



Advent 2 2014: St. Christopher's West Vancouver
The Rt. Rev. Melissa M. Skelton

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
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.

A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

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.

The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

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!"
See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
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.

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

It was late summer in Maine. I was driving a couple “from away” who was visiting across a causeway leading from Deer Isle to the bridge that connected the island to the mainland. It was high tide. On the left of us was a tiny uninhabited island jutting up from a blue cove. On the right was a channel of very deep water called Eggmoggin Reach studded with the last summer sailboats straining east. The light was golden, signaling that our precious Maine summer was fading and that fall followed by winter was not far off.

From the passenger’s seat came a woman’s rapturous voice. She was asking me a question. “What is it like to live in a place where you are *bathed* in beauty?” she cooed.

My mind went blank. Whatever was she talking about? Yes, Downeast Maine was beautiful. But its beauty was incidental to something much more gripping, much more powerful, and much more dangerous.

Downeast Maine, at least for me was about living right up against the sheer power of nature. It was about discovering who I was and what I was made of as I daily lived in the presence of something much bigger than myself.

Downeast Maine was not about living in a picture postcard—beautiful, static and safe. It was about living in the wilderness.

Today we hear in Isaiah and in our Gospel that the wilderness, with its desolate landscape and its fearsome creatures, is the place where God’s people become prepared to receive God in a new and transforming way.

We, of course, have heard this before. During the Sundays following Pentecost, we tracked the people of God in their wilderness wanderings after they were brought out of their

bondage in Egypt. What we learned then was that they did not enjoy the deprivation of life in the wilderness, something that perhaps rings true for us as well. Few of us would knowingly choose to live in the wilderness (and I mean this both literally and metaphorically), for the wilderness is challenging, lonely and fearsome.

Then why is it a means and a place of transformation in our spiritual tradition? Why is it the place God calls the people to wander through in the book of Exodus? Why is it the place through which the people return to their homeland in the book of Isaiah? And why is it the home of the wild one, John the Baptist, the forerunner and the one who prepares us for the coming of the Holy One of God?

Belden Lane, an expert in the Christian desert tradition, wrote a book entitled *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Mountain and Desert Spirituality* that explores these questions.. According to Lane the desert fathers and mothers sought the wilderness because of two basic reasons: first, they knew that God was most easily found in a place without distractions, and, second, the desert was a laboratory for dealing with the self, which was their other major spiritual project.

According to Lane, the desert asks two questions: What can you learn to ignore? And what do you learn to love? In other words, how do you let go and what do you hold onto?

Lane tells this story out of the desert tradition:

A young man goes to the great monk Abba Macarius and asks him how to become a holy person. Macarius tells him, "Spend the day tomorrow over at the cemetery. I want you to abuse the dead for all you're worth. Throw sticks and stones at them, curse at them, call them names—anything you can think of. Spend the whole day doing nothing but that."

And so the young man does this. When he returns, Abba Macarius asks him, "What did the dead people say out there today?"

The young man reports that they didn't say a thing. They were dead. Macarius replies "Good. Now I want you to go back tomorrow, and this time spend the day saying everything nice about these people. Call them righteous men and women, compliment them, say everything wonderful you can imagine."

So the young man goes back the next day, does as he is told, and returns. Macarius asks him what the dead people said this time.

"Well, they didn't answer a word again," replies the young man.

"Ah, they must indeed be holy people," says Macarius. "You insulted them, and they did not reply. You praised them, and they did not speak. Go and do likewise, my friend, taking no account of either the scorn of men and women or their praises. And you too may be a holy person."

This story gets at the questions Belden says are characteristic of the desert: What will we be able to ignore? And after deciding to ignore certain things, what will we give ourselves to fully?

And so to turn the questions to you: What are you in the process of trying to constructively ignore in your life? What do you want to give yourself fully to?

In the midst of all the activity of this season as it's celebrated in our culture, these are the wilderness questions we are being asked to hold within our minds and hearts and to listen for in the silence and stillness we experience in our Sunday morning liturgy and in our more contemplative Evening Prayer liturgies during the week.

What will we ignore in life, and what will we give ourselves to fully? And where, of course, is God in any of this?

A few months after I bought a house in Downeast Maine, the sky opened up and dumped snow on the entire state. I drove up from my place in Portland with a snow shovel and two dogs in the back seat, determined to spend the weekend in my new (old) house and excited that I had finally made the decision to leave town life and live in the country. I had no idea that we had just bought a house in the wilderness.

As I drove north and then due east, though the roads had been plowed, the snow got deeper and deeper and deeper. By the time I crossed the bridge to the island, I was looking at more snow that we had ever seen.

When I got to the farmhouse, what I came to was a place literally buried in snow. It was then late in the evening.

I got out, pulled the car over to the shoulder, took out the snow shovel and began my work. I worked feverishly like a fiend, fueled by all manner of fearful voices on my head: "How had I ever thought I could live here? What had I done? What did my friends really think about my having done this. Was I going to be OK? Would I die out here?"

I worked until I had cleared a place big enough to pull the car into our drive. After pulling the car in I got out and stood there for a moment. And then I walked in silence to the back deck of the house. Once there I sat down on a snow bank and looked down into the field leading to the cove. The old apple trees stood snow-covered under a full moon. Everything was silent and still.

It was there in that place, in that space, that all the fearful and frantic voices drained out of me, leaving me empty and finally open, ready to receive what was being offered to me.

And what was offered to me was peace, born in the silent and austere beauty of that place, through the fresh, mysterious presence of the one who is both creator and patient companion, the one whose days are a thousand years long.

During this Advent season, I invite you to find a way to abide for a time in the wilderness. For though it may be fearsome, it is the place where God chooses to be alone with you, his beloved. It is the place where he sits beside you in the silence, takes your hand and guides you into a world that is your home.