

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Mark 1:1-8

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1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," " 4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Isaiah 40:1-11

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Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. 9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

“Crying in the Wilderness”

Punctuation is very important. For instance, commas placed or not placed after a series of words listed in a sentence can make all the difference. Maybe you may have heard about the panda who walks into a restaurant, sits down and orders a sandwich. After he finishes eating the sandwich, the panda pulls out a pistol and shoots the displayed bottles of wine, and then stands up to go. "Hey!" shouts the manager. "Where are you going? You just shot up my place, and you didn't pay for your sandwich!" The panda yells back at the manager, "Hey man, I am a PANDA! Look it up!" The manager opens his dictionary and sees the following definition for panda: "A tree-dwelling marsupial of Asian origin, characterized by distinct black and white coloring. Eats shoots and leaves." Or maybe you've seen those T-shirts that read: "Let's eat, Grandma" and below it, "Let's eat Grandma" and below that, "Commas save lives."¹

Yes, punctuation is important. In the case of our two readings today, it is not a comma that changes things, it's a colon. In Isaiah we read the words of the prophet who was encouraging the people for their arduous trip from exile in Babylon back to their homeland in Judah. Isaiah says, "A voice cries out: (colon) 'In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord...'" It's a directive. "Go to the physical wilderness, that's where a way must be made for the Lord". Now, in the Gospel of Mark, we read a bit different version of the Isaiah's words. Mark says, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: (colon) 'Prepare the way of the Lord...'" This instead describes the prophet, John the Baptist, already out in the wilderness, calling people get themselves spiritually ready to receive Jesus. I think this is sort of interesting, don't you? Being directed to head to wilderness to change and cause change, versus being directed to change and cause change by one who is in the wilderness.² The first is very clear that it is in the

¹ Jill Duffield. "Second Sunday in Advent: Punctuation Matters." Dec 10, 2017.

² Jill Duffield.

actual world's wilderness that change must be made and the Lord received. The second addresses I think a spiritual wilderness, our hearts and minds. It may, however, imply the physical one because in order for people to have heard what John was saying, they'd have to have gone to where he was. No TVs or telephone or streaming video. So, ultimately in the end, both of the passages have to do with making a change and doing it in the wilderness whether spiritual or physical, the place that by, virtue of its name, is not usually where we want to go.

The wilderness, by definition, is wild (wild-erness). It is an uncomfortable place filled with strangeness, threat and insecurity. I think of vast, empty spaces with inherent dangers ...cliffs to fall off of and paths to fall down on, territories in which to get lost, critters to be eaten by. I think of dried up streams and howling, biting winds, no shade or shelter in extremes of heat and cold. I think of a place to steer clear of, a lonely, isolated place. Yet, the wilderness is where Isaiah and Mark in different ways ultimately want us to be, in order that we make way for the Lord. (*pause*)

You know, in the last several years, I've become a lot more attuned to current events, and I know it's because I've also, in the last several years, been charged with preaching the word of the Lord. I recognize this to be an awesome privilege...but also a terrifying one. By the power of the Spirit, I have the responsibility of pointing out the relevance of the Word. What did Karl Barth say? "*Preach with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.*"³ But, it's tough. It's tough because it's tough out there. Tragedy and chaos, conflict and depravity and suffering feel very close and big in these days. The actual destruction of the planet is a real threat through nuclear war and global warming, not to mention the erosion of our moral center. Meanwhile, the killing of entire races of people in Myanmar, the expected 20 million deaths from starvation in Yemen, South Sudan, Nigeria and Somalia, and the 66 million people who are displaced from their homes gets little attention. While I AM uplifted each day by the good that is done by people for other people, for the planet for God's creatures, I am still so often at a loss,

³ Karl Barth. <https://sinibaldo.wordpress.com/2015/03/05/on-barth-the-bible-and-the-newspaper/> (accessed 12-7-2017)

desperate, and starving, thirsting for a word of life from the Lord amid the pain of the world. I find myself in a real wilderness, praying the psalmist's prayer, "How Long, O Lord".

