

Where the Wild Things Are

COMMUNION

December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40: 1-11

¹ Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1: 1-8

¹ The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, "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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

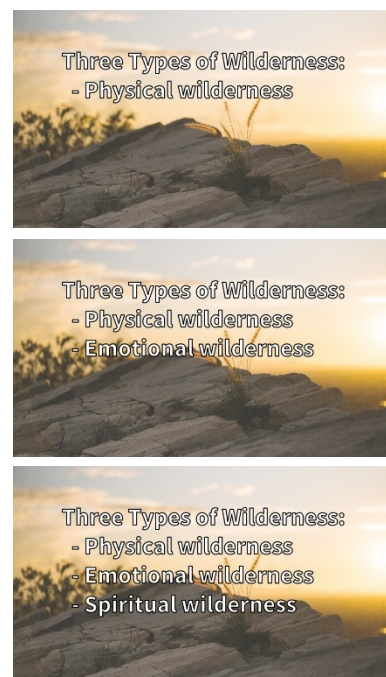


We began Advent last week with the passage from Mark 13 that detailed the second coming of Jesus and the events leading up to it. With this came the call to be

alert, to stay awake, to be prepared for the end of the world as we know it. This morning, we go back to the beginning of the story and even beyond that. In the book of Isaiah, we hear the prophet speaking of the one who will come in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. Then, at the beginning of Mark's gospel, we hear about the wild thing – the one who came to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

Last Sunday I spoke of the second coming of Jesus, an event that has many unknowns. We do not know the time or date. We do not know exactly how it will unfold. We do know that if we have claimed Jesus as our Lord and Savior, on that day, he will claim us as his own. In today's passages, the scene is the wilderness. In a similar way, the wilderness is also a place of unknowns. We do not always know who or what lurks in the wilderness. Last week I spoke of being prepared, of staying alert, of being awake. These traits very much apply our time in the wilderness as well. Being prepared and staying alert and being awake are very much a part of John's calls to a baptism of repentance. As we prepare to delve into the wilderness today, let us begin with a word of prayer...

As we begin, let us first think about the wilderness. The wilderness can be a scary place. When we wander out in the wilderness, it can lead to fear and into the unknown. By 'wilderness', there are at least three ways that we can experience the wilderness. In each case, there are scary things about being in the wilderness. In each case, there are scary things – wild things – that we encounter in the wilderness. First, there is the physical wilderness – where you end up when you walk to the western end of Main Street here in Piedmont. If you wander afar, you can find yourself in the middle of nowhere, in a place that feels desolate and remote, empty. Second, there is the emotional wilderness. In this wilderness we feel emotionally lost or dry, we feel like nothing is working, we feel like nothing can be done about our situation. Third, there is the spiritual wilderness.



Sometimes we enter this wilderness willingly – of our own accord. We choose to sin, to become separated from God and from our brothers and sisters in Christ. Here we wrestle with our soul, with our faith. Here we feel alone because here we struggle with fear and the unknown because we look at our sin. This is the place that the Jews stepped into when they came out to see John the Baptist. And some of the time, life places us in the wilderness. Death or loss or unwanted change of another sort makes us ask, “Where is God in the midst of all of this”?

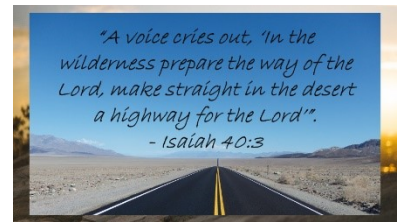


We do not like the wilderness much because that is where the wild things are. Being in the wilderness is what the Israelites felt as Isaiah ministered to them. For

years before, the Israelites had turned from God, ignoring the warnings and calls of the prophets, continuing in their sinful, selfish ways. For years the prophets warned that something bad would happen if they did not repent. Finally, that something bad happened as the Babylonians invaded, conquering the Israelites, destroying Jerusalem and the temple. Then they marched the Israelites off into exile, away from the land they knew and loved. In exile, the Israelites felt like they were living in the wilderness – in a land of foreign gods and unknown customs. There, in Babylon, they turned away from God and found themselves truly living in the wilderness. Yet God remained faithful – that was the message to us last week, right? God continued to call the Israelites back, continued to preserve a remnant, continued to speak through the prophets. Even though many of the exiles became comfortable in Babylon – marrying the locals, building homes, starting businesses, raising families – God wanted to bring them back home, to the land where they belonged.

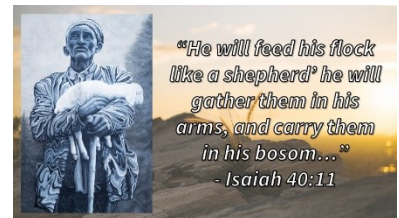
In the midst of the scary, unknown, unfamiliar wilderness, God came and spoke words of hope and comfort. Turn with me to Isaiah 40 as we hear the words of the prophet as a voice cries out.

