

Braving the Wilderness: 2. Courage to stand
Isaiah 11:6-9; Isaiah 61:1-3
December 7, 2018
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There is often a gap between things as they are and things as they ought to be. Last week, one of you sent me the story of a boy who wanted a kitten. His parents were not so sure he needed a kitten but when the boy's cousin who lived on a farm offered a kitten, the parents agreed. And the boy felt like this was meant to be. One day, the boy laid down on the couch and the kitten jumped on his chest and as the boy petted his kitten, the kitten's eyes closed and soon it was purring and the purring penetrated the boy's heart. And the boy thought, this is the way things are and the way things ought to be. In the next moment, he heard his dad's voice, "It's time to go." As the family got in the car to go to a church activity, no one noticed the kitten had followed the boy until it was too late. The kitten met with the back tire as the car backed down the driveway and now lay motionless in the driveway. Welcome to the wilderness. Things as they are and things as they ought to be are not the same. And that's the reality of life in this world – not always, not every day, but often enough that we know the wilderness. We live in the wilderness.

Last week, I began this series by referring to Brene Brown's book, *Braving the Wilderness*. She reminds us that the wilderness is that place of vulnerability that we cannot control. But when we are in the wilderness, we have a choice. **1. We can live in pain** and we end up seeking relief by numbing it or inflicting pain on others. Or, **2. We can deny the pain** even though everyone around us can see our pain and is influenced by it. Or, the third and frankly the best option is **3. We can find the courage** to see where we are and move through the wilderness. And last week, we turned to scripture and found that God sent Jesus into this world to experience the wilderness right along with us. And what we learned from Jesus' baptism in the wilderness is that to move through the wilderness, it is important to know who you are and whose you are. There were moments in the past few days when I needed that reminder: "I am a child of God and God is happy with me." Because there are times when we find ourselves in a wilderness that is too much for us. We feel this gap between what is and what ought to be.

In the Old Testament story of the Exodus, it was Jacob and his family that left Canaan for Egypt in order to survive a famine, leaving behind what was and seeking what ought to be. And in Egypt they found food and also Jacob's son, Joseph, - and suddenly it felt as it ought to be. And then years pass – 500 years to be precise – and now they have become slaves to the Egyptians. One day God calls Moses and with God's help Moses wins freedom for the Israelite slaves. God splits the Red Sea and Moses leads them to freedom. The problem is – they are free in the wilderness. This was not as it ought to be. Freedom in the wilderness? After forty years – who wants to wait forty years? – but after forty years, they finally enter the Promised Land but even the Promised Land looks more like a wilderness.

Have you ever been to Disney World? We were there once when our children were 8 and 9 years old, and I don't know who was more excited me or them – probably me! Maybe things have changed, but after parking the car we got on a ferry for a short ride to the Magic Kingdom. We were leaving one kingdom (the one that we knew) and entering another (the magic one). And very quickly, we discovered there are no worries in the Magic Kingdom – long lines maybe, but no worries and no litter – it's all happiness. But that day in the Magic Kingdom, I learned two things. First, the Magic Kingdom costs a whole lot more than I thought it would. And second, it's not real. I've mentioned this before, but I was so disappointed in Cinderella's Castle. I was there with two little girls and we were excited to see Cinderella's Castle, but there was nothing inside.

And a lot of times that's what we discover in our lives – we have an idea or we are seeking some dream of what we hope our lives will be. It looks magical on the outside, but look beneath the surface and it isn't real. There is the world as it is and the world as it ought to be and it's not the Magic Kingdom.

Here's how the prophet Isaiah describes the world as it ought to be: **The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them.** (Isaiah 11:6) The wolf and the lamb – that is predator and prey, but not anymore. Leopard and goat – predator and prey, but not anymore. Calf and lion – prey and predator, but not anymore. They are together. Children at a time when they are the most vulnerable are not vulnerable at all but can live without fear – because we all of creation has the same purpose. Together. And after the resurrection, Christians looked at these world and realized Jesus came for this.

