

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
The Geography of Wilderness
Advent II
Matthew 3.1-12
December 4, 2022

We are, today, on the 2nd Sunday of the season of Advent, which means we're on the 2nd Sunday in the church year which begins with Advent and then, as we follow it along, takes us to the Feast of the Incarnation, which we know of as Christmas, and then on to the season of Lent and the Feast of the Resurrection, which we know of as Easter and then on through the rest of the year. Everything begins with Advent.

Or I should say, begins again. In calendars, earth's seasons, and the church liturgy, time is cyclical. It goes around and around. For the church, we go around each year within a three-year cycle of readings, called, poetically, years A, B, C. We're now in the 2nd Sunday of year A, which means we're reading today and through all this year, the gospel of Matthew. Matthew is year A, Mark is year B, Luke is year C, which we just completed. Readings from the gospel of John are included throughout all the years. Now, you can read whichever gospel you want whenever you want to. But for the church's readings together, this year we follow Matthew's gospel of Jesus Christ.

That's important because the gospels are all a little different from one another. They tell the story of Jesus from slightly different perspectives and with different emphases. Matthew, for example, loves to quote the Old Testament to show how Jesus fulfills the prophecy of a coming Messiah and therefore that God is faithful to God's promises. We'll see a lot of that this year. Also in Matthew, and in Matthew alone, will we come to Jesus' invitation in chapter 11, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Our youth are memorizing that verse this year as they read Matthew and talking about it with them helped me remember what a meaningful invitation this is. To come to Jesus, whose yoke is easy, whose burden is light. We'll think more about that verse as we go along and as we come to it in the middle of next summer. It will be a guiding light for us all year.

Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. In our reading this morning in Matthew's gospel, chapter 3, one may wonder if John the Baptist missed the memo.

There's not much about John that suggests an easy-going spirituality or a lightly burdened discipleship. He 'appears' in Matthew 3 preaching in the wilderness with a fiery urgency, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Dressed in nothing but camel hair and subsisting on a diet of locusts and wild honey, John must have appeared unlike anything anyone had ever seen since the old stories of the prophet Elijah.

So, here's John, dressed in the vestments of meager survival in the wilderness, preaching a prophetic message of repentance and preparation, and baptizing for the cleansing of sins in the flowing water of the Jordan River. There are two things, in particular, Matthew wants us to see about John in the wilderness for this morning.

First, people flocked to him. They came from the cities and suburbs, the civilized parts of town, out to John. No one made them. No one asked them. They just came. They went like butterflies insane for the light. Why? Why did they go out there? They had everything they needed from a religious perspective already right where they were. The temple was in Jerusalem just a short walk away--the temple that had been rebuilt in a major King Herod-sponsored Roman reconstruction project just a generation before. It was beautiful—everyone said so—they said, “If you’ve never seen the temple in Jerusalem, you’ve never seen beauty.” And the temple was attended regularly by professional priests who were on duty every day to receive visitors, process sacrifices, and pray absolution for sins according to their authority and traditions handed down for centuries. They had a gleaming new temple, a fully-staffed priesthood, and the Pharisees--the teachers, spread out into all the neighborhoods and small communities to interpret the scriptures and teach the ways of God. They had the whole system Church and state, so to speak, vocation and construction, conspiring to maintain the framework of the institution of religious practice.

So why would people leave that to go out to crazy-looking, locust-eating John out there in the wilderness--spitting fire, submerging people in water, and proclaiming, without institutional authority, that through baptism sins were being washed clean? How strange, right? I don't know this for sure, I can't get in their heads, but . . . have you ever needed, like knew you needed, to get back to something basic and raw? To tear something big down to build something good back up? I mean in your own life. I'm talking about, when you come to a moment in your lives when your hunger for God is raw, but what's served on the menu is too overcooked or bland. When the fire that burns within us compels us to search for someone or something burning with the kind of fire we crave. I think John must have appeared to them like a bush burning but not consumed in their eyes. They went and they took off their shoes and got in the river because all around him was holy ground and holy water.

The geography of wilderness beckons when our spirits already inhabit the existential grittiness of the wilderness. One commentator puts it this way, “John calls them away from the holy city and the temple toward the wilderness, a place of danger and testing, but also the place where Israel was formed, where God's provision and care were demonstrated, and the people grew ready for God's promises. In the wilderness, away from the trappings of human traditions and powers, we may see and hear God's call more clearly. John's ministry in the wilderness thus calls the people to remember who they were before their kings started building cities and temples, even before they had kings at all.” (Stanley Saunders, *Commentary on Matthew 3.1-12*, Workingpreacher.org)

So why did they go out there?

Maybe part of it was a judgment against the empire's intrusion into their faith and their lives.

