



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

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Advent 2 Year B: December 6, 2020

Sermon Title: "The Wilderness"

Gospel Text: Mark 1:1-8

Places have real power in our lives. I don't always remember names and dates, but *places* resonate deeply in my memory. I vividly remember the classrooms in the old elementary school I attended in Kane. I remember the room in the little house in Clarion where I proposed to Linda, and the humble little apartment we made a home right after we got married. I can recall the hotel room in California where a little baby was placed in our arms and became our daughter. I remember the exact room I was in, in our home in Maine, when we got the phone call that our son was born. And I remember the table in the dining hall at Antiochian Village where I first met Pastor Lynn as, unknown to me, he began sizing me up to ascertain whether I might have what it takes to be a pastor at Grace.

You'll notice that none of the places I mentioned was inherently special or sacred. In fact, if I were to show you photos of them you'd undoubtedly conclude that they are ordinary, unremarkable, and maybe even boring. But think about some of the places emblazoned in *your* memories. I suspect they are similar to mine – ordinary places that suddenly became sacred ground because of what happened there. The relationships that unfold in those places, the connections we make, the transitions that begin, and the events we experience give importance to a place, and a place helps shape our understanding of what happened.

Throughout history, God has consistently used *places* – even the most ordinary and unremarkable of places – to demonstrate the breadth, depth, durability, and significance of God's love. And so that's why on this Second Sunday of Advent, before we get too preoccupied with the peculiarities of *John the Baptist* or even the content of his *message*, I want us to explore our Gospel lesson from the perspective of place.

That place of course is the *wilderness*. As we read in verse 4, "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness." In doing so, John was fulfilling ancient prophecies that had been proclaimed hundreds of years earlier by Isaiah. In John's case, the *wilderness* was a barren region east of Jerusalem, near the Dead Sea. If you've ever been there, you know how desolate this area appears, even today. It's a harsh place to live or eke out an existence. It's not the kind of place you want to be stranded in, and it's surely not the kind of place where you'd imagine God delivering a message that would change *lives*, change the *world*, and indeed change *eternity*. The notion of *Good News* in the *wilderness* makes very little logical sense.

That's because throughout the Bible, the *wilderness* is a place where God typically seems absent. It's a desolate, deserted area, devoid of civilization; an area that's beyond the limits of settlement and governmental control. It's an untamed, disorderly, dangerous region; a place wild

beasts call home, and a place where savage, nomadic tribes threaten any and all outsiders. The *wilderness* is a place of hunger and thirst; a place of demons and wild, threatening creatures; and a place of lawless raiders, howling noises, and frightful winds.

The *wilderness* is not normally a place anyone willingly chooses to live. In the Bible, it's a place of last recourse, a place renegades and refugees go to escape even more terrifying dangers. The Israelites entered the wilderness only to escape slavery in Egypt. At times, they questioned whether slavery might be *preferable* to the wilderness. The wilderness was a bitter place for them, one they *forever remembered* and *forever hated*.

Often times the wilderness looked just as most of us imagine, as a windswept, barren desert. But within the Bible, the wilderness was defined less by the geographical characteristics of the *land* and more by its lack of safety and security. Wilderness areas might just as likely be sparsely settled pastureland or even wooded forests. What really defined the wilderness was the inherent danger one experienced there. It could even be a place of perilous temptation, as Jesus himself would discover.¹

And so with all this in mind, we can now fully grasp the astonishment that everyone must have felt when God's *messenger*, God's *Good News*, and God's *hope* appeared in that most unlikely of places: *the wilderness*.

But why? Wouldn't it have made so much more sense for John the Baptist to share God's message in a less dangerous place? Send him to Jerusalem, where more people might hear him. Send him *somewhere else* – *anywhere else* - where the people might be more refined and less desperate, more sophisticated and less dangerous, more prosperous and less impoverished. After all, the only ones who might hear a message in the *wilderness* are *wilderness people*, people who are just as untamed, unrefined, and desperate as John himself. *Did God make a mistake?!*

No! Of course God did not make a mistake. God knew *exactly what* the wilderness was and *who* dwelt there, so God quite intentionally prepared and sent a voice to cry out in that wilderness. God quite intentionally tasked that messenger with a message of Good News – a message of repentance, forgiveness, mercy, and hope. God intentionally unleashed a message that was as untamable as the wilderness itself, a message that would straighten highways, lift up valleys, make mountains and hills low, level uneven ground, and make rough places plain so that the Good News of Jesus Christ, *planted there in the wilderness*, might spread throughout all the land and eventually throughout all the world.

There in the wilderness – the *wilderness* of all places – God's glory would be *revealed* and God's people would be *blessed* so that hearts might be mended, sins forgiven, hope restored, souls uplifted, and all of creation sanctified and made holy. Because if the Bible tells us anything, it reveals that Christ comes to his people even in their most *broken of states* in the midst of their most *desolate places*. *Jesus is a wilderness savior*.

What was true in the days of John the Baptist remains just as true today. Our Jesus continues to be a *wilderness savior*. Earlier in this sermon I asked you to recall some of your

most special places. But now I want you to think about your wilderness. Because whether or not we realize it or admit it, we *all* pass through wildernesses in this lifetime.

When the world seems overwhelming and dangerous, *we find ourselves in the wilderness*. As we move from health into sickness, *we find ourselves in the wilderness*. As our treasured loved ones pass away, *we find ourselves in the wilderness*. In the midst of moving, job changes, divorces, and other transitions of places and relationships, *we find ourselves in the wilderness*. When we wonder if we are hopelessly broken, forever lost, or eternally forgotten, *we find ourselves in the wilderness*. As our faith stretches, bends, and risks breaking, *we find ourselves in the wilderness*. As we question our identity, our worth, our direction, and our purpose, *we find ourselves in the wilderness*. And especially during this awful pandemic, when so much of what we've known and valued has been upended, we find ourselves confused and uncertain *in the wilderness*. To be human means that eventually we all find ourselves in the *wilderness*.

But if you hear nothing else today, hear this: Jesus is with you in whatever wilderness you find yourself. You are remembered, and you are loved. So turn away from your distractions. Let go of your false gods. Put away your fears. Good News has arrived. Hope has returned. Here in the wilderness, your Savior walks with you. Cling to him. Amen.

Citations

¹. For more information about the Biblical concept of "wilderness," see *The Oxford Guide to the Bible* (1993), pp. 798-799.