

## The Second Sunday of Advent + December 4, 2011

Last Sunday we began our journey of watching and waiting for the coming of the Savior. We were invited to come before God openly and not be hindered by our distractions but invited, instead, to let go of our wishes, coming only with the expectation that God might do a new thing. It is an invitation, really, to pray: To watch for God, wait for God, wonder at the mighty and mysterious ways of God.

Today we light two candles. And with the lighting of the second candle we hear a voice. It is the voice of John the Baptizer. Now, John is a prophet. A prophet is a messenger, truth teller. A prophet is someone who speaks for God and speaks the things of God. And this messenger isn't speaking a word from a pulpit or even a church. No, his voice is coming from a place that is far away. It is the voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Now, the wilderness is an odd place for a messenger of God to speak. The messenger himself is kind of odd, wearing camel's hair, eating locusts and wild honey. He is a rough around the edges sort of person. He sort of fits in with the wilderness, don't you think? That is where he is. Now, wouldn't you expect the messenger to be in the city where all the action is and where all the important stuff takes place, or in the city's Temple where all the worship takes place? Instead, he is far away from the city, out in the wilderness.

And, so we are surprised again. But, should we really be surprised? God's messengers have always had difficulty fitting into the mainstream. They are not conventional people. They are not spit and polished or neatly manicured. You usually don't find them in popular places, but usually on the margins, out on the edge of things. That is usually where they speak and where they hang out, among people who are on the margins.

That is where John preached – on the margins, on the edge, on the fringes, out in the wilderness. And Mark tells us that all people in the countryside and all the people from Jerusalem, the city, came to the wilderness. They came to John to be baptized. They all converged on the wilderness, eager to receive the coming Messiah. That is where we are called to go, too.

Britt and I do a fair amount of hiking and that's when we get close to the wilderness. It's usually just the dog, Britt and myself with nothing more than a leash and a couple of water bottles. We are apart from the distractions so that we are given time to just be and reflect. It's amazing how freeing it can be to be apart from the phone and computer and so on. It can be a good place to ponder and pray. We usually stay on the path, but if we were to verge from the path we would really be in the wilderness which can be a dangerous place or a confusing place, easy to get lost and lose ones sense of direction.

I wonder what the wilderness is for you. It can be that place that is sufficiently far away from the distractions that we can do some honest soul-searching and some self-inventory. What does that place look like for you? Yes, sometimes it can be a scary place, a dangerous

place, a confusing place where we get lost but it is good for us to go there nonetheless because the great promise about going to the wilderness is that it can be a place of great promise if it becomes when you discover the truth about yourself and the truth of God.

John's message of repentance is essentially a message of change. Do a 180. Reorient your lives. Turn your hearts and minds and souls toward God and much of the time that is preceded by an honest look at us, our brokenness, and, yes, our sin. Taking good look at those things that separate us from God ... where we fail to love,

When we go to that place where we are stripped down to the bare essentials we may ask ourselves some honest, soul-searching questions like what in my life needs changing? Where am I too full of myself or too full of stuff or possessions or money that gets in the way of being open to my neighbor? Where am I so filled with judgment of others that I cannot begin to see the truth about myself? What in me needs to be changed? Where am I being called to make a new beginning? Can we be so honest? Can we go to the wilderness, stripped down to the bare essentials where only God can fill in the gaps?

I wonder what that is for you. And when we go to that place we remember that not only is that where God's messenger is, out there in the wilderness. That's where Jesus is too. At Christmas, we'll remember again that Jesus wasn't born in the city or in the Temple but in a little out of the way town called Bethlehem, not among the privileged but there in a messy stable, born among the poor. And it was out in the wilderness where Jesus went to join John and all those other folks to be baptized by him and the Gospels tell us that right after that Jesus spent a 40 days sojourn in the wilderness.

There we discover him in powerful ways - in the margins, on the edge, far away from the mainstream. Jesus is always powerfully present in those empty places, those broken places, where he comes right here in our humanity dwelling among us fully in human. There he is taking you as you are and loving you as you are, giving you permission to be free not only with yourself but with others, too ... free to confess our sins, name your wounds, to be honest about your broken dreams, there Christ is, taking us as we are, loving us as we are, and refusing to leave us as we are but always taking us into new paths marked by joy and opportunity to love and serve others.

Do you hear the voice of the prophet? Out there in the wilderness. HE is summoning you to join him. Linger there a while and listen. Turn heart and mind toward God. It's not a bad way to prepare for the coming of the Savior. Amen