

When the Wilderness Comes to You

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Crozet United Methodist Church

Second Sunday of Advent - December 6, 2009

Luke 3:1-6

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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 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. 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

In Act IV of William Shakespeare's seventeenth-century play *Macbeth*, the murderous and disturbed Macbeth visits the Three Witches, the prophetesses who predicted in Act I his ascension to the throne of Scotland, now make their famous prediction that Macbeth "never vanquish'd be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him." Since Macbeth believes that the odds of the forest in Birnam uprooting itself and making the roughly 20 mile journey to Dunsinane Hill are quite low, he assumes he is safe from defeat.

However, in Act IV, Macbeth's enemies, Malcolm and his army, Macduff Siward the Elder, are encamped in Birnam Wood and plotting an attack against Dunsinane Castle. The soldiers are ordered to cut branches from the trees in Birnam Wood and carry them into battle to disguise their numbers. Thus, in the battle that ensues, Birnam Wood actually comes to Dunsinane, fulfilling the witches prophecy and beginning the final defeat of Macbeth.

This morning's text does not mention forest land, and it only describes hills and mountains as things that are to be "made low This morning's terrain is what Luke simply refers to as "the wilderness." The most commonly used word for wilderness in the Old Testament is *midbar*, a word which means both "desolate and deserted," as well as "that which is beyond."¹ The midbar was a place beyond settlement, beyond the control of the government, the place of the savage, wandering tribes, the place so bad that when the Israelites were there after escaping slavery in Egypt, they wanted to go back. The midbar is the place of which the prophet Isaiah writes They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness. (Isaiah 8:21-22). And those "wild beasts" were believed to be demon-possessed.

This was a time in human history where, if you were creating any kind of village or settlement of any sort, the first thing you had better learn to do is dig a well, and you had better do it while someone

¹ "Wilderness" in *The Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Harper, San Francisco, p. 1133-1134.

else is at work building a wall surrounding the area. The wilderness represented everything that was to be feared, and nothing about it was to be taken lightly. The Bible refers to wilderness as a place of hunger, thirst, and deprivation, a place that is unsettled, nonarable, windswept, haunted by beasts and demons, and echoing with scary noises. It is the domain of the Midianites, Amalekites. It was the place where only the nomads, the lawless, the insane, and those who had no other place to live. When God wanted to punish a people, God could do so simply by converting the farmland to wilderness.²

Advent is such a strange time in the life of the church. It seems we do things out of order. The worship seems slow, like we are spending too much time getting to the good part of the story, getting to the point. The first Sunday of Advent, last Sunday, we were in the 25th chapter of Luke's gospel, right there near the end of Jesus' public ministry, with Jesus talking about the end of time. Today, we jump back to the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, yet we do not jump back far enough. Instead of getting a baby, an inn, O little town of Bethlehem, angels, and shepherds, we skip those chapters and instead read chapter 3, where we get wilderness and John the Baptist.

Macbeth never dreamed that Birnam Forest would come to him. Likewise, though you and I may have times in our lives when we may choose the wilderness as a place to encounter God, more often, despite our greatest hopes, best design, beliefs and expectations, and our strongest resistance, sometimes the wilderness comes to *us*.

It has been a long time in the wilderness for many of us, as well as for our nation, and our world. Your wilderness may be your loss of employment, your loss of your home, struggles in your marriage, struggles with your kids, or struggles with your parents. Your wilderness may be addiction, grief, depression, failing health, or a sudden, shocking diagnosis. Your wilderness may be a crisis of faith, a sense that God is absent from your life. Your wilderness may be something you deeply regret, something of which you simply cannot let go.

