

A Voice in the Wilderness

Mark 1:1-8
Advent 2 (2011)

Our second reading for today is from Mark's gospel. Unlike the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark does not begin his story about the life and ministry of Jesus by describing Mary, Joseph, or the babe in the manger. Instead, Mark starts his account of the Good News with a story about the importance of repentance. Listen with me for God's word:

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The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" '

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

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I will readily admit that when I sat down to write this sermon late on Thursday morning – after 4 hours of sleep in two days and a brain overloaded with the newness of life – I was wondering how in the world I would connect the birth of our twin babies with the camel-hair wearing, locust-and-honey-eating, repentance-preaching John the Baptist.

But, I knew that it would be impossible for me not to bring the reality of my week into the pulpit this Sunday.

You see, Eliza and Tyler Peery are a long-hoped-for dream for Lindsey and me.

Through years of having difficulty getting pregnant, our yearning for more children has taken us on a journey marked by the signposts of real life. It was a journey that led us on a winding road, through valleys of bitter loss and lonely despair; peaks of brilliant hope and scientific wonder...and a much deeper awareness of how many people walk along the same path.

Through our journey, we have developed a fuller understanding of God's gift of empathy that knits people together who have shared a similar experience – many without happy endings. Many with their journey not yet complete. Many who sit in the pew beside us on Sunday mornings.

So yes, in a very real sense the birth of Eliza and Tyler compels me share my experience with you this morning in order to bear testimony to the goodness of God. Not because our story ended up with the two cutest little bundles of joy you could ever imagine, but because Lindsey and I recognize the fact that through our journey, God has been present with us at every step – and for that abiding presence, we are deeply, deeply grateful.

With life as my teacher, I notice that it is usually easier to experience God's presence when you are in the wilderness. Whether, like us, it is the wilderness of unfulfilled hope. Or the wilderness of a cancer diagnosis. Or the wilderness of a broken relationship. Or of joblessness. Or of depression. Life is full of wilderness places.

And, at least the way Mark tells it, that is where the Good News of Jesus Christ begins: in the wilderness where we are met by a preacher named John the Baptist.

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What is surprising to me about John the Baptist is not his appearance, or his diet, or even his message – all of which are rather odd and wild and unsettling. No, what surprises me about John the Baptist is that people from across the region left their homes and their towns and their cities and their routine lives behind to traipse out into the wilderness to come listen to what John had to say about the importance of repentance.

To seek repentance is to want to change. To repent is to acknowledge that something in your life is beyond repair, or outside your capability to “fix.” People who repent readily admit that they need something, or someone, to help them live in a different way; people who repent readily admit that they are not capable of being the captains of their own ship.

And nobody really wants to admit those things.

At least not in the middle of their otherwise happy, busy, important lives.

Maybe that is why John had to preach in the wilderness – because who would listen to him if he preached that kind of message in the center of town where most of us pretend that we have it all together and that the world is fine just the way it is?

I have a guess – it’s not scientific, it’s not something that I found in my study of the scripture, it is just a guess – but, I have a guess that people are more familiar with the wilderness than they like to admit.

We don’t hear about anybody asking for directions about which fork of the Jordan River they might find a baptism for a repentance of sins. I doubt if “wilderness” would pop up on the GPS if you typed it in...and yet the gospel writer tells us that crowds of people came to hear John preach and to be baptized.

My guess is that the reason people didn’t need a map to find John in the wilderness is because they had been there before.

Let me pause and say that I think we need to be careful not to romanticize the wilderness experiences of life. No one really wants to go through them. I do not believe God causes them. I just think they are part of what it

means to be alive. But, again, with life as my teacher, being in the wilderness – painful as it may be – helps keep us awake to the presence of God. And once we experience the presence of God, our lives cannot remain the same.

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Over the past few days, I have spent a significant amount of time in a hospital room tending to my new family. For all their busyness, hospitals are remarkable in that they are places where time seems to stand still, which – often – helps clarify what is important in life and what is not.

A few years ago, a pastor named Barbara Brown Taylor wrote about her time in a hospital on the occasion of her father's death. It was a few days before Christmas, and she spent several days sitting with her father in hospice care. When other family members came to relieve her, she discovered that she did not want to go.

“At first I thought I did not want to leave my father,” she writes, “for fear that he would die while I was gone, but after about 15 minutes in holiday traffic I knew it was more than that. I did not want to leave the state of grace inside that room, where I had only one thing to do and not a doubt in the world that it was the only thing worth doing. I did not want to leave that place of the deeply real, where my father and I were both in labor. I did not want to be with anyone but him, my family and the nurses that cared for him so tenderly, because there was no pretense among us, not need to chat, lie, or glitter.

“Over the days that followed, I did what holiday chores I could at a nearby mall. Standing in line behind shoppers yelling in to cell phone or watching them struggle through doors with too many bags, I began to feel sorry for people who did not have a hospice room to go back to. Who could not benefit from such a sanctuary, where there was no sound for hours but two people breathing? Where else could one find the time to notice that morning sun was more lemon-colored, while the afternoon sun had more honey in it? In what other economy could a sip of water make everything better for another couple of hours, or a fresh shirt be all one really needed?”¹

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Clocks of the Heart” from *The Christian Century* (December 14, 2004). With thanks to the Rev. Andrew Foster Connors who quoted this in his *Well* paper on this text (*The Well*, Austin, 2011).

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On the face of it, it is odd to encounter the harsh words of John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness. But, as a preacher friend of mine says, “if you know what is coming, if you know who is coming to bring comfort that cannot come from within, maybe the wilderness doesn’t have to be such a bad place after all.

Maybe the wilderness in all of its struggle, in all of its scarcity, in all of its pain is one of the few places to find the deeply real – [where God’s presence is undeniably felt.]²

I stand before as someone who can bear witness to the fact that, indeed, this is true. And my hope for those of you who are in the midst of a wilderness experience is that you might experience the presence of God that leads to comfort, and that comfort would lead to transformation.

Prepare the way of the Lord.

Amen.

² My thanks to the Rev. Andrew Foster Connors, Pastor of Brown Memorial Park Avenue Church in Baltimore, MD, and a member of The Well for this quote and his paper on this text that greatly aided this sermon.