this issue of power, and comfort, and security transcends time. Just take a look around at what is happening in politics today ... around the world. And, what about in our churches. Power, and comfort, and security deafen those with authority ... at best they respond apathetically ... at worst their selfish actions harm the most vulnerable.

However, what about in the wilderness? In the wilderness, there's no safety net. No Plan B. No savings account ... or home to retreat to ... no powerful office to hide in. In the wilderness, life is raw and risky, and our illusions of self-sufficiency fall apart fast. When we live in wilderness experiences today even our own home feels strange and foreign. We try to retreat from the world only to find out we can't retreat from ourselves. To locate ourselves at the outskirts of power and security is to confess our vulnerability in the starkest terms. In the wilderness, we have no choice but to wait and watch as if our lives depend on God showing up ... simply because our lives do depend upon God showing up.

And it's into such an environment ... an environment so far removed from power and security and comfort as to make power and security and comfort laughable ... it is into that environment that the word of God comes to John.

But, Luke goes on. Not only is the wilderness a place that exposes our need for God. It's a place that calls us to repentance. "John went into all the region around the Jordan," Luke tells us, "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Elsewhere in the Gospels, we read that crowds streamed into the wilderness to heed John's call. In other words, they left the lives they knew best, and ventured into the unknown to save their hearts and souls through repentance. Something about the wilderness brought people to their knees.

For us 21st century Christians, though, "sin" and "repentance" are loaded words we try to avoid. Many of us actively dislike the word "sin" ... I'm one of them. We associate "sin" with paralyzing guilt and eternal hellfire ... with fear and self-loathing rather than grace and mercy. Many of us also distrust the word because we've seen how easily it can be manipulated to justify one moralistic agenda over another. Just look at the churches where homosexuality is the big, bad sin ... while our rape of this planet and our systemic disregard for the poor are not. And yet, Advent begins with an honest, wilderness-style reckoning with sin.

It seems that we can't get to the manger unless we go through John the Baptist, and John is all about repentance. Is it possible that this "repentance" might become an occasion for relief? Maybe ... maybe if we can get past our baggage and follow John out into the wilderness, we will find solace in the fact that something more profound and deep is at stake in our souls than just "I've made mistakes in my life" or "I have a few issues I need to deal with."

Wo, what is sin? Growing up, I was taught that sin is "breaking God's laws" ... or "missing the mark," as an archer misses his target ... or "committing immoral acts." These definitions aren't wrong, but they assume that sin is a problem primarily because it angers God. But, God's temper is not what's at stake ... I think God is more than capable of managing her own emotions. Sin is a problem because it kills ... it kills us ... it steal life away. Why and how? Because sin is a refusal to become fully human. It's anything that interferes with the opening up of our whole hearts to God, to others, to creation, and to ourselves. Sin is estrangement, disconnection, sterility, disharmony. It's the slow accumulation of dust, choking the soul. It's the sludge that slows us down, that keeps us from living into that image of God in which we were made.

Sin is apathy ... and apathy is sinful. Sin is a frightened resistance to an engaged life. It is fear of living. Sin is the opposite of creativity ... the opposite of abundance ... the opposite of flourishing ... the opposite of trust. It is a walking death. And, it is easier to spot, name, and confess a walking death in the wilderness than it is anywhere else.

Finally, Luke suggests that the wilderness is a place where we can see the landscape whole, and participate in God's great work of leveling inequality and oppression. Quoting the prophet

Isaiah, Luke predicts a day when “every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.”

When we’re wandering in the wilderness the immense, barren landscapes of life stretches out before us in every direction. Suddenly, we feel the rough places beneath our feet. We experience what it’s like to struggle down twisty, crooked paths. We glimpse overconfidence in the mountains and desolation in the valleys, and that is when we begin to dream God’s dream of a wholly reimagined landscape for our own lives. A landscape so smooth and straight, it enables “all flesh” to see the salvation of God.

Where are you located during this Advent season? How close are you to power and security and comfort? And how open are you to risking the wilderness to hear a word from God? What might repentance look like for you, here and now? Where is God leveling the ground you stand on, and what will it take for you to participate in that uncomfortable but essential work?

Location ... location ... location. The word of the Lord came to John in the wilderness. May it come to us, too. Like John, may we become brave voices in hard places, preparing the way of the Lord. Christmas is just over a couple of weeks away. Christmas ... the Feast of the Incarnation ... Emmanuel ... God with us ... the God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus. The story of John the Baptist tells us that it just may be in the wildernesses of our lives that our hearts and souls are opened to hearing the Christmas story in a new way. The God that came alive in Jesus can come alive in us also.

Amen.