

## Advent 2 B (10 December 2017)

Cathedral Church of St. John, Albuquerque

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Some of you know that I spent six years as an Episcopal nun. My hardest sacrifice was not worldly possessions, not human intimacy, not even my own freedom, but the ability to leave Boston and return to the wilderness where I could breathe. When I was a baby nun, I sat on the little stool at the feet of my old novice mistress pouring out my longing for wilderness and being told sternly “Your wilderness is inside now.” Of course she was right, but that did nothing for what I called my “itchy foot syndrome!”

Every year now I disappear into a remote canyon in the Chama wilderness for three weeks of silence. No electricity, no cell phone reception, no internet, no way of communicating with the outside world, no pizza delivery guy, no one to tell me who I am. I cover the little mirror with a paper towel so I cannot see what I look like. I stop using my voice for everything except reading the psalms which I wail and shout and cry and whisper. There between walls of ancient rock I am undone, unmade, stripped bare. So far I have always been put back together again before returning to civilization. But I make no promises about returning.

Physically and metaphorically wilderness has an essential place in spiritual life. In the Bible the wilderness is the always place where one meets God. Moses first heard the call to free his people out of the burning bush in the wilderness of Midian. The Hebrew people wandered for 40 years through the wilderness while God struggled to form them into his holy nation Israel. The prophets heard the voice of God, mostly in the wilderness, commanding them to proclaim to a wayward people “Thus saith the Lord! Love one another!” Jesus also spent much time in the wilderness praying and fasting. Countless saints and sinners, desert fathers and mothers, holy people of every religion in every generation have gone to the wilderness to encounter the Holy. Wilderness is what the ancient Celts called “a thin place,” where there is not much between your puny little human self and the Almighty Living God. There is no place to hide. The wilderness doesn’t care who you are, what you’ve done, what you’ve accomplished, how much money you make, what you look like. It is a place of extremes, of danger, where death is but a breath away by heat, cold, thirst, or creatures higher on the food chain there than you.

Rockslides, sink holes, flash floods and invisible quicksand could easily hide your bones. To meet God in wilderness is also risky. In one of CS Lewis’ books of Narnia, the children are having tea with the beavers and ask about Aslan the lion. “He is a tame lion, isn’t he?” asks Susan nervously. “Tame?” cried Mrs. Beaver. “TAME? Who said anything about tame! Of course he’s not TAME! But he’s GOOD!” In the wilderness we stand in utter naked vulnerability before the Holy One who is Love. There we learn to trust that love, even if we die. Death is not the worst thing. Alienation is.

Two of our lessons today call us into the wilderness. Isaiah commands us: in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. That has always confused me a bit: why would the Creator of the universe need a straight path? Why would the One who moved as a pillar of fire by night or cloud by day over the wastelands of the desert need a road without potholes? But this is echoed in Mark to introduce this strange, wild

man of the wilderness who eats locusts and honey and is clothed in the hairy skins of camels (do you know what camels smell like? You would not want him at your next dinner party.) John is a bridge figure between the Testaments. He looks and sounds like the prophets of old but appears in the New Testament pointing always and only to Jesus, consumed with passion for God-with-us. His single message is to prepare for Christ. It is in the wilderness that Jesus comes to him at last, where John recognizes him, and we hear that deeply moving story about their meeting by the River Jordan where Jesus asks John to baptize him - but that's after Christmas and we haven't gotten there yet, in spite of what the culture around us thinks!

So why think about wilderness today, the 2nd week of Advent? We'd probably rather think about finishing - or starting - our Christmas shopping, about getting those lights up, deciding who we'll invite for Christmas dinner. This wilderness stuff works better for Lent, anyway. Temptation and purification and all that. But in all three years of our lectionary cycle we have to face John on this Sunday. Why? Can't we meet God perfectly well in Albuquerque without dragging ourselves off to some godforsaken wild place to the north? Well, yes. And no.

I have come to think that this business of making a straight, level road in the wilderness is not for God's benefit but for our own. In other words, let nothing hinder us from encountering the Holy One, for whose birth we prepare, for whose coming we yearn, into whose love we cast ourselves. But here I invite you to think of wilderness not just as a physical place. What if "wilderness" means anything we cannot control? Anything we can't dominate, bend to our will, force to fit our expectations, drag out into a cheery, happy ending. What if wilderness is illness, or severe pain, or crushing loss? Maybe our wilderness is grief, fear, the breakdown of our most precious relationship. Maybe it is a grandchild in danger or debilitating old age. Maybe it is a colossal failure. Maybe wilderness is mental illness, a severe depression through which there is no light to be seen, whose boundaries extend farther than we can see with no clear road out. And certainly we all traverse the wilderness of mortality, the valley of the shadow of death. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" says Isaiah, restoring perspective to everything. Sometimes we go into the wilderness and sometimes the wilderness comes into us.

Wilderness is where we must shed our pretenses, expose our secrets, the false images of ourselves we love so much - where can we hide from God anyway? We are who we are, as we are. All is known anyway so we might as well go ahead and confess our sins so God knows WE know them. "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid..." It's why I make you read it with me every week I preside. Welcome to the wilderness, friends, where we stand before God with open, empty hands. Wilderness is any place we are parted from our trappings, our distractions, our pretenses. It is not just a place. It is a condition that forces us to become simple, humble, repentant, and above all OPEN to transformation through the Spirit of the Living God.

This, beloved people, is why the church gives us John the Baptist every Advent NOW. Our God takes our humanity and comes out into our wilderness to meet us there. God crosses the mountains and valleys, fords the raging rivers, navigates treacherous quicksand and trackless wastes to come into our personal, human, and national wilderness to find us. Even there we are not abandoned. We may meet some strange, unsavory characters in sore need of a

shower out there in the wastelands. We may even recognize some of them as ourselves. But Isaiah then gentles, and gives us this promise:

*Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good things, lift it up; do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom.*

Do not fear, beloved. In the wilderness of your lives, prepare a way for the Lord. See? Your God comes.

Wait.