

Advent II 10<sup>th</sup> Dec 2023 / St Brandon's

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, and we are embarking into the wilderness.

The wilderness is a significant place in the Bible. It is a high stakes environment: a matter of life or death. There are so many stories in the Old Testament where the wilderness is the place where humans come face to face with God. When Abraham sent his slave Hagar and her young son into the wilderness, a well miraculously appears. When the prophet Elijah flees to the wilderness, an angel makes him a cooked breakfast. It's also a spooky, haunted place, where unclean spirits and lawless men lurk. It is a place of great temptation and testing. Above all, it is the birthplace of the people of God. It was here that God spoke to Moses in a burning bush, calling him to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt and revealing His name: I am who I am. After the ancient Israelites left Egypt, they encounter this great I AM again in the wilderness. God meets Moses on Mount Sinai and gives him the law, and leads the people as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Even when the people complain, God feeds them with bread from heaven and makes water flow from the very rocks.

Geographically and spiritually, the wilderness is an exposing environment. There is nowhere to hide, no distractions. In the wilderness, all religious speech *about* God is silenced – God has to be *faced*, as He is – “I am”. No caveats or explanations, only confrontation. Here at the edge of all comfort zones, idols and illusions get radically stripped away. This is why the prophets in the Old Testament consistently refer to the wilderness when the people of Israel forsake the God who saved them. Their message is – don't forget that you are in fact utterly dependent on God for everything. Don't let riches or status or comfortable lifestyles make you forget where it all began. Repent, repent – turn around, turn around. Face your creator, face your liberator.

Why does the writer of Mark's Gospel insist that *the* good news of Jesus Christ begins here? I had never really considered this question properly before preparing this sermon. On one hand, it fits with the wilderness as a place of revelation and confrontation with God through the Hebrew Bible, a place where the people of God are tested and formed and purged. In this context, it is fitting that the gospel of Mark begins with the wilderness – it is the place where it all began for God's people. By identifying Isaiah's “voice in the wilderness” with

John the Baptist, the gospel writer seamlessly integrates the good news of Jesus Christ into the longer story of Israel's salvation history.

But the teensiest problem arises. We are here today in Brancepeth, in 2023 – a beautiful village which seems a far cry from the wilderness of John the Baptist or the deserts of Sinai. Can we hear the good news of the wilderness here too? Can we hear John the Baptist at all, or is he too far away – lost to us in the depths of history – a strange, difficult man, squashed into a two-dimensional Christmas story? Our culture has so long been saturated with the idea of Christmas as a time of joy, comfort and family that it makes these angular, pointy readings about wilderness repentance a little jarring. I for one have never seen a picture of John the Baptist on a Christmas Card. What a picture for the mantel piece, complete with a camel jumper and some locust wings stuck in his teeth.

Can John the Baptist's cry reach us?

Let's hear the gospel text again. "So John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." A baptism of repentance. Phrases like this just sort of wash over me most of the time – weird Bible speak. While I'm sure you all do, I often don't think about precisely what it means – and not just in the sense that I literally don't understand the words sometimes, but I'm not sure what it means for my life, how I can relate to it.

Baptism of repentance. In a Christian context, baptism has a pre-loaded meaning, loaded with the life of Christ. But baptism in a more general sense means initiation, and often into something difficult. There is a reason we have the phrase in English, again rooted in John's proclamation, a "baptism by fire". Repentance is also much stronger than apology, even a sincere one – repentance means realizing something is wrong and reorienting your life, seeing the world differently. So, to paraphrase the gospel reading, we could say that John's "baptism of repentance" is "a difficult reorientation."

It is difficult because John's call is so demanding: he is saying we must learn to face "life at the limits" in the wilderness, to live exposed and vulnerable before God, facing our sin, warts and all, our frailty, our fears. And to seek him and declare our need of him as He is – the great I am – source of all life and love. For some, this first step is easier – if you have lost a loved one or had your life turned upside down, you probably have tasted something of the wilderness – you know what it means to face life and death. For many others, the first step feels

impossible – why should I go into the wilderness, when I can just as easily distract myself, remain safely ensconced in the walls I have built, with full larders and a guard patrolling? Our society is more than happy to provide plentiful distractions, particularly now that we have screens in front of our faces or close to our fingertips at almost every moment.

But it is only here, in the wilderness, where the stakes are high and we are being as honest as possible, that we can hear the voice crying in the desert as one who brings *good news*. John the Baptist tell us today, here in Brancepeth in 2023, that the Lord comes. When we enter the wilderness, when we risk true honesty with God and stake our whole life on Him, we are not left abandoned. This is the good news – that God’s judgment does not pounce on our exposure or taunt our vulnerability. His judgment is a healing salve – it might sting a little at first, but it brings salvation. He is like a skilled surgeon with a scalpel, fighting for the life which He gave to us.

Responding to John’s call to reorient our lives, difficult as it may be, is both the invitation and the warning of Advent.

Get ready. Go into the wilderness and do the difficult honest-to-God work of repentance.

For each one of us, the wilderness will look different. God knows our stories. Where are we hiding from God? What are the golden calves in our lives that need to be melted? Only you and I can answer these questions for ourselves. And part of John the Baptist’s message is that this is a matter of urgency. We have only to look around us in our society and the world at large to see the effects of refusing to enter the wilderness, of refusing repentance when it is called for. All the rage, pride, lies, greed and fear of our own hearts gets exponentially multiplied, black muck gushing through predatory economics and cynical politics.

And into all this, we hear the call of John the Baptist, like the cry of a falcon soaring over the desert, piercing our hearts. The Lord is coming, the judge before whom none can stand on their own merit. As the prophet Isaiah says, there is no place to hide – not in the valley or in the mountains – **all** will be exposed in the light of His judgment. And the good news is that he is merciful. His judgment saves us from the treadmill of sin and death, from the circular noose of evil and violence. The one who comes will be the Shepherd who leads his people to

peace, to promise, who knows our frailty from the very interior of our flesh, having taken it on himself, warts and all. Get ready.