

Advent 2B, December 6, 2020.

Mark 1:1-8; Isaiah 40:1-11.

The good news of God begins in the wilderness. It begins out here, where we are removed from the comforts we have become accustomed to. Where the terrain is unfamiliar, and that unfamiliarity and uncertainty breed fear and anxiety. We aren't quite sure where we are, or how to get where we hope to go, and what's over the next hill feels more ominous than promising. We don't know how to thrive in the wilderness; sometimes we aren't sure that we know how to survive in the wilderness.

The wilderness is a place of uncertainty and danger. There may be wild beasts, there may be unknown people who live outside of our social norms and so, we are quick to assume, may be dangerous. There are no landmarks by which to find our way. In the wilderness, we're always at least a little bit lost, and we always feel at least a little bit unsafe.

We are in the wilderness, now. So much of our familiar life has been taken away from us, and much—though certainly not all—of what we have lost was either harmless or good. There are real dangers everywhere, coupled with the astonishing callousness of our rulers and even some of our neighbors. We may have a general sense of where we hope to go, but at least for me, how we're going to get through this winter is not at all clear. Some of us won't get through the winter. There's a lot of pain in the wilderness. There's a lot of pain here, now.

But God's good news starts in the wilderness. Even out here, where we are frightened, hurt, and perhaps a bit lost, God's good news begins. It begins as a voice, making a straight path where there was chaos, for the salvation that is coming. That voice that begins the good news is a little rough, and it doesn't just whisper soothing sounds to us. It is not a voice for singing lullabies. It calls us to repent, to turn around and amend, to change the direction of our lives. It tells us that we need a bath; it hints that parts of us may need to drown.

We want "Comfort, O comfort my people," and we will get there, but first we need to hear the call to repentance. Even out here in the wilderness and in our pain. Much of our familiar life has been taken away. We are in the wilderness. Salvation is coming, and repentance is our preparation for the new life of salvation. Because the world that is rebuilt should not be the same world that has fallen apart. The call to repentance is less about what has gone before or what is now—it is mostly about preparing ourselves for the world and the one that is coming. God's salvation doesn't want just to give us back what we have lost. It wants to transform us. It is built, always, on the pattern of resurrection, on dying and rising with Christ to new life, a changed life. Now, in the wilderness, we repent so that when we return from the wilderness, we return transformed to participate in God's transformation of the world.

John the Baptizer appears in the wilderness and calls us to repentance, but despite his stern reputation, the emphasis here is not on us being miserable and wicked. The emphasis is fully on the one who is to come, on the coming salvation. In Mark's gospel, John is just as

strange as he is everywhere else, with an odd diet and badly out of fashion clothing. But he is there to announce hope: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” He is here to announce hope. Even out in the wilderness, the light of the world is coming into the world. Out in the wilderness, we hear the message of hope, that the one who will save us is coming. That we can repent and be a part of that world where every valley is lifted up and every mountain and hill made low.

My friends, these are dark days. *And* the light of the world is coming into the world. The gospel begins in the wilderness, because it is we who are in the wilderness who most need to hear it. Our reading from Isaiah was written in exile: he cries out to a people under the heel of the Babylonian empire, ripped from their life and home. And to them, at rock bottom, he says take comfort, for God is with you and is coming. Now, at the worst moment, your salvation is arriving. John goes out into the wilderness and speaks to a people under a different empire’s heel, to people desperate enough to stream out of their cities and into uncertainty and danger to try to find hope. And there, in an unlikely place and from an unlikely messenger, it comes. All the records we have agree that God draws closest to us when we are most in need. God’s good news begins here, in this unlikely place in our lives. And in it, we have a hope that is stronger than death, that invites us even now into new life. Amen.