



SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

In the wilderness

LUKE 3:1-6

IN THE WILDERNESS

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If we could launch ourselves backwards in time, and read this morning's gospel text with the ears of an ordinary person from Judea, 2000 years ago, in that ancient time and place, we would think: same story, different day. I mean, we'd be pleased, because by then, it'd been nearly 500 years since God's inspired word had come to anyone.

But if we were hoping for something new, something ground-breaking after such a long silence, something that would make a real difference to us and in our world, we would read John's introduction and think, same old, same old. Nothing new here.

But we'd be wrong.

John the Baptist's introduction only sounds like a return to the old way of doing things. John is, in fact, a new kind of prophet for a changed and changing world, reversing the old traditions and patterns in favour of a new way for God to speak and act among us.

A prophet's job, historically, is to speak God's word at just the right moment, to the people who need to hear it. Often that word is a reminder of the laws or commands that God has already given his people – a whole chunk of the Old Testament, the first big section of the Bible is God's rules for living and worshipping well – and a lot of the rest of it is God's prophets, his chosen spokespeople, re-delivering the relevant parts of those rules at the opportune kairos moments.

The goal is always to redirect God's people, away from their dangerous or cruel or unwise behaviour, and back to the path of following and trusting God. When a prophet speaks on God's behalf, it's God intersecting with the flow of human time and history. And that's why the recording of the beginning of a prophet's work takes care to define the political situation into which he speaks. It happens again and again in the Old Testament; and it happens here, too, with this A-list of earthly powers.

That list of names is basically the people in charge, the people who have the political and religious clout to affect change in the known world. You've got the emperor of Rome, Tiberius; the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate; then the three kings or tetrarchs – each given a third of Judea to rule over by Rome. It's kind of like our federal, provincial and municipal government today, but much bigger and with no checks and balances in place to curb the enthusiastic wielding of their absolute power. And just to round things out, you've got the two high priests, in charge of the religious aspect of the Jewish people. In those seven names rests all the power, the authority, the historic lineages, the wealth, the muscle...these names and offices are what power looks like in the ancient world.

And John, too, makes sense as a prophet, in the old tradition. John has a historic lineage of his own, coming from a family of priests on his father's side, and on his mother's side, from the Levites, the ancient tribe of priests, established thousands of years earlier, in the time of Moses. In a different life, at a different point in history, John would most likely have been a temple priest himself, like his father, like his mother's ancestors since time immemorial. But instead, at this opportune kairos moment, the Word of God came to John, calling John to be a prophet, in this brief interval between Jesus' birth and the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

So here comes another prophet, the latest in a long line, off to argue with kings and rulers, holding up how God wants them to lead us against what they're doing, and pointing out all the ways that those seven powerful men are getting it wrong.

That would be the familiar, expected pattern; much of the first half of the Bible operates precisely like that. Sometimes it worked, setting the people's leaders and through them, all the people, back on the right track, following God; often, it did not work very well. But that isn't what happens now at all.

For those of you who know about John the Baptist's life, yes, he will eventually end up in King Herod's dungeon, and end up preaching truth to power while he's looked away in there, like so many Old Testament prophets. But that is not how John begins.

This time, the Word of God is not for the A-list of earthly power; it's for the people, all the people.

John's prophetic call is to proclaim the Word of God at the grassroots level, to ordinary men, women and children, inspiring a movement from below rather than trying to encourage top-down change. This is a complete reversal of how prophets normally act, a complete reversal of how a period of social and religious change was typically embarked upon. John is doing an old thing – proclaiming God's Word at the right moment to the right people – but he's doing it in a completely new way.

So John will leave the wilderness behind, and return to the cities and towns and villages of Judea, travel through the countryside and along the seaside, with his message of preparation and change. But before we leave the wilderness behind, it bears asking: what was John doing in the wilderness? Did he need to be there to hear God's Word?

What image appears in your mind when I say "wilderness?" I'm guessing your mental picture of wilderness is either of an unspoilt natural landscape, ideal for a vacation, or a dangerous, inhospitable environment, ideal to look at on TV from the comfort of home. Whether you imagine the wilderness to be a place of wonder and beauty, or of danger and emptiness, well, it's all correct. The wilderness is all of those things. The wildest wilderness I've ever visited has to be Kluane National Park in the Yukon territory, back when I was a teenager. The mountains and glaciers were completely alien to this north-eastern Ontario girl, as was the midnight sun, the wildlife, the wide-open river valleys...the whole experience was amazing. And the wilderness of the national park was all of the things a wilderness can be: beautiful and remote, inhospitable and adventurous, a nice place to visit for the day, but not an easy place to find the necessities of life, once you've run out of bottled water and granola bars.

The wilderness is a dangerous, risky place to be, if you can't go home when you're ready to leave.

