

“From Wilderness to Paradise”

Isaiah 35:1-10 & Matthew 11:2-11

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This past summer Abigail, Spencer, and I had a wonderful time rock climbing and hiking in South Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana. The rock climbing routes were diverse with spectacular views. The hiking in Glacier National Park filled us with wonder: the enormity of the mountains; the power of the glaciers; the playfulness of the mountain goats; the dazzling variety of color from rocks to sky; from lakes to wildflowers.

It also was a wilderness experience: far from home; sleeping on the rocky ground in a tent at night; exposed to the elements during the day; and eating energy bars and freeze-dried food for 16 days. No luxuries such as running water, temperature control, a table, or chair. Our first night we arrived at camp right after a major thunderstorm. We set up our tent in the soggy conditions just in time to seek shelter from another major thunderstorm complete with hail that covered the ground white and then gave way to a flooded campground. We wisely placed our tent on the highest ground but even there the water rose right to the edge of our tent. The days were hot and the nights were surprisingly cold. A few of the days the air was thick with smoke from nearby forest fires. With no bathing for about a week our plan was to take a refreshing swim in what the guidebook said was one of the best swimming lakes in Wyoming. However, the lake is controlled by a dam. Since they needed water elsewhere, the water was down about 30 feet. We slogged through the mud for a murky swim. In Glacier National Park, we hiked around 62 miles with 21,800 feet of elevation gained and lost over 5 days.

The last of those days we had a decision to make: continue on to the trailhead where there were coin operated camp showers and food or take a spur trail 4 and one half miles, 600 feet up and down to see beautiful Iceberg Lake. We were already exhausted. We had hiked strenuous challenging trails through dense brush, been exposed to scorching sun, endured wind gust of 60 miles per hour on Red Gap Pass that pelted us with grit, slid through loose scree, hopped across boulders, and crossed rivers on slippery rocks. We were covered in grim, bruised, our joints were aching from the pounding and our heavy packs. My one boot had a crack in the sole. We decided to eat our last bit of food, 3 energy bars, and take the spur trail. We arrived at the lake exhausted. We purified and drank water. In order to shed a few pounds we would take just 32 ounces of water. The sole on my shoe completely blew out. With every step my heel rolled to the left and smash into the rocky ground. It was getting late in the day. We needed to complete these last five miles and get to camp. Hungry, thirsty, sore, limping, fatigued, dirty, itchy we reached the trial junction just one mile from camp to find a warning sign. Trial closed due to grizzly bears. Please take the longer trail to camp meaning an extra mile. We sighed deeply and scampered on.

We arrived at camp instantly transforming our wilderness into paradise. We drank cool refreshing water. We devoured a huge amount of food from a restaurant – the delicious food was hot, the drinks cold, and every flavor a robust explosion of delight. We enjoyed hot showers and clean clothes. We enjoyed safety from the bears, elements, and wilderness. We savored rest and soft surfaces. A few days later we were back home in paradise, home-cooked roast beef, milk, running water, bathrooms, and beds. We enjoyed eating off of dishes on a table while sitting at a chair, being reunited with Leslie, and not needing to hang our food or pack up our garbage.

Our wilderness experience caused us to rejoice in the simple pleasures of daily life. Advent reminds us that we live in the wilderness of a fallen world. We do catch some glimpses of glory. However, we are far from the safety and comforts of home – that is heaven or a fully redeemed cosmos. We are only able to enjoy dim experiences of God's love, joy, and peace. Advent invites us to dream of the majesty of restoration, the coming paradise.

The prophet Isaiah declares **Isaiah 35:1-10 NRSV** “**The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. God will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. God will come and save you."** Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

Most of us need a lot of imagination to connect with Isaiah's description of God's promised reclamation. Isaiah's words connected with every fiber of his original audience. They knew energy-sapping, painful hunger. They knew throbbing headaches and dizzying thirst. They knew the pit of your stomach fear of being lost in the limestone wilderness, ridges blocking your view, cliffs barricading any straight path that went on for miles. They knew travel across the wilderness, grit grinding into every pore, dust caking on your tongue, pain radiating up from your feet, sand blurring your vision, scorching heat during the day, and shivering cold at night. They knew desperately swinging sticks and throwing rocks to buy some time to run from ravenous jackals. They knew being separated from family, being dragged into exile, and forced labor. They lived on the edge of one of the fiercest wilderness areas in the world. They all knew friends and family that died in the wilderness. They gave the wilderness a name which means “the devastation.”

These conditions gave rise to metaphors we still use today. Spiritual wildernesses are times when we feel burned-out, empty, confused, and famished for God. A church is going through a wilderness time when the air is thick with judgment, prickly tempers, and gnawing conflict. Wilderness represents death.

Most of us can more easily relate to Isaiah's wilderness of disease, disabilities, fatigue, fear, sorrow, being lost, and uncertainty. We live in the wilderness, war, crime, greed, broken relationships, suffering, depression, addictions, pain, grief, heartache, sadness, anxiety, loneliness, oppression, abuse, unemployment, the world is a mess, our lives are a mess, there is no way out, there is no way to save ourselves. Our daily life is wilderness. God is coming to save us, to clean up the mess and recreate paradise out of the wilderness.

