

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

The Fourth Sunday in Advent (2020)

Wilderness Voices

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“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—” (Deuteronomy 18:15, ESV)

Advent is drawing to a close, that season chronicled by our patient waiting for the Lord. As this season closes, we anticipate with great joy the celebration of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus on Christmas Day. Five days from today we shall hear of the Word become flesh, who dwelt among us to live as we live, experiencing the same emotions and feelings that we experience. Our Lord Jesus experienced hunger, cold, heat, love, sadness, pain, death, and Satan’s tempting power in the same way we do. But there is one great difference between Him and us, when He was tempted, He did not sin.

In the OT Reading for today we heard Moses say to the people, ***“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—” (Deuteronomy 18:15, ESV)*** From the wilderness, Moses cries out to God’s people proclaiming the coming of a prophet, a New Teacher who will establish a new priesthood, another kingdom, another type of worship of God, and another word. That word which Moses taught will be set aside. This new Prophet will bring a new word declaring to all, ***“Take heart . . . your sins are forgiven.” (Matthew 9:2, ESV)*** The apostle John reminds us that, ***“the law [which is good] was given through Moses; [but] grace and truth [come] through [the Gospel of] Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17, ESV)***

Called by God, Moses became the voice of God to God’s people in the wilderness. When he spoke, he spoke as the prophet of God. But there was one time when the people heard the voice of God Himself from Mt. Sinai, and they were frightened. Fearful of God, who they saw as a consuming fire, they pleaded with Moses, ***“You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” (Exodus 20:19, ESV)*** But now we hear Moses say to them, I want you to listen to another, to listen to a new Prophet. I have led you all these years in the wilderness teaching you about sin, wrath, and death, but now I want you to listen to this new Prophet who will teach you about righteousness, grace, and life. The Law, the word Moses taught, humbled men, but the new Prophet will proclaim a word that will exalt all men. As to their divine authority, both words are alike, yet with respect to the fruit of ministry, they are not alike, they are opposed to each other. The sin and wrath which Moses arouses through the word of his ministry, is canceled by the soothing words of righteousness, and grace the new Prophet speaks. Two voices, one spoken in the wilderness of sin, the other spoken in the garden of grace.

Having told the people of the coming new Prophet, Moses then repeats God’s warning concerning the new Prophet. God said, ***“whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.” (Deuteronomy 18:19, ESV)*** The voice of the new Prophet will proclaim life and salvation, but no one is forced to listen. But for those who do listen, God pours out His mercy upon them and renews them with the Holy Spirit. However, for those who will not believe, who turn a deaf ear and a cold heart to the words of the new Prophet, they are left to God’s judgment, for God says, ***“Whoever does not believe is condemned already.” (John 3:18, ESV)***

As we read the story of Moses and the people of God in the wilderness, we see many similarities today. One of those is that the wilderness is still with us.

In the wilderness we find the voice of false prophets who are signs of the end of the age. In the time of the church Jesus says, ***“many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.” (Matthew 24:11, ESV)*** Moses had no more told the people about the new Prophet, when he warns that God said, ***“But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.” (Deuteronomy 18:20, ESV)*** False prophets make the people trust in lies, prophesying things to come that will not, thereby giving false hope or undo fear. False prophets do not prophecy the revelations of God.

In the wilderness we find the voice of false teachers. False teachers twist, isolate, and take Scripture out of context to change the revelation of Scripture that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ Jesus. They do this purely for their personal gain and glory. Preaching heresy, they promote personal rights and immorality contrary to Scripture lies meant to destroy faith in Christ. St. Peter tells us they ***“indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority. Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones . . . They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, while they feast with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray.” (2 Peter 2:10, 13–15, ESV)*** They shout, Lord, Lord, but their lives and their preaching are a contradiction of God’s will and Word.

In the wilderness we find the voice of the worldly, those who are, as St. Paul says, ***“without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools.” (Romans 1:20–22, ESV)*** Having exchanged the glory of God for images, ***“God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.” (Romans 1:24–27, ESV)*** They are, ***“filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice . . . full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” (Romans 1:29–32, ESV)***

And in the wilderness we find the voice of Satan, sweet-talking and tempting God’s children into sin, asking, ***“Did God actually say?” (Genesis 3:1, ESV)*** That crafty serpent is the same one who tempted our Lord Jesus for forty days in the wilderness after His baptism. If he is so bold as to try and tempt the Son of God, what makes you think you are immune from his crafty ways. You are not. If you insist on wandering in the wilderness, you, too, will be confronted by the great tempter as he seeks to lead you into falling in line with all those who are without excuse and who have become futile in their thinking.

But the Good News is that God’s promise spoken of by Moses has come to past. The new Prophet has come, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He has come to rescue you from the wilderness of sin. He is the One who calls you out of darkness into His marvelous light. His

voice, the voice of the Good Shepherd, is heard through the voice of His under-shepherds as they proclaim His invitation to the lost sheep of the wilderness, “seek refuge from the harshness and dangers of the wilderness and be secure in His blessed sanctuary, the Church.” Therein He feeds the multitude with Bread from heaven and bids them to drink of the gift of eternal life offered in His Blood. In His sanctuary He shields the refugees from danger and binds their wounds with His Means of Grace, offering them His love, mercy, and forgiveness.

He is the Messiah who was prophesied by Isaiah, who ***“had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. [Who] was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”*** (Isaiah 53:2–3, ESV) He came to rescue us by taking our sin upon Himself in the waters of His baptism. There, God effected a divine exchange, our sin for His righteousness. In those blessed waters, ***“For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*** (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV) ***“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*** (Isaiah 53:4–6, ESV)

Yes, He gave His life upon the Altar of the Cross to appease His Father’s wrath against our sins. Yet, in the face of such suffering and shame, His love for us knew no bounds. He gave of Himself to offer us safety in His sanctuary, the Church. Today, we hear His voice from His garden of peace, calling us to safety, calling us to Him that He may be rescued from sin, death, and the devil.

Yes, there are many voices in the wilderness, all leading you away from Christ, all calling you to a life of sin and eternal destruction. But out of His grace and mercy, our Lord continues to call you through the voice of His called servants who through Word and Sacrament ministry proclaim the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins, thereby strengthening your faith so the indwelling Holy Spirit may muffle and drown out those *Wilderness Voices* which try lead you away from Christ.

Yes, there are many *Wilderness Voices*, voices which proclaim joy but give sorrow. But thanks be to God, today there is one voice, the voice of the new Prophet, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, which delivers what it promises: forgiveness of sin and life eternal in paradise. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.