

## There's a Voice in the Wilderness Crying

### Sermon for Advent 2, December 6, 2020

*Readings:* Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

*Sermon text:* The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,"

Last Wednesday, Zoe and I hiked up to the cell tower above Red Wing fields on Rt 82 south of here. At the top there is clearing and picnic bench. The view looks south and east—I can see the Kasin's house on the far hill. I can also see the next cell tower many miles away on the next highest point; modern day signal towers along the great wall, defining the horizon.

I took a second to imagine the dense network of invisible signals crossing and filling space; picked up on phones laptops, other devices; like the pattern of trails of shipping and flights around the world, dense around the luminous cities, still an intricate weave across the great plains and steppes and jungles. I imagined the prayers of all people ascending to God, criss-crossing, weaving, the pain, the hope, the longing.

But I could only actually hear the rustle of the last remaining oak leaves rustling in the breeze; and saw only quilted blanket of darkening clouds with a streak of orange along the western horizon as the sun sets early in the afternoon

I was also thinking about Tuesday evening's Embracing Evangelism session and the idea of story sharing—with a special intention to listen and name and celebrate what is holy in the story—where God's presence (like a band of glory) peeks out. The course encourages us to practice generous listening, vulnerable sharing, mutual connection and deepening relationship—this is what Episcopal Evangelism is (not preachy or pushy church marketing). But it begins with listening.

Do you hear it? The voice crying out in the wilderness?

The question presumes the listener is in the wilderness, a wilderness that is trackless desert, or dense forest with twisting paths, leading, it seems,

nowhere. Or nowhere good or no place healthy, no place of rest, no source of joy.

In scripture wilderness is a state of soul as much as a kind of place. Perhaps a desert, such as the desert the ascetic lived in, in caves by the Dead Sea; perhaps the wilderness the people wandered through, a generation long, looking for the promised land, perhaps the inhabited villages of Judea and the capital city of Jerusalem, for people there heard the call too. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

Perhaps it is modern day America, this interconnected everywhere and nowhere where no voice is so distant it cannot be heard if once it makes onto the internet. We live in a blanketing cloud. But so many voices flood the air it becomes itself a vast wilderness in which a listener or seeker can wander, asking which is the voice that leads me home, which is the word that will will save, how can I reach what I long for, which path do I take?

Are you wandering in the wilderness now? It is an unsettled, disoriented state of mind and body so many are in, heightened and brought to an anxious and exhausting edge by the pandemic. A state of mind and body that feels so far from rest and deep relaxation, from centeredness and peace. We are far from from our home in that beloved community God made us for and for which we long and look for. But as we look we find instead anger and resentment among the people of this country, in which divisions and differences are heightened and sharpened to heresies and enemies. A state of exhaustion and fear as an invisible virus flies through the air, borne it may be by our own family, putting at risk not only the elders but the children whose lives are marked forever into a before covid and after. And it is a state of disquiet in our souls, as the former ways and customs of church and state, of our institutions and communities, fall into suspicion of hypocrisy and corruption or worse, irrelevance and false teaching, and we look for teachers and gurus on the that ocean of media whose waves wash us here and there, sometimes making us feel as if we have caught the wave and other times that we are breaking on the rocks.

It is wilderness few can navigate alone. And yet so many feel alone. Isolated, Silently crying inside. Longing for connection. Longing for truth. Longing for rest. Longing, may I say, for God.

There's a voice in the wilderness crying prepare the way of the Lord. Isaiah prophesied in exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC, that comfort would come, that will be a way home, that the time of wandering in the wilderness would one day end. Many years later, around 30 AD, many thought his prophecy pointed to John the Baptist. John was called the Baptist for the simple reason that he seems to have taken the Jewish ritual of cleansing baths and brought it to a new place, a new intensity and a new purpose. A new place, the thick wilderness along the banks of the Jordan River. A new intensity: complete immersion in this wild river, not just a ritual bath at home,. And a new purpose, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Sin became not only the washing off of having touched something unclean, or having emerged from one's menstrual cycle if a woman,. But the outward symbol of an inner turn, a metanoia or conversion of heart and mind. That's what repentance is. Turning from going the wrong way. Stopping the digging of ever deeper hole going nowhere. Admitting, finally, that one is helpless in the wilderness alone. Admitting finally that I am lost, unable to find my way home. That I am alone. That I have brought myself here. That I need to change direction. That I need help. That I need, as they say in AA, a higher power.

The wilderness is none other than a world without God, in which people are asked to find a way for themselves. The act of repentance is none other than an admission that this cannot be done. That we have tried and failed. Every attempt—and we have made so many—seems to lead into a further thicket, and the same unsettled sense of emptiness and longing. And so you finally come to speak the word in your heart, God, Lord, Jesus. help me find my way home.

To turn is to begin to listen, to begin to seek. We are always beginning again, for we always turn back to self and need to repent again and again. That's why we confess every week. Some of us every day. But the point is

not to wallow in weakness. It is to find the way home, to peace and power and joy.

So you turn because or hoping to hear the voice of one crying in the wilderness. A voice that you can follow. It speaks of a first step, of preparing the way. It is not itself the way, it is not itself the baptism of fire. We are not ready immediately to go from wilderness to purifying fire. It is best to get to the water first. And that is what repentance is. A letting go of self and an unburdening, a confession of dependence, a preparation to walk in the way of life.

And this is what the season of Advent is about, a season of preparation. We talked last week about planting seeds of new life, the metaphor of new birth, and the season of pregnancy. We are right to say we are expecting.

The word of God is what you are hearing when you hear that voice in the wilderness. Like the seeds scattered on the path, or in the wilderness; God is profligate. Seeds you can nurture in your heart through prayer and study. Seeds of the Spirit growing even now.

Henry Thoreau once wrote, that you does not expect to see life emerge where are no seeds, but if he finds a seed, he prepared to expect wonders.

Listen to the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Expect wonders.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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