Isaiah describes God's promised complete reclamation as waters bursting forth in the wilderness, streams quenching thirst, lakes for refreshing swims, moisture for lush crops to

satisfy hunger, and rain for soft grass to roll upon. It's a highway so smooth and broad even fools can easily find their way home. It's leaping for the lame, singing for the mute, 20/20 vision for the blind, energy for the exhausted, strong, hoping knees for pain-filled, crippled joints, peace for the fearful heart, hearing for the deaf, protection from harm, safety, forgiveness, salvation, understanding, reunion, harmony, health, wholeness, completeness, every goodness, every blessing, every love, every peace, every joy. Anything that prevents one from living abundantly, joyously, lovingly will be removed or transformed by God.

Did you notice the descriptive words throughout the text? Glad, rejoice, abundantly, joy, singing, dancing, glory, majesty, everlasting, gladness proclaimed and promised over and over. Isaiah is trying to give us a glimpse of God's grace that heals, renews, completes, perfects, and glorifies every aspect of each of us and all of the cosmos. God's transforming grace will bring a dancing, singing, banner waving, organ booming, cymbal crashing, extravagant celebration.

The barren land will become vibrant green with foliage and colorful with beautiful flowers. This is the basis for our tradition of the "hanging of the greens". We take plain, barren spaces and hang greens with an array of colors for the blossoms, ornaments for ornate flowers. When we "Hang the Greens" we are illustrating Isaiah's words, declaring our faith that God will bring life, beauty, joy, love, and peace to every aspect of our lives and world. God will restore paradise from the wilderness.

John the Baptist was filled with hope from God's promises despite his brutal life in the wilderness in a turbulent time. John prepared the way for Jesus. John baptized Jesus. John looked up into the glory of heaven. John heard God's voice declare **Mark 1:11 "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."** John was illumined by the radiance of the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus. John gazed into the compassionate loving eyes of Jesus. John felt the gentleness of Jesus' hands that wipe away every tear and the strength of Jesus' embrace which protects us for eternity.

Like John all of us live in the wilderness with only glimpses of God's coming reclamation. Our wilderness living buries our hope, blurs our vision, mutes our hearing. Our wilderness struggles causes us to forget our experiences of God and ushers fear into us. John's life fell apart. John was in prison about to be executed.

Perhaps John thought if only I could live in the future after Jesus' resurrection. If only I could know the future, if Jesus' disciples will grow and spread love throughout the world. If only I knew that someone would write down Jesus' words and people will read them. If only I could travel to the future to live in North St. Paul in safety, with freedom, a warm house, running water, food, clothing, and see people serving in Jesus' name feeding the hungry through the food shelf, educating children through Remember Niger, providing relief through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, caring for retired baptizers through the Christmas Joy Offering, keeping people warm through the mitten tree, seeing people worship God in millions of churches throughout the world; surely then, the wilderness would not diminish hope. Yet wilderness still plagues us today and sometimes one will say if only I could go back and live the life of John or one of the disciples or anyone of the people healed by Jesus surely then the wilderness would not diminish hope.

Like John our wilderness living fills us with doubt. Our wilderness world imprisons us. Our wilderness circumstances disappoints us as we long for Jesus to do something about our situation right now. John wanted Jesus to get him out of prison. The wilderness dampens our faith. This is the situation for John that Matthew explains. **Matthew 11:2-11 NRSV "When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to**

Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Life is hard, difficult, confusing. We see glimpses of God's coming kingdom. Some people are miraculously healed, some people are declared dead and come back to life, some people are joyful after depression, some enjoy freedom after addiction, some poor inherit wealth, some people are miraculously saved from an accident and on and on. Yet many suffer. And what about our life, our wilderness, when will God bring paradise to that, when will God renew the cosmos? Advent reminds us of the promise that God will come. All of creation will be renewed, humanity will be redeemed, all obstacles and dangers will be removed. The world will come to the Lord and experience the everlasting peace of God's Kingdom.

By hope in the coming glory of God, we distinguish ourselves from the despairing who believe nothing will change and from the self-sufficient who believe that it all relies on them to make the change. Advent invites us to renounce control and hopelessness and embrace grace. Breathe a little easier. Take yourself less seriously. Soar, and leave the results to God.

In Advent we invite Jesus to open our mind's eye to see the unseen beauty that will burst forth, to invite Jesus to unseal our heart's vision to glimpse the coming glory of God. God's coming will be way, way bigger, grandeur, more spectacular than a fruit tree flourishing in the sand, than healed people dancing, but these images give us a precursor morsel.

Life is tricky – waiting, expecting, for we only have God's promises and mere glimpses of God's coming glory. This is why every year we take 4 weeks to reflect upon our wilderness situation, to prepare for the coming of God to renew our hope, to revitalize our faith, to invigorate our soul, to imagine the majesty of God's coming. Advent invites us to dance, sing, rejoice, and celebrate in the wilderness; because, God is coming. God will recreate paradise from the wilderness. Amen.