

Advent I 2020
Isaiah 40:1-5 and Mark 1:1-8
November 29, 2020
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Last week a series of persons worked here in the sanctuary to prepare us for Advent. Tim retrieved the Advent wreath out of storage and attached it to its wire. The beautiful wreath, hung from the ceiling as if brought down to us from God on high, was a gift to Grace Church from Bruce, in memory of his mother. Claire slipped in one morning, swapping out the green altar cloths for the blue ones. These paraments were also a gift, given in the late 1980's from two sisters, Kay and Marianne. They are no longer with us on earth and yet their gift lives on. This morning I placed our empty manger on the altar, a more recent tradition at Grace and one that typically occurs during the children's time on Advent's first Sunday. The bare manger becomes another visual reminder of the space we are to make inside ourselves for the Christ who is coming. It is a different Advent, I know, but the candles, the color, and the empty cradle endure . . . as does the faithfulness of God, whose promise of presence will not fade.

In this different season we are focusing each Sunday on a central figure within the Advent story. Four Sundays, four difference characters, each who play a pivotal role in making space for Christ. These familiar figures remind us that memory helps sustain us when the future feels uncertain. Advent wreath. Blue cloths. Empty manger. Light the candles. Lay the cloths. Hold the empty space. These truths upon which we stand have not changed. Nor has the voice that cries out to us from the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord.

John the baptizer, as Mark calls him, appears as wild as the wilderness from which he speaks. His clothes are woven of camel's hair. Locusts dipped in honey are on his fingertips. His hair is every which way. And his eyes can see beyond our carefully constructed appearances into our weary, sorrowful, seeking souls. John begins the good news of Jesus Christ. He is not the main event. Yet his voice forges the path we are to follow in order to arrive in Bethlehem. And in order to hear him clearly, we must turn our faces toward the wilderness from which he speaks.

John lived in the wilderness. He did not own a house in town or manage a store in the city center. One did not run into John at the grocery store, bump into him at the library or slide into the booth next to him at the neighborhood café. John made his bed on the rocky ground of a cave, tucked around a bend in the barren hillside, found only by those who had a map pointing the way. It was a good hike from the city gate. One had to put on hiking boots, carry a water canteen, and wear a hat providing good shade. John was found amid the shrubs, rocks, wind and sand. He dwelt in the wilderness.

Wilderness is not simply a material landscape. Wilderness is a state of the heart, a heart broken by loss, devastated by the cessation of everything normal, hardened by absence, numbed by trauma. God's people find themselves in the wilderness at critical moments: when they escape from Egypt, when they are forced out of Jerusalem by a conquering army, when they are pushed out beyond acceptability by Herod, or Pilate or any Roman ruler. To dwell in wilderness

is to be on the edge of survival, in the thin place between before and after, between despair and hope, between death and life. Each option is possible. Neither ending is certain. This wilderness place is where Advent begins.

John cries from the wilderness AND the people leave the city to go out into the desert to listen more closely to his words. Who does this? Who inclines their ear to the one speaking on the margins and then searches in uncomfortable places for such a voice? Those who are desperate, who are frightened, empty and searching for more. Those who are sense in the reverberations a holiness, their own hearts hungry for God.

This year's Advent is an advent of wilderness, as we are exiled from cherished routines, numb to the months of living separated from family, community, or sanctuary, heart-broken that the waves of infections continue, aware in our bones that the toll of the year has accelerated all types of vulnerabilities. We, then, go out beyond the edge of the city, past the spectacle of normalcy. We abandon the pretense of decorum and meet John in his rough clothes, harsh voice, crazy hair and knowing eyes, to hear about a path being laid for the coming Lord.

Prepare the way of the Lord, says John. Gather around the wreath, light the candles, dig through your decorations and find the creche. Let the manger be empty for a few weeks, so to deepen your hunger for the coming One. John's voice is a voice of hope. His hope is not mere optimism. The optimistic person says, "I get that the weather forecast reports a 90% chance of rain, but I'm going to plan for sunshine." Shallow optimism, asserts Peter Gomes, too often requires looking away from the horrors of the world. It asks us to continue in self-deceptions. Hope is different. It is an act of imagination and courage. It is, says Valerie Bridgeman, "based not on the belief that humans will get it right but on the trust that God will help us live into God's vision for all creation." Prophetic hope looks at the desolate scene and imagines the mountains being laid down, the valleys rising up and the rocky steps being made smooth. The entire cosmos rearranging itself so that the glory of God can be seen for thousands of miles across the horizon.

The voice of optimism tempts us to ignore the grim numbers, close our eyes to the brutality, look away from the emotional and economic impact of 2020. Just focus on staying cheerful. Soon everything will be alright. Hope looks directly into hospital hallways, the protests on the streets, the empty places at the tables and confesses, I do not know the way nor do I have the power to get there by myself, but I know God. I trust God, who is the way, has the power, and offers life. John the prophet exists on the edge. He sees on the hunger, need and terror and says God is . . . coming.

John wants us to be ready when God comes. For in addition to the wreath needing to be brought out, the cloths needing to be hung, and the manger awaiting its place, we have other work to do. The work is harder than finding a tree, hanging the lights, ordering the presents. It is the work of naming sin.

What do you think of when you hear the word sin?

An angry word, a temper lost, an estrangement of decades,
A pile of money unlawfully accumulated, greed upon greed while others are hungry,
A mountain of selfies, photos comprised solely of self-references, reflecting an ego out
of control,
An enormity of wildfires and hurricanes, signs of creation in peril,
A knee upon a neck, a life ended, centuries of horror not yet accounted for?

Naming sin entails confessing how lost we are, how deeply we have erred, how defeated we really feel. Acknowledging all the sins that have accumulated forces a reckoning with the forces – internal and external – that have defeated our good intentions. Never has this work felt more urgent than it does right now.

John beckons us out into the wilderness to confess these sins. As we utter the words, tell the stories, the pathway forward gets clearer. Here in the wilderness we can feel the cold winds, notice the solitary shrubs and realize we have no path to trod except the one created by the painful yet beautiful truth of how much we need God. So make your confession. Let the space be cleared. As we do, the candles burn, the blue cloths beckon. In the weeks to come the manger will get a blanket as well as expectant parents hovering nearby. Bit by bit our hearts will stir, starting to make room. The Lord is coming.