

Watch the Wilderness

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Scriptures: Malachi 3:1–5; Psalm 126; I Corinthians 4; Luke 3:1–6

A meal tastes different when it is eaten outside. A burger at the ballpark. A s'more eaten by the campfire. I know that nothing has changed on the molecular level, but those same foods just aren't quite as delicious when eaten with a roof over your head. This was never more true for me than when I was on a backpacking trip with my Boy Scout troop when I was about 12 or 13 years old. One of the big things we were learning about on excursions like this one was how to plan, pack, and prepare meals when you didn't have access to a kitchen. So when you pair limited food options with a heavy pack, long days of walking, and not the greatest sleep under the stars, you can bet that when it came time to eat a meal, we were ready and ravenous to devour whatever we had packed. And it is in this context that I first tried this particular brand of maple and brown sugar instant oatmeal. You would have thought it was food worthy of kings and queens the way I gushed over this instant oatmeal. I do not remember what trail we were on on this trip, but I remember how much I enjoyed that oatmeal. And so of course, the minute I got home, I was determined that this new oatmeal was the singular thing my family's breakfast table needed. And so we got it. And then I tried it. And it was just...ok? I can still feel the disappointment today.

Things are different in the wilderness.

The wilderness shows up for us in our Advent readings for today, the words of Luke taking the words of Isaiah 40 and applying them to John the Baptist. And indeed, things are different out in the wilderness from Luke's perspective, because this itinerant preacher wandering around the Jordan river was stirring revival. Baptisms and repentance, forgiveness of sins. God was moving in the wilderness. And to those who had been paying attention to the story of God's people, this rustic choice of venue should have come as no surprise.

When God called Abraham several long treks through desolate places were part of the deal. He first had to leave the land of his ancestors and head to the promised land of Canaan, but famine would soon drive him to live for a time in Egypt. His promised grandson, Jacob, too lived the life of a sojourner. When the time came for Jacob to find a wife for himself, he went in the direction of Haran, where God had called his grandfather, Abraham. And it is on the way, in the middle of nowhere, that he wrestles with God. Jacob seems to be constantly naming places throughout his travels, places that didn't have names before, not cities or towns, but a bunch of nowhere-s. He is living life in the wilderness, interspersed with encounters with the Divine.

When the descendants of Jacob's twelve sons are called out of slavery in Egypt, they are led by Moses, who was led away from the metropolis of Egypt into the role of a shepherd in the house of his father-in-law Jethro. While he is tending the sheep in the wild, he gets a call from God through a burning bush on a mountain. When Moses leads the people of Israel out of Egypt it is not just for their freedom. They are called into the wilderness, toward Sinai, so that they can worship God and receive his Law.

They wander for 40 years in the wilderness before they are allowed to go into the land that God has for them to settle.

Coming into that land is marked by the crossing of a river, and not just any river, the river Jordan. The people of Israel cross into Canaan, the land they will settle, with the Ark of the Covenant carried before them, and the water stops so that they can pass through.

When God's prophet Elijah is fleeing for his life after confronting the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, he flees to the wilderness, where God speaks to him in a cave at Mount Horeb after he had been travelling for forty days. When the time comes for Elijah to pass his prophetic mantle to the next generation, he is called out across the river Jordan, where he is taken up in a chariot of fire as Elisha looks on. After he is gone, Elisha crosses back over the Jordan, parting it with Elijah's cloak, and continues the prophetic ministry in the land.

When Isaiah writes from the context of impending exile at the hands of Babylon, he says that the messenger of the Lord will call out to make a way for him in the wilderness. And when John the Baptist steps into that role, that's where he goes, out across the Jordan, camel hair, locusts, honey and all.

What we can begin to see is that if we want God to show up, the wilderness is not a bad place to look for him, and it has always been this way. When we think of world-altering, earth-shaking, life-changing power, our minds tend to go to the halls that hold human power. The White House. Silicon Valley. The New York Stock

Exchange. The United Nations. If you want to enact real change, we're told, that's where you need to be. That's where our energy should be focused. Let's revisit how our Gospel reading for the day began:

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

I think this framing does a couple of important things for us. First, it grounds the Jesus story in the real history of the world. Second, Luke is saying that the Jesus story is the continuation of the long history of God meeting his people in the wilderness. And finally, this laundry list of people in important places (both politically and religiously) shows us how God is working from a different perspective and with a different agenda, working at the margins and independent of the power systems of the world. Do you want to see what God is doing? Watch the wilderness.

