

Matthew 3:1-12 "Advent Begins in the Wilderness"

Read Matthew 3:1-12

vv.1-3: The passage opens with John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness. Matthew declares that it was prophesied by Isaiah that John would cry out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight" (v. 3).

1. What does the word "wilderness" mean to you? What is, or has been, the wilderness in your life?

"Wilderness," sometimes translated "desert," evokes many different images, through our experiences in nature, through movies, through literature, and through Scripture.

Please take a minute to emphasize that no one should feel pressured to share their personal struggles. But for those who are comfortable, sharing some of the difficult and painful events and experiences in our lives may be a meaningful way to start. Our recent service of lament addressed some of the losses we have suffered over the last 3 years. Our "wilderness" can arise because we lost something or because we never had it at all. It can arise because of the actions of others (e.g. betrayal), because of events and circumstances (e.g. illness, including COVID), or because of our own actions (e.g. anger, selfishness).

2. How did you cope with the wilderness you were in? Did you stay or did you try to leave, and how?

This is an opportunity to share our experiences of trying to manage, or escape from, the wilderness. The sermon went through four different options:

- (1) **Denial:** things are not really that bad!;
- (2) **Nihilism:** pain and darkness are all there is;
- (3) **Progressivism:** We can make things better on our own, through self-help, science, and reason; and
- (4) the **Gospel:** Christ has come into the wilderness to carry us out.

There are other possibilities as well, and some of them have even been used in the church (e.g. "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger").

3. Did you encounter God's grace in your wilderness? If so, please share your stories of how God blessed you in the midst of the wilderness, including through the love and care of others: family, friends, and sometimes even strangers.

God meets us in the midst of our darkness. Some of this may have already emerged in your discussion of the prior question, if group members have shared tangible experiences of encountering God in the wilderness. If not, this is an opportunity to do so.

4. If you did not have a concrete encounter with God in your time of need. Does John the Baptist's message in v. 3 give you comfort and hope? Are there other passages in Scripture that you have turned to in your wilderness?

John the Baptist is the herald that declares that God is coming into our wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (v. 3). In Scripture, we know that God will deliver us because He saved his people of Israel over and over again, because He sent his Son to die for us, and because He has promised to return to restore all things.

The wilderness is an image and a location that appears again and again in Scripture. The members of your group may be able to see themselves in and through some of these stories. The sermon mentioned God's provision during the exodus from Egypt (e.g. manna in Exodus 16; water from a rock in Exodus 17:1-7). There are also the stories of Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21:8-21); David fleeing from Saul and from other enemies (e.g. Psalm 63; 1 Samuel 23:14-29); Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-18), and many more. If John's message did not immediately resonate with your members, or if no one suggests other passages from Scripture, please consider reading Genesis 16 or Psalm 63 together. Any of the other passages noted above also speak to God meeting his people in the wilderness.

5. John calls on the people to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (v. 2), and to "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (v. 8). What does repentance mean, and what does it look like to bear fruit in keeping with repentance?

The following is a slightly edited excerpt from the sermon:

John's call to repentance is a call of return: Repent! Turn away from your idols, and return to the Lord. The message of Isaiah and all the prophets is that "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6 KJV). And just as he did through them, God declares through John, the last in the line of Old Testament prophets: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:22 ESV). Return to the Lord, he is our only comfort and our peace.

So when John, and Christ, preach repentance, they are inviting us to stop and turn around. To stop walking deeper and deeper into the wilderness with our heads down, apologizing, feeling guilty and shamed. God doesn't want us to be alone with our guilt and our apologies. He wants us all to return to Him as his children. God calls for us to turn away from sin, so that we can turn, re-turn, towards Him. If repentance is turning away, then faith is turning to. Turning away and turning to are two sides of the same action. All faith is repentant, and all repentance is faith-filled.

After we turn around, God carries and deliver us, to return to Him. We return through the power of Spirit, in Christ, not through our own efforts or power. What does it look like when we receive his grace in our lives, and return to him? How do we and/or our thoughts and actions change?

6. What does it mean that repentance is plural, that the call to repent is a collective call to the entire community?

The following is a slightly edited excerpt from the sermon:

*When John preaches "Repent," that verb in the Greek (*μετανοεῖτε*) is plural, it is "All of you Repent," it's "Repent, y'all." All the key verbs in John's exhortations are plural. John is literally preaching to a huge crowd gathered from all over Judah, he isn't calling out a solitary sinner to shame him. All the prophets made collective calls to God's people. The return of the people includes a return to righteousness in society itself. Isaiah and the prophets preached against the kings and religious leaders of Israel, exposing their injustices and hypocrisy, just as John does to the Pharisees and Sadducees here (v. 7). Society itself, including ours, must turn, and repent.*

7. What are we waiting for as we repent together as children of God? What do we wait for during the season of advent?

The sermon emphasized that John the Baptist does not speak directly to Christ's birth, to the event that we focus on during Christmas. After all, Jesus is already around thirty-years old when John the Baptist is preaching! John is speaking to Christ's ministry, to the coming of the kingdom of heaven. The completion of Christ's ministry, the fullness of God's kingdom, is yet to come. In Christ, as participants in Christ's ministry, we wait for his second coming, for his return in power and glory when he will make all things new.

The following is a slightly edited excerpt from the sermon:

John is inviting us to the full restoration of all creation, to the great wedding feast of Matthew 22, to the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19. "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (Isaiah 40:4-5). Valleys and mountains transformed—all of creation is being remade. Later in Isaiah God declares: "For behold, I create a new heaven and new earth" (Isaiah 65:17). The first heaven and the first earth will pass away, and the new heaven and the new earth will emerge, all creation will be remade when Christ returns in glory and power. The entire wilderness of humanity and creation will be made new. That is the party in the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21: We will dwell with God, and we will be his people, and he will wipe every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, and there shall be no more crying, no more pain, for the former things have passed away (Revelation 21:3-4).