

SLD12.10.06 2nd Advent
Emory Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 40:1-6
Luke 3:1-18
Jill Oglesby Evans

“In the Wilderness, Prepare the Way”

“As it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah,” says Luke, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’” Only, that’s not exactly what Isaiah wrote. What Isaiah wrote is, “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.’”

So who all’s in the wilderness? Just John, or the people John is addressing as well?

John’s a wild man, no question about that. Not only does John live and labor and minister from the wilderness, symbolically speaking, John IS the wilderness. Smelly, dirty, raw, unpredictable, the Baptist is a funky, scary guy with a weird diet and limited social skills. A macrobiotic Ed Loring on steroids. And like Ed the Agitator, the Baptist has a rep for telling the truth with the kind of candor and volume and venom that irks and alienates his listeners. His is a wild voice, lonesome, fierce and angry; born and bred in the wilderness, and destined to die there as well. Sent to prepare the way of the Coming One, *pro prosopou sou*, before your face, the Baptist’s behavior is more like “in your face,” and there’s precious little tolerance for it in polite company.

No question but the Baptist’s voice cries from the wilderness. But who’s out there with him? Anybody else is in the wilderness needing to prepare a way out?

Well, when Isaiah pens those words, or 2nd Isaiah, as the scholars call him, *he’s* talking about a whole *nation* in the wilderness.

You see, in B.C.E. 597, Isaiah’s country of Judah is overwhelmingly defeated by marauding Babylonians who haul off Judah’s king and entourage to captivity. Ten years

later, there's a *second* invasion. This time the whole *city* of Jerusalem gets destroyed, the temple gets burned down and everybody left, including Isaiah, is carted off to Babylon. It's a very rough period in Jewish history.

By the time 2nd Isaiah puts pen to papyrus, he and his people have put up with exile from their homeland for a full generation. But comes the day when the Persian ruler, Cyrus, arrives on the scene, and when it starts looking like he's going to pretty much trash the Babylonians, 2nd Isaiah starts leaking hope: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term. Her penalty is paid."

Through the victory of the Persian armies, Isaiah believes, God's fixing to "let my people go!" At which point he writes, "a voice cries out: 'in the wilderness (of exile), prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"

Double entendre, that "making straight a highway" part. You see, every year the Babylonians have this habit of constructing special corridors along which they carry images of their pagan gods, just to remind everybody whom they're supposed to worship. So Isaiah says, let's "make straight a highway for **our** God," not so we can carry God's image, but so that God can carry **us** out of the wilderness of Babylon and on back to the Land of Promise. "Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A few hundred years go by and what do you know but that the writers of all four gospels identify Isaiah's crying voice with John the Baptist. By then the wilderness is not so much a geographic location of exile as an existential place to which God's people wander in their hearts. It's in the wilderness of their hearts that John demands God's people to prepare the way for the Lord, for someone's coming to set things straight and bring them on home.

'Course, not everybody has any idea what John's talking about. So John doesn't waste any more words to make his point. He just dunks people in the water and holds them down 'til they think they're gonna die, until some part of them *does* die, and they get the fundamental message that they're not in charge. They always come up thinking it's the Baptist who's in charge but he's quick to set them straight.

"The One who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals."

Who is he, John? *"I don't know."*

How will he look? *"I can't say."*

"What will he do?" *"I'm not sure."*

"Well, how will we know him?" *"I can't tell you. All I know is that he won't need any shouting or symbols or simulated death by drowning to prove his point. He IS the point. Where I've baptized you with water, he'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

What will **that** be like, John? *"I don't know. But I'm telling you, get ready! Prepare the way!"*

A voice crying out, "in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord." But how are we supposed to do that? How are we supposed to prepare a way for the unknown? The unknowable? How are we supposed to prepare a way for a mystery?

"Through a baptism of repentance!"

And what the heck is that supposed to mean?

"Repentance! Metanoia! A change of heart. A shift of being. Don't bother me with your petty regret, your guilty remorse. God's not looking for an apology! Forget about feeling bad about what you've done – those are baby steps! Grow up! I want insight, action, accountability. Change things! Make a move. Break out! Break

*through! True repentance is a revolution! An insurgence! A transformation of being!
That's what I'm talking about!"*

You're making it sound like it's all about what **we** do.

