

Malachi 3:1-4
Canticle 4
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

My clergy colleague, Fanny, who was here just a few Sundays ago to preach for us, just got back from her first trip to the southwest. While she was there, she got to see the Grand Canyon for the first time. She talked a long time about how startled she was with the magnitude and the majesty; the beautiful colors and the breathtaking scenery everywhere she turned. She said that photographs couldn't possibly do it justice. Seeing it all was a moving experience for her as it is for most people...particularly when they see it for the first time. The Grand Canyon is America's great desert and one of America's places of wilderness. If you are out in that desert, away from the outposts of civilization, you can be overwhelmed by the vast and merciless landscape that offers little shelter and presents a deep threat to survival. And at the same time, this wilderness also holds incredible beauty and great majesty. It's a paradox. How can anything so beautiful also be so dangerous?

Like many things, the desert or wilderness can be both a physical place and a metaphorical place. There's something about the wilderness that is not like any other place on earth. There is no place to hide and no way to survive on your own. You are forced to depend on the others with you and on God. The wilderness strips away all that is superfluous and challenges everything we think we know. It removes all pretention and all illusion. All that is familiar to us is gone. It takes us down to the bare bones.

Each of us has had times in our life that we refer to as our 'wilderness times' or time spent 'in the desert.' Those are the bleak times...the times when we feel like everything is falling apart or that all has gone wrong or that we are trapped in a situation from which there is no escape. And we don't have nearly enough of the one thing we need the most...love and support. Those are the times that we feel the loneliest. Those are the times when we are tempted to slip into despair. Lost in our solitude and completely vulnerable, it is a desolate time in life. But those are also the times when God can reach us most easily. Those are the times when God transforms us. Those are the times that God can make radical changes in us. He can soften our hearts and open our eyes to things we've never seen before...very often things we've never seen about ourselves. And he can give us insight about those around us that would not have happened otherwise.

It is in the wilderness that we can hear God's voice most clearly. It is in the wilderness that we can rail at God for all that has gone wrong...for all that we want Him to fix...for our disappointment in Him and in life. It is a time when we are most fully engaged with God in a unique way. It is a time when we are most ready and available to hear God. It is a transformational time for us. It is easy to drift far away from the God when we are enjoying the

fat of the land; when we have all we need and most of what we want. In the wilderness, God walks with us in the valleys and lifts us up. In the wilderness the mountains that loom large and foreboding before us are made low. In the wilderness God makes every crooked thing straight. And in the wilderness, God smooths off all the rough edges.

God formed the nation of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years. During that time, the Israelites suffered, but God also provided for them...manna on the ground...birds in the air...and water from a rock. It was a preparation time for them. When they emerged from the wilderness, they were ready to build a new nation...one devoted to God. After he was baptized, Jesus spent time in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. During that time, God formed him for the mission that lay ahead for him. Jesus was being prepared for the ministry and mission that lay ahead of him. When Jesus emerged from the wilderness...when he had been fully prepared for his mission...he was ready to begin. And when John emerges from the wilderness he knows exactly what God wants from him. He preaches repentance and he heralds the one who is coming to save the world. "Get ready!" he tells everyone. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" We've each had our own wilderness time and as a church community, we have also spent time in the wilderness. We simply need to realize that perhaps God has been preparing us for something...something even more than the preparation that we make each year to welcome the infant Jesus. Our prayers, then, are that God in God's good time, will reveal to us what he is preparing us for.

In a literal sense, the wilderness from which Israel, John, and Jesus all emerged is a very public place. It belongs to and can be accessed by everybody. There are no boundaries around the wilderness and there are no rules. There is no social structure and no hierarchy. It's a level playing field.

But the world in which you and I live...and the world in which John the Baptist and Jesus lived... does have boundaries and it does have rules and there is most definitely a hierarchy. Our scripture lesson this morning reminds us of that very fact by locating John and Jesus in a particular place on the earth at a particular time. It was the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius in Rome and when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod Antipas was ruler of Galilee and it was during the high priestships of Annas and Caiaphas. The Bishop of Western Massachusetts, the Rt. Rev. Douglas Fisher suggests that this might be the single most important verse in the entire Bible because it tells us that our faith is not a fairy tale. It is not a myth. It is not an abstraction. It is not "once upon a time." And it is not "in a galaxy far, far, away." It is in *this* time, when *these people* held power, that the word of God came to Zechariah's son, John, and the place was the wilderness. When he emerged from that wilderness, he could not be stopped. Prepared by God to tell the people to prepare themselves for the Messiah, John was lit from within. And Jesus himself could not be moved.

These were perilous times...the times in which John and Jesus lived and ministered. Our own Presiding Bishop and nearly two dozen other religious leaders have described our own times as both perilous and polarizing. They see a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of government and in our churches. They believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith is now at stake. They have challenged us to renew our commitment to be followers of Jesus before anything else. We have many identities: nationality, political party, gender, race, ethnicity, geography, denomination, occupation...but our identify in Christ precedes every other identity we have. It is the one that must be the most important to each of us.

During this Advent Season as we prepare for make room, anew, for Jesus in our hearts and in our lives, we are taking a look at the Way of Love way of life that Bishop Curry has devised for us. It's a challenge to change some of the ways we do things in order to be more fully present not only for Jesus, but for those around us. Slowly, as we look at these practices and as we experiment with new ways of doing things, we will learn about the value of intentionality. We will learn why it is so very important that, as Christians, there are simply certain things that we are going do to because we are followers of Christ. And we are going to do them on purpose. Because, as Jesus said, "They will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." And if we can take that love for each other and that self-acceptance and share it with everyone we come in contact with, we will be preaching the gospel...and not necessarily with words.

As we prepare in Advent for the coming of the Christ child, reach back into your own thoughts and memories about your time in the wilderness. What was God doing to you during that time? How did God change you? For what was he preparing you? How is our life together going to change because of this preparation for Jesus that we make now and that God has done for us in the past? How do we prepare to receive the Christ child, Jesus, once again?

The wilderness is paradoxical. It is a place of great privation and a place of beauty and majesty. It is also the place where God pursues us most energetically and cares for us lovingly...all of it done to prepare us for what's next.

So, what's next? That's our prayer to God!

Thanks be to God,

AMEN.