

SECOND READING: Luke 3:1-6

pg 60 NT

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

FIRST READING: Malachi 3:1-4

pg 890 OT

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight— indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD.

“Crying in the Wilderness”

Well, if ever Scripture sets up a contrast it is here in the third chapter of Luke. It is about as plain as can be. All this power... Emperor Tiberius, Governor Pontius Pilate, King Herod, Ruler Philip, Priests Annas and Caiaphas all set up against a nobody named John, son of Zachariah. All this enormity in regions and cities of Ituraea and Trachonitis and Lysanias and Abilene set up against nowhere, the wilderness of Judea. It's quite a contrast, isn't it? We're meant to see it. For God intentionally chose John, son of Zachariah. to be the One to prepare the hearts and minds of people, all people, for the coming of Jesus, and God chose the wilderness of Judea as the place to issue the call.

We could spend a lot of time talking about John, known as the Baptist, this strange cave-like man, who existed on the fringe, wearing camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey, but I am drawn today, on this second 2nd in Advent, during such a busy, hectic time of year to consider with you the wilderness. The wilderness of Judea with its vast beauty, its startling color, red and yellow rocks against the browns of the earth and the blues of the skies...the night sky so dark and stars so bright that a person feels that can nearly reach out and touch them, with its awesomeness, its hugeness and its mystery....the wilderness of Judea with water so scarce and sun so fierce that it can bake a person's skin in no time at all, and with wind so dry and relentlessly blowing that it can choke the air out of those who breathe its dust....the wilderness of Judea with its vastness, its emptiness, its silence.

Actually, when you think about it, it should not surprise us that God chose the wilderness of Judea as the place from which John the Baptist would issue the call for repentance. For Israel had been formed centuries earlier in such a wilderness place. For 40 years God's people wandered in the desert of Sinai. But why? Why the wilderness in the first place? *(pause)* Well, could it be that in the wilderness, in its vastness, its emptiness, its silence, the word of God is most easily heard? In the wilderness there is nowhere to hide. In fact, there is often little shelter. In the wilderness, all illusion, all extraneousness, all distraction is stripped away. All that we think we know, all that is familiar, must be shed. Obstacles are blown away with the desert wind, and the view is for as far as the eye can see. In the desert the most powerful and

self-sufficient persons are humbled and brought down, and the big and mighty are made to feel small because they find themselves dependent on their Creator for life's basic needs. In fact, did you know that Moses' words to Pharaoh, "*Let my people go* ("Shalach ami") were only part of the message? The actual full passage was "Let My people go, so that they may serve me ("*Shalach ami v'yaavduni*").¹ As Rev Sue Eaves says, "Whether speaking about metaphorical or literal wildernesses, it is in the wilderness that God always does the radical work that God always does".²

So, "no", it should not surprise us that it is into the wilderness that the John called the Jews back. He called them to be washed of their sins, to undergo a baptism of repentance both personally and as a community, to prepare themselves to hear God's truth once again. For...Israel had fallen away. They'd been swayed. They'd ignored the suffering of their own people. Widows and orphans were now starving. Injustices, significant ones, were being committed against their own poor. The voiceless had no one to speak for them. And their own priests and king, Annas, Caiphas and Herod had amassed enormous power in controlling the Religion with temple taxes and priestly hocus-pocus. The Spirit had gotten all but covered up with pretend piety. And false prophets were commending them all for their religiosity.

John called the people to account, to repent of what was obstructing their view of God, their idols, their shame, their guilt, their misdeeds against one another. He also called them to let go of all that had been imposed upon them that obstructed their view, the fear thrust upon them from corrupt, oppressive, and brutal Roman rulers like Pilate, Philip and Tiberius, who stifled them from thinking and believing as they wanted. "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,*" John said. "*Realign your hearts and lives to be in relation with God's agenda. This will be the means by which you will get ready for Jesus. All roads will then lead to the divine life which will soon be present in the world,*" he, in essence, told them.³ Ultimately, John called the people into the wilderness to see and hear that God is coming, to tell them that

¹ Yossy Goldman. "*Let MY People Go*" https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/252586/jewish/Let-My-People-Go.htm (Accessed 12/7/18).

