

**2 Advent**  
**December 5, 2021**

**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.

Advent is a good time to remember that the Bible we read and reverence is essentially a wilderness text. These are stories with origins in trauma, displacement, and loss. The ancient writers who penned our sacred scripture ... and the vast majority of characters who populate the pages of our Bible were not, by and large, history's winners. They were the persecuted ... the dislocated ... the enslaved ... the desperate. These people lived through periods of famine, war, plague, and natural disaster. They suffered starvation, violence, barrenness, captivity, exile, colonization, and genocide. They were, in countless ways, the wretched of the earth. Brave, lonely voices, crying in the desert.

A wilderness is literally a place with no landmarks and few resources. When we look at it metaphorically we all have known emotional and spiritual wildernesses in our lives. Loss of a loved one, diagnosis of a chronic disease, and empty bank account with mounting bills, and certainly a pandemic that leaves us with more questions than answers are all wildernesses of sorts.

However, wilderness can be a "thin place." A "thin place" ... a place where the veil between the mysteries of eternity and our present understandings are thin and porous. In the quiet of a wilderness, one can sometimes feel the presence of the spirit of the elders who encountered a vision and a hope in a wilderness, and that space then became sacred. There is something about being in a wilderness which brings us to understanding of self that we can know in no other way.

So, what did these ancient sages cry out in their wilderness? These wisdom people ... and John the Baptist was one of them ... cried their sorrow ... they also cried out in fear, horror, and pain. But, they also cried their hope ... their hope in a God who cares ... a God who rescues ... a God who gives strength ... a God who heals what is broken. Something about the wilderness experience birthed in these sages a capacity for profoundly life-changing hope ... hope beyond hope.

So perhaps it's fitting that on this second Sunday in Advent, we are invited into the wilderness to listen to just such a voice ... the voice of John the Baptist ... a voice of hope, crying out the truth of God's faithfulness in the most desolate of places.

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 haggard hardship in a barren place is the only gateway we have to the manger in an animal stall, to the swaddling clothes, angel's wings, and fleecy lambs we envision each Christmas. As baffling as it may seem, the holy drama of the season depends on the camelhair cloaked, leather-belted, locust-eating baptizer's opening act.

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.

Let me try to explain what the author of Luke's gospel is trying to say between the lines. If I were to paraphrase this using today's set of characters it might sound like this ...

*In the first year of President Biden's presidency, when Rod DeSantis was Governor of Florida, and Greg Abbott was Governor of Texas, and Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk were competing to be the wealthiest person of earth, and Francis was Pope of the Catholic Church, and John Howard was Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Florida, the word of God came to Charlie, a Black transgender person living in his own personal wilderness.*

Seven positions of wealth, power, and influence in just one sentence. Seven centers of authority ... financial, 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? The one on the margin ... the one in their own 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 lone outsider 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 ... that is the point of my paraphrase of Luke's gospel. Just take a look around at what is happening in politics today ... around the world. And, what about in our churches. What about our economy? 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 ... no 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. Think of those with whom we share a meal at Dining With Dignity, or the people having to go to the Ecumenical Food Pantry for the first time, or the people displaced in their homeland of Afghanistan and become refugees in our country, or those thrown into a wilderness because of COVID.

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.

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."

We will hear this theme again next week when Mary sings her song about the lowly being strong, and the rich being sent away empty.

You see, unless we're in the wilderness, it's hard to see our own privilege, and even harder to imagine giving it up. No one standing on a mountaintop wants the mountain flattened. But when we're wandering in the wilderness, and immense, barren landscapes stretch out before

us in every direction, we're able to see what privileged locations often obscure. Suddenly, we feel the rough places beneath our feet. We experience what it's like to struggle down twisty, crooked paths. We glimpse arrogance in the mountains and desolation in the valleys, and we begin to dream God's dream of a wholly reimagined landscape. A landscape where the valleys of death are filled, and the mountains of oppression are flattened. 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 in your own life? And how open are you to entering a wilderness to hear a word from God? Where is God leveling the ground you stand on, and what will it take for you to participate in that uncomfortable but essential work?

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 ... brave voices against the power of our own personal past that seems to control our lives. Brave voice 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.