**“Walking in the Wilderness”**

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Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

My predecessor at the church was an avid camper and the youth group traditionally took two big trips to camp in tents and cook on campfires in the middle of the Texas hill country each year. When I took his place, the new intern and I looked at the youth closet full of sleeping bags and tents and lanterns and all the appropriate wilderness gear and I asked, “so how do you feel about camping?” He looked at me with wide eyes and gulped. Between us, we figured we could probably set up the tents and cook dinner, but we agreed that we were much better suited for lock-ins than camp-outs.

See, I’m not a fan of wilderness walking. I like to know where I’m going. I like nice paved roads that someone has already made straight. I’m not a giant fan of dirt. And as for eating foraged berries and bugs…no, thank you.

But this is not the only kind of wilderness we face. I mean, the world right outside these doors can seem pretty wild from time to time. Between the problems of a world that can’t seem to get along and the problems of just being human, we can find ourselves on uneven footing way too often, trying to find the faithful path through a world that doesn’t always make sense, and we don’t know what to do or where to go.

There’s these in-between moments when we see it most clearly, when everything is changing and becoming something new, they’re as much a wilderness as those literal forests and deserts. We know that we’ve crossed a threshold and maybe we know where we are headed…maybe we don’t even know that. We know we can’t go back, but the way ahead is uncertain, and the path is not clear.

I suspect that as I say this, you are already thinking about your own journeys through the wilderness.

* The waiting for a child already promised, but not yet held in our arms. The threshold to parenthood where nothing will ever be the same.
* The months of destruction and construction in a home remodel or repair, when you know what it will be but what it is is somewhat bewildering.
* The summer between high school and college, where you’re on the cusp of a new thing, the first steps into adulthood, but still waiting.
* The season between one job and another, whether you planned it or not, whether you know where you’re going or what is ahead is still to be determined.
* The time when a loved one becomes ill and what the future holds is not yet uncertain but will certainly never be the same.

The story of the people of God is full of these in-between, liminal spaces. Whether it’s a divine calling to leave home for a distant land, a wandering through the desert in search of a promise of freedom, living in exile far from home, or living in the economic chaos and oppressive regime of a powerful empire, the entirety of the story of God’s people is one of wilderness walking. So much so that when Mark calls on the ancient scriptures at the beginning of his gospel, he actually combines at least three different passages from the Hebrew scriptures into one. We hear the promise of a messenger sent ahead of Moses and the people of God in the desert…Malachi’s promise of the messenger that would go ahead and purify the temple…and Isaiah’s suggestion that the people of God build a highway for God who lead them home from exile.

And now Mark is sharing the good news of a new threshold. The beginning of something new, something good, in Jesus Christ.

Now Mark doesn’t seem to have time for flowery narratives, for the stories of shepherds and mangers, wise men and angels. He gets right to the point. This guy, Jesus, the cousin of John, is a game-changer. He has made it possible for us to know the kingdom of God. And this is just the beginning, the first eight verses. Reading ahead and knowing this story as the Easter people, we know that, because of him, the kingdom is actually here all around us, already a thing, but sometimes hard to see and not yet completely realized.

So, we look to the story of John the baptizer, who appeared in the wilderness as a guide on the way. He starts with a baptism in water, calling for repentance. This dunk in the river is a first step, a show of willingness to be open to a relationship with God. But John knows that this is our human action that is preceded and followed by God’s own action. John says, “I baptize in water, but the one that comes after me will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.” It’s a covenant, a two-way promise between God and God’s people. We hear that covenantal language in the scripture Mark references from Isaiah…comfort, O comfort my people, says your God…God claims us and we claim God. And in that moment, those who take the plunge are called to abandon their old way of life and live in ways that are so often at odds with the world.

This baptism that John offers is an invitation to wilderness walking. We are to step out of the ways of this world that so often worship money, power, and comfort over the ways of Jesus, ways of love, inclusion, and grace. We will walk through this wilderness, preparing the way of Lord wherever we are, even when it’s uncomfortable, we don’t know exactly where we’re going, or there are roadblocks in the way. No matter what, our lives will never be the same. This doesn’t exactly seem like good news. But we, like those crowds who left the city and flocked to this strange guy in the wilderness, we are hungry for the grace we find in the water and are hope-filled by the Spirit that calls us to live in ways that are radically different.

We actually return to our baptism every week in our confession – weekly turning away from things that separate us from God, accepting God’s mercy, and affirming our commitment to the wilderness walking. We will return to the font, remembering our baptism over and over and over again and being healed and transformed for kingdom living right here and now until it is complete in our death, and we are safe in the arms of Jesus in the kingdom of heaven.

So, we are wilderness walkers, journeying through our lives, keeping our eyes peeled for glimpses of the kingdom, and preparing the way for the Lord that we know is coming.

So, in Advent, the beginning of our church year and the time when we remember the beginning of the breaking in of the kingdom, we have to ask ourselves, how DO we prepare for the coming of the Lord? Well, first, we open ourselves up to see it. We remember the call of John the baptizer to turn away from the things that separate us and see the world through a lens of grace. Glimpses of the kingdom are all around us. Moments when the world is just the way God wants it to be for us – a community where everyone’s gifts are valued, everyone knows their worth, and all work as one to complete a world of peace and harmony.

Sometimes it’s just a moment. A moment that seems brighter and more vivid. A feeling of peace that washes over you. The smile of infant, the sunrise and sunset, the weed that grows up against all odds in the crack of the sidewalk, the random phone call from a friend that comes at just the moment when you needed it most, the shared breath of the choir and music that speaks to the soul. In the midst of the wilderness, it’s a shaft of sunlight that makes it through the trees. Notice and name them.

Train your eyes to see the kingdom right here. But remember that covenantal language. The miracle of Christmas is a promise that God, Emmanuel, is with us in the wilderness. In our baptism, we are called to be wilderness walkers, bravely looking for the places where we can break it open and reveal the kingdom that is all around us knowing that Jesus is truly with us in this work.

John literally became a wilderness walker. He was preacher’s kid. His dad was a priest in the temple. By all logic, John should have been there too. But he refused to stay within the walls of the church watching and waiting. He knew that worship happens in the wilderness. That all our life can be worship when we do what we practice in our life together in this place at every place with everyone…the gathering of beloved community, the repentance and forgiveness in the water, the feeding at the table, and the good news proclaimed for all.

Instead of just waiting patiently, we are called to actively break open spaces where the kingdom can shine through. It’s hard work and sometimes it’s feels like we’re clawing our way through the brambles. If I lift up the voices of the marginalized, befriend the ones that no one values, include the commonly excluded, I take the chance that I will be shunned. But for those people, the kingdom has shone through. So we claw at the wilderness and let in the light.

And it’s hard to know what to do when the wilderness is such a tangled, thorny mess. We look at systems of racism that are complicated and layered. If I give up my power to make a level playing field for another, I make it harder for me. I take the risk that I might not get through unscathed. But having seen the hope of justice, we hack our way through the branches that blot out the light and make places of justice and light in the midst of the world.

Like John, we are called to go to the wilderness places of this world to show, even just for a second, what it could be like. To give hope in a hurting world.

When we go out, braving walking in the wilderness, not just waiting for Jesus, but finding the glimpses of the kingdom and tears them open, making space for others to see it and live in it…then we are preparing the way, leveling the playing field, smoothing the rough places, so that the glory of the Lord can be revealed and all people can see it together. And that’s good news.

Amen.