

Braving the Wilderness: 1. Into the wilderness

Matthew 3:1-6, 12-4:1

December 2, 2018

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The first Christmas that Amanda and I were married, we lived in Duluth. We had moved there from Dallas Texas and decided if we were going to live this far north, we had better find ways to enjoy winter. For Christmas that year, a family member had given us money, and finding a sale the day after Christmas, we were able to stretch the dollars and purchase cross country skis. One afternoon, a few days later, I took my skis and told Amanda that I had heard about a ski trail and would be back later. The ski trail was located on the other side of the St. Louis River, outside of Superior. Mine was the only car as I pulled into the parking lot. I put on my skis, found the entrance to an intermediate trail – and I was off. It was a beautiful afternoon. A picture-perfect afternoon with light snow falling, and I wasn't paying much attention to where I was, mostly I was trying not to fall – and a whole lot sooner than I anticipated, it was getting dark. I came to an intersection in the trails, I took the trail that I thought would take me back to my car and at the intersection, I made what I thought was the right choice. And then, I stopped. I looked around. And I had absolutely no idea where I was. I could not retrace my path because I didn't remember how I had gotten to where I was. And it was quiet – completely quiet – and in the time I had been skiing I had not seen another person. Cell phones had not been invented yet or that would have been my next thought. I had not told Amanda where I was going or when to expect me to return. And suddenly, I felt very alone and vulnerable and scared. It was a moment that I would come to understand as a wilderness moment. Though I've never again been lost in the woods, I've experienced the wilderness – and I'm guessing you have too. And if you haven't, you will. Alone. Vulnerable. Scared.

Last spring I read Brene Brown's book, *Braving the Wilderness*. Dr. Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston who has spent the past 16 years studying courage, vulnerability, shame and empathy. She also has one of the most viewed TED talks on the Internet. In her book, she uses the wilderness as a metaphor. Most often wilderness serves as a metaphor to represent everything from a rugged environment with dangerous trails to a place of refuge and beauty where we seek renewal. But in her book, wilderness is also a metaphor for that place of vulnerability that we cannot control, but as we journey through the wilderness we can discover a place of belonging. As we begin this season – these four weeks until Christmas – as we begin the season, I'd like us to think about the wildernesses of life.

We know the wilderness. Maybe you discovered a lump or a blood test detected something was not right and further testing led to a biopsy. But you were told not to worry – which, of course, only intensified your worry. You're told that most lumps turn out to be nothing but as you return to your doctor to receive the report, you brace yourself for the worst – and then you hear the word – cancer – not somebody else, but you. Suddenly lost, alone, and so vulnerable. You're in the wilderness. Or it was the unexpected news – today is your last day – you are without a job – and you have planned for a lot of things, but not this. Suddenly lost, alone, and vulnerable. Or the person who meant the world to you has died, or a relationship that you depended on has ended. Or like Brene Brown, you've spent a lifetime feeling you are not good enough. Or in this season, you look at the calendar and know that Christmas is coming but it is the last thing in the world that you want to do. Like my long ago experience in the woods, you look around and you don't know where you are, all you know is that you feel totally and completely alone.

That's where we pick up this morning's scripture. **The voice of one shouting in the wilderness**. This is John the Baptist, known as the Baptist because as we will learn, he is

baptizing people in the wilderness. Born months before Jesus, likely the cousin of Jesus, John has been sent by God into the wilderness. Matthew tells us: **He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke** Five hundred years earlier, the people of Israel were living in Exile. Forced from their homes, the city of Jerusalem destroyed, taken by the army of King Nebuchadnezzar back to Babylon and for the next 50 years they served the people of Babylon. They were slaves – but prophets such as Isaiah did not let them forget that even in Exile God had not abandoned them. And when Cyrus of Persia took control of Babylon, the Jews were able to go home – but a generation had past, the people who left Jerusalem would not be the same people to return and between Babylon and Jerusalem there was a vast wilderness. Yet, from the wilderness there came a voice: **“Clear the Lord’s way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God! Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level, and rough terrain a valley plain.”** There will be no obstacle too great, a highway will appear that will lead you through the wilderness and you will return home. And it was so. And now 500 years later, it is John the Baptist – the voice in the wilderness, announcing a way forward through the metaphorical wildernesses of life that will lead us to the fullness and presence of God.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” It is what God is doing. With the birth of Jesus, God has entered the world – here comes the kingdom of heaven. And things will be different – which is what we want, if we are in the wilderness that is the last place we want to be, but no one survives the wilderness without being changed by it. To come through the wilderness, it is important to know who we are and whose we are. People were drawn to John and his message of change. They came for baptism. John plunged them into the water of the Jordan River and they were changed. They knew who they were and whose they were.