Have you driven through Minneapolis where Interstate 94 meets Highway 55? Have you seen the tent city that has been in the news nearly every week since people started camping there? It is unsightly and unsafe – and can we agree that no one should end up there, no one should end up without a place to call home – and yet it is the world as it is. Scripture provides us with a picture of the world as it ought to be but we don't live there – as individuals we strive for it, but when we look around, the gap between what we seek and the world as it is just seems to get wider. But then God sent Jesus. This is the season when we remember that God took on human form and moved into the world as it is. God gave us Jesus to show us Emmanuel (God with us) and to show a way through the wilderness.

The gospel writer, Luke, tells us that one day Jesus stood up in his hometown synagogue to read the scripture for that day. It turned out to be Isaiah 61 which turned out to be Jesus' mission statement. Here's what Jesus came to do – why God sent Jesus – why we celebrate his birth in this season: **The Lord God's spirit is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.** It's what happened when Jesus went into the wilderness and was baptized. He came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descended and God said – this is my son; I'm happy with him. Knowing who he is and whose he is comes with a purpose. **He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.** Poor, brokenhearted, captives, prisoners... And then Jesus adds to Isaiah's words: **Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.** In other words, I'm the one! You've been waiting hundreds of years for the world as it ought to be, but there are still poor and brokenhearted people, people who are captives and prisoners for all kinds of reasons – and I'm here to put you on notice, this is not the way it has to be. And do you remember what they did – the people who had known him his whole life? They ran him out of town. They tried to kill him.

They refused to stand with him. To stand for the world as it ought to be takes courage. Jesus did not enter the world to look around for people like him. He came to the wilderness, looking for poor, brokenhearted people, people who are held captive to all sorts of things, and prisoners (people locked away by others or themselves, for what they've done or failed to do). Do you know anyone who fits the description? Brene Brown says: "This world feels lonesome and heartbroken to me right now." And it feels that way to me. Sorted into factions based on politics and ideology, even Christians have sorted into factions and turned away and blame and rage. That's not why Jesus entered this world. This is the season to come together – to pray together, to stand together, to brave the wilderness, to learn to trust each other. That takes courage.

A few ways I see this courage to stand: It's a man who thought he could never again risk loving finds himself able to overcome his fear and opens himself up to a new relationship. A woman who always equated security with a spouse discovers after a broken heart that she can make a home by herself and enjoy it. A man who cares for his invalid wife for a number of emotionally difficult years finds after her death that he has energy for the pursuits and interests he had given up. A woman who thought she could never enter a church again after a pastor told her to stay in an abusive relationship, not only found courage to get out of that relationship but enters a church and comes alive. At another level, it's a group of teenagers who decided people in this community deserve a place to call home and so they spent a cold night in November sleeping outside so we would not overlook the world as it is. And finally, it is people, many of them right here this morning, who realized this life is not about me and have stepped into places of service, standing alongside others.

In 1864, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem that would become a familiar Christmas carol. "I heard the bells on Christmas Day." He wrote the poem in response to the despair that he saw in the world and felt in his own life. The Civil War was raging with no indication that it would end anytime soon. Then his wife was burned in a tragic accident and died. Then his oldest son was wounded in battle and left paralyzed. Yet, from the wilderness of his life experience on December 25, 1864, he wrote these words: "In despair, I bowed my head, 'There is no peace on earth,' I said: 'for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men!' But then pealed the bells more loud and deep. God is not dead, nor doth he sleep. The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail with peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Last week, I heard someone ask how we might keep Christ in Christmas. Just ask Jesus: It's simple really – feed the hungry, clothe the naked, forgive the guilty, welcome the unwanted, care for the sick, love your enemies. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

It's simple, but it takes courage to stand – in the wilderness. The world as it is – is not the world as it ought to be. But Jesus comes to lead us from one to the other.

Grow, Pray, Sturdy for Week of December 9, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Dear God, as we make this Advent journey, grant us the courage to stand with others in ways that will make for peace in this world. Amen.