Isaiah 40 opens with words of comfort. Through Isaiah, God tells Israel that she has *"served her term... her penalty is paid"*. Continuing on, in verse three we read, *"A voice cries out, 'In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord'"*. Isaiah goes on to describe how the way will be made: valleys will be



lifted up and mountains and hills laid low. Uneven ground will become level and the rough places a smooth plain. There will be no barriers for those seeking to draw near to the Lord. In this way, *"the glory of the Lord will be revealed"*. Our passage from Isaiah 40 closes with these familiar words, with these words that draw us into the reason for the season, so to speak. In

verse eleven we read, *"He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom..."*. Turn with me to Mark 1 to hear



the story of how God prepared a way for the one who would feed his flock like a shepherd.



While the Israelites were back home, much of life felt like life in the wilderness. There was once again a foreign power ruling over them, enforcing high taxes

and pushing the worship of many different gods and the emperor. The Jews felt desperate, out of control; they were living in a time of oppression and violence.

This is Mark's audience. He begins the good news of Jesus Christ with a word from the prophet Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet: *"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"*. He continues, paraphrasing from the prophet Isaiah, saying, *"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight"*.

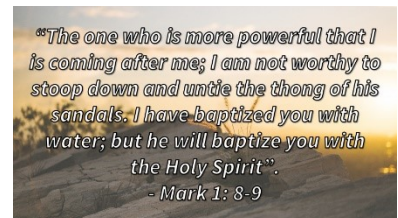
Mark is connecting the Old Testament prophets to Jesus because he is writing to a Jewish audience, a people desperate for hope, desperate for a Messiah. In verse four we read, *"John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"*. John came to call the people back into a right relationship with God. His words touched the longings of their hearts. John's words cut straight to the path of the Lord. This path would lead the Jews out of the wilderness. In many ways, John called the Jews to what Jesus calls us to today the communion table. He offered the Jews a baptism of repentance. Baptism or washing in the waters was a cleansing act for the Jews. This concept closely tied to the laws of ritual washing runs throughout the Old Testament. And John drew a crowd.

Mark reports, *"people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him"*. They came in droves to be made right again with God. Confessing their sins to John, the people were then baptized in the Jordan River. Emerging, they promised repentance – to turn from their sin and to then commit to living faithfully, to leading a life without sin. This morning we too participate in an act of cleansing as we celebrate in Holy Communion – the confession of sins, the promise of repentance, the washing away of our sins by

the blood of the lamb. Baptism and communion – they are both freeing acts. They draw us out of the wilderness, away from the place where the wild things are, and into the care of the good shepherd. There we are freed from the powers of this world, freed from the chains of sin and death.

In some ways, John himself represented the wilderness. He dressed and acted like one from the wilderness – *"clothed with camel's hair... he ate locusts and wild honey"*. To the religious leaders, who also came out to see just what was going on, John the Baptist was a bit of a wild thing. John had no formal training; he held no rabbi tag. He was just out there in the wilderness, preaching the word of God, inviting people back onto the straight path of living in alignment with God's will and God's way. And like Isaiah and most of the other prophets, John also issued a warning of sorts to the religious leaders, a word of hope to those seeking to come in out of the wilderness.

In verses seven and eight John proclaims, *"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". The story of John baptizing in the wilderness is just the beginning of the story of Jesus Christ, Messiah of the world. He is just the one sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

In the words of Isaiah and in the words of Mark's gospel, we see once again that God is often found in the most unexpected of places. Today, this morning, God is out there in the wilderness. In whatever wilderness you find yourself in – whether physical, emotional, or spiritual – God is there with you. Like the Israelites in Isaiah's day and the Jews of Mark's day, even when we fall to temptation and when we live in our sin, God still works to clear a way for us to come back home. God does not ever give up on us because God too has been in the wilderness. We recall that Jesus' ministry was initially forged in the wilderness when he faced down Satan's temptations. Christ too had his wilderness experience. Because of that, he can relate to the times that we struggle with the wilderness. Because of that, Jesus intercedes for us when we find ourselves in the wilderness.

Advent is a season that invites us to times of quiet, of seeking God, of searching. In these days of Advent, these days of anticipation and expectation, we see that our hearts too need to be made straight, to be brought in from the wilderness, to turn from the wild things that we struggle with. The questions to ponder today as we enter into a time of Holy Communion are these: How do we clear a path to God? What are the obstacles that need to be laid low in our lives? As we prepare to enter into Holy Communion, I invite you to consider these questions as we turn to the Lord our God in our prayers of confession.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. What do you need to do to clear a path to God? What are the obstacles that you need to lay aside to grow closer to God?
- 2) *Pray*. Psalm 139:23 reads, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts*". May that be our prayer each day this week.
- 3) *Study*. Read John 1: 19-28. John is very humble and understand his role in relation to Jesus. How could your life point more towards Jesus as Lord?