

Wilderness Voices

Wilderness voices. We hear them from time to time: those unsettling voices that challenge the conventional wisdom, upset the spiritual apple cart, and call for abrupt and immediate change. Wilderness voices are rarely moderate or middle-of-the-road. Wilderness voices are almost always radical and severe.

Let's go back a few decades, and recall the voice of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn crying in the wilderness about inhuman Soviet gulags or prisons. And for many decades, the voices of Nelson Mandela, Alan Patton, Desmond Tutu and others cried in the wilderness about their beloved country, South Africa, and the immorality of apartheid – legal separation of the races.

Voices in the wilderness today cry urgently

- about global and domestic terrorism;
- about the rancor and general incivility of American society at large;
- about the apocalyptic perils of climate change;
- about the horrific war in Yemen, and prolonged wars from which we seem to have neither the ability to extricate ourselves, nor a viable plan for doing so.

These wilderness voices are urgent voices. And as often as not, they irritate us. Even those with whom we are in basic agreement we sometimes find abrasive, their rhetoric off-putting and shrill. Their offense? They refuse to leave us alone. And – harried and hurried people that we are – we want nothing more ardently than to be left alone. Especially at this time of year.

- Annual reports due at work (*and at church* – staff and ministry team leaders, take note!)
- End-of-year pledges to be fulfilled;
- Christmas shopping to be completed in the – Holy Moses, only 15 days left!

We come to church in the fond hope of finding some solitude and solace on the Sabbath. And what do we get? “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight.”

Our response? OK. I'll put it in the Things To Do app on my iPhone: p-r-e-p-a-r-e the way of the Lord. Right after “buy Secret Santa present and wrap tie for dad.” All right. But I can promise you I won't get to it before next Thursday. And the most amazing thing is: We actually expect God to understand and accept our lame response!

God will have none of it. The wilderness voice is not only urgent. It is authoritative. Listen: The word of God came to John [it can also be translated “The event of God happened to John”] in the wilderness and he went into all the region about the Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

John was in no way patient with the people's pathetic excuses. He spoke **for** God, **as** God's messenger and therefore **with** God's authority! Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Why the urgency? Nothing less than forgiveness is at stake, and therefore also salvation – in this life and the next.

What does it mean to prepare, repent and make straight? It is the painful process of a revolution that begins inside the heart and turns life upside down for us and right side up for God.

- It reverses our priorities, upsets our values, turns our pockets inside out and reorganizes our To Do list.
- It shatters our systems of safety and security and hangs our eternal lives on that thin thread the Jewish and Christian traditions call “the grace of God.”
- It tears us from ourselves and invests our lives in others.
- It rises in revolt against the sin that we have loved and turns us back toward the neighbor whom we have not.
- It comes with empty hand and empty heart and reaches hungrily for the grace of God's forgiveness, which is – first and finally – the only way we can prepare the way of the Lord.

The word of God that came to John – the event of God that happened to John in the wilderness is not a timeless word, an eternal truth, a pious platitude. St. Luke spills a lot of ink on the historical detail. Listen again: “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 Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, that’s when the word of God came to John, that’s when the event of God happened to John.

Luke carefully details the names of the authorities in “church” and state and with a purpose: This is the stage on which the drama of redemption will be played. This is the panorama of world and regional history with its kings and governors, its principalities and powers, its politics and policies. The mighty God created a world and now comes to that world to act. And so, in the wilderness, a voice; an urgent voice: Prepare! Make straight! Repent!

Is there any other way God’s way can be prepared than by the good news of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? Is there any other way God’s path can be made straight, the valleys filled, the mountains leveled, than by the good news that God has not abandoned the world or cast it aside, but instead comes – as one hymn puts it – to break oppression, to set the captive free, to take away transgression and rule in equity?

We miss the point utterly unless we understand what Luke is telling us in these historical details: that Jesus Christ is precisely for this world, corrupt as it is; that his salvation is precisely for us, hurried and harried as we are. We cannot politely bow him off into a corner as the private privilege of the religious few. And we cannot put his call to discipleship in a box to be stored away with the rest of the Christmas ornaments once the happy day has come and gone, as if he has nothing of significance to say to us here and now in the second year of the presidency of Donald Trump, when Northam is governor of Virginia, and Kaine and Warner and tetrarchs of the senate; when Eaton is presiding bishop of the ELCA and Humphrey is bishop of the Virginia Synod.

God comes precisely in time, fully aware of our policies and politics, our wars and rumors of wars, our incivilities and prejudices, our militias and terrorists, our international and interpersonal problems. And God comes to do what? To forgive us, and set us free. Therefore, repent. Turn in whatever it is that keeps so many of us here and now from radical commitment to this God.

Remove the roadblocks, the things that get between us and God – those things we want more and like better. “Prepare the way of the Lord” who comes to forgive and set free.

John quoted the prophet Isaiah, whose poetic illustration is an obvious description of a highway building project where the cuts through the hills provide fill dirt for the lowlands, so the highway can stretch like a satin ribbon, smooth and straight, across the countryside.

That’s what John’s baptism of repentance was about: to level mountains built of human pride, to fill in the valleys of despair and hopelessness; to root out all the crooked and perverse things of our lives, to even out the ups and downs of peace and love one day, selfishness and sin the next. To make a highway for our God so that God might come in with forgiveness, with healing, with wholeness.

Today, again, here and now, the one who speaks for God, as God’s messenger and therefore with God’s authority summons you to bend proud knees, to bow stiff necks, and to receive the gift with open and uncluttered hand. For the word of God that came to John – the event of God that happened to John in the wilderness – even now that word comes to you. Even here, that event happens to you, in whatever wilderness you find yourself. The word of grace. The event of God. Take and eat. Take and drink. What for? For the forgiveness of sins.