Maybe part of it was a rejection of the institutionalization of religion into buildings and budgets. But I think the biggest part of it was they just knew they *needed* to go. John Muir said, “the mountains are calling and I must go.” I think the people who went out there just had to go or they wouldn’t be able to breathe. They knew they needed the raw, gritty God of John, a God of judgment and mercy, an undomesticated deity who could move mountains and set bushes aflame, the God of the river and the hill and all who dwelt there. They needed someone to say out loud the quiet thing nice religious people don’t say in tame religious company: God is a burning flame and a roaring river, and a quaking mountain. And God’s coming. And you better get ready.

Some people can’t hear that or aren’t ready for it. Sometimes in our lives, we aren’t hungering for that type of message, and we’re not ready for it. But sometimes, we are, and when we are, nothing else will do. To some, John and the wilderness seem like very strange incursions into holiday mirth. But for some, John is exactly what they need. Those whose souls whisper in the quiet parts of the day: “I can’t keep going on the way I’m going on. I need a change, and I need a God who’s big enough for my tears and my anger and my sin and my hopes and my passions and my whole self.” The wilderness was the geography of a God just that big, and John was the herald of a kingdom of heaven just that urgent.

They went, so many went because they **had** to go. That’s the first thing Matthew wants us to see.

The second is this, there is something about **the wilderness that makes it the way to Jesus**. Each of the three church years in the gospel readings follows one of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In each of the biblical gospels, John the Baptist heralds the coming of Jesus. Each gospel has its own personality and its own emphases, but in each of them, John heralds the way to Jesus. Each year in Advent we have 2 Sundays of gospel readings about John the Baptist, which means that each year in Advent on our way to Christmas, we go through the wilderness. In other words, the way to Jesus goes through John and the message of repentance and preparation, which is a statement far more expansive than a commentary on the order of lectionary readings. We are prepared for Jesus, it seems, by being stripped, by being washed, by being loosed of all of that which we are carrying and which smothers our spirits—even when all of that are things we have worked very hard to amass and hold on to.

I was talking with a young minister some time ago who was feeling a lot of anxiety about her competence and whether she was charismatic enough to be a pastor. I said to her, “You are a bright light. You charge the air when you walk into the room. You are smart, a hard worker, and you’re clearly dedicated. You’re going to be good, very good. Don’t undervalue competence. I want to encourage you; you have what it takes to be good at this.”

I could have just stopped right there, with a word of encouragement to her about her gifts and capacity for the work she wants to do and the person she wants to be, and maybe I should have. But something said I needed to say something more, something equally true of life to someone who was a high-capacity, high-caliber person. And so I did, at the risk of

discouragement. I said, “There’s going to come a time when everything that you do well isn’t going to be enough. You’re going to feel your inadequacy in the deep part of your soul that you don’t even know is there yet. You will come to a point when everything that you’ve relied on, everything you’ve earned, gained, and worked for won’t be enough for you or for the people around you anymore. And then, it’s at that time when you’ll finally become a pastor. You’ll become a pastor for people for whom this is their experience, too. And here’s the secret: it’s the experience of almost everyone in life.” We have a name for that experience. It’s wilderness. When you go through the wilderness, nothing but the Gospel is enough. Nothing but the Gospel will do for you, for them, for anyone. It’s hard but the promise is this: the way through the wilderness is the way to meet Jesus.

Advent, of course, prepares us for Christmas. Christmas is a day of great joy, even external to the church celebrated in all kinds of ways, but above everything else, Advent is a **religious event** for which spiritual preparation is necessary. In this season of Advent, we are guided by John’s preaching: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!” We prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight when we seek the highest love-giving and love-making when we submit our restlessness to the wilderness, and submerge all that is within us into the river of life. The way to Christmas goes through the wilderness experience.

The church’s liturgical wisdom says to us, “You’re heading toward Christmas. You’re wanting to meet Jesus. Wonderful. Before you do, go spend some Advent time with John and come back when you’re ready. We all need some places in our hearts scrubbed with the steel wool of prophetic preaching; we all need some cobwebs in our attention cleansed by the winnowing broom of urgency. We need to feel the sharp blade of the ax laid to the root of the trees of our pride and arrogance.”

“There is one coming after me,” John says. He says it as warning; he says it as hope.

It seems at first like John missed the memo of Jesus’ easy yoke and light burden. But, you know, actually, he’s the one who helps us see just how heavy-laden we are and just what burdens we carry and force those around us to carry for us. The wilderness prepares you to travel light with only what you need to be who you are being made to be. This is a severe grace, this preparing the way of the Lord, this bearing fruit worthy of repentance, this holy longing, this sacred fire. But we are redeemed by Advent fire.

May it burn in our hearts that we may say, thanks be to God.

Amen