Of the four gospels, only two (Matthew and Luke) make reference to the birth of Jesus but all four talk about what happens in the wilderness. Jesus himself went into the wilderness – to be baptized. Surely Jesus knew who he was and whose he was. But when I’m in life’s great wilderness, it is a comfort to me to know that Jesus chooses to go where I am. When Jesus was baptized: **Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him.”** When Jesus showed up, the heavens opened up and when heavens open up, you will never be the same again. When heavens open up and you know that God has blessed and promised to be with, the road ahead, even when it’s the wildness will not be the same. When heavens open, we know the power and glory of God. The truth of who you are is cemented in your soul. This knowing that you know that you know! No matter what you are facing, you are loved: I am a child of God and God is happy with me. Put that on your bathroom mirror and read that every morning when you wake up and every evening when it’s time to sleep. I am a child of God and God is happy with me. What if you filtered every comment you receive and every experience you have through this truth. It may not remove the wilderness – even after his baptism, Jesus went further into the wilderness. The truth of who you really are may not remove the wilderness, but it will bring you through it.

Jesus could have skipped his baptism, but he came to earth to show us the way. I may be in the wilderness but I know my help comes from the Lord.

That January afternoon, alone and vulnerable and scared, I came to the next fork in the path and I waited. I thought if I waited in a place where several paths came together, maybe someone would come – and eventually two people came. They weren’t looking for me but they

knew the way. They'd been where I was, and they were able to lead me out of the woods and coming home never felt so good.

Days ago, I knelt at the bedside of someone in his own wilderness journey – a journey that every one of us will take one day – and when heard my voice, he reached for my hand and held on tight. I made the sign of the cross on his forehead and said: you are marked with the cross and sealed as God's own forever. We all need that hope: You are a child of God and God is happy with you. Prepare the way, knowing that God never let's go. And on this first Sunday in Advent, lean into that hope, the profound gift of Jesus – Here comes the kingdom of heaven. You are a child of God and God is happy with you. And no matter where are – even if it is the wilderness, lost, alone, vulnerable, there is a way and a truth and a life that will lead you home.

Grow Pray Study for the Week of December 2, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Dear God, as we begin our Advent journey, show us the power of hope to guide us ever closer to you. Let your light shine once again in us and through us to all the world. Amen.

Monday, December 3

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, comfort my people! says your God. Speak compassionately to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended, that her penalty has been paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins! A voice is crying out: "Clear the LORD's way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God! Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level, and rough terrain a valley plain. The LORD's glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together; the LORD's mouth has commanded it."

Observation: Chapters 40-55 in Isaiah are seen by most Bible scholars as written from exile shortly before Cyrus of Persia captured Babylon and allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem (539 BC). They had been living in exile for nearly fifty years, encouraged by voices such as this one in Isaiah. Today's reading begins as if God is instructing his heavenly court to proclaim a message of comfort and hope. In verse 3 another voice calls for a sacred highway through the wilderness that will lead the people back to Jerusalem. Hundreds of years later, John the Baptist would recall this message, calling for another highway – this one leading to God.

Application: In this season, we are invited to examine where we are and how far we may be from God's presence. God has never wandered – not from the exiles in Babylon, not from those who came out to hear the message of John the Baptist, and not from you. God is waiting to do something new in your life. What will you do in this season to prepare a path through the current-day wilderness? God is ready!

Prayer: Faithful and loving God, thank you that you never give up on me. Let me hear again your message of comfort and hope. Help me to prepare the way so when Christmas comes I will be ready for what you want for me. Amen.

Tuesday, December 4

Scripture: Psalm 130:1-8

I cry out to you from the depths, LORD— my Lord, listen to my voice! Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy! If you kept track of sins, LORD— my Lord, who would stand a chance? But forgiveness is with you— that's why you are honored. I hope, LORD. My whole being hopes, and I wait for God's promise. My whole being waits for my Lord— more than the night watch waits for morning; yes, more than the night watch waits for morning! Israel, wait for the LORD! Because faithful love is with the LORD; because great redemption is with our God! He is the one who will redeem Israel from all its sin.

Observation: In Psalm 130, the psalmist said he was crying “out of the depths.” The CEB Study Bible says, “The term describes the destructive forces that diminish life and confront people with deadly threats.” Yet even in a time like that, the psalmist wrote, “I hope, Lord...I wait for God's promise. My whole being waits for my Lord” (verses 5-6). This resilient, persistent hope is one of God's promises for Christmas. It's the reason we light the candle of hope on the first Sunday of Advent.

