

**Wilderness Spaces**  
Matthew 3:1-12  
Second Sunday of Advent  
Rev. Don Best  
Bethel Presbyterian Church  
West Union, IA  
December 8, 2019

Gospel Reading

Our gospel reading for today is Matthew, chapter 3, verses 1 through 12. Matthew gives us this story of a familiar and perhaps troubling figure, John the Baptist. You remember John, dressed in weird clothing, eating insects, and shouting out in the desert. Every Advent we hear from John, because since the early days of Christianity, his proclamation about the promised Messiah, was understood to be about Jesus. Listen again to what Matthew tells us about John, in the wilderness:

<sup>3:1</sup> In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." <sup>3</sup> This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

<sup>4</sup> Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

<sup>5</sup> Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

<sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

<sup>9</sup> Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

<sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup> "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

<sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

## Sermon

I want to start by asking you to think of a time when you were in the wilderness. Here in rural Iowa, you don't need to go too far to be in the wilderness. Maybe you were on vacation, a time when you went camping, hiking, fishing. Maybe floating down a river, or rowing across a lake. What was it like to be in the wilderness? Peaceful...restful...Isolated...frightening...

In our reading, we are told that John went out into the wilderness, that he lived out in the wilderness. We are told that John is the one that Isaiah spoke about, the "one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

It seems important that John went out in the wilderness, but why and what did it mean? What does it mean to us?

In scripture, the wilderness is pretty much any uninhabited space. Outside the city, or town, or village. Out in the country we might say. John the Baptist was out in the country, outside Jerusalem by the Jordan River.

In my studying for this sermon, it was mentioned that the wilderness was, for Israel, a liminal place. I wasn't sure what was meant by that, so after reading it several places, I checked, I googled it.

Liminal, from the Latin, *limen* which means "a threshold," is the middle part of a rite of passage. It is the between time, when a person transitions from one stage of life to another. If you have raised children, you might think of the teen years, when they were no longer a child, but not yet an adult: adolescence. I remember our sons growing up and acting very adult like one moment, and very child like the next. Or went they went away to college after high school. For four years, or so, living on campus; not living at home, but not really living on their own. Still supported by the parents, if not financially, emotionally. In this case the campus is the liminal space where the student is transformed and prepared, hopefully, for living on their own and earning a living.

In the history of Israel, the wilderness was a very important, liminal place.

Moses left Egypt and went out into the wilderness. It was in the wilderness when Moses encountered the burning bush, spoke with God, and was sent back to Egypt to save God's people from the slavery of Pharaoh.

When Moses went back into the wilderness, he led the people of Israel out of Egypt.

Out in the wilderness, the people of Israel were led by the presence of God; they received the Law at Sinai. In the wilderness, the people of Israel were transformed from a group of slaves, into a strong nation. A nation of people who grew to depend on the God that led them and sustained them in the wilderness. After their time in the wilderness Israel was ready to enter into the Promised Land and take control of the region.

The prophet Elijah, after defeating and killing the priests of Baal, fled into the wilderness where he was first fed by God and finally met God at Mt. Horeb, and was sent back to proclaim God's word to the king and people of Israel.

In scripture, the wilderness is a liminal place, a place of transition, a place of change. And, in our reading today, the wilderness is the place where John called for the people "of Jerusalem and all Judea" to repent and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. John called the people out into the wilderness, into a liminal place, into a transition from life as they knew it, to a life lived in preparation and anticipation of the coming Messiah. The anointed one who would bring judgement on the people of God. The new king in the line of David, who would save the people from the oppression of Rome, and make them, once again, the strong kingdom of Israel and the mighty people of God.

The wilderness is where John railed against the leaders of the church, the Pharisees and Sadducees, saying: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance." In the wilderness, John called the leaders of Israel to set aside the oppressive nature of their actions, as puppets of the Empire, and transform into the merciful leaders of the people that God meant them to be.

John called on the leaders and the people, to repent and bear good fruit. When we hear "repent" we usually think of asking for forgiveness, confessing our sin. But, repent, in our text, carries the sense of changing direction. Repentance is the act of turning around; changing direction and continuing in a new direction. John's call for repentance is a call to change the direction of our life and reorient ourselves toward the coming kingdom of God.

Most of us go through liminal times in our lives. Periods when things are fluid and changing. Maybe the loss of a job and preparation for a new job. Maybe when the children grow up and leave the house, transitioning to an "empty nest." Maybe moving to a new house, or town, or state. Or getting to the end of a career and transitioning into retirement. All of these periods in our lives

are wilderness places, metaphorical places where things might seem unsettled or fluid. The period of time when the old situation has ended and the next phase of our lives is just beginning to form around us. I am sure that most of you can recall wilderness spaces in your own lives.

Congregations often have their wilderness spaces. After a pastor leaves, or particularly important members move away, or die. How will the congregation continue, who will step up, who will be the next pastor, things are uncertain. In these times congregations can either struggle, or they can realize the uncertainty of the times and plan for the future; rise up and take on the next phase of life as God's community. Again, many of you remember the wilderness spaces in the life of this congregation.

But, when we hear this text from Matthew, when we hear the story of John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, on the second Sunday of Advent, the time when we are preparing for the coming of God's Son, we hear John calling us into a liminal space. Last week we heard about living in the time between the first and second coming of Christ; a liminal time for God's creation that calls for us to be prepared. Advent is the time we prepare and anticipate. Each year we are called into the wilderness by John. Each year we as Christians need to set aside the rhythms of life and consider again the full significance of what God has done, what God continues to do, and what God promises to do for us in Jesus Christ.

John's call to the wilderness, is a call to turn away from society's trappings of the season. To look away from the twinkling lights and focus on God's promises. To tune out the cheery holiday music and listen to the joyful promises of the prophets of God. To take a break from shopping for the perfect gift and ponder the coming of the greatest gift of a child.

Advent is the time when we are called to join John in the wilderness and reorient our lives toward God.

Let us pray:

God, you sent prophets, like John, to call us out into the wilderness. Help us to hear the call and recognize the liminal times of our lives. Give us courage at those times, and during this Advent season to accept the invitation to venture into the wilderness, set aside the attraction to purely commercial and profiting ways and find ways to redirect our lives back to the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. AMEN.