Monday, December 10

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: Ancient roads had many more bumps and hills than modern American highways. So when a king was going to travel, work parties would level the highest and lowest spots on the road he was using. Based on that custom, Isaiah portrayed the work of the forerunner God would send to prepare people spiritually for the Messiah. The first section of Isaiah contains many tough messages of judgment. But with chapter 40, the tone shifts. After the pain of exile in

Babylon, God says, "Comfort my people." In this way, Isaiah reminds us that grace is always God's last word.

Application: In which part(s) of your life do you most need to hear God speak tenderly to you right now? On Wednesday and Thursday, we'll read in the gospels that Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, fulfilled Isaiah's words. Yet John and Jesus were poor peasants, in no way part of Israel's elite. How did Isaiah's image of a king coming to town help people in Jesus' day (as well as us) to grasp Jesus' royal identity as ruler of all creation?

Prayer: Lord, you have not left your people alone but promise to remain with me in all that I face. Help me to open my life to you – to prepare the way for you – so that I can receive all that you have for me. Amen.

Tuesday, December 11

Scripture: Malachi 3:1-10

Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear the path before me; suddenly the LORD whom you are seeking will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight is coming, says the LORD of heavenly forces. Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can withstand his appearance? He is like the refiner's fire or the cleaner's soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver. He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. They will belong to the LORD, presenting a righteous offering. The offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in ancient days and in former years. I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against the sorcerers, the adulterers, those swearing falsely, against those who cheat the day laborers out of their wages as well as oppress the widow and the orphan, and against those who brush aside the foreigner and do not revere me, says the LORD of heavenly forces. I am the LORD, and I do not change; and you, children of Jacob, have not perished.

Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have deviated from my laws and have not kept them. Return to me and I will return to you, says the LORD of heavenly forces. But you say, "How should we return?" Should a person deceive God? Yet you deceive me. But you say, "How have we deceived you?" With your tenth-part gifts and offerings. You are being cursed with a curse, and you, the entire nation, are robbing me. Bring the whole tenth-part to the storage house so there might be food in my house. Please test me in this, says the LORD of heavenly forces. See whether I do not open all the windows of the heavens for you and empty out a blessing until there is enough.

Observation: Like Isaiah, Malachi (who wrote some 400 years later), foretold a herald who would prepare the way for the Messiah. But Malachi also expressed a deep spiritual concern. God was calling for a major change in the way God's people did their business. If they weren't willing to change - to live God's way - then who could abide the Messiah's presence? The prophets often made people uneasy, because they pointed beyond our usual ways to God's better way.

Application: Are there any parts of verses 2-5 that make you uncomfortable? Malachi chose bold language to describe the fiscal ways of his day. "You are robbing God," he told his hearers. "Test God. Be faithful, and see if you're not blessed." In what ways might God "bless" those who faithfully act as stewards of what God gives them? How is God calling you to act in this season?

Prayer: Search me, O God. Search my heart and help me see the truth of my actions. If I am focused primarily on me, turn my focus to you so that I may see more clearly how I can bring about peace on earth. Amen.

Wednesday, December 12

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said: The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight." John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out."

Observation: The Judean wilderness is harsh and bleak. The people who created the Dead Sea Scrolls lived in this wilderness. From this rugged land came the rugged, blunt prophet John. He heralded the Messiah's nearness, and baptized those who repented. Bear in mind: "repent" means not toxic self-hatred, but a moral choice to turn around and live a new way. There was something about John's message that would draw people from the relative comfort of Jerusalem into the wilderness to listen and be baptized. Or maybe it was something missing in their lives that drew them into the wilderness.

Application: In what ways do you need to hear John's message today? In verses 9-10, John challenged those who thought their ethnic or religious heritage alone made them close to God. How can family tradition or church affiliation take the place of a living personal union with God? What do you hear in this season that could be a word from God?

Prayer: Lord, you know the challenges that I face and the wilderness experiences that remain with me. Lead me through the days ahead and help me to be filled with the peace that you offer. Amen.

