

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8,19-28

The wilderness.

Day by day, we ourselves are learning more and more about the wilderness. It's a place of desolation. It's a place populated by demons and evil spirits. It's a place of testing...a place of struggle and temptation. It's a place of darkness. It's a place where our imaginations can run wild. It's a place chock full of 'wrong paths' for us to pursue.

All of us are experiencing a wilderness of our own right now. Our wilderness is not a place...it is a state of being. It is the restriction of movement in the world. Our wilderness is the absence of people that we love. It is a barren place where the things and people we need are absent. We need to see familiar landmarks that tend to guide us, but at the moment, we can't see them at all. We are learning in this wilderness. We are stumbling in this wilderness. And sometimes we are drawn down the wrong paths because we can't see our way. Right now, our focus is on the parts of life that we usually shove to the sidelines while we attend to more pressing, attractive and urgent matters. But those things that we tended to push to the sidelines are the things that speak to our very souls...that nourish our deepest longings...that reveal to us the nature of the God who created us. These are the things we attend to in the wilderness....by necessity. We have no other distractions. No other more tempting and attractive focus for our attention. In the dark, we search desperately for familiar landmarks.

Our wilderness is known as the 'Pandemic.' It's eerily deceptive because so much of our life seems to be the same, but it isn't. We are living in the same places. We are moving along on the same streets. We 'see' each other electronically in an attempt to stay connected. We have food and heat and light, but we are, nevertheless in the wilderness. It's a foreign place populated by an enemy that we cannot see...and enemy that is deadly and could take our very lives...randomly and at any moment. We are, indeed, in the wilderness. But as our scripture passages tell us this morning, there is joy just around the corner. Salvation is on its way. For the time being, joy seems to have escaped us, but we celebrate it now on this Third Sunday of Advent.

From the Old Testament book of Isaiah we hear these words this morning:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
Because the Lord has anointed me;
He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
To bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And release to the prisoners;
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn,
To provide for those who mourn in Zion----

You may remember that this is the passage of scripture that Jesus read in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth just before he began his ministry. He told the congregation there that these words had been fulfilled within their hearing. They were so offended by Jesus' claim that they chased him out of the synagogue and tried to push him off a cliff to kill him. To them, his claim was blasphemous. Jesus, who had just conquered the temptations of the devil in the wilderness, must have realized that he was facing a very different kind of wilderness as he started his ministry. He was facing a wilderness of condemnation from his friends and neighbors and even his family. How easy it would have been for him to give up before he even got started. But he knew who he was and he knew his mission and he stayed the course. There are many different kinds of wilderness to conquer...some within our own souls.

But Jesus' mission is to walk with us...to stand beside us...to invite us into the presence of God...to teach us about the kingdom of God and the nature of God. His mission was to show us the unbounded wideness of God's mercy. His mission was to assure us that he was willing to walk beside anyone who wanted his presence. Is Jesus walking with you now? Have you invited him into your space? In the quiet of the pandemic exile that you endure, have you offered to allow Jesus to walk with you? Is he standing beside you even now?

Isaiah was not the only one to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. In his letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul employs this little church to "Rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." We sometimes don't understand how God is working in the circumstances of our lives when we are in the midst of turmoil. We don't often see what good is happening underneath the surface of what appears to be nothing but evil and harm. But Jesus is standing beside us...whether we acknowledge him or not...he's right there with us. It's a comfort to us to acknowledge him, but sometimes that's just too hard to do in the moment. There's too much pain...too much confusion...too much angst...and too much anxiety to focus on the loving care of Christ in the

midst of devastation. Nevertheless, in our own wilderness, whatever it may be, Jesus is standing beside us.

The psalmist this morning in Psalm 126 is filled with the joy we hope to find when we become aware of Jesus' presence and God's goodwill toward us.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion
We were like those who dream
Then our mouth was filled with laughter
And our tongue with shouts of joy.

The psalmist is talking about Israel being released from its own wilderness journey in the captivity of the Babylonian exile. When they were allowed to return to their beloved Promised Land, they were overcome with joy! There wasn't enough laughter and singing to express their pure joy! And there was relief...blessed relief...that the long struggle of exile was finally over. All was, once again, right with the world. They were going home. They were going to rebuild. They were going to be able to worship in the manner that they saw fit in the holy places that they would build. The future was once again bright for them and they knew that the Lord had done great things for them.

That's the kind of joy that we celebrate on this third Sunday in Advent. This is the Sunday of Joy. It is the Sunday that we acknowledge our sense of joy even in the anticipation and the waiting for Jesus' entry into the world. When that happens all will be right again...all will be as it should be. We can breathe a sigh of relief. Our Advocate will be walking with us. He shines his light in all the places in our lives that we are unable to see because we are so often in the dark. It's frightening in the dark. We don't know which way to go and we don't know how to protect ourselves. Jesus' light dispels the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

In the gospel lesson this morning, John is not described as "The Baptist." John spends several minutes explaining who he is not rather than who he is: He is not the Messiah. He is not Elijah. He is not one of the prophets. He is not the Light, but is there to make preparation for the Light. He's the one crying out in the wilderness for us to make way for the one who is coming. John is the witness to Jesus. He is the one who points to Jesus as the One we've all been waiting for. John has built a reputation of his own and a following of his own and in doing so he has established his own credibility. We tend to believe people who have established themselves as trustworthy and reliable. If John testifies, everyone knows that he speaks the truth...so his bearing witness to Jesus...his testifying about Jesus is powerful enough to capture peoples' attention and to stir their souls. He awakens them to the possibility of Jesus as the Messiah.

John's testimony is powerful enough to prepare his audience to recognize Jesus when they see him and experience him.

John bears witness to the Light...the light of Jesus Christ...the light that illuminates our path. Jesus helps us to see what we could not possibly see if we were totally in the dark. We need only a sliver of the light of Christ to focus our eyes and to get our bearings. We need only to ask Jesus to stand beside us as we make our way through our own wilderness. His Light will show us the way. And knowing He is present with us is the greatest joy we could even know. When he stands beside us, no matter what else is going on, we know that all is right with the world.

Is Jesus standing beside you? Have you asked Him to walk with you? Are you willing to walk with Him?

We already know that He is the Way!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.