

you seek to refine us in your love and purify us in your ways of righteousness. O God, open our lives to you that we may live as true disciples of Christ, and join ourselves to your good will for this world. Amen.

Gloria Patri

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost.
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, reign without end. Amen, amen.

Scripture

Unlike Mark, who jumps in with both feet by introducing John and Jesus in the first few verses of his gospel, Luke builds up our anticipation with the story of two births, John the prophet, and Jesus the Messiah. Here in this passage Zechariah, John's father, speaks prophetically of God's work of salvation and John's role as the herald of the Christ.

Luke 1:68-79

⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us
⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Like many of the prophetic books of the Bible, Luke places John in a historical context of the political and religious arena, anticipating God's greater work with the world. Likewise, John's presence in the desert recalls Israel's formation as God's covenant people and thus John's call for Israel to return to God's ways.

Luke 3:1-6

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Special Music

“What a Friend We Have in Jesus,”
Charles Converse. Arr. Robert D. Vandall

Sermon:

A Wilderness, A Voice, A Call

As some of you know I love hiking. And yet, for all my adventures I have seldom actually been in a wilderness. My closest hiking spot is Mount Tom, and you literally cross under I 91 to enter the preserve, and when you reach the summit, East Hampton and yes I 91 are in your view. So no, it is not even close to a wilderness.

Yet if I look at my life, our lives, we are surrounded by wilderness, a wild-ness. Covid, the economy, politics, culture wars, global warming, refugees, and so much more. Add to that the number of illnesses, injuries, anxiety and demands on our lives... well, who can't claim that we are living in a wilderness of sorts.

No one wants to be in a wilderness, but there we are; and like Israel's journey we just want to go back to where we were. It may not have been Egypt, but it was home. Unfortunately, going back is not possible, as the saying goes “the only way out is through”. But here is the good news – you are not alone. We have a whole history of prophets and leaders who have known the wilderness, from Moses to John the Baptist and beyond.

This is the good news of grace in today's reading. It was in the wilderness that “the word of God came to John”. Just as God called Moses in the desert and formed Israel, giving them the law at Sinai; so God met John in the wilderness with a word for God's people. John was called in that place as God's

prophet, and more than a prophet, as a forerunner of the coming Christ. He was called as a herald, a messenger. He was the Voice – a voice calling everyone to “Prepare the Way of the Lord”, to prepare for the one who is coming. In fact, while Luke quotes Isaiah by saying ‘a voice crying in the wilderness’ some translators of Isaiah shift the phrase ever so slightly to ‘a voice cry, in the wilderness prepare the way...’ And that simple shift offers us such hope.

Consider how often the wilderness was used to call and shape and form God’s people. The wilderness, as distressing, exhausting and fearful as it may be, it is where life is transformed. The wilderness strips away the non-essentials and focuses our attention on what is and on what may be. That is what both Isaiah and John knew and proclaimed and called for- ‘prepare the way of the Lord’

In the wild, unsettled places of life our lives can be transformed; in the wild, empty places we are most open to changing and being changed. And we are most available to God. Hidden in every wilderness is the beauty and mystery of God’s presence. It was true for Moses, for the prophets, for John and for Jesus. That is why every year, during Advent, the church is called to the wilderness to hear a voice and a call. No, it is not a trip to the Jordan wilderness, nor a call to a winter hike. It is a journey that enters our personal wilderness, those challenging regions that can feel, not just fruitless but threatening. It takes courage and hope, as well as trust in God to enter or acknowledge those places in our lives where we experience high, insurmountable mountains; low, dark valleys; rough, chaotic places and crooked, twisted paths.

In reality, it may be that we can’t ‘fix it and make it better’. But that is not what God is after. If we could ‘do it ourselves’ we wouldn’t need a savior, now would we? The promise and gift of God is not that we must ‘do the heavy lifting’. Rather God comes to us, to our side, with grace and power; so that by God’s power and grace mountains, valleys, rough and crooked are transformed in ways we could never imagine or accomplish alone, in ways that truly reveal and embody the deep salvation of God.

Today, in the season of Advent, and in the various seasons of our lives, we are being challenged in and through our wilderness. It is here, in the midst of it all, that we hear a voice proclaiming a word, a word that calls us ‘prepare God’s way, make ready for God’s coming’. And in that coming we will see and know, experience and live a new, whole and hopeful life – straight, smooth and even – that is the joy of God’s salvation.

Shall we answer that call? Amen.

***Hymn**

On Jordan’s Bank

1 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh.
Awake and harken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings!

2 Then cleansed be every life from sin:
make straight the way for God within,
and let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.

Joys and Concerns

Prayers of the People

Loving God, we come to you today, thankful for all the prophetic voices that proclaim your ways to us. We thank you for their clear insight, their challenges, their hope and their assurances that you are coming to restore us in all that is right and good. We thank you for all you accomplished in Christ, and all you are continuing to achieve through your Spirit. We eagerly await your coming, O God, and turn to you as we strive to prepare your way.

And so, we pray for your church and for this congregation. As we rejoice in your grace may we also take to heart your call. May we live as today's voices of truth, and labor in hope to see your reign of righteousness and peace flourish in our world.

We pray for the world and all its leaders. Grant them wisdom to hear your voice through the many claims that confront them every day. And grant them your power as they seek to bring true justice and peace among the nations. We pray also for all who are crying out today. Grant your healing to the ill, your comfort to the mourning, and your provision to the needy. We especially lift up... and we thank you for....

We praise you, faithful God, for all your mercy and grace towards us through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

Choral Response

Remember Me

Offering

God has prepared his holy way for us to walk in. As we recognize the wonders of God's majesty and realize the amazing depth of God's concern for us, we respond with joyful obedience, giving to him all that we have and all that we are. Our offerings are a small measure of our gratitude. Let us dedicate them with joy.

How good you have been to us, gracious God! You have looked favorably upon us and redeemed us. You grant us the knowledge of salvation and guide our feet in the way of peace. For this and so much more we give you thanks, not only with a portion of our income, but also through renewed commitment to righteous living. By your grace, may we share in the work Christ came to accomplish among us. Amen.

Doxology

(choose the one that is best for your faith)

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise him all creatures here below,
praise him above ye heavenly hosts, praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise God all creatures here below
Praise God for all that Love has done; Creator, Christ and Spirit One. Amen

Communion

Music Jesus, the Joy of Loving Hearts
Invitation
Great Thanksgiving
Consecration and Service
Prayer of Gratitude

***Common Commission**

Let us go forth into the world in peace, being of good courage, holding fast to that which is good, rendering to no one evil for evil, strengthening the faint-hearted, supporting the weak, helping the afflicted, honoring all persons, loving and serving the Lord, and rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

***Benediction**

Go now into the world

May the Lord God, our mighty Savior, be present to you,
may he renew your life with his love,
may he delight in you with shouts of joy. Zephaniah 3:17 adj

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

Postlude

“There’s a Voice in the Wilderness”

music provided by Chris Harris and Lynne Walker