

Advent 2C 21

Waiting in the Wilderness

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Malachi 3:1–5, Psalm 126, 1 Corinthians 4:8–21, Luke 3:1–6

In these days of Advent, we join the longing of the ages for the coming of the Lord. We listen for the call that comes from beyond the easy comforts of our lifestyles. We hear a voice calling from the wilderness. Calling from outside the systems and structures of power and calling from beyond the never-ending -drive to satisfy selfish lusts and self glory. We are called to let go of human distractions and behold the promise of God.

The opening words of our Gospel reading today proclaims, “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. (Luke 3:1–2)

Luke announces the coming of the Word of the Lord during the reigns of the great ruling powers in government and Temple. The Word of God comes not to these mighty men who lord over their people, but to one lone prophet in the wilderness of Judea. Drawing upon the song of Isaiah 40, Luke describes the wilderness calling of John the Baptist in contrast to the powers of the nation.

Adam partakes of the fruit so that he might be like god. Instead, he and Eve are driven into the life crushing struggle of the wilderness. In the place of death, they must learn to survive by trusting in the Word of God. In the wilderness, the niceties of society burn away. Humans face their weakness. Abraham follows the Word of God past the comforts of civilization into the wilderness of naked faith, trusting that God will fulfill His promise and raise Abraham as a father of nations. Moses leads the enslaved Hebrews into the wilderness and the promise of a world made new. Isaiah prophecies to the Jews in exile that God remembers them and will lead them through the wilderness home.

After the people languished as exiles in Babylon for over a generation, the Word of God through Isaiah 40 comes to the people,

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her

that her warfare is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the Lord's hand

double for all her sins. (Is 40:1–2)

The Lord speaks tenderly to His people, Comfort upon comfort upon comfort. He pardons her iniquity and will lead her back through the wilderness. He promises that the people will behold His glory in the wilderness.

In the wilderness, the false images of power and glory are exposed as passing illusions, as grass that withers and flowers that fade. The Word of the Lord stands forever even as kings and kingdoms collapse under the relentless heat of sun that burns from hour to hour and generation to generation.

Empty human idols and corrupted human desires cannot survive the desert heat. We come to realize that our only hope is the coming of the Lord. He comes to set His people free and lead us into the glory of His perfect love.

In the wilderness, He instructs His people as a Father instructs His children. In the wilderness, God calls His people to repent. He exposes our idols, our thoughts, our actions that enslave us, lead us into exile, and break apart the community of God. Moses teaches the rescued Hebrews the Ten Commandments, Ezra teaches the returning exiles the law of God, and John the Baptist calls the people to bear fruits in keeping with repentance: share your extra resources with those in need, don't steal, don't extort from those you rule. Jesus fulfills the law of love by fully embodying God's instruction from day to day and in life and death and resurrection.

The stark world of wilderness is not our final destination. IF we continue reading through Isaiah 40, we see the Lord comes as a shepherd to His exiles wandering through the wilderness on their way home. The Gospel also reveals our Lord coming to His lost sheep, leading us home. He promises that His people will not be abandoned in the wilderness. Isaiah alludes to the ancient Hebrews when he sings,

27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,

“My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

29 He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.

30 Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;

31 but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;

they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:27–31)

Just as the Lord rescued the ancient Hebrews, He led the Jewish exiles home. He is also leading all His people through the purifying wilderness into the safety of His love. Even as John the Baptist points to the salvation of God, he prepares us to behold the Word of God in flesh in Jesus Christ.

Advent calls us to wait for the Lord in the wilderness while reminding us that most of life feels like walking through a wilderness. We struggle, we question, we fall, we fail. Jesus calls us our name. Jesus calls us to follow. He prepares to walk forward into glory. Let us watch, let us wait, let us walk forward in His love and light.