

## Wilderness Words

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent

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*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor 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 son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" Luke 3:1-6*

John is one of the more interesting characters in scripture. He gets a lot of airtime throughout our lectionary. We hear parts of his story in Advent, Epiphany, Lent, and Pentecost. His life is not one we would likely choose. The life of a prophet is a hard one, and yet, we are all called to this life at times. Being a prophet seems to flow out of being a faithful disciple. Disciples and prophets alike proclaim good news, though it does not always sound like good news at first.

Speaking the truth of good news from God, the truth of God's kingdom, can be risky. It usually means confronting the worldly powers that be, the status quo. It often leads to a time in the wilderness, or wearing uncomfortable clothing like camel hair, or strange diets that include grilled locusts with honey. All of John's peculiarities are not mentioned in Luke's gospel, but we've heard them many times.

What Luke does mention is what is going on in the world at the advent of John the Prophet. And what he does first is list the political and the religious powers. Lots of us say we don't want to hear about politics in church, but scripture is filled with politics and God is very interested in politics.

With that in mind it may be helpful to define politics. It comes from the Greek work "politika" which comes from the word for city, "polis". Originally it referred to the affairs of the cities. It is the set of activities that are associated with making decisions in groups, or other forms of power relations between individuals, such as the distribution of resources or status. Luke gives us the whole list of VIP's in the political and religious circles - the emperor, the governor, regional rulers, and high priests. They were the ones making all the decisions for the people.

When the decisions were not being made with the best intention, when resources were not being distributed righteously, God got into the politics, and God did this by sending word to the prophets of the day. And the prophets were not always the people with any political or religious power. The word did not always come from the cities either. It came from the outskirts, the margins, and often the wilderness.

In our text on this Second Sunday of Advent, the word of God did not come to any of those powerful political and religious leaders Luke mentions. No, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. John was not in a business meeting, not on vacation, not at a party, not on his cell phone or watching TV. John was in the wilderness.

According to Luke, John spent most of his life in the wilderness. In the Hebrew scriptures, wilderness usually referred to the area between Egypt and the Promised Land where the children of Israel wandered with Moses, trying to understand the responsibility of being God's chosen people. In the New Testament, wilderness referred to a narrow strip of desert to the east of the Jordan River. And it was to this wilderness that both John

and Jesus went to be alone with God. It was here where they wrestled with their demons, with things done and left undone. It was here that they became clear about responding to God's call and their part in God's mission.

Moses, the children of Israel, John, and even Jesus spent time in the wilderness. But what about us? Where is our wilderness? Where is the place where we wrestle with our demons and where God draws near to us and helps us discover our call and mission? If we always avoid the wilderness, which may be as near to us as a daily time of silence in God's presence, we risk not hearing what God longs to reveal to us.

Most everyone would say there is nothing comfortable about being in the wilderness, so if we find ourselves uncomfortable, we might want to consider that we could be in a wilderness, and that we are hearing a word from God. Perhaps we are being called to some construction work, some road building. And, strangely enough, maybe the best place to find the equipment necessary for road building is in the wilderness.

John, son of Zechariah, knew all about the wilderness and came out of it to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, the coming of the Messiah, and the need for the people to prepare the way. He knew from experience the uncomfortable difficulty of being in the wilderness, and of the need for repentance, but he also knew the certainty of forgiveness. Using the Prophet Isaiah's imagery of road building, he helped the people understand that road building is not easy nor can one person do it alone, but that it takes everyone working together.

The people who streamed out into the wilderness to hear John also heard the words of Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" Today the word of God continues to come to us, and not always through the powerful, or the political and religious leaders, but to each of us, right where we are.

No matter what wilderness we are journeying through, we can be truth-tellers and prophets to one another, helping one another get through the crooked paths, deep valleys, and high mountains. Together we build the road, we prepare the way of the Lord and make the rough ways smooth so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

The good news is that God has drawn near to bring comfort and to help us with the road building ahead; to help us discover our call and mission, as individuals and as followers of Jesus at Christ and Grace. When we hear the call, and then take action, we too become God's prophets in this world.

There will be times of wilderness for us, as individuals, and as a community. And because our time is not God's time, we won't always know *when* our wilderness times will end. And maybe that's the point. Because when we are always watching the clock and the calendar, we miss what is going on around us in the moment. God draws near, and we have missed it.

Avoiding the wilderness by returning to the past, or moving too quickly to the future, can cause us to miss what God has for us in the moment. But the good news is that God keeps drawing near, because that is what the graciousness of Yahweh is all about. Advent is a time when we are reminded of that graciousness and are encouraged to pay attention and to watch for God's nearness.

Amen.