

“Wilderness”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
II Advent – 8 & 9 December 2018
Luke 3:1-6

John was a wild man. He an agent of change on the move with no place to call home, driven by the word that came to him in the wilderness. He’s a stark contrast to the long list of leaders Luke gives us that starts with the Emperor and works its way down through the ranks to the local boss. Safe in their grand palaces with power over life and death, their job was to keep a stable *status quo*. John’s job was to overthrow it, to shake things up, to make a mess, to expose the lie of those proud men.

He called people to repentance, to turn their lives around, away from sin and back toward God. John offered baptism as a symbol of that transformation: the waters cleansing, stripping away the old self so that someone new could emerge reborn and ready for the baptism to come – one of purifying fire in the Holy Spirit, brought by Jesus. His work was radical, scandalous, and dangerous, but for many John’s message was the sole hope for freedom under the control of an corrupt and oppressive regime.

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, John cast a vision of what would be. He saw hills and mountains levelled, empty valleys filled, the rough terrain made smooth, the crooked straight. Those obstacles would be no more, the way made clear for Jesus to come, and for people to come to him, to walk the Way of faith, to see clearly a horizon that had been blocked for so long.

It’s inspiring, exciting, and frightening. This wild man, whose voice still echoes strong, uncompromising and urgent, calls us out to follow the straight path of faith, to make a mess, to reject and upturn the ways of the world, come what may, cost what it will. But how, we wonder do we do that? Where do we even start?

We start in the wilderness, just like John, not literally by going out to the deserts of New Mexico, but figuratively, in a spiritual sense. It's a precarious place, scarce and sparse and raw. It sounds dreadful. None of us want to go there, but all of us need to, because it changes us. The gift of the wild is that we see things we often miss.

The stark unfamiliar landscape breaks off our blinders and complacency and gives fresh perspective. A wasteland also has its own strange beauty and peacefulness, because in that barren space we learn what gratitude really means. But again, we wonder, how do we get to the wilderness? Repent from sin to receive forgiveness.

We can't get rid of something if we don't know that we've got it, and being in the wilderness means some soul-searching. At its heart, sin is what gets in the way of our relationship with God, whatever that might be. Sin is an obstacle. It's the hills and the mountains that need to be laid low, the valleys that need to be filled.

When we go into the wilderness, we're hunting for sin, for what messes up our connection with God, and that's incredibly uncomfortable. But when we find it, we can choose to change it: to ask for and receive forgiveness from God; to ask for and receive the grace to forgive ourselves. And then we're set free to see life in a new way, and that vision can give us the power to prophesy.

We often think of prophecy as the purview of a select few chosen by God and endowed with very special gifts. We think of people like Malachi and John and Isaiah, and the idea that we might have a prophetic role seems ridiculous. While it is true that God has given a select few extraordinary prophetic powers, this doesn't mean that only biblical figures have the gift. In fact, St. Paul lists prophecy as a spiritual gift multiple times in his letters. So whether we like it or

not, some of us go into the wilderness, face our sin, repent, receive forgiveness, and wind up with prophetic powers.

Yet these powers are so misunderstood. A prophet is not a soothsayer or a psychic, someone who can magically predict the future. Remember that John and Jesus were cousins, probably spent time together as kids. John simply saw something in Jesus that others did not. A prophet is someone who can see clearly what others cannot. A prophet perceives the truth about what's happening in the world. A prophet sees idolatry and injustice for what it is, a violation of God's will and our covenant with Him. A prophet sees what needs to change, and how it can change, and what will happen if it doesn't. And prophets don't remain silent. They speak: come what may; cost what it will.

Now we need to be cautious. There is such a thing as false prophets, people who confuse their opinion with God's truth. Again, as St. Paul wrote, the gift of prophecy is discerned within a prayerful community that holds people accountable. But those who have the gift need to speak, humbly yet boldly, as John did. He confronted the political and religious elite, challenged their power by professing the Jesus superior power to save. There are serious things wrong with this world, big things, and lots of people can't see, but prophets can. And nobody can change what can't be seen, so prophets must speak.

So we've been to the wilderness, seen our sin, repented, received forgiveness, newness of life, and a more godly perspective on reality. Some of us have been granted the gift of prophecy, and all have received spiritual gifts. Now what? We do what John did and call people to come. At the same time, though, like John, we need to stay on the move.

As Church, we sometimes expect people to come to us, but it didn't work that way back then, and it certainly doesn't work that way now. Had John stood in one place crying out in the

wilderness it's hard to imagine many people hearing him. Instead, "He went into all the regions around the Jordan." He was a wild man on the move.

There are two ways that we as Church need to move. The first is fairly obvious. When we leave here, we cannot remain silent – prophetic gift or no. We need to reach out to people with the good news, to witness our own experience of grace and love. And when we speak, we need to meet people where they are. The work of evangelism is not to impose but to invite and entice. It's like a courtship, or better yet like being a matchmaker, trying to hook somebody up with Jesus. We need to move from here into the world with courage, sharing the precious gift of forgiveness and freedom, despite the fact that some will reject our message and even mock us for it.

The second way the Church needs to move is less obvious and perhaps even less popular than the idea of being evangelists. As Church, we need to move into the future, and that means change. We need to understand and adapt to the culture around us. If we don't understand our mission field, then our work together will be stunted and will eventually wither.

Now this doesn't mean throwing away our goodly heritage, compromising on our core values, or watering down the Gospel to some easy-sell, feel-good entertainment. We've got to be honest about both the joy and the challenge of following Jesus. But as a Church, we can't stay where we've always been when it comes to how we do certain things. Some of our habits and patterns act as obstacles to people seeking Jesus. Yet we are called to "Prepare the way of the Lord," to level mountains and backfill valleys, so that the way is clear for Jesus to come and for people to come to him.

John was a wild man, an agent of change on the move, driven by the word that came to him in the wilderness. His job was to shake things up, make a mess, and proclaim the coming of

Christ. It was radical and scandalous, a dangerous job, and it's our job, too. It's inspiring, exciting, and frightening, and 100% non-optional for people who follow Jesus. But it's definitely not boring.

It's an adventure of a lifetime that returns to us a thousand-fold whatever we put into it. Through Christ, we are greatly blessed. It would be selfish not to share it with others, and what a joy it is to give: to give the hope that things needn't be as they are; to give the freedom and peace from guilt and shame that comes with forgiveness; to give love of Jesus that accepts people as they are, where they are, so that we and they might be moved to a better place. Amen.