

Pastor Joe Polzin
Mark 1:1-8
“In the Wilderness”
Year B – Second Sunday in Advent
December 6, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

In Scripture, the word “wilderness” comes up hundreds of times. It was considered a very physically and spiritually significant place for God’s people. Literally, it referred to the place outside the cities, outside the land of Israel, on the other side of the life-giving waters of the Jordan River. It’s where Israel wandered for forty years as God led them from slavery to freedom. It’s where prophets were driven in times of danger and isolation. It’s where Israel ended up in exile and captivity. And it’s where Christ himself would go to be tempted by Satan.

More than anything else, the wilderness throughout the Bible is the place *through* which you want to journey, but not the place *in* which you want to live. It is dangerous, wild, and inhospitable to life. You cannot make a home there. The things you need and want are not available. It is the place that is far beyond your control, where wild animals, demons, and death seem to always be close at hand.

It is significant, then, that on this Second Sunday in Advent, we hear not only a voice, but a voice that is calling out *in the wilderness*. And it says, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Mark 1:3; Isaiah 40:3). And immediately after our Gospel-writer, Mark, recounts the words of Isaiah, who prophesied that the Lord’s messenger would cry out in the wilderness, he then says, “John appeared, baptizing *in the wilderness* and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4).

John *was* that voice foretold. He *was* the Lord’s messenger. John was rough and tough and more than a little strange. Camel hair clothes and a leather belt and a diet of locusts and wild honey. In other words, John did not make his home in the city or the suburbs, and he certainly didn’t wear soft clothes and reside in a palace. John made his home in the wilderness. And from the dangers and inhospitalities of that wilderness, John had one job: to prepare people for and point people toward the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ. And that’s what he did.

In our lives today, just as the people of Israel often found themselves in the middle of the wilderness, we too often find ourselves traversing through it. In fact, I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that we are in a wilderness right now, both physically and spiritually.

This pandemic has highlighted that we are not as physically safe as we like to think. We liked our nice, comfortable lives prior to COVID, but the reality was that we weren’t any safer than we are now. Modern 21st-century Americans like to think we’re invincible from things like plagues, or tragedy, or danger, or death, but the truth is we aren’t. We often downplay those things or overlook them so we can go on pretending like we’re invincible.

But as smart as we may think we are, we are still mortal. And we aren’t as in control of our lives, or our safety for that matter, as we so often pretend to be. We were and still are in a physical wilderness. Of course, it’s not only the pandemic that shows us this. That’s just what life is in this fallen creation. This life is not ideal, no matter how desperately we want it to be. We are not free from pain, or sorrow, or sin, or death.

And what’s more, our wilderness in life is not only physical. In fact, I would say that our wilderness in life is not even *primarily* physical. We find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness. And

we can have discussions about how our secular culture is driving away spirituality and faith in America, and that certainly leads more and more people in this country into a spiritual wilderness. But truth be told, this is not a new problem. Ever since Adam and Eve ate of the fruit in the Garden, humankind has been in a spiritual wilderness. We were literally and figuratively exiled into the wilderness. The wilderness of our own sin.

And like we discussed last week, we need not look any further than ourselves to find that sin and our sinful nature that leaves us in that wild, inhospitable, and dangerous place. That's what sin does to us. And we are responsible for it. We sin, we rebel against God, and we fail to see how our thoughts, words, and deeds drive us further away from the good God has provided for us, and instead drive us even further into the wilderness. Without God we are lost. We are in danger. We are worse than dead because of our sin.

But you see, today, this Second Sunday in Advent, what Mark reminds us is that there is still a voice calling from the wilderness, telling us that God doesn't leave us for dead. In fact, neither does God beckon us from the comforts of his royal palace, or from the city, or from the suburbs. No, by sending John into the wilderness as the one who prepared the way of the Lord, God shows us that he is the God who marches right into the wilderness himself, bulldozing the hills and filling the valleys of our lives, in order to save us.

You see, God didn't abandon Adam and Eve in the wilderness. He provided for them and made his presence known among them. God didn't abandon the Israelites in the wilderness. He provided for them and made his presence known among them. He didn't abandon the prophets like Elijah in the wilderness. He provided for them and made his presence known among them. And what John the Baptist was telling the people of Israel in his day was that God hadn't abandoned them, either. And he was about to make his presence known among them in a brand new way.

John's job was to point people to Jesus, and he did. The Savior arrived. In less than three weeks from today, we will be celebrating the most significant way God chose to act in the history of his people being in the wilderness. God provided for us and made his presence known among us, God in human flesh, who took all the dangers of both body and soul, facing the enemies we would otherwise be lost to—our sin and the devil and death itself—and he marched straight into the wilderness that we could not find our way out of, and he paved for us a straight path.

It's a path that takes us to his cross, where we see all of our sins forgiven. And it's a path that takes us to his empty grave, where we see death left behind and powerless. And it's a path that leads us to the hill outside of Jerusalem, where we see Christ ascend into heaven and promise that he will return again. Christ didn't simply encourage us to find ourselves a way out of the wilderness of this life. Christ came into the wilderness to rescue us and to carry us through it.

That's why John is the voice calling out from the wilderness. That's why he made his home there. To prepare God's people who also were in a wilderness for what was about to happen. And that's why it's so important this Advent, maybe even more important than in years past, that we once again hear that voice calling us.

The voice that is crying out, not from some place of safety far away, but rather a voice heard right here alongside us, with us, and for us, here in the wilderness of life. A voice that is pointing us to Jesus Christ, who has forgiven the sins of the world. A voice that shows us the path that Jesus has prepared for us. The path which leads us to only one place: the day of the

resurrection and our eternal life with him. The day when there will be no more wilderness, but only a perfect and restored creation.

Until that day, realize that Christ is present with you in the wilderness, providing you all you need for this journey. His Baptism safeguards you. His absolution forgives you your sins. His Word strengthens you. His body and blood nourish you. His Spirit dwells within you. You are journeying through this dangerous wilderness of both body and soul, but Christ has made the path straight to lead you and all his saints out of the wilderness and into his Promised Land. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**