

Advent 2C
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
December 5, 2021

Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 1:68-79
Phil 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

I speak to you in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Blessed greetings of Advent to you and yours. Here we are at the second Sunday of Advent, a Sunday that is appointed each year to consider John the Baptist – a strange character indeed. The gospels tell us that John had an unusual diet of locusts and wild honey, that he lived in the wilderness and that his wardrobe consisted of clothes made of camel hair – though he did have a leather belt around his waist. Probably not the kind of guy that any father would like to see come to the door for a first date with his daughter.

Yet John's words are particularly apt for us today as they were then. Prepare he urges. Prepare. The things that we do to prepare vary, of course, with the event that is to come. Getting out the suitcase is part of the preparation for a coming trip. Getting out the highlighters, reviewing class notes, and finishing the assigned reading is part of preparing for final exams. Many of us are in the midst of preparations for celebrations with family and friends – decorations going up, gifts being bought, menus being planned, homes being cleaned and tidied.

But John was talking about a different preparation altogether. He proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, a ritual washing and cleansing. A ritual by which we become more attentive, more mindful of what is happening in our lives. Following this ritual served to re-orient oneself in relationship to God and to one another. That is what repentance really is – it is not saying "I'm sorry." It is shifting our whole focus from that which leads us away from God to that which puts us in relationship with God and each other. And, John urged, do this because something very important is breaking forth. Next week we'll hear some more about John's words to the people gathering around him; some of the ways that the preparation he urged looks and how we live into it.

But today, I would like to focus on a small phrase in our Gospel reading – in fact, it is so small that I have often read right over it. In the second verse we hear, "The word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness." Yesterday, several of us gathered together under the leadership of Pastor Rick Armstrong of the Lutheran Counseling Services in Winter Haven to consider our life together as a community of faith. We touched on many topics in our time together. We talked about communication, healthy ways that we express our thoughts and ideas with one another. We talked about these twenty months of pandemic, a pandemic that seems to have no ending, a pandemic that has changed our lives individually and collectively. We considered how it is that God works in these times as well as in the "good times." We talked about changes and transitions – how we navigate them, how they challenge us, the fear and apprehension that can result.

And, one of the images throughout our conversation and time together was that of “wilderness,” the wilderness that accompanies change. Wilderness it that time after the ending of one thing and before the beginning of another. For me, wilderness was that time after Earl had died and before I was settled in my new home and parish in Nashville. Wilderness might be that time after one has lost their job or has resigned and before there is a new one. I think about recent headlines of Kevin Strickland who was wrongly imprisoned for 42 years and recently released exonerated of the crimes for which he was punished. Entering current society at the age of 62 after being imprisoned since 1979. He is in a wilderness – one thing has ended and the new thing has not yet been fully revealed or realized.

Think about wilderness in the holy Scriptures. Perhaps the most common of these is the story of the Exodus – God heard the cries of God’s people, sent Moses to liberate them, they crossed the Sea of Reeds and then came the wildernesses of the Sinai Peninsula. And they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years – not 39+1 – but forty meaning “as long as it takes.” They had left Egypt, an ending, and were heading to the Land of Promise, a new beginning, but had to go through the wilderness.

Let’s think about what we know about that wandering. There was discouragement, blatant sin and idolatry, anger, frustration. In fact, there was a number who wanted to give it all up and go back to Egypt where it wasn’t really so bad, was it? Then Moses sent 12 of them, one from each tribe, on ahead to scout out the Land of Promise near Jericho. And they came back reporting that it was indeed a rich and bountiful land but ten of them said they would never be able to enter it because it was so well fortified, the people who lived there were giants – the Nephilim – so fear-producing that the spies said, “we are like grasshoppers compared to them.” Two of them, Joshua and Caleb, said, “Wait! It is the Lord who will bring us into the land.” For the forty years of wandering, God was present with his people – in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

And there is the story of Hagar, handmaiden to Sarah wed to Abraham. Hagar was treated dimly by Sarah and on more than one occasion fled the cruelty. One of those she was in the Wilderness of Shur despondent and despairing. And the Lord came to her with words of hope and encouragement right there in the middle of the desert. And she was shocked at the Lord’s presence. And she named God – You are El-Roi, the God who sees me.

Yes, my friends, in the wilderness, whatever your wilderness has been or is, whether you are suffering in it or coming to see the other side or if it is painfully remembered, even if you are shaking your fist at God, you are seen and known and loved.

There are some facts of life that are unmistakably true, right? Change will happen, it is inevitable – and, yes, we talked about that yesterday as well. It’s been said that two things are certain – death and taxes. Well, make that three. Change is certain as well. And when there is change there has almost always been an ending of some sort – a death, a resignation, a move. That which was is no longer the same. An ending. And because of that ending, something new can come. Jesus said that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies there is no harvest. Without death there can be no resurrection.

I daresay that here at Grace and indeed in our community and country, we collectively are in a time of wilderness. Things that seemed so certain almost two years ago, are less so now. Those days and times have ended. And as the pandemic continues to rage, we may have little idea of how things will look ahead. You have heard me say over these months of pandemic that we will never go back to the way that it was in March 2020 when things changed so drastically. And we may feel some of the things that the Israelites did as they wandered for forty years – pray God, let it not be that long! – we may feel frustrated, at loose ends, despairing. But the God whom we love and serve is the God who sees – El-Roi.

Together as a community of faith we are preparing for what is ahead – we are praying, talking, sharing, wondering. And in the midst of this we are mindful of our call to share God’s love with each other, our community and our world even in this in-between time of transition and change. Because we serve the God who sees us, we can live in this time of transition in a spirit of hope – not that hope that says, “I hope the rain holds off until we get home.” But the hope of which St. Paul writes in Romans – hope as the confident assurance that God is with us, that nothing can separate us from God’s love; hope that we hold on to during the storms and wildernesses of life; Advent hope that is ours as beloved children of God.

And we hear these words of Gospel – “the word of God came to John in the wilderness,” John the son of Zechariah, John the eater of locusts and wild honey, John the wearer of camel hair, John the son of old man Zechariah and old lady Elizabeth, John who was proclaiming that something new was coming about. The reign of Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip and Lysanias and all the others – all that the world held dear – power and influence and wealth – all of that was about to change. And something new was coming about. Get ready! Prepare! Even in the wilderness God is near and God sees.

Thanks be to God!