

The Second Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

If you have ever been to the Big Bend area of Texas, you have seen walking stick cactus. A single walking stick cactus plant looks like several dead branches stuck in the ground. They are dull gray and show no signs of life. But when a rain comes—even the slightest bit of rain—these apparently dead branches put forth tiny green leaves. And then a few days after the moisture disappears, the leaves wither and drop off, and all you see are the same dead branches you saw before.

In a way, the walking stick cactus symbolizes the Big Bend wilderness. Most of the time there seems to be no life there at all, but once in a while a rain comes and life suddenly blossoms forth. Between the rains the wilderness is a dreadfully lonely place, utterly frightening in its desolation. But the tiniest bit of moisture calls forth the life that is there but until now hidden from view. The desert comes alive.

Now the moisture does not come from the desert. It comes from above. The desert does not cause the rain or control it in any way. It only receives it when it comes. The desert wilderness therefore is entirely dependent for life on what is given to it from above.

According to Mark, the Gospel of Jesus Christ begins in the wilderness. John the baptizer cries out the good news of one who is coming after him, who will set all things right and establish the kingdom of God. But the word from John is first heard in the wilderness.

It is said that there were many who went out into the wilderness from the country of Judea and from Jerusalem to hear John. But before they went out, there were others already in the wilderness. Who were they? They were the rejects of society, the misfits, the lepers, the crazy people, the fugitives. These were the ones who were in the wilderness. It was people who for one reason or another could not remain in normal society. They were either banished or ostracized, or else they themselves had withdrawn to live lonely, desolate lives in the desert. Yet it was to just these people that the first word of the Gospel came from the mouth of John the baptizer. Little by little the news spread to the towns and villages that in the wilderness there was a word being spoken which promised new hope in the life of the world. And so the comfortable people had to leave the security of their social setting and go out into the wilderness to hear the word. The acoustics of plush comfort and self-satisfaction would not permit the word of God to be heard, but the acoustics of the dry and barren wilderness carried that word quite well.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ begins in the wilderness. It begins in the dry and lonely places in life. It has its origin not in the crowded malls or the boisterous cafes, but in the solitary desert, the empty wilderness.

When have you found yourself wandering alone in a wilderness? Was it when friends you trusted betrayed you and you were left with no one to turn to? Was it when you were discharged from a job you thought you were doing well but your supervisor said you were doing poorly? Was it when a loved one died and you were left all alone? Was it when a belief system you thought was airtight suddenly began to deteriorate and the things that once seemed so secure now began to collapse around you? The wilderness comes to all of us at times, and we find ourselves exiled from what was once comfortable and familiar to us. Life becomes empty, boring, unfulfilling. That which we thought was permanent withers and fades, and there seems to be nothing left.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ begins in the wilderness. These wildernesses. All wildernesses in which we find ourselves. For until we are reduced to desert-like dependency on God, we will never hear the Gospel. The major turning points in life cast us for a time into bewilderment, and yet it is this bewilderment that allows the word of God to be heard by us. As long as the illusion of self-sufficiency prevails, we do not hear the Gospel. But when the world we have created for ourselves begins to break up and we have nowhere else to turn except the wilderness itself, then there is a word uttered in that wilderness which says, “Comfort, comfort my people, your warfare is ended, your iniquity pardoned.”

The wilderness does not create the word of hope. The desert is not the Gospel. Rather, it is in these barren and lonely places of life that the still, small voice of God may be heard. The word comes from God

through those he chooses to utter it. Sometimes you have to be in the wilderness a long time before you hear any word other than your own laments of loneliness. But those who wait and listen will hear the word sooner or later. No wilderness is forever. The word of God stands forever.

In the wilderness where John the baptizer preached there was a river named the Jordan. John took people to the Jordan River where he baptized them as a sign of their renewal, a sign that they were giving up the old life of staying a secure distance from God and taking up the new life of radical dependence on God. The Jordan River was water in the midst of the wilderness. It was water that refreshed the parched skin of the ones who wandered in the wilderness, but in combination with the word of hope, that water took on the added meaning of refreshing the parched souls of the ones who were fugitives from life in a society that had hurt them. The water of the Jordan River refreshed both body and soul, for in connection with the Gospel John preached it gave cleansing and courage, forgiveness for the past and hope for the future. And yet it was precisely in the wilderness that the Jordan River flowed and the voice of John was heard. It was the wilderness that summoned people to lonely reflection on their own emptiness, and yet it was the word and the river water that summoned them to new life. It was the wilderness that called people to death, and yet it was the word and the river water that called them into resurrection.

Martin Luther experienced many wildernesses in his lifetime. One of the most severe was when he was exiled in the Wartburg Castle. During that time he translated the New Testament from Greek into German, but the translating was not easy. Luther said afterward that daily he struggled with despair—so much so that at times it seemed as if the devil himself stood in the room taunting him. At one point, it is said, he hurled an ink bottle at the devil and splattered ink all over the wall of his room.

How did Luther survive? He said that the only way he survived the temptation to depression and despair was to say over and over again, “I am baptized, I am baptized, I am baptized.” It was not his work that enabled him to survive, nor was it his ability to believe certain doctrines. It was his trust that beyond the devil’s temptation to despair there was a Father in heaven whose love and forgiveness and acceptance of him had already come to him in the water and the word of baptism.

Luther believed in God because his baptism told him that God believed in him. No wilderness could overcome the Gospel. Rather, it was the wilderness of the Wartburg that allowed the Gospel to be heard by him once again.

The coming of the Christmass season leads many people back into the wilderness. The prospect of facing a family holiday where your family is scattered by death or divorce or dissension can cast you into the desert of despair quite readily. The thought of Christmass can take you back to Christmasses past which were better than this year—or worse—and the nostalgia for what could have been and the longing for what might be hurls you into a wilderness of brooding loneliness. The idea of entering yet another wilderness fills you with anxiety and desperation.

No one can prevent wildernesses from existing, nor can anyone forestall entering the wilderness when the time comes. But the good news is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ begins in the wilderness. It is precisely in the wilderness that hope may be found. Not that we ourselves must create it, for we cannot. The hope is from God who invades our wilderness and forgives us and leads us through it.

Therefore, there is no need to feel sad because of what you have failed to do this Christmass or any other Christmass. Christmass is the story of what God has done in coming into the world in his Son Jesus Christ. His coming more than makes up for what we lack. His coming to us is our forgiveness, our belovedness, our hope for eternal life. His coming to us makes the wilderness a temporary state, for he comes to gather us up in his arms and carry us safely through the wilderness to our eternal home in him.

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