

Second Sunday of Advent December 6, 2020

Mark 1:1-8

The wilderness in the Hebrew imagination was challenging to define. Is it a scary, lonely place filled with demons and trials, danger and pain? Is it a place of renewal, of stripping away and being remade? A place of refuge for rebels and the persecuted? All these were images presented for the arid lands that surrounded the nation of Israel, a land that people only traveled through, a harsh landscape of wind, rock, and sand.

Wilderness is certainly the crucible through which the Israelites wander for 40 years (a generation) learning again to trust God and God's provision in their lives- Food- quail and manna enough for the day, trusting that God will provide tomorrow's food then. A school to learn to trust God's Word and in following that Word, they come to a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of abundance beyond daily needs. Of plenty for all. But they had to go through the training ground of the wilderness to get there.

With lowans and other US citizens dying in record numbers this week from the Coronavirus and daily hospitalizations nationwide at all time highs, with racial tensions and chaos around our election, we are certainly in a wilderness. One that looks more like a place filled with trials, dangers, and pain.

What are we learning in the wilderness of this year? The Israelites learned through the Ten Commandments that the way they had been living (enslaved, afraid, turning on one another for survival) was not how God had created and called them to be. Instead, God taught them to build a society together based on

trust given and assumed (you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor).

A society built on respect for the property and person of other human beings (you shall not steal, you shall not kill), a society oriented to love of God and love of neighbor.

What are we learning in the wilderness of this year about our own capacity to turn inward on ourselves? One of the very definitions of sin. Our capacity to think first of our own wants and desires and not how those affect our neighbors. What are we learning about our own unbidden and unwelcome biases towards those who don't look like us, act like us, vote like us, think like us? What are we learning about the fragility of this thing called democracy which, like any functioning society, is built on the basic assumption of trust in other human beings?

What is being stripped away from us in the wilderness of this year? For the Israelites, the wilderness stripped away their enslaved attitudes, it reshaped their wants and desires, it stripped them back to their basic understanding of who they were (created, loved, and called by God as agents of God in the world- working for justice and peace) and then it rebuilt them into a shining beacon on a hill, a nation as example to the world. One that fell short of that calling at times, that faced challenges, surely, but also one that has endured due to the steadfast love and faithfulness of God to God's people. A love and faithfulness that has been undeserved and unearned from the beginning but one that has been poured out generously to them, nonetheless.

Do we even recognize that something needs to be stripped away? That change should happen? Or are we like those Israelites who when they faced a harsh land turned from God and yearned for the “easy” life of slavery in Egypt?

Who turned their faces to the West and said with longing, “Do you remember what it was like there? Food and water in plenty. Those were the good old days” Forgetting the cost. Enslavement, being worked to death, life hanging on the whim of a tyrant.

John, like Moses, comes to the people of God in the wilderness- preaching and teaching. A teaching that cries out for repentance, a deep change of heart, a setting of a new direction.

As Christian author Nancy Rockwell points out, the road to Christmas always starts with repentance, the voice of John calling to us from the wilderness- a place of transformation. John, washing the newly repentant, those having confessed out loud their sin, who have named it...a washing of water in the Jordan, the river that marked the end of the wandering of the Israelites and the beginning their lives truly as the people of God. A mark of change.

Where do we need to repent? To change the direction of our lives? To change our minds? And how easy is that anyway? What does it take to make that change?

Science has shown that it takes between 18 and 254 days for a person to form a new habit and an average of 66 days (over two months) for that habit to become automatic. Think about it. How long do those diet and exercise programs you’ll go on in about a month last? Long enough to become a new habit? Into March?

What does it take to truly change our minds? To take a new direction in life? To change the way we live?

For the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber it was when, on Christmas day 1991, she started drinking at 10 am and woke up 24 hours later in a strange bed. But that in itself was nothing new in her life at that time. What horrified her about that moment was not the circumstances she found herself in, it was that she wasn't horrified by any of it. So, she went to a twelve-step program just to prove she wasn't an alcoholic. She stayed because of women like Margery, a leather-faced woman with a New Jersey accent who knew what it meant to get jittery from not having a drink and who knew how to keep from drinking. And it was in those meetings that Nadia connected with the faith that these people had. A faith based not on theological beliefs and doctrinal purity, but one based on desperation- knowing that their only hope of salvation lay in a power greater than their alcoholic selves.

For her, repentance, that change of direction, was never one she accomplished on her own. She writes, "It felt instead like I was on one path towards self-destruction and God pulled me off it by the scruff of my collar, me hopelessly kicking and flailing and saying, "I'll take the destruction please." And God looked at tiny, little red-faced me and said, "That's adorable," and then plunked me down on an entirely different path."

And this is the good news of God in Jesus Christ that the author of Mark is telling us. That God in Jesus comes into this wilderness that is our life, comes alongside us as we blithely say, "I'll take destruction please" and wraps us in his arms, plucks us from that path, and sets us down on an entirely different one.

That is grace, that is hope. That is the only way our hearts will be truly changed.

Nadia could not truly confront what needed to be stripped away from her life, could not see a different direction on her own. She needed the miraculous intervention of God in her life. God made flesh for her in those daily gatherings of broken human beings who had confronted their own sin, their own imperfection, their own shortcomings, and with the help of God and one another found a new path.

Nadia needed a God who loved her enough to come down. To travel into the wilderness of her life, wrap his arms around her, pluck her from that path and put her on another one. Show her the possibility of another way. It was not easy, but once on that path, with the support of other grace hardened sinners, she found her way out of the wilderness and into a land flowing with milk and honey. Life has not been all sweetness and light for her since then, but she has always known that there is another path, another possibility than the one that leads to destruction.

What are you learning in the wilderness of this year? What needs to be stripped from your life?

Can you even see how destructive the path is that you are on?

Let everyone who has ears to hear, listen!

The one who is coming is more powerful than I am. I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandal. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. I wash the outside, but he will transform the inside.

For in him God's love has come into the wilderness of this world to dwell among us. To walk into our lives, look us in the eye and say, "Follow me"! Let me show you a new path, a new direction.

In him the depth of God's love for us- unearned and undeserved- is made known. A love that comes to us, wherever we are. A love that hangs on to us even as we kick and scream that we'll take the destruction of our lives please. A love that is willing to die so that we might see a new way.

And this is Jesus, Emmanuel- God with us. The one who has come and who we wait for this Advent.

Thanks be to God.