But, but, but, I am also sensing something getting stronger and louder inside of me...stirring me I suppose, tugging on me, urging me... to....well...to do something...to do something! It's saying to me that, while I believe the advent promise that someday the lion will lie down with the lamb and that justice will roll down like the river...someday, when the Lord comes again to gather us unto himself, I need step outside the warmth and safety of the Sanctuary into the wilderness out there. It's as if I'm hearing my "*How Long, O Lord?*" words bounce right back at me from God. "*How long, O People?*" "*How long will you wait to love each other as I have loved you? How long will you wait to claim the blessing of being the body of Christ?*" *How long will my children die?*" Maybe it is that I'm hearing "*a voice inside me cry: (colon) 'In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord....'*" Is this happening to you too? (pause) Well, if it is, you will understand my discomfort. The physical wilderness in the world is a wild, scary place and I know my inner spiritual wilderness is filled with the snares of fear and self-doubt.

*Rev. Shannon Kershner, however, describes an experience that she and her family had as they were one night driving from Texas to Oklahoma which is helpful. "The sun had long since gone down," she says, "and the shapes and forms of life in the 'land of the red clay' were no longer visible." And suddenly, they were aware of an enormous number of bright stars dominating the sky....just a jaw-dropping scene. Her parents spoke of how long it had been since they last were surrounded by the beauty of a deep, dark night punctuated by the brilliance of the stars. They remarked to each other that until they'd seen it that night, they had not known that they were missing it. Then in the stillness, all of them with their faces against the windows of the car, her father said, "It is interesting, that we spend so much of our time avoiding the darkness, isn't it? Yet, the only way we could have seen the brilliant light of those stars was precisely because of the darkness, not in spite of it."*⁴

⁴Shannon Kershner. "*Seeing the Light*". <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2014/120714.html> (accessed 12-7-2017).

Friends, when we are in our wildernesses, whether physical or spiritual, whether out in the world or in our hearts and minds, we encounter vast emptiness and things that frighten and threaten, things that make us uncomfortable and dis-eased. But in our wildernesses, we also encounter what we long for...beauty, truth, life-giving goodness...if we but look. In our wildernesses, we encounter God. God is there. In fact, God has always been in the wilderness **with** us and God has been in the wilderness **for** us. Jesus on the cross said, *“My God, my God, why hast thou abandoned me.”*

So, we need not fear, we need not fear, but instead prepare the way. We need remove obstacles which prevent receipt in ourselves AND in the world of God’s forgiving grace, God’s justice, God’s mercy and compassion, God’s heart for beauty, joy and peace, God’s light and life and love. We need not be complicit with broken systems of being and doing, but instead remove that which separates US from God...like our all-consuming thoughts which are hurtful, angry or unforgiving, our wasted energies on old grievances, regrets, addictions, and of course, our crippling fear and self-doubt...and remove that which separated THE WORLD from God like inequity and exclusivity, corrupt and immoral practices, disregard for life and truth, LIKE abuses of the planet, children, women, animals, elderly, like racism, facism, poverty, hunger.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, in the wilderness,” the prophets tell us, *“in the wilderness.”* They do not say, *“just hold hands and sing ‘Kum ba Yah.’”* They say, *“Get up, go out, grab hold, jump in, and let God turn you and things of this broken world from the way they’ve been. Repent. The Lord is coming and his Spirit will soon be set loose in the world. Open yourselves up for change, for transformation, for new life.”*

Brothers and sisters, I pray that you and I are attentive enough to notice and brave enough to respond to the tug which may be going on inside of us, the tug of the Holy Spirit, urging us to go into the wilderness...into the wilderness of our minds and hearts and of this broken and hurting world. I pray there we will see the stars and meet God, and that we will trust that God to enter in, to forgive, and to heal and reign. *The valleys will be lifted up, and mountains and*

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hills laid low; the uneven ground will be made level, and the rough places a plain.” “Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.” Amen.