

“In the Wilderness there is Light”

Prayer: *Lord, that we are alive, that food is delicious to the taste, that the ground is firm beneath our tread, that rest can compensate for toil, that the Earth is fair and all her children blessed, your name be praised. We thank you for friends who care, for ways that open when every door seems shut, for the reality of forgiveness—human and divine. ... We thank you for yourself—ground and source of every good—and especially for your love, that no resistance can diminish, and no need exhaust. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray, Amen.* (see Ernest T. Campbell, “Advent” from *Where Cross the Crowded Ways: Prayers of a City Pastor*)

When we read the texts for today aloud, like we did in the lighting of the Advent Wreath and our Gospel, a key word often jumps out at us with unusual magnitude. That key word I want us to think about is “wilderness.”

Wilderness means “an uncultivated, uninhabited region.” We can think about Alaska or some unexplored place out in the Arizona desert. Those pictures that have come to us from the desert have been awesome in their vision of wilderness. Mile after mile of sand and little vegetation is etched in our minds. The sand and wind, the dryness with no habitation, and as far as one can see ... there is nothing. That’s wilderness ... the wild and threatening part of creation!

But there is another use for the word “wilderness”. It is the human wilderness of confusion, lostness, and being overwhelmed by life. It is that region of a person’s life that is so scary and threatening. That is the wilderness I want you to be thinking about today ... because you have been there. Wilderness is a part of living as an aging person struggles in the pain, uncertainty, and the confusing puzzle that life can become. Our Biblical accounts this morning are both set in wilderness experiences.

The prophet Isaiah came to the people of Israel during the time of exile when everyone and everything was lost. The lessons remind us that God is built for comfort, not for speed. God is a God of comfort and a God of hope and light who rarely does anything at a sprinter’s pace. God is a God of consolation and of restoration. God is a God committed to our salvation, the salvation of the world, and it takes time and patience.

The Babylonians had destroyed their country and their families. With the exception of the few remaining people who survived in exile, literally everything was wasted. And there had developed a wilderness in the people’s relationship with God. They thought that God had abandoned them and all was lost.

The same was true for the world into which Jesus came. The religious leaders had truly lost their way to God. Their faith had been capsulated into a series of thoroughly distorted laws. Rebellion from the essentials of the faith was rampant.

You and I know about wilderness experiences in people’s lives. We see the pictures of children crying and scraping the empty bowl in Third World countries ... or sometimes in the next community. We have seen people in long lines for food at the local food banks. In a few days we will be seeing people lined up at various service agencies waiting for a few gifts and a taste of Christmas. Or we may have lived through the pain and deadly journey of the alcoholic.

We may have experienced the confusion of a friend who is mentally ill. We may have lived through the torturing disappointment of family conflict with all its anger and unintended hatred. The economic downturn of the past five years has been devastating and we have family members not knowing if there will be a job next week or at what salary level. Or maybe still, it is the experience of threatening health ... or even death itself.

Yes, we have all been there ... and ***In The Wilderness there is Light.***

Today we have Mark's story about John the Baptist. There is a wilderness around the Dead Sea. Beyond the ancient ruins and the city of Jericho are the limestone cliffs and caves that were the hiding place of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The temperature threatens to make Arizona summers seem cool. Yet people have long lived and worked there.

Archaeologists report that the radical religious group known as the Essenes lived in this area 2000 years ago. Their dietary rules were strict even by orthodox Jewish standards. They preached a message of repentance and baptism. This curious and strange fellow described by Mark as John, the baptizer, was probably an Essene.

John the Baptist came and made the connection with Isaiah: "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' "*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" (Mark 1:2-5)

John came to sound the alarm. He proclaimed a sense of hope into the wilderness of his day. Despite his scary looks and strange style, the messenger was not meant to terrorize the people ... but rather, he came to help people to be ready for the one who was to come after him. "*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*" (Mark 1:7-8)

The late Clarence Jordan, once described John the Baptist as "God's bulldozer" in the wilderness. John's job was to make things ready with a message of repentance for the "real highway builder" Jesus Christ, who was coming. He had to bulldoze into people's lives to get them prepared to receive the Good News of Jesus Christ. He had bulldozed King Herod along the way ... and eventually lost his life.

We hear John with that same message today. John's word comes to us like a "bulldozer, seeking to level the hills, build up the valleys, bridge the rivers ... make the highway to our hearts as straight as possible." The missive directs us to clear out the obstacles that block us from becoming true and faithful believers. Move aside the commitments that seem so important and yet reflect only things that are so temporary. Can we not see the wilderness in our lives for what it is? That threatening and lost region of our lives that is filled with confusion and despair ... yes, ***Into The Wilderness there is Light.***

Hear and see the light that is coming! Here is a new way. There is hope coming. Even in our lives ... ***In The Wilderness there is Light.***

God's word proclaimed the coming of Christ as God's chosen Messiah. In Christ's coming there is hope that can far surpass any wilderness experience in life. To the wilderness of the Hebrews in exile the light came ... "... *comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*" (Isaiah

40:1-2) To the wilderness of the first century spiritual distortions, John came and said that the Messiah is coming.

The message is still the same today: ***In The Wilderness there is Light.*** Think of this message of John and its use of the highway metaphor. The engineers plan a road so that it follows the highest point of the valley and crosses at the lowest pass in the mountain. We now have the extra lane on the right going up a long steep grade for slower vehicles. This third lane is an accommodation for the slow moving trucks and the small 4-cylinder cars, like ours. Our message of light says to us that God is that third lane for those needing rest, comfort, support, and love.

God is there in our lives when we need that sustaining friend. God is there in those wilderness experiences and we need to listen for that hopeful word. God is there understanding, supporting, forgiving, and loving us. God comes to us in Christ with hope! There is hope and light for the hungry children of our world and our city with the outpouring of food from people like you and me. There is hope and light for the alcoholic because the disease can be turned around. There is hope and light for those who are mentally ill through the gifts of drugs and experienced therapy. There is hope and light through the skills of doctors, the patience of family, ... and the healing power of time when a loved one becomes ill or even dies. There is hope and light for people caught up in the economic crunches of our day as our nation's priorities are re-established.

In The Wilderness there is Light.

Into my wilderness and into your wilderness comes hope and light! There is hope for our lostness in those wild and threatening areas of life. There is hope and light as we hear again "For unto us, a child is born" The gift of God in Jesus the Christ brings light to all.

On this second Sunday of Advent, as we focus on the coming of God to us in Jesus Christ, our texts remind us that God does not abandon us in the wildernesses of life. God goes with us filling in the ravines and chasms, leveling the towering cliffs, making a holy highway that leads to new life.

In those moments when we feel we simply cannot take another step, God lifts us up in strong arms, and like a shepherd, carries us. It does not happen in a moment, or even days or weeks. God is built for comfort, not for speed. The road to hope and light is not a hundred yard dash, ... it is a long distance run, with highs and lows, with twists and turns.

Today, God speaks his word of light, calling you and me to receive hope that will enable us to go the distance. The message is ***In The Wilderness there is Light.***

Scriptures: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8