

Wilderness Journey

Malachi 3: 1-14 & Luke 3: 1-6

Second Sunday of Advent/ 10th December 2006

In this season of Advent waiting the church prepares for the coming of Christ. We are preparing to celebrate again that day of days when God was enfleshed among us “full of grace and truth.” And we use the occasion to remember Jesus’ promise to come again. In the anticipated coming of Christ, we wait and we prepare. This is to what the lectionary texts direct us, to moments and characters who are good at getting us prepared. The most proficient are the prophets in any age who have the imagination, vision, and guts to envision the presence of God in our midst. This week, Luke draws our attention to John the Baptist, who, being Jesus’ cousin, played a critical role in leading the way to the Messiah.

He bursts on the scene, Luke tells us, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” We don’t know exactly how baptism came to be associated with the tradition of John and Jesus. They didn’t invent the ritual. There were some references to it in First Century Judaism, specifically among the Essenes. The Essenes were a reform movement within Judaism, whose followers lived in remote places and conducted ritual baptisms. We know these spiritual baths or washings were associated with the repentance done in preparation for the coming of the Jewish Messiah. By repentance we mean “changing one’s mind” or “turning around.” Repentance, like baptism, indicates a change has taken place: before, one is running from God; after, one is running toward, preparing to encounter God. Repentance also comes willingly, not in fear, joyfully because the One who is coming is bringing salvation, bringing forgiveness. Quoting Isaiah, John preaches, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” He tells us how to prepare, to repent. If there’s one word associated with John, it’s the word “repent.” This is *how* we are to prepare for the Coming One.

But I think Luke wants us to see something else. The *act* of preparation is also linked with the *location* it takes place in. Here in Luke’s gospel, the advent of God occurs in a specific place – *in the wilderness*. So that, maybe it takes going to such a place to really prepare.

Throughout Luke’s gospel the wilderness is a significant space, a place of “ambivalent ambiance,” as one scholar put it.¹ It’s the place where John is nurtured

¹ Mary H. Schertz, www.ambs.edu, a lectionary-based commentary of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.

(1:80), the place where the Word of God comes to him (3:2), and where he preached repentance (3:4). The wilderness was also important for Jesus. It's the place where Jesus seeks solace and refuge from the crowds after a series of exorcisms, healings, and preaching about the kingdom (4:42). After calling the disciples, he withdraws into the wilderness to pray. It's a place of rejuvenation. But the wilderness is also a dangerous place. It's the place where the Spirit leads Jesus to be tempted by the evil one. In Jesus' time the wilderness was a place of chaos and emptiness where demons roam. It's not some place you visited to get away from the pressures of city life. You didn't want to go there. It was scary. So it was seen as a place where both God and evil are at home – which means it's a place humans are usually reluctant to go. But that's where John begins his ministry and where Jesus arrives as an adult and where we must begin.

The point couldn't be stronger in the first couple of verses of chapter three, which are easily overlooked. "In...the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priest hood of Anna and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah *in the wilderness.*" Now why does Luke tell us all of this? Luke is pointing to specific historical coordinates, stressing the centers of political power and religious authority to drive home the point that *the word of God did not come in those places and to people of power, wealth, authority, and prestige, it came to an outsider, a no-body, who barely had a shirt on his back but was receptive to the Spirit.* Luke is very clear that the Word of God, this Wild God of Israel, shows up in these marginal, liminal places, on the edge, the places that aren't tamed or domesticated, to the wild, sometimes scary places we would prefer not to go. That's where one prepares for the Messiah. Maybe because in these wild places that life is put into perspective, we are forced to pull away, slow down, pay attention, and discover what really matters. It's striking that this is where Jesus is prepared for his ministry – on the perimeter of earthly power beyond the influence of the Roman Imperium and/or the temple in Jerusalem.

Let's bring this closer to home: "In the ...reign of President George W. Bush, when Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr., was governor of Maryland, and James T. Smith, Jr. was County Executive of Baltimore County, during the high-priesthood Pope Benedict XVI or, we could say, Joyce Tucker, moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.), or Anita Hendrix, moderator of Baltimore Presbytery, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah, or fill in your name – *where?* In rush hour traffic on the beltway? Columbia Town Center on the weekend before Christmas? Or, where is your wilderness? Where is the wilderness for us? Going to downtown Baltimore? Visiting the Cold Weather Shelter? Going on a mission trip? Learning to pray? Where

is the wilderness for you? A hospital waiting room? The rugged terrain of Garrett County? The landscape of your heart? Is it easy to name, or is it difficult?

In our society, we're so proficient at taming the wilderness, pushing it further and further away that it's tough to know where it is or how to get to it. We've "transformed wilderness into scenery,"² as Wendell Berry believes, something we might drive past and look at from a distance or maybe read about in National Geographic, but never actually enter. For the wilderness can be a dangerous place, it can take our lives (I'm thinking of James Kim who was found dead in the wilderness of Oregon this week trying to save his family. James and his family are neighbors to Jennifer Kloetzel. We were just talking about this family after the concert last Sunday evening.). To talk about wilderness includes risk and the unknown. Maybe it's our risk aversion and fear that motivates us to tame the wild places. But I wonder if in the taming we have not also cut ourselves off from precisely those places, those scenarios and situations where, as scripture tells us again and again, we stumble upon the Holy and find our lives transformed? God appears silent or absent or dead to so many in our age. But I wonder if we're not looking for God in all the wrong places. Very often those who live on the margins tell a very different story about the presence of God.

The good news is that the Word of God will not be tamed, controlled, or domesticated by our whims and fears and will be revealed and always is being revealed in the most unlikely places: like the womb of a poor Semitic woman who otherwise would have been nameless to history; or crying in a manger full of dung and straw (that's an unlikely place for God to show up); and in unlikely people (not those with power or influence or even religious professionals). Ours is a God who gets mixed up in the flesh and blood lives of ordinary people, real people, needy people, grieving people, broken and confused people, lost people who are, in one way or the other, all on the journey to *our* Bethlehem.

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² Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (Sierra Club Books, 1996).