Yet the wilderness, as I said earlier, figures prominently in the biblical witness. In my first week of seminary, I heard a sermon by one of our professors of Hebrew Bible in which he said, "The problem with God is that God always leads you through the desert before bringing you to the promised land."³ He is probably right. For all of the assumptions made that the Bible is a book advocating unquestioning, blind faith, the fact is that the Bible is filled with the testimonies of women and men whose lives feel much like the wilderness. Hagar and Ishmael are cast into the desert. Hannah cries out for a son. Job loses his family. God sets Ezekiel in a valley of dry bones. David loses his son. Daniel finds himself in a den of lions. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego find themselves in a blazing furnace. Jonah finds himself alone and trapped in the belly of a giant fish. Gideon is found threshing grain while hiding in a winepress for fear of the Midianites. Uriah is betrayed. Mary and Joseph are relegated to a stable. Rachel cries out for her children. Paul is beaten and imprisoned. Jesus is crucified. The psalmist writes As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long,

² "Wilderness" in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, New York, 1993, p. 798-799.

³ The professor was Dr. Bruce C. Birch, preaching in Oxnam Chapel at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC in the fall term of 1994.

"Where is your God?"⁴ Early next year, we will read how immediately after his baptism, Jesus had to spend his time in the literal wilderness, fasting for forty days, and being tempted by Satan.

Yet, in a strange way, the wilderness is exactly where we often meet God in a way that is visceral and raw. The wilderness is where Hagar, Moses, and Elijah meet God. In this morning's text, Luke tells us that John "went into all the region all around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," yet Luke also tells us that John not only proclaimed this message in the wilderness, he also *received* this message in the wilderness.

Bishop William Willimon tells of a friend who pastors a group of churches in Africa, and who has suffered greatly for it, including political oppression, civil strife, and imprisonment. However, when this pastor arrived in the United States, he told Bishop Willimon, that "Actually, I have more sympathy with your situation [than you do with mine]."

Willimon thought, "My situation? My church is not beset by political enemies. I have no friends in the ministry who have been jailed for their convictions. None of my people suffer from pervasive poverty. How could he have sympathy with my situation?"

To this, the African pastor replied, "There is just so much here. You have so much freedom, so many things. What is left to offer people? What needs do they have for which the gospel could be fulfillment? I have great respect for those of you who preach the gospel and who minister in the situation of North America. There is so much, so much fulfillment, and so little emptiness. The gospel feeds upon emptiness."⁵

Anyone who has ever spent any time in the wilderness, spiritual, emotional or physical knows that it is a place where we experience the learnings that we never would have chosen for ourselves. Years ago, a woman diagnosed with pancreatic cancer sat in her living room as the afternoon light came through her picture window and told me about the *clarity* with which she now saw her life, and the unending gratitude she now had for each passing hour. I have had people who have survived life-threatening diseases offer themselves completely as a resource to others who have just received a diagnosis. I have seen people raised in poverty become not only advocates for the poor, but their servants and friends. I have seen people who have struggled in their marriage or in their parenting become mentors for those in the midst of the storm, and I have witnessed those who have wrestled to believe become the profound witnesses to those still in the fight.

The wilderness, the place where, stripped of our all of our padding and the illusion that we are ultimately in control of our lives, is the place where we, as we are, can most powerfully and uniquely encounter the living God, who is a God of the wilderness, and who meets us there.

C.S. Lewis writes about what he calls the Law of Undulation, which addresses how we all have peaks and troughs; we all have times in our spiritual lives of green pastures, and we all have times of wilderness. **He writes, "And that is where the troughs come in. It is during such trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that it is growing into the sort of creature [Christ] wants us to be. Hence the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those which please Him best...He wants [us] to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really**

⁴ Psalm 42:1-3, New International Version.

⁵ Willimon, William, "Yearning for Christmas," *Pulpit Resource*, December 7, 2003, Logos Productions.

there He is pleased even with [our] stumbles.[Satan's] cause is never more in danger, than when a human, no longer desiring, but intending, to do our [Christ's] will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”

This is why we gather at this table, even when times are hard, *especially* when times are hard. We gather at this table for this meal of remembrance because in doing so, our wilderness touches heaven, as we break the bread of paradise, and drink the cup of salvation, and we both remember and claim the promises that we are not alone, and that this meal is a foretaste of the meal we will share in paradise.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.