² Rev. Sue Eaves "*Born in A Desert*" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1T4VAI1mD8Q> (accessed 12/8/18).

³ WJ Jennings. *Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World . 2nd Sunday of Advent*. In: Connections. Yr C, Vol 1, Editors: J Green, TG Long, L A Powery, CL Rigby (Louisville: WJKP: 2018), 31.

God would change them and their world, but that they needed to prepare themselves, heart, mind and soul, to be able to grasp it, not only as individuals but as a community. (PAUSE)

So.....what, friends, is the take away for us on this 2nd Sunday of Advent? What does the Spirit have for us during this busy, hectic time of year? Well, I asked this question of the best theologian that I know, whose name is Mike, and of course, he asked me a question back, a good one. He asked, *“Don’t you think it’s sort of amazing that so many people went out into the desert? to see a guy like John in the first place?”*⁴ Well, “Yes” I do, but yet I think it makes some sense too. I think the people recognized John for who he was, and I think that they were compelled to go to him. When a prophet looks like a duck and quacks like a duck and walks like a duck then maybe he’s a duck! John the Baptist was to the people an obvious messenger from God. He was not one of the false prophets they’d been hearing. Not only did he look the part of a classic prophet, (he looked like Elijah) but he spoke like one too. He did not commend them for their piousness. He instead called them to account, and they knew that that that was right. “He passionately spoke about the One who was coming as if he were repeating what God was saying to him, one sentence at a time. He did not have many details, not the name of the one who was coming, or what he looked like, but yet he seemed knew that the old world was about to end and a new world was coming, and it was being carried to them in the arms of God’s Messiah”.⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way, *“John was God’s messenger alright, and the message he brought lit him up like a bonfire out there in the wilderness.”*⁶

And in addition, the people were feeling a real need to go to the wilderness. They were feeling a tug in their hearts to change, to be washed clean, to start over again. And this, they certainly knew might be done in the wilderness, for it was not a place to be lost but a place to be found. They knew this. Their prophesy not only foretold that there would be One someday who would cry in the wilderness, but their God had a fondness for the wilderness as a place to speak new truths, to do new things. It is where Israel was formed, where Moses, Joshua and

⁴ Personal communication. Mike Ingrim 12-8-2018.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor. *Wherever the Way May Lead*. In: *Home By Another Way*. (Boston: Cowley Pub; 1999); 11-14.

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor.

Joseph were shaped, and where Elijah fled to hear the still small voice. Little did they know that Jesus too would emerge from the desert.

So, I'm here today to ask you, as I ask myself, are you needing to go to the wilderness? Do you hear a voice calling you, even ever so faintly, to go? Maybe you are in a place right now where you are struggling to see and hear God. Maybe you're having trouble getting into the Christmas spirit, finding joy in God becoming a living, breathing, touchable baby in order to be with us and for us, in Jesus promising to come again to gather us onto himself? Are you struggling with despair or fear, or uncertainty or shame or regret, flat out fatigue or numbness, dread or guilt? Maybe distraction from the idols of our business this time of year is overwhelming you? Well, if so, I urge you, as I urge myself, to find a wilderness place, literally and spiritually. Listen carefully for the voice. It may take a bit of courage to go when you hear it, for the wilderness is a vulnerable and sometimes a lonely place at first, but it is a bit like venturing into the night. You cannot see the stars and certainly can't reach out and touch them until you go. I pray that you will venture forth, and that once there you will trust God to enter in, to forgive, to heal and reign forever. *"May every valley be filled, and every mountain and hill be made low, and the crooked be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and may you see the salvation of God."* Amen.