

Sermon: Finding a Way in the Wilderness
2 Advent, Year B
Matthew 3:1-12

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In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness.

Sin, judgment and redemption!

Not exactly cocktail party talking points, not exactly what most of us discussed at the breakfast table or are eager to contemplate as we order gifts on line or as we decorate our homes with fresh greens. And yet this is the full focus of John the Baptist (JtB) in our lectionary for today: sin, judgment and redemption. This prophet, on the margins of society, out in the wilderness, is alarmingly direct, powerfully focused on addressing the human condition and the power of God.

JtB is not worried about stepping on toes as he insults the religious leaders who come to him. He's not worried about offending others who come to him. This truth teller is clear about his own identity, which is one pointing the way to Jesus. And underneath this bold and bothersome message about sin and judgment is a most important foundation of redemptive love.

So why the wilderness? And why is the wilderness being thrust upon us as we make our Christmas preparations? Why would we choose to go out into the wilderness when we are eager to get on with Christmas joy? In scripture the Wilderness was a place of renewal where the revelation of Torah was given, and a place of judgment – where a stiff necked people perished due to their lack of faith. Wilderness is a place of both judgment and redemption. It is a place of encounter with a Holy God. And it is a place of growth as the people of God learn to depend on God, learn to grow in faith.

And if we are honest with ourselves we recognize that often there is a sense that all is not right with the world, all is not right within ourselves. What are the howling winds in your own lives, what are the haunting thoughts in your own minds, what are the dark secrets of your own heart? The reality is that we all have hurts and fears, worries and frustrations, guilt and insecurities. We long to know what the future holds and struggle with the unknown, we long to be in control and struggle when we are reminded we are not in control. In the wilderness we have opportunity to confront the ways in which we have not been faithful to God, all the ways we come up short.

Many of us carry guilt, worry, anger and frustration around with us, sometimes not even aware of how much it colors our world. But JtB is not interested in our guilt, anger or frustration, except as a means to an end – the end being redemption, the end being our healing and wholeness, for that is the desire of God. John's interested in offering a *way in the wilderness*. One way of looking at Advent is that it is a season of accountability, a season where we prepare for Christ by acknowledging God's love for us and asking how can we more effectively open ourselves up to that power of love? JtB's interested in the power of God and God's presence here and now. The kingdom is at hand!

During the next five minutes of silent contemplation, I invite you to consider where God is in your own wilderness situation. How are you hurting, either through choices you have made or through other circumstances? What has drawn you away from God's love and peace? How can you follow JtB's lead to recognize that the kingdom is at hand, that God is eager to redeem you with his love, God is eager to lead you in, through and eventually out of the wilderness? As you contemplate, imagine being held by the strong but gentle arms of Christ.
Amen.