

Sermon, The Gift of Wilderness
2 Advent, Year B
Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

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In this new liturgical year, which began last Sunday, we will be hearing a lot from the Gospel of Mark. As the oldest of the four Gospels that appear in our Bibles, Mark either doesn't know the Jesus infancy narratives or perhaps just doesn't find the early Jesus stories relevant to what he wants to say to his audience. He skips over mentioning the baby Jesus, there is no mention of Luke's angels and shepherds and no mention of Matthew's magi. Maybe he's just not all that into babies! Mark begins his gospel with the adult prophet, John the Baptizer, in the wilderness.

In Mark's text, we hear an echo from our first reading from Isaiah, which would have been written centuries earlier, "A voice cries out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Here we have this strange man JtB eating bugs and wild honey for his diet (By the way our Sunday School children are going to be eating locust cookies later this morning as a tribute to JtB); and he's wearing a scratchy camel's hair suit. And people from the "whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" are coming to see him. (Maybe Mark is exaggerating a little bit – I don't think *all* the people really came.) But we can imagine a LOT of folks were making their way out into the wilderness to see him. I suppose some were curious about this prophet, and some were genuinely interested in repentance for the forgiveness of their sins, genuinely interested in turning around their lives that they might be closer to God and walk in God's ways.

And yet they had to leave their homes and to go out into the *wilderness* to be baptized. Why the wilderness? What is the wilderness? At first thought sometimes we think of a desert-like place, barren, one void of life, and yet a wilderness can actually be a lush, pastoral place where there is plenty of vegetation and water. But it is usually a wild place, beyond civilization, a place that has not been subdued by human beings; it can be a scary or threatening place with wild animals and bandits; it is a place of uncertainty that can conjure up fear and anxiety. When we are in the wilderness we may well be vulnerable and unsure of ourselves. In Scripture wilderness is usually viewed not just as a place but a concept. The Hebrew word often used for wilderness, *midbar*, meaning a desolate and deserted place, can also mean "that which is beyond."

Moses meets God through a burning bush in the wilderness, the Israelites struggle profoundly in their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land. Later in Mark's story, even Jesus will, after he is baptized, spend time in the wilderness. Again and again in Scripture important things *happen* in the wilderness – people are given the opportunity to encounter God and be formed or tested in their faith, a time to look beyond our normal sense of our capabilities.

Bob Dickerman's uncle, Ernie Dickerman, brother-in-law of Brooke Dickerman, our beloved and now deceased member of Emmanuel, was known to some as the "Father of Eastern

Wilderness.” While working for the Wilderness Society, Ernie played a pivotal role in wilderness preservation efforts. He was instrumental in having some of our local wilderness areas, such as St. Mary’s Wilderness and Ramsey’s Draft Wilderness areas designated as such. A few years ago, our two sons, then aged 22 and 16, chose to hike up in Ramsey’s Draft Wilderness one chilly November day. They got started kind of late and as the curtain of darkness began to fall they were nowhere near their car. There they were - lost in the woods and no seeming way out. Our younger son, who looked up to his older brother as wise and experienced in the ways of the woods, knew they were in trouble when his brother said they were lost. When they were not home soon after dark, two anxious parents began trying to reach them on their cell phones, which, of course, proved fruitless, as cell phone coverage in the wilderness is an oxymoron. The temperature was dropping rapidly and it was dark. The older son decided when they came upon a stream that they would follow the stream downward, which meant they had to cross the stream several times, sometimes with *cold* water up to their waist, to keep with it. After a humbling journey the stream led them to the parking lot where their car was parked. They had indeed been vulnerable, uncertain and frightened in the wilderness but there had been a recognizable grace in the difficulty that helped them arrive home.

Where is your wilderness? Is it in your adjustment to retirement or in the loss of a loved one? Do you feel in the wilderness because of physical or mental health concerns? Maybe it is a time when you don’t feel that you fit in or connect with the group you are in. Or maybe your wilderness is more keenly felt as you look at problems we face as a nation, things brought to your attention through the media.

In this Advent season, we are invited not to ignore our inner and outer darkness but to look at it square on with the hope and confidence that the light of Jesus is coming to strengthen us in our weakness, the light of Jesus will be our sure foundation; the light of Jesus will show us a way home. Jesus is there with us in the wilderness, and as we face our own uncertainties, our own vulnerabilities, we know that we are not alone; Emmanuel, God is with us. And Advent gives us the time and space, if we claim it, -and we must *claim* it or otherwise it will be gobbled up with *busyness*, - Advent gives us the opportunity to look at our own wilderness and in it, recognize the opportunity to encounter God, and the chance to let our faith grow, and to be formed as children of God.

As the people from the Judean countryside and Jerusalem came out to JtB in the Wilderness to be baptized in repentance for forgiveness of sins, we have this incredible opportunity to do the same. Ernie Dickerman and John the Baptizer, both advocates for the preservation of the wilderness, remind us that we NEED wilderness in our lives. We actually need the wilderness and the accompanying mystery that reminds us we are not in control, really of anything, and that to live lives of meaning we must depend on the grace and love of God.
Amen.