

Sermon – Advent II – Cathedral of the Incarnation

Mark 1:1-8

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” proclaims Mark. Where does this good news come from? It comes first from the wilderness, and from the lips of a very unconventional man. It does not come from the center of power, from a throne or from a temple. The good news of Jesus Christ was first proclaimed by John the Baptizer from the wilderness, the margins of society.

Isaiah is said to have directed his prophetic message to the Israelites in the wilderness of exile in Babylon, but I can also see him proclaiming his message from the wilderness of a destroyed Jerusalem to the remnant of the Israelite people, that have been abandoned by the Babylonian conquerors.

The wilderness is typically a place of rawness, rugged and harsh that tests our human capabilities and spirit. We can think of the natural wilderness of rugged mountains, harsh deserts or snow-covered glaciers. We can also think of the wilderness of destroyed cities like Jerusalem, or today Aleppo in Syria. People despair at their predicament and seek the help of others. “Comfort, O comfort my people,” says God. Jerusalem “has served her term and her penalty is paid.” The Lord is coming and salvation is close at hand.

These words from Isaiah form the opening aria of Handel’s *Messiah*. On Tuesday evening I am going to see the New York Philharmonic’s production of the *Messiah*. The librettist Charles Jennens pens the start of this classic oratorio with this very passage from Second Isaiah. It is a dramatic opening to the oratorio and sets the scene for God’s promise of salvation to the faithful remnant of Israel.

God’s mighty acts in history follow a consistent pattern because God is true to God’s self and to God’s purpose. When the Israelites feel all hope seems lost God sends his prophet Isaiah to declare that salvation is at hand. In this historic event the revelation of God’s glory is proclaimed from the wilderness. God’s glory is salvation and salvation is the hope of mankind.

The restoration of Israel is the salvation event. Israel had been stripped of her soul when the wealthy and healthy had been captured and taken to Babylon. The faithful remnant were the unwanted people left in the wilderness of destruction and in a wilderness of despair.

Many in our community today find themselves living in an urban wilderness of despair. Changes to our society brought about by economic hardship, social injustice, mental illness, and gentrification is forcing segregation of communities. Gentrification is forcing stratification of our neighborhoods and forcing people of lower incomes out of many areas to the fringes of our city. These fringes are our urban wilderness of despair or what Ched Myers calls a “belt of misery.”

It is into these areas that we must go as people of faith to cry out for the people trapped, to bring them hope. In my work on the Bishop’s staff we have been concerned with housing

justice and the impact of our church developments on neighborhoods and communities. Our very action to try and raise funds from the sale of land could very well contribute to the problem of condemning people to the fringes of our city. We cannot be condemning our public servants, our police and fire fighters, our teachers and retail workers to 3 – 4 hour daily commutes. This is why the Trustees adopted a policy to ensure at least 30% of any development we do is affordable housing. The economic and social forces at work in our community lays so much pressure on the poor and the weak. It can feel overwhelming for us and we can be powerless to stop it.

These urban wildernesses of despair can be places of darkness, violence and anti-social forces that contribute to the destruction of families and communities. A sense of hopelessness can shroud the community like a fog and subject people to generations of despair.

However, it is from the margins, from these dark belts of misery that a slither of light and hope can emerge. It is from the margins, the wilderness, that we can really encounter self and truth if we allow God in. The wilderness of course doesn't always have to be geographical, it can be physiological, psychological and spiritual as well. Many times we can find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness wandering aimlessly, wondering why, seemingly hopeless to the weight of grief, anger, fatigue, illness or poverty.

As humans we always need to find balance in our lives. It is natural for us to seek balance or statis for this usually brings peace. When we find ourselves in the wilderness our statis can center on despair, loss, hurt, grief and pain, which can define how we live. In facing ourselves, our despair, and death on many levels we can find life, and on the cross of our suffering we can find resurrection.

Salvation is at hand and the glory of the Lord has not abandoned God's people no matter how desperate and lost we feel. The voice crying out from the wilderness is the voice that seeks to make the path from us to God easier to travel. Isaiah cries out to "prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." The people feel as fragile as grass and flowers, likely to wither "when the breath of the Lord blows" upon them.

Isaiah reminds them though to "lift up their voice with strength," "lift it up and do not fear," he says. Their God is coming to them as a shepherd comes for his sheep. The Lord will come with strength and he will gather his lambs into his arms and "carry them to his bosom."

This is the glory of salvation.

From that same wilderness comes the new cry of John the Baptizer, heralding the coming glory of salvation through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This rugged and rough preacher calls people from Jerusalem and the surrounding villages out to the wilderness and offers them salvation through the baptism of repentance. And the people listened. Their hearts opened to his message after years of oppression. And whose wouldn't.

It is telling that Mark chooses to start the telling of the good news of Jesus from this place on the margins of society, the likely wilderness of despair. Mark borrows the refrain from Isaiah

“See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.” “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” John the Baptizer is the messenger of God who came to baptize the faithful in the river Jordan, as they confessed their sins. This was the invitation to a new life, and life that would also be sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

In today’s society we too as Christians play our part in going to the wilderness and crying out for our brothers and sisters trapped in despair and separated from God. We too are the heralds of God’s salvation through Jesus Christ, the hope for recovery and restoration. This is the essence of our outreach work and our inreach work, the very essence of our faith and our community.

We come alongside our neighbor, our friend or our family member, and offer God’s salvation glory through our presence. We can help to guide the person to Jesus so that they feel spiritually restored with Jesus at the heart of their lives. To do this we often need to enter the despair of people’s lives and the sadness in which they live.

This is our calling and God will give us the strength to be heralds and messengers of God’s redeeming glory.

In this way we are all freed from the belts of misery, the wilderness of despair. We are all strengthened by God to face the mighty challenges of life, filled with renewed hope that comes from the glory of Jesus Christ, and from his incarnation into this world.

The season of Advent offers us an opportunity to reflect on Isaiah and John’s cry from the wilderness and what this can mean for us and for those around us that feel overwhelmed by life’s challenges. “Comfort, O comfort my people.” We pray to God that our hearts will be filled with God’s glory so that we too can shine the light of Christ for the people of Christ, bring comfort to them and help lead them to a new day.

Amen.