

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," " 4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Isaiah 40:1-11

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Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 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. 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 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. 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." 6 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. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. 9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

## “Crying in the Wilderness”

We are in the season of Advent. It is the season of preparation, and all over the world today Christians will be reading texts about the one whom God sent to prepare the minds and hearts of the people for Jesus Christ. Jesus did not just suddenly appear; people were prepared for his coming. They were prepared by the prophet named John the Baptist. From his birth, John had been set aside as a Nazirite, one devoted to God. Nazirites lived away from society. They did not drink or eat fruit from the vine nor cut their hair. John reportedly ate locusts and honey and wore camel hair and a leather belt. He was a very rough character. He likely lived in a cave in the desert, in the wilderness. From there he preached the word of God.

People came from everywhere to hear his message. Fred Craddock imagines that *“it was riveting! Plows were left in the furrows, bread was left in the oven, shops were left unattended, school was let out early because crowds were moving out into the desert to hear this extraordinary man.”*<sup>1</sup> *“A stump was his pulpit, the stars were the chandelier of his cathedral and the Jordan River was his baptistry,” Craddock says.*

I wonder sometimes what it must have been like to hear John preach. I wish I had been there to hear his riveting sermons, or to see Jesus be baptized. But then... I remember that during this season of the year, we are spend studying, diving deep into the scripture and meditating upon it. So let's go...let's hear John preach.

Ah, but wait. The wilderness's not a place most of us want to go. Even the name, “wilderness doesn't create a picture that is too enticing, does it? The root of the word is wild. When I think of the physical wilderness, I picture a fuzzy, hazy place with heat emanating off scorching sand...a bleak and arid place....a dusty, thirsty place with danger lurking at every turn. I think of where the wind blows so hard and hot that it can suck the breath out of you, and scary critters sting, bite and slither. The wilderness is vast, empty, and silent. But also, I know that the wilderness can be a spiritual place too... a lonely, empty place of regret and guilt, of shame, of oppressive quiet, of anxiety and worry, of unsettledness and limbo, a place of dark depression

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock. *“Have You Heard John Preach?”* In: *The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock.* (Louisville: WJKP; 2011), 109-115.

and despair, of grief. Quoting Barbara Brown Taylor, the wilderness may be described as “*any vulnerable place or state of mind where you look around for that which you thought you needed to live and you come up empty.*”<sup>2</sup>

It was from here that John was asked to preach to the people of God. And actually, when you think about it, we should not be surprised. For Israel had been formed centuries earlier in such a wilderness place. For 40 years God’s people wandered in the desert of Sinai. There in its vastness, its emptiness, its silence, the word of God through Moses and now John could most easily be heard. There, the people could not hide...no dark corner for deception or being deceived. All extraneous distractions were stripped away, and they could be humbled. Everyone was made equally dependent on their Creator for life’s basic needs...the rich and poor, husband and wife, old and young, powerful and weak could hear what “a moment of truth”, a call for inner CHANGE...for repentance.

Yes, this was John’s message... to repent...to quit running, to enter into the presence of God and come clean. He was tough and did not flinch in his compelling words. One preacher says that John in essence said, “*The Judge is coming and I’m here to serve subpoenas.*”<sup>3</sup> He had some great analogies to allow people to see clearly what he meant. He preached of that time being “*like an axe being laid at the root of a tree. If the tree has not borne good fruit, it comes down.*” He also said that that time in their lives, “*was like when a farmer has harvested the grain but it’s still full of chaff. And so, he takes a winnowing fork (like a large fan) and while the grain is being poured from one container to another, uses the fan to blow away the chaff. The grain is saved but the chaff is burned.*” He explained that there is one coming after him that would be so much stronger and greater, who will cause truth to come clean and clear, who will serve as a light for their darkness and forgive their sin, their distorted priorities, their disregard for truth, their greed and self-centeredness, their immoral thoughts. This One, Jesus, will ease their pain, mend their overall brokenness, and set before them a new path forward, a new life, a new beginning. He told them to begin sharing with someone who was poorer than

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. *Sermon: The Wilderness Exam*, [http://day1.org/1756-the\\_wilderness\\_exam.print](http://day1.org/1756-the_wilderness_exam.print), (accessed Feb 13, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Craddock.

them, to be kind and understanding with each other, to help those who could not help themselves, to be honest and content with what they had, to be peacemakers.

So, the wilderness ends up being a place in which most of us do not want to be, but it is where we discover who we are, what our lives are about and what they need to be about. And it can be one of the most spirit-filled life-changing of places. 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”.<sup>4</sup>

*Rev. Shannon Kershner describes an experience that she and her family had as they were one night driving from West Texas to Oklahoma. “The sun had long since gone down,” she says, “and the shapes and forms of life in the ‘dry land of rock and red clay’ were no longer visible.” And suddenly, they were aware of an enormous number of bright stars dominating the sky....just a jaw-dropping scene. Her parents spoke of how long it had been since they last were surrounded by the beauty of a deep, dark night punctuated by the brilliance of the stars. They remarked to each other that until they’d seen it that night, they had not known that they were missing it. Then in the stillness, all of them with their faces against the windows of the car, her father said, “It is interesting, that we spend so much of our time avoiding the darkness, isn’t it? Yet, the only way we could have seen the brilliant light of those stars was precisely because of the darkness, not in spite of it.”*<sup>5</sup>

So, friends, today on this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent, I pray that you and I are attentive enough to notice and brave enough to respond to the tug which may be going on inside of us, the tug of the Holy Spirit, urging us to go into the wilderness....into the wilderness of our minds and hearts in order that we might then be completely exposed, uncovered before God. And as the wonderful Advent hymn says, to then let the long-expected Jesus come, set us then free from our fears and our sins, and release us to find rest in him. That’s what Advent, the season of preparation, is about. We indeed do need, brothers and sisters, ultimately to hear to John preach....*“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight, ’ ”*. Because, as Rev. Craddock

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<sup>4</sup> Sue Eaves “*Born in A Desert*” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1T4VA11mD8Q> (accessed 12/8/18).

<sup>5</sup>Shannon Kershner. “*Seeing the Light*”. <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2014/120714.html> (accessed 12-7-2017).

says, *“on our way to Bethlehem we will have to. You can’t get to Bethlehem without going through the desert,”* he says. Well, you actually CAN get to Bethlehem without going through the desert”, he says, “but if you do, it won’t be Christmas.”

*“The valleys will be lifted up, and mountains and hills laid low; the uneven ground will be made level, and the rough places a plain.” “Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.” Amen.*