Application: Waiting is hard – we're action-oriented people. But this waiting is connected to hope. It is knowing that God will act. When have you had to wait for God as you journeyed through your personal wilderness of isolation and vulnerability? What helps you firm up your trust that God WILL act, in eternity if not now?

Prayer: O God, you know I don't like to wait. I wish you would make everything right – and right now! This Advent season, remind me that waiting for you, in hope, is one key to the good life you have for me. Amen.

Wednesday, December 5

Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-7

Nonetheless, those who were in distress won't be exhausted. At an earlier time, God cursed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but later he glorified the way of the sea, the far side of the Jordan, and the Galilee of the nations. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned. You have made the nation great; you have increased its joy. They rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest, as those who divide plunder rejoice. As on the day of Midian, you've shattered the yoke that burdened them, the staff on their shoulders, and the rod of their oppressor. Because every boot of the thundering warriors, and every garment rolled in blood will be burned, fuel for the fire. A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever. The zeal of the LORD of heavenly forces will do this.

Observation: “A child is born to us,” said Isaiah's prophecy, “a son is given to us.” His words of hope rang through the years. “He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” Maybe the darkness (wilderness) wasn't permanent. In the hope of that amazing, unique birth, the promise that people walking in darkness would see “a great light” seemed worth hoping for.

Application: We sometimes overlook verse 5 of Isaiah's promise: “Every boot of the thundering warriors, and every garment rolled in blood will be burned, fuel for the fire.” The child to be born,

he said, would be named “Prince of Peace.” How can you more fully internalize the Prince of Peace’s way of life, and resolve conflicts in his way in your day-to-day dealings with others?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, just as the sun rises every morning, your light is always there to illumine my life. Help me keep my vision alert and focused for what your light seeks to show me. Amen.

Thursday, December 6

Scripture: Luke 2:25-32

A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn’t die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus’ parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said, “Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation. You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. It’s a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel.”

Observation: Simeon was “led by the Spirit” to the Temple area. The text implies that the Spirit must have also led him to Mary, Joseph, and their infant son rather than to any other parents who brought infants to the Temple that day. Luke said, “The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn’t die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” So for Simeon, this was truly a dream come true.

Application: Verse 27: “Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area.” This speaks to the importance of paying attention to God’s “inner nudges” through the Spirit. In what ways have you sensed the Holy Spirit’s leading in your life? How can you distinguish between the Spirit’s “nudges” and other impulses that may come to you?

Prayer: Lord God, I’m thankful for the story of how Simeon eagerly anticipated and welcomed Jesus. I pray that I might live my life in eager anticipation and openness to your Spirit for what you want to do today. Amen.

Friday, December 7

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-3

Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the LORD’s glory has shone upon you. Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations, the LORD will shine upon you; God’s glory will appear over you. Nations will come to your light and kings to your dawning radiance.

Observation: This beautiful poem was probably first addressed to Israelites returning from exile in Babylon. The Jerusalem to which they returned had been sacked and burned. As they arrived, it was not glorious. But God called the returned Israelites to be a light to others. God’s hope wasn’t just a show to watch passively. When the light shined on God’s people, it called them to “Arise! Shine!”

Application: Verse 2 described a situation every generation seems to face (and ours certainly does, when seemingly random acts of violence cause fear and death): “Darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations.” When have you faced a dark time? Were there people who shined God’s light for you by loving you at those times? In what ways? Who are the hurting people God wants to love through you right now?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when the world seems the scariest and ugliest, shine your light in and through me. In place of gloom, give me a spirit that shines, not only at Christmas but all year round. Amen.

Saturday, December 8

Scripture: John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being. What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.

Observation: Boldly and creatively, the prologue to John's gospel brought together the worlds of Greek and Hebrew thought. Greek thinkers saw "the Word" (Greek logos) as the force that directed the universe. Writers like Philo often personified "the logos" as the world's guiding force. In Hebrew thought, Genesis 1 said God created by speaking, and Proverbs 8:12, 22-31 said "Wisdom" was with God at creation. Yes, said John – coming to us out of the mysterious mists of eternity, the Word (Jesus) embodied all that power, wisdom and light.

Application: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light" (verse 5). God did not leave us alone in the wilderness, but came to live here – and in this world, Jesus' life created new life and light for all who trusted in him. What spiritual practices keep you growing closer to God, so that God's light keeps shining more and more brightly for you?

Prayer: God of life and light, I begin this Advent season in hope – hope that beyond the tinsel and shopping, I will find the way and the life that Jesus offers me. Thank you for coming as light into our darkened world. Amen.