I want us to consider this about the wilderness this morning: that we ought to be encouraged when we find ourselves there. There are those that would have us believe that to be in God's favor would be a shield from any times of wandering or want, and the witness of Scripture shows that understanding to be just plain wrong.

Some of us face the wilderness of uncertainty about the future and we search for hope in spite of what we see. Some of us face the wilderness of loneliness and long

for a listening ear or a hug from someone who loves us. Some of us face a rocky financial or medical future and we don't know how our most basic needs will be met. If that is you, don't think this is because God is far off. It just might be the exact place he intends to meet with you. When the time came for Jesus to be announced to the world, God didn't come to the Roman Emperor, or even the high priest of his chosen people. He went to the camel hair wearing guy out in the desert everybody thought was crazy. If you are in the wilderness, that's just the kind of place where God shows up. So listen for him.

We also need to consider what sorts of things God can do with the wilderness. You see the wilderness is not only a setting where God can be abundantly present, its difficulties are the sorts of things that God has a habit of correcting. Whether it is manna, quail, and water in the Sinai, or locusts and honey on the other side of the Jordan, God has the ability to turn the wasteland into Eden.

Luke borrows some words from Isaiah: Valleys will be raised up, mountains will be made low. When I am on a hiking trip, you know what sort of path I long to have? Flat ground. Going uphill is bad, sure, but downhill isn't much better. It wears out different muscle groups eventually, and plus, if you are going out and back, a downhill hike on the way out means an uphill climb on the way back. I love hiking along a ridge. You have all of the beauty of the heights, but you stay flat, all the vegetation gets a little smaller and the air just feels different. What can God do to our sojourn in the wilderness? All ridges. Flat, walkable ground as far as we can see. The maker of the mountains and the valleys can tell them what to do. The crooked ways will be made straight and the rough places, plain.

Remember the plea of the Psalmist this morning: "Restore our fortunes, o Lord, like streams in the Negev." For those of you who haven't already guessed or don't already know, the Negev is the desert, the wilderness. That's what God can do. Streams in the desert. Mountains made low.

But the Psalmist doesn't stop there, because we know that the physical wilderness is not the only type that we face.

"Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!
He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,"

And this is where the question of the wilderness starts being a little more practical for us. Many of us probably live lives insulated from many of the risks of exposure in the literal wilderness, though even in our time and in our city, there are those who do struggle with the needs of shelter, food, and warmth. But what about the wilderness faced by those who have been wronged by family, friends, co-workers? What about the wilderness of those who face unjust systems and circumstances, those who are suffering at the hands of those who do evil?

The one who can make the mountains into molehills also comes to judge an unjust world. Hear the words of the prophet Malachi: "I will be a swift witness against the

sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.”

God, the righteous judge, sees your suffering at the hands of an unjust world and will not let it stand in the light of eternity. There’s a word for the wilderness. While reading our passage from Malachi, I couldn’t help but think of that iconic recording from Johnny Cash’s later years: “Tell the rambler, the gambler, the back biter, tell ‘em that God’s gonna cut ‘em down.”¹ Indeed he will.

But let us not get too ahead of ourselves. Because there is something else about the wilderness. The wilderness is a place that shows us our own brokenness and need for God. The wilderness shows us our own sins and unrighteousness. God is coming to cut down unrighteousness, then that is indeed a cause for rejoicing, but let us not be fooled into thinking our own unrighteousness will stand before his coming.

The people who had their stomachs filled with manna in the wilderness longed to go back to their Egyptian enslavers because they didn’t think God could provide for them. They wanted to have a go themselves and do things their way. That’s what the wilderness does. The struggles of the wilderness can and will make us fail if we do not keep our eyes where they ought to be placed.

But here is the good news: there is one whose trek through the wilderness reveals not his unrighteousness, but his righteousness. There is one who can stand the test

¹ The song is of course, “God’s Gonna Cut You Down,” off the Album *American V*. It is required Advent listening in my book.

of the wasteland. He does so right after he goes out to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. 40 days and 40 nights, three temptations that range from the immediate need for food to the draw of ultimate power. Jesus stayed true.

So when you find yourself in the wilderness and are tempted to think that God is far off, look to Jesus, for he is near. When you are in the wilderness of suffering in an unjust and fallen world, look to Jesus, because his justice is coming. And when the wilderness tempts you to lay aside the ways of God and go at things your own way, look to Jesus, who showed us the way to endure.

Things are different in the wilderness. It can show us who we really are. But more importantly, it shows us who God really is and opens the invitation for us all to come to him and find our salvation. So let us come!