

## "THE GEOGRAPHY OF JESUS: JERUSALEM TO THE WILDERNESS"

Isaiah 11:1-10    Matthew 3:1-12

December 8, 2019    Second Sunday of Advent

York Center Church of the Brethren

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I hope you wore your hiking boots today because we are heading into the wilderness. When I think of wilderness, I think of mountains and forests, but in scripture, the wilderness is more of a desert- arid, vast, empty, rugged, rocky, dangerous. On this second Sunday of Advent we find ourselves in the wilderness with John. If you look at your map you will see that John staked his claim along the Jordan River, just north of where it empties into the Dead Sea. The holy city of Jerusalem sat atop a lush hilltop about ten miles away. As you made your way downhill from the city towards the Jordan River the land became more barren and desolate.

The Judean Desert is considered relatively small at 580 square miles. It is bordered on the west by mountains and on the east by the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. Throughout history this wilderness was a hiding place for rebels and renegades; and a home of solitude for monks and hermits.

In this remote and harsh landscape is where we find God's prophet preparing the way for Jesus. It may seem odd to find ourselves in the wilderness on our way to the baby in the stable until we remember that throughout scripture the wilderness is often the place of God's revelation. And Advent is more than just the lead up to Christmas.

In last Sunday's New York Times (December 1, 2019), Anglican Priest, Tish Harrison Warren, reminded us of the purpose of Advent in an Opinion piece entitled, "Before Christmas, Face the Darkness." She writes, *"To observe Advent is to lean into an almost cosmic ache: our deep, wordless desire for things to be made right and the incompleteness we find in the meantime. We dwell in a world still racked with conflict, violence, suffering, darkness. Advent holds space for our grief, and it reminds us that all of us, in one way or another, are not only wounded by the evil in the world but are also wielders of it, contributing our own moments of unkindness or impatience or selfishness."*

*She continues, "I'm well aware that for most Americans Christmas has less to do with contemplating the incarnation of Jesus than celebrating friends, family, reindeer, and*

*Black Friday sales. Even among observant Christians, the holiday season has often been flattened into a sentimental call to warm religious feelings.*

*Still, I think Advent offers wisdom to the wider world. It reminds us that joy is trivialized if we do not first intentionally acknowledge the pain and wreckage of the world."*

John the Baptist was a champion at acknowledging the pain and wreckage of the world. He didn't hesitate to point his finger at the ones who were most responsible for such wreckage- the religious leaders and the Roman oppressors. That, of course, made him quite unpopular with the ruling class but no doubt contributed to his popularity with the common people. He was an odd man with a hard message and yet people flocked to the wilderness to hear him preach.

They had to travel miles and miles by foot from Jerusalem and nearby towns to the middle of nowhere to hear this holy man rant and rave. In case anyone wondered if he was really a prophet of God, his clothing and his location identified him as a modern-day Elijah. He wore a tunic of camel's hair with a leather belt- just like the Old Testament prophet did. And he made his home in the wilderness, the place of revelation and revolution in the story of God's people. In his book, *THE SOLACE OF FIERCE LANDSCAPES*, Belden Lane reminds us that both "*Elijah and John thrived on the edges of culture, threatening its structure.*" That is what made them so popular---- and so dangerous.

Our Advent journey this year invites us to look closely at "The Geography of Jesus." Harvard biblical scholar Jon Levenson says that "*Geography is simply a visible form of theology.*" Talk about God cannot easily be separated from discussions of place. Where we live defines who we are, what we wear, what we eat, the way we speak, and often, what we think. It also helps to form our spirituality and what we believe. A sense of place is crucial in biblical theology. God's people are always on the move from one place to another- coming and going- trying to find their home in the world; traveling from where they are to where God wants them to be. And not always happily or willingly.

There is a reason John preaches in the wilderness and not in the Temple in Jerusalem. Cornel West wrote, "*Prophetic beings have as their special aim to shatter deliberate ignorance and willful blindness to the sufferings of others, and to expose the clever forms of evasion and escape we devise in order to hide and conceal injustice.*"

It is easier to preach against the injustice of the powers that be when you aren't beholding to them for your pulpit. John found his holy place in the wilderness because he knew that their sanitized version of the Temple made no spiritual demands on the people. Instead he went to the desert, to the wilderness where people had to make an effort to find him. If you wanted to be comfortable and safe then you wouldn't make the journey.

Belden Lane writes, *"One of the scourges of our age is that all of our deities are house-broken and eminently companionable. Far from demanding anything, they ask only how they can more meaningfully enhance the lives of those they serve."* (1)

The God of the Bible is not domesticated or sanitized or house-broken. The God we find in scripture is a fierce and loving God who leads God's people to places of unanticipated grace and demands that we take care of each other on the way. An Arabic proverb states, *"The further you go into the desert, the closer you come to God."* Apparently, John knew that to be true so he set up shop in a remote corner of the desert, preached fire and brimstone, and baptized those who were willing to turn away from the past and be transformed for God's future.

In Scripture, the wilderness is a place of grace and punishment. It is the place where Abraham and Sarah left Hagar and Ishmael to fend for themselves. It is the place where Joseph's brothers abandoned him in a pit. It is where Moses heard the voice of God from a burning bush. The wilderness was the home of the Hebrew people for forty years on their road to freedom and it was the place where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Jesus spent time in the wilderness being tempted by the devil as a prelude to his ministry. The wilderness in scripture is a place of call, instruction, fear, learning, training, threat, growth, death, and new life. It is the place where God speaks and where God is silent. It is a place of welcome and a place of despair. It is a place of justice and a place of rebellion.