Thursday, December 13

Scripture: John 1:19-34

This is John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?" John confessed (he didn't deny but confessed), "I'm not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" John said, "I'm not." "Are you the prophet?" John answered, "No." They asked, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied, "I am a voice crying out in the wilderness, Make the Lord's path straight, just as the prophet Isaiah said." Those sent by the

Pharisees asked, "Why do you baptize if you aren't the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered, "I baptize with water. Someone greater stands among you, whom you don't recognize. He comes after me, but I'm not worthy to untie his sandal straps." This encounter took place across the Jordan in Bethany where John was baptizing. The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one about whom I said, 'He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.' Even I didn't recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel." John testified, "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him. Even I didn't recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son."

Observation: The Gospel of John tells many parts of Jesus' story in a different way than Matthew does. They agree, however, that John's preaching and baptizing carried out the words of Isaiah 40. John gives us a clearer view of the deep humility with which this prophet worked to prepare the way for Jesus. John also saw Jesus as the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament sacrifices were about. The Advent season is a time to prepare to receive "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

Application: In his day (and, some scholars think, for decades after) some of John's followers disliked Jesus' impact. "Everyone is going to HIM," they said. John's reply was amazing from one so dynamic: "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). How does John's model of honoring Jesus above his own "success" speak to your heart?

Prayer: Lord, give me a humble heart so that others will see you through me. Let this be a season when you become greater in my thoughts, words, and actions. Amen.

Friday, December 14

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-3

The LORD God's spirit is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and a day of vindication for our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for Zion's mourners, to give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement. They will be called Oaks of Righteousness, planted by the LORD to glorify himself.

Observation: John the Baptist knew Isaiah's prophecies. So did Jesus, the one John identified as the Lamb of God. In Luke 4, Jesus used this passage from Isaiah as the text for a sermon he preached in his hometown synagogue. I came, Jesus said, to bring good news to the poor. Isaiah portrayed an upside-down world. In the world we know, the poor get very little good news, the brokenhearted usually stay sad, and captors seldom set their captives and prisoners free. Isaiah counted on a God's power to reverse the known order of things. Then and now, we need a Messiah.

Application: Jesus found his sense of calling, his personal mission statement, in this passage. To what extent do you, as Christ's follower, also sense that these verses are speaking to you about your purpose in life? How has God equipped you to be actively involved in helping to bring about the changed world of Isaiah's vision?

Prayer: Lord, as I prepare for this Christmas, help me to hear good news for all people – not just for some and not just for me. Prepare me so that I can be used by you as the good news to those who find themselves in a wilderness. Amen.

Saturday, December 15

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots. The LORD's spirit will rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of planning and strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD. He will delight in fearing the LORD. He won't judge by appearances, nor decide by hearsay. He will judge the needy with righteousness, and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land. He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth; by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked. Righteousness will be the belt around his hips, and faithfulness the belt around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them. The cow and the bear will graze. Their young will lie down together, and a lion will eat straw like an ox. A nursing child will play over the snake's hole; toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den. They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain. The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD, just as the water covers the sea. On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples. The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious.

Observation: Isaiah saw that the earth was suffering terribly. The poor were judged unfairly. The wicked and powerful took the upper hand. Growling killers were hunting the weak; hungry marauders were prowling at the doors of the oppressed; greedy predators were taking whatever they wanted. The lambs, the kids, the fatlings and the little children of the world were vulnerable, always in danger, always threatened, and always at risk. No global solution was visible. God answered Isaiah. The answer is in today's reading, and it's in the gospels. The answer is the Messiah.

Application: Today, we still see a cruel world where many are suffering. Hopefully, we also see the answer. That's the reason for this season. If God were to enter your life in a new and profound way this Christmas, would that change your priorities? Could God use you to bring about a peaceable kingdom?

Prayer: God, as you have provided for me, help me to reflect on how I, as part of the body of Christ, might be a blessing to others who are struggling this Christmas. Help me to emphasize your presence in this world and in their lives. Amen.