*"You're missing the point. Are you in the wilderness? I know you are. Many of you are. And you've lost your way out, haven't you. If you're not sure who you are anymore, or what you should be doing, or whom you should love, or **if** you can love, or what you believe, or why you should get out of bed in the morning, you've lost your way. And you're not going to find it because the way out isn't your way but God's way. It was for Israel; it will be for you. In the wilderness, prepare the way of the **Lord!**"*

Maybe John's right that a lot of us live in the wilderness. Maybe more of us than any of us imagine. In his book *Transitions*, William Bridges talks about the wilderness of much of modern western life. Says Bridges, every change or ending or loss in our lives launches us into what he calls a "confusing nowhere of inbetweenness,...a disquieting gap in the continuity of existence in which things just don't make sense the way they used to."

Here in North America, we're in the midst of so many transitions so much of the time (related to relationships, work, seasons of life) that we're often caught in what Bridges calls a "semipermanent condition of transitionality,"¹ a wilderness period after an ending but before any signs of a clear beginning. And what with our general resistance to chaos and ambiguity, these wilderness periods of transition can be times of disorientation and discomfort.

Apparently primitive societies were much better at managing such periods of transition, regarding them as necessary and natural to the process of renewal.

¹ Bridges, William. *Transitions*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Reading Mass., 1980. P. 4-5.

Arnold van Gennep, the Dutch anthropologist who, 80 years ago, coined the term “rites of passage,” remarked that primitive societies regarded these wilderness “gaps” as gateways for new forms to emerge. Gennep was the first to interpret for a modern western audience the wisdom of primitive rituals and initiations designed to accompany, guide and sustain one through the often chaotic wilderness of ending and beginning, letting go and reclaiming, of forgetting and rediscovering, of dying and living again.²

However impatient or uncomfortable we may be with this rhythm today, says Gennep, primitive cultures understand that every life-giving transition begins with a symbolic death - like the Baptist holding ‘em under water a minute or two longer than is reasonable – followed by a separation from one’s familiar place or function in the social order. (For as long as a system is working, it is very hard for any member of it to imagine alternatives.) This is Elijah fleeing to the mountains, Jonah heading to the sea, Christ’s 40-day journey into the wilderness, or your basic mid-life crisis.

But such separation typically causes disorientation. We tend to lose our bearings as to which way is up and which way is down, which way is forward and which way is backward. Ordinary things may take on an unreal quality. What used to be important may not seem to matter as much. We may feel stuck, dead, lost in some great, dark non-world wilderness, Jonah in the belly of the whale.

*“Hey, not good enough! God’s no anthropologist and I’m no shrink! For people of faith, it’s not enough just to understand the wilderness, or merely endure it. After all, Jonah doesn’t stay in the belly of the whale. The Jews do not remain in exile. Jesus departs the desert after 40 days. Too much talk about the wilderness. I say prepare the way **out** of it! And that would be the Lord’s way. In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord!”*

² Bridges, p. 86.

This wilderness of which the Baptist speaks is...clearly...wild. Untame, indecent, chaotic, out of control, at least our control, and therefore often full of dread and uncertainty. And don't imagine for a minute that only you experience it; that the person sitting next to you, or behind, or in front of you, or down the street, hasn't experienced the wilderness as well, for it is unavoidably embedded in life, especially new life. But John says there is an escape route, though not necessarily the one we might imagine. In the wilderness, says John, prepare the way of the Lord.

I feel oppressed...by white folk, black folk, men, women, my family, my parents, my work, my church.

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

I have cancer. I lost my job. My spouse doesn't want me.

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

I can't stop drinking, gambling, shooting up.

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

I feel alone, depressed, stoned, sick, dying, dead.

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

My home has been burned, my village has been bombed, my friends have been killed.

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

I cannot feed my children. I cannot house my children. I cannot protect my children.

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

My lover has AIDS. My wife has AIDS. My baby has AIDS.

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

My Son is on the cross, my Son is dying, my Son is dead.

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

Friends, there is no wilderness from which our God cannot find a way and so we do well to prepare for it. And though the wilderness knows no season, yet during the season of Advent, we people of faith willingly wait in the wilderness, preparing together for the coming of the Christ child...not just in this sanctuary of beauty and peace but in our wilderness-weary hearts as well. Not just in the sweet rhythms of community life, but in the private ravages of our personal doubt and disbelief. Not just during the delight of morning-kissed meditation but during the despair of 4 a.m. hot flashes and 4 p.m. fatigue. Not just in the calm of the season's flickering candlelight but in the press of the frantic, rushing crowds as well.

We may imagine we know who, or what, is coming, and how the story ends, but in the wilderness, not even the Baptist knows for sure. He's only clear about what we should do, how we should act:

"Repentance! Metanoia! A change of heart. A shift of being."

Or, at the very least, give to the poor, share what we have, be fair and kind and generous in our dealings, and cultivate a satisfied and grateful heart. For how better, in the wilderness, to prepare the way of the Lord?

(Wayne sings.)

To the glory of God. Amen.