

## Wilderness Repentance

The beginning of the Gospel of Mark doesn't give us Christmas (like Matthew and Luke do). Instead, it gives us something that sounds suspiciously like Lent. It doesn't give us angels, dressed in blinding white light. Instead it gives us John the Baptist, dressed in camel's hair. It doesn't give us a warm, cozy stable, with candles in the windows, and Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus, lying in a manger. It rather gives us the wilderness, where we are left with only ourselves. Its invitation to us is not to celebrate, but rather, to repent. Its opening plotline is not enunciation, like it is in Matthew and Luke, with the angel Gabriel and his colleagues coming to us to announce the good news, but rather, denunciation.

As I studied verses 1-8 this past week, two themes or images emerged. The first is wilderness. This word appears 298 times in the Bible. It's often a place of wandering, of being lost; a dry, desert place where there is no water. Think the children of Israel, wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. The wilderness is often a time of testing and torment; think the Temptations of Jesus. It's a place often inhabited by demons, and the pitiable people they possess. Think of all the demons Jesus had to cast out. And it's a place of waiting and longing. Think Israel in exile.

We are of course amid our own wilderness right now. I'm talking about the Coronavirus pandemic. What are some ways in which you have been experiencing this as a wilderness time?

Certainly, it's a time of waiting and longing. We could hardly have imagined way back in March, when this virus first arrived, that it would still be here at the end of summer, that it would last into the Fall, and now, clearly all the way to Christmas, and beyond. We long for it to end, for the vaccine to arrive, for life to return to some semblance of normalcy—when we can once again gather, and travel to visit family and friends, and go out to eat, for goodness sake, and have funerals for our loved ones. The ashes of my cousin Morris Birch, who just died due to the virus, are going to have to wait.

Our present wilderness is a time of testing. Testing our resolve. Testing our ability to adapt (like sitting through a Sunday morning service with masks on, unable to sing). Testing our clear-headedness and creativity (like having to come up with plans B, and C, and even D, when plan A should have been enough). Testing our willingness to sacrifice personal freedom for the sake of social safety. And for that matter, testing our very understanding of the Bible.

This wilderness is a time of wandering and feeling lost, a time of disorientation, a time of wondering, Has God abandoned us? For many of us, this is a time of loneliness and aloneness. I think of those in Parkside, and Salem, and Bethesda who are essentially confined to their rooms. We humans were not meant to be confined, locked up, with only our demons to talk to.

And speaking of demons, what demons have you met during our Pandemic wilderness? They may be different for each one of us. Maybe you have suffered a deeper or more tenacious depression than usual. Maybe you're less patient with your kids than you used to be, or your parents, or your spouse.

Our wilderness, like in the Bible, is a dry, desert place. We can't go to concerts, or sporting events, or movies, or other "normal" activities that entertain us, and add interest to our lives. We can only watch so much television.

And speaking of television, if we add to our wilderness the election, yet unresolved and contentious, dividing friends and families and churches, our wilderness is almost unbearable. It's as if all those who voted differently than we did are the demons. Pitching their political tents in their front yards; flying their flags; flashing their yard signs. What are we more desperate for, a vaccine, or an inauguration? What deliverance is there from our wilderness? What end is in sight?

The second theme or image that emerged from our text this morning is that of repentance. Of having John, the Baptist (played by John Harder) in our face, smelly and unseemly and loud, informing us that we need to repent, and soon. Leaving us to ask: what do we need to repent for? And why?

Perhaps it would help if we understood better what it means to repent. You may have heard in some previous sermon how the Greek word for repent is *metanoew*. Which literally means to turn around. Do a “180.” Which sounds so drastic, and so difficult. Is this what Smelly John is saying we need to do? Stop dead in our tracks, and then reverse direction? Stop what, exactly? These runaway freight trains we call our lives?

Maybe it doesn't need to be quite so drastic. Maybe we just need to make a slight adjustment in our direction. Turn our rudders just a teeny bit. Maybe five or ten degrees, instead of 180. That's not so bad, is it?

And maybe we don't need to stop the train and completely reverse direction; maybe all we need is to switch tracks. A train doesn't necessarily need to stop to switch tracks; just slow down a little perhaps. Is that all we need to do? Simply slow our lives down, so that we can turn without derailing? Or does a true *metanoia* require us to come to a complete stop first?

We find a different way to talk about *metanoew* in this morning's text. In verse 5, the writer of Mark seems to imply that repenting has to do with confessing. Admitting. Acknowledging. Okay, yeah, I screwed up there. (Which of course is always hard to admit.)

Or maybe confessing can at least start with simply listing. Take out a pencil and a piece of paper and start writing them down. What have I done in the past several days or weeks or months that was somehow counter to God's will? How have I hurt people . . . including those I supposedly love? How have I hurt God? That won't be such a long list, will it?

Of course, we must include not just sins of commission, but sins of omission. What are the things I haven't done in the past days or weeks or months that I should have, or at least could have? When have I not been generous with my money? When have I not stopped to help someone? When have I crossed to the other side of the street to avoid talking to someone I really didn't want to?

Okay, so maybe our list will be longer than we thought. But why go to the trouble? Why confess our sins? Can't we just forget about them? Pretend they never happened? Trust that they won't happen again? Smelly, unseemly, noisy John tells us why: so that our sins can be forgiven. Our slate wiped clean. Our debts cancelled. Our iniquities washed away. We all need to take a shower or bath now and then. “Once a month, whether we need to or not” as the saying goes. But then we also better be ready for those stains that just don't come clean no matter how hot the water is, how strong the soap, or how hard we scrub. We may need help getting clean. Superhuman help. God's help.

So, let's review. To repent means to turn around. To confess. To wash. And the Advent worship curriculum we're using suggested another way in which we might talk about what it means to repent. How about, to let go?

What might we need to let go of? Certain stubbornly held dreams or plans, perhaps? Dreams or plans that just never quite worked out? That's hard to do, isn't it? We keep hoping, clinging, wishing. When maybe it's time to let them go, so that we can move on.

Or maybe there is something in our past that we need to let go of. A past hurt, wound, or injury. A past longing. A past memory. Letting go of such things is never easy.

What about those grievances we have against others? Is it possible that to repent means as much to forgive others as it means to be forgiven? No wonder Jesus taught his disciples to pray, each day, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

To let go of anything we're holding tightly onto is scary. Like the phrase, “holding on for dear life.” Letting go of that which we think we need to stay alive.

In closing, I'm not often one for trite sayings. But there is one trite saying that I've found profound, despite its trite-ness. “Let go and let God.” It may be that that's the only definition of what it means to repent that we need. Is that what John the Baptist is saying to each one of us? To our church? Let go and let God? It sounds way too easy. Then again, maybe repenting isn't as hard as we think.

Thanks for the lesson, Smelly John.

Amen.