So, when John showed up preaching in the wilderness wearing the latest fashions from the catalogue of Old Testament prophets, folks knew that something new was happening. And the religious leaders knew it too- and they didn't like it.

John was bold, audacious, and fearless. He knew his job- it was to prepare the way for one more powerful than he. John said, *"Everything old is about to pass away to make room for the new thing God is doing. Get on board or get out of the way!"*

Tom Long writes of John, *"The long, lost night of hopelessness is coming to an end, and John the Baptist is the rooster who awakens the sleeping world with dawn's excited cry."* (2)

It is interesting to note that only two of the Gospels in the New Testament begin with the birth of Jesus but all four open with an account of John. That shows clearly how essential John is to the story. The biblical prophets had a crucial role in the life of God's people because they told them who God is and where God is taking them. They offered a vision that made possible full life in the present, the here and now. Even though they spoke God's word of hope, they were often unwelcome intruders into the lives of God's people because more often than not, God's hope demanded change. God's prophets disrupted all

that was old, comfortable, and destructive and offered a new vision, a divine vision of the world as God intended.

Centuries before John arrived Isaiah was a prophet who preached in Jerusalem at a time of great despair and political upheaval. The magnificent family tree of the great King David had been hacked down and was reduced to nothing but a useless stump. But just when the people thought all was lost along came God's prophet to speak of new growth coming from that old stump. Into the world of fear in which they lived came God's vision of a healed and happy world where lions and their prey live in peace. It is an absurd dream of harmless snakes and safe children. It is a stunning promise of reconciliation and restoration for all of God's people.

Isaiah makes it clear that when human beings are reconciled and living in harmony then God's creation will also be healed. The terror and brutality that are so pervasive in our world will be banished and all creation- human, earth, and animal will be reconciled to God and to each other.

The world will be transformed from a place of fear to a place of joy. And it will all begin with one small, green, innocuous, almost unnoticeable shoot growing out of an old, useless, lifeless stump. Isaiah preaches his ridiculous and beautiful message of hope and justice in a time of terror and oppression. For the oppressed, it was a message that was just too good to be true. He brings a message of hope and peace because he knows the world can be better than it is. And because he knows that is what God wants.

Like John's message, Isaiah's message is risky because making change is always costly. Those in power rely on maintaining the status quo for that ensures their power. Even though we may want things to change we have to admit that we benefit from the old, deathly patterns of our culture. Welcoming God's new age requires something of us and sometimes we have to pack up and head for the wilderness to find out what it is.

Belden Lane suggests that *"Fierce landscapes remind us that what we long for and what we fear most are both already within us. Wilderness makes us reorder our boundaries and confronts us with our edges."* (3)

If we have learned anything from our biblical ancestors it's that God's people cannot detour around the wilderness but must go right through it. *"Even Jesus knows that places on the edge, those considered God-forsaken by many, are where his identity as Messiah has to be revealed. In the wilderness anything can happen."* (4)

Belden Lane writes, *"The spiritual function of fierce terrain is to bring us to the end of ourselves, to the abandonment of language and the relinquishment of ego."* (5) Throughout scripture, deserts and mountains, on the margins of society, are locations of choice in

luring God's people to a deeper understanding of who they are. God moves the boundary to restore the center- calling broken people back to justice and compassion. It is often only on the margins that we can find the true center. Lane suggests that for Thoreau, the inexplicable wilderness carried him beyond himself, beyond all illusion of mastery, into an emptiness that left him stunned, vulnerable, and open to the unexpected. Thoreau himself said, " *We need the tonic of wildness.*"

I think we are more open to God in the wilderness because we didn't create it. The wild places came into being without us. When we wander through populated, urban areas, for instance, we see magnificent buildings and monuments, museums and bridges that were built by human ingenuity and human hands. Perhaps we feel a sense of control, a sense of ownership, a sense of our own power and omnipotence because these magnificent structures are of human creation. But when we see the Grand Canyon, the Rocky Mountains, rivers, waterfalls, mountain peaks, even wildflowers- we know that we have no control, no ownership, we can take no credit for their existence. It's all God. Perhaps that realization, in those places, allows us to be more open to what God might be doing in us and in the world.

Perhaps the wilderness allows us the space to recognize the awe and wonder of our God; the One who is so far beyond us and yet as close as our own heartbeat.

We began our Advent journey last week in Jerusalem and now we are slowly making our way through the wilderness. In the coming weeks we will visit small towns as we wander into other areas of Palestine, walking along with faithful people as they make long and difficult journeys- all because of Jesus. Some will travel to find him and others will travel to give him life.

If we have learned anything about the wilderness today, I hope it is this: the wilderness can be a place of danger and fear but it is also a place of God's presence and revelation. There is no clutter in the wilderness, no distractions, no deadlines, no schedules to keep. There is only time, space, air, God. Maybe John knew that if he could get the people out of the city, away from the Temple, away from their homes and jobs and responsibilities- maybe then, they would make room for God;

maybe then, they would be able to hear his tough message; maybe then, they would be open to change, to repentance, to transformation.

And maybe we will too.

And the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them.

May it be so. Amen.

*End Notes:*

- *THE SOLACE OF FIERCE LANDSCAPES*, Belden Lane, Oxford Univ Press. 1998. P.53.
- *MATTHEW*, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox. P. 25.
- Lane, p. 37.
- Lane, p. 46.
- P. 114.
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