

Sermon 20.12.06

Scriptures:

Isaiah 40: 1-8

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

Mark 1: 1-8

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.’

Desert sounds/images, ending with slow moving river:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvRkWO5g2HE> from beginning to 2:28.

(recorded scripture with ponderings...)

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Imagine yourself as one moving with the crowds, retreating to the margins of the wilderness to seek something new.

The crowds were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

What risks are involved in your decision to respond to John the Baptist’s cries? What might need to change in your life?

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how, through the power of **confession** and baptism, are you transformed?

SERMON:

We're going to spend a lot of time in the gospel of Mark in the coming year, so let's start at the beginning.

Mark's gospel - the earliest gospel written, starts:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.'

This brief sentence summarizes Mark's purpose for writing the book - to tell the story of God's 'good news' made present in the advent, the coming, of Jesus Christ. Unlike the later gospel writers, Mark does not say he intends to give a full and final account of things. In fact, Mark does not offer a conventional conclusion to the gospel either, wrapping things up neatly as we find in the other gospels. Instead, Mark's gospel actually ends in 16:8 with an empty tomb. The unfinished gospel message, paired with this opening statement, suggests that for Mark, the life, ministry, death and even the resurrection of Jesus Christ are not the end of the story. Instead, they set the gospel in motion. The good news story of Jesus Christ, Son of God, is an ongoing one, continuing into the lives of us who meet the living Christ today.¹

We begin in the wilderness...

The wilderness is where the Israelites wandered for 40 years.

One Bible Dictionary suggests the wilderness was a place not meant for human habitation.

The wilderness was a place to move through, no time to linger.

¹ Horton, Leah (2014). *Feasting on the Gospels, A Commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press.

But here, in this story from Mark, we find people, ALL the people, leaving the city to journey INTO the wilderness. They weren't avoiding it, they were seeking it out. WHY?

Because **The wilderness is a place to meet God**

When we're not able to meet God in places we're used to, where do we find God?

God is not, in these COVID times, nor was God, eons ago, where we expect God to be.

This story of good news starts out in the wilderness.

Wilderness, a place where God is found on the edges and belongs there.

In traditional interpretations the wilderness is depicted as a daunting place full of menace. As such, the wilderness was a place to be *conquered and defeated*.

Theologian Delores Williams offers a different version of the wilderness, one rooted in the experiences of enslaved persons and that remains present in the traditions of many American Black churches today. Rather than a place to be feared, Williams reinterprets wilderness through the lens of the biblical slave woman Hagar, where wilderness is a place of struggle *and* Spirit, both problematic *and* promising.

It's in the book of Genesis that we meet Hagar - the young slave girl of Sarai, Abram's wife. Taken from her homeland of Egypt, she was at the mercy of her owner. Out of desperation, Hagar was forced into the bed of Abram, conceiving a son. Sarai's grief turns to anger and abuse, Hagar again bearing the brunt of her frustrated longings. And so Hagar runs, runs for her life and the life of her unborn child. She flees into the wilderness.

The wilderness, a place where God is found on the edges.

It's there, in the wilderness that an angel finds her, telling her to return, that she will bear a son and name him Ishmael, meaning "God hears". It's there, on the edge, that Hagar encounters God.

So she follows the will of God, raising Ishmael in the presence of Abram and Sarai. Many years later, when Sarai, now called Sarah, is 90 years old, her womb is open and she bears Isaac.

Even in the joy of having her own child, Sarah still rages at Hagar, her slave woman, jealous of what might come her way, and so demands that Abraham cast her out. Sent into the wilderness once again, Hagar and Ishmael wither, crouching under bushes, waiting for death, crying out to God in their suffering. And again Hagar meets an angel of God - her eyes were opened, she found water, life was restored. Hagar and Ishmael lived in the wilderness, free of slavery, relying on this God found on the margins of existence.

It's in the wilderness that Hagar meets God. The wilderness, a place both sacred and struggle-ridden. (From Genesis 16:1–16; 21:8–21)

Delores Williams writes - "For African American slaves, The wilderness was a positive place conducive to uplifting the spirit and to strengthening (spiritual) life."²

I wonder, might it be so for us, too? Might we find **The wilderness as a place to meet God on the margins; and be transformed?**

What clues might Mark give us to experience that transformative power of the wilderness?

The Gospel says: "John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And... people were going out to him, and were baptized by him, confessing their sins."

This wilderness is where John proclaims repentance is possible. The Greek for repentance is *Metanoia*, meaning to change, to change one's mind or purpose.

People entered the wilderness and came to John seeking change, and we are told, they came confessing. Confession, my friends, is the first step on the road to repentance, to lasting change.

² [Commentary on Mark 1:1-8](#) by Dr. Courtney Buggs.

In a Goshen College devotional this week, Joe Liechty, professor of **peace, justice and conflict studies**, wrote: “Of the five stages of repentance, acknowledging wrongdoing, accepting responsibility, and changing attitudes and behaviors are essential.”

Acknowledging our wrongdoing, our sins, is the act of confession. It’s an essential part of the repentance John is proclaiming in the wilderness. But repentance, change, requires more than just confession. It demands that we take responsibility, and action.

Yes, the wilderness is a place of struggle *and* Spirit, both problematic *and* promising, sacred and struggle-ridden.

This good news of Jesus Christ starts in the wilderness, **a place to meet God on the margins; a place of transformation.**

This Advent season, if you are feeling in the wilderness, on the margins, maybe, just maybe, this is a place for you to meet God.

For the good news began in the wilderness.

The wilderness is a place to confess, to be transformed, finding God on the margins, under bushes, when we are thirsty and hungry.

God shows up, not in the temples of our own making, but in the wild places and spaces of our lives.

That, my friends, is good news.

(SHORT MUSICAL INTERLUDE - Then, right into confessional video)

Intro to confession:

We, too, recognize a need for confessing - naming those places in our lives where we lose sight of God and lose our way.

We confess so that we might be transformed by the power of the Spirit of Christ. Finding new life, freedom, in the wild and mundane space in our lives. Join us as we enter into a time of confession. Please stay muted, but you may choose to be either voice, or simply pray all of it along with us.

Voice 1: God of the wilderness,

We must admit, there are a million things on our minds.

We would like to be as focused as John the Baptist—preparing the way,
gathering the crowd,
spreading the word of your arrival.

Maybe then we'd know transformation.

(Moment of silence)

Voice 2: However, more often than not, we are a swirling compilation of grocery lists,
text messages, e-mails, and to-do lists.

All: So today, we ask for your help in preparing the way.

(Moment of silence)

Voice 1: Today we confess, in front of this community of faith, that we need your help in this Advent season.

(Moment of silence)

Voice 2: Start with our ears, then maybe our hearts, You who meet us on the margins,
We long to hear you more clearly.

**All: God of the Wilderness, Prepare the way for greater peace, and teach us how to be a part of it.
Amen.**