

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Second Sunday in Advent - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85:1-2; 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

12/10/17

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark,

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."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

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

The Wilderness

Have you ever been lost? I'm not talking about driving around on vacation lost, I'm talking full blown lost in the woods or the desert. According to a report that covered search and rescue operations in national parks from 1992-2007 almost 80,000 operations took place. It averaged out to a little over 10 search and rescue missions a day.¹

I've had only one little brush with being lost in the woods. It was in a giant valley so it wasn't that scary; we just went down hill and then back out the way we came in. I don't hike a lot, I wish I did more, so I haven't had many chances to be lost. But I have heard the stories of what it's like getting lost, and of what you should do if you end up lost. They tell you to do things like be prepared, tell people where you're going and take the right gear, as if you could somehow control all the variables. If we could, we wouldn't be lost in the first place! They also give that classic line: stay calm. As if we intentionally decide to go crazy in stressful situations. Let me tell you, I start to panic when my phone hits 25% battery and I'm not near a charger, let alone lost in the woods.

But in our first reading from the prophet Isaiah and the Gospel lesson from Mark, we find ourselves called out into the wilderness. I used to think that the wilderness was the desert. The words get used together sometimes, but this is completely wrong. In the Old Testament we find

¹<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/outposts/2009/10/searchandrescue-operations-in-national-parks-numerous-costly-but-effective.html>

eight different words used for wilderness! I would tell you what they are, but my Hebrew is a little rusty. The New Testament only has one Greek word for wilderness, which I can pronounce, it's called *erēmos*.

And according to scholars: *“Wilderness denotes a range of landscapes, from open plains and rugged mountains offering seasonal pasturage, to scrub or nearly barren desert, to scorched toxic land incapable of supporting vegetation. The term typically refers to unsettled and uncultivated land, the natural habitation of wild animals but not of humans, a place through which shepherds... pass following pasturage and travelers hasten to safer havens.”*²

So it's not the type of place you seemed to want to spend any time. And strangely, it's where John the Baptist seems to live. He appears in the wilderness, calling people to a baptism of repentance, to atone for what they've done, all the while informing the crowds that someone far greater is coming after him, someone for whom he's not even worthy enough to perform what was expected of a slave. He Comes...

Now scholars have spent a great deal of time discussing the finer points of what the Gospel writer means by John's actions in verse 4: *“preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*³ But for our use we'll keep it simple and highlight one interesting detail. Repentance seems to be a critical component of this unit. And one commentator writes the following: *“Since in verse 5 John's hearers respond to his call by ‘confessing their sins,’ repentance seems also to imply recognizing one's sins, being sorry for them, and admitting them*

²The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006. V5. pp. 848

³ Mark 1:4 (NRSV)

publicly."⁴ Please don't get this confused with the type of "public" confession we have before our service, no, John the Baptist is calling on the seekers to name specifically the sins they have committed, to speak out, in front of everyone, the ways they have worked to separate themselves from the community and from God.

In this season of Advent the lectionary seems to be reminding us that our repentance and public admission is a critical part of God's Advent, of doing something new. So, do you feel ready to make that confession? Want to come up here and announce publicly your sins? No? I'm not ready either, but maybe that's because we're not in the right place yet. We need to go out into the wilderness.

*"The wilderness is Yahweh's original home. Several texts imply that the Lord is uniquely present in, or originates from, the wilderness..."*⁵ one scholar writes. This is because the wilderness is a place of testing. It's consistently the place where God calls God's people out to wrestle with themselves and their calling. The wilderness is more than just a physical place, it's a symbol too. It would be better to understand the wilderness as a place of passage, not a destination. The wilderness is a transitory location, an in-between place. One scholar writes the following: *"The bible never romanticizes the wilderness... It is sometimes represented positively, especially as a place of new beginnings. As such, wilderness denotes both a place and an*

⁴Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 31

⁵The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006. V5. pp. 850

existential condition. It is a zone of liminality where individuals or groups encounter existential limits and where they are tested and transformed through numinous encounter.”⁶

Need some examples? None are more famous than the 40 years Moses spends in the desert with the Israelites. Elijah spends some time there, John the Baptist seems to live there, Jesus will spend 40 days being tested there, and one of my favorite Old Testament stories takes place there; where Jacob wrestles with an angel of God, leaving injured but re-made. The wilderness is where John calls out those wishing to repent. In order to grow, to wrestle with what God is doing in our lives and in the world, we need to enter the wilderness so that we can see clearly.

It’s scary, I know, it’s a place where wild beasts live and where some texts seem to suggest demons run wild.⁷ But we’ve been there before. You don’t remember? Well, for some of us we were only babies. In the waters of baptism we entered the wilderness where the old Adam was killed, and we were washed in forgiveness. It’s a place we need to go. When we stop traveling through the wilderness we become complacent. We start to worry more about watching out for *numero uno*, forgetting that God is calling us out to something different. The wilderness has always been a place of expectation, a place of waiting for the Messiah.

This Advent, God once again calls us out to wrestle, to test ourselves. For the congregation of St. Paul’s that wrestling is tied to our discernment of how God is calling us to live out the Gospel here in Hampton, Va. It will be taken on by the leaders of this community

⁶The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006. V5. pp. 849

⁷The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006. V5. pp. 850

who will shortly be installed and blessed for their wilderness survival course. Individually, that's harder to answer. God is always working in our own hearts and minds to turn us away from sin. Some of us have been spending a lot of time in the wilderness, wrestling with those demons and wild beasts. Regardless of our individual struggles, what unites us all is the call to the wild. It's there that we confront our sins, it's there that God gives us the strength to repent, to speak our sins out loud for what might be the first time. Why? Because in the wilderness we wait in expectation, because He comes... Amen.