In the Bible, the wilderness appears often in the lives and history of God's people as a place of vulnerability and danger; as a place of hunger and fear, a place that it is very easy to become lost in. The most famous wilderness in Scripture is the desert through which God's people wandered lost for forty years as they journeyed from enslavement in Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land.

But there were other times of wilderness, too, that individuals experienced: Moses, until he met God in a burning bush and experienced his own prophet's call; another prophet, Elijah, running from royalty who were enraged at the word God had for them; the apostle Paul, between meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus and taking up his church-planting ministry; Jesus himself, not too far in the future from John's call in the wilderness this morning, would also spend forty days in the desert wilderness.

I could go on; in all cases, the wilderness was an in-between place, an experience, to be journeyed through. In all cases, the wilderness journey ended, not after so many steps through shifting sand or over rough paths were taken, but rather once a spiritual journey had been taken, too. The wilderness was inevitably a place of hardship, hunger, spiritual and physical stress, and loss – but it was also the place where God appeared, where God spoke, and where God provided.

The wilderness is where and how God's people learn to depend upon him. The wilderness is one of the places where God draws near; and when God draws near, things start to change.

So John was likely drawn to the wilderness, seeking meaning and direction, knowing the circumstances of his own birth, knowing that in the wilderness, God speaks to his people and to his prophets.

And whether John went because God urged him to go, or because John himself was seeking God, either way – God spoke, and John returned from his wilderness experience a changed man with a message that heralded even greater change.

In how John went about his prophetic work – travelling from place to place, speaking to ordinary people from all walks of life, rather than to kings and emperors – John prepared the way, showing them how Jesus would go about his own ministry. John also prepared their minds by introducing key ideas that would underpin Jesus' message.

Our Scripture reading used the words “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” It’s a bit of a mouthful; but in its most basic sense, a baptism of repentance is all about change, and the forgiveness of sins is all about peace, being brought back into a thriving, life-giving relationship with God, and finding spiritual wholeness, connection and new meaning in that relationship. John’s job was to prepare the way for those things to happen: to prepare Jesus’ way into the world, and to prepare the people to receive him into their lives.

The most exciting and evocative part of our Luke reading this morning is how John begins. There’s something really adventurous and anticipatory about the image of a voice crying in the wilderness, promising incredible, earth-shaking transformation: valleys filled, mountains and hills levelled, crooked roads made straight...a highway punched through a wild and challenging landscape, made straight and wide and true for the coming of the Lord. It’s a description of radical transformation and change, so dramatic that what we’re seeing is a reversal of the earth as it was: peaks flattened and valleys lifted up, a way ploughed through an impenetrable, labyrinthine wilderness. John is actually quoting another prophet, Isaiah, from a long time ago. These words – so exciting and promising such change – would have been as familiar to the ordinary people of Judea then as the Lord’s prayer or the 23rd psalm are to us.

When these words were first spoken, God’s people were in exile: taken captive at the end of an invasion by neighbouring Babylon, in fact, nearly everyone had been taken from their homes and cities, from the Promised Land that God had led them through the wilderness to find, generations earlier. These words, spoken in the wilderness of exile in a foreign country, promised an end to that exile and a journey home. And they also promised radical transformation, a complete reversal of what was, as the Lord began to draw near and act for his people.

John’s message of repentance encouraged a similarly radical transformation of the hearts and minds and lives of the people who heard him. To repent means to radically change: to turn completely away from old, harmful and hurtful ways of thinking and living and to turn toward God, and live a new life in Christ. For John to equate repentance and forgiveness with a change as radical and transformative as an end of exile and as a mountainous landscape levelled, that tells us just how deeply preparing our hearts and lives, and the world, will change things as Jesus draws near and makes his way in.

John's opening salvo, his first go at the proclaiming of God's Word as the forerunner of Jesus, has three important things to tell us. First, it emphasises again what we reflected on last Sunday: that when God draws near, things change. John gives us an idea of the depth and nature of that change, and it is significant: lives spun around and reoriented, shedding the old and being transformed as we repent and as our relationship with God – our peace – is restored; world thrown into upheaval, as reversal after reversal occurs.

John also tells us something about journeying in the wilderness. Whatever form or circumstance comprises our own wilderness – the global pandemic, a personal or family struggle, a sense of being lost in between your life yesterday and what your life might become tomorrow – time in the wilderness is often accompanied by a sense of longing. Longing for certainty in the future, when it's disappeared in the present; hope for a new life, or a yearning to return to how things were. Whatever your wilderness, John shows us and reminds us that above all else, the wilderness is where God appears to us, to care for us and guide us.

And finally, John tells us about what to do when God – when Jesus – draws near to us. Prepare the way of the Lord; and be willing to be changed by Christ's coming into the world, and into our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.