

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Advent 2-B (6 December 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

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Collect

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

1 Isaiah's Message

The story of the Bible is the story of people who find themselves in the wilderness. After the Exodus from Egypt the people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Eventually they made it to the promised land. But there came a generation who did not live out the reality of God's promises in the ways they loved their neighbors. The poor still cried out; the widow and the orphan were not looked after; the immigrant was not welcomed. In vain the Israelites invoked God's name over a society full of suffering and injustice. So that failed kingdom ended and the people were carried off into exile, into a wilderness existence that reflected more accurately the absence of the reign of God in their lives. Not the absence of God! The absence of the reign of God in the people's choices and habits.

In the wilderness the people's eyes were opened and they began to pay attention once more to God. In the wilderness the prophet Isaiah spoke, as we heard this morning: *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.*¹ Even in exile, the prophet cries out: *In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* The prophet describes the road-building crew that might precede an important state visit, maybe like when Premier Kosygin and President Johnson came to Glassboro, or perhaps the Corps of Engineers who is preparing the way for a great army. *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 people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

The people are in the wilderness, far from home, but God is not far off. Even there in far-off Babylon, God is already present with God's people, preparing to enact God's mighty will of liberation in great acts of freedom, salvation, comfort, recompense, and pastoral care that will reshape the entire world! *He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

2 Wilderness

God's people keep finding themselves in the wilderness. It's almost like that's what it means to be God's people! The wilderness is a place that steals from us our protective shields, our assurance and easy confidence about what's true, what's right. The wilderness exposes us, makes plain our weakness, our ignorance, our obstinance.

¹All references from Isa 40.1-11 NRSV

Some of us, like Elsie Hoell, may she rest in peace, like to embrace a little wilderness by spending lots of times outdoors: hiking, camping, and hunting. Others of us are *thrust* into the metaphorical wilderness by a change of jobs, moving off to go to college, joining the military, or a radical restructuring of our families by birth, death, marriage, or divorce. Sometimes we enter the wilderness full of joy and anticipation; sometimes we enter the wilderness with broken hearts. Sometimes we enter with curiosity and wonder. Nearly always we enter the wilderness with fear.

The wilderness is a place of challenge, of change, of growth and of destiny. The wilderness is the place where we are stretched, sometimes beyond what we thought we could bear, and we are invited to stretch some more. The wilderness is a place where we discover repentance, change, doing and being and believing differently than we have before. In the wilderness we re-evaluate our past and sometimes we choose to embrace a new vision of the future. The wilderness is the place that breaks up our preconceptions, demolishes what we thought were our limitations, and invites us to a whole new encounter with God. The wilderness rips up the tidy certainties of our lives, lays low the mountains of our idolatries and fills in the valleys of our despondence to build a new, straight road and to make a level place on which we are met by God.

3 God is present even in the wilderness

It is in the wildernesses, those arid, desert, hard places in our lives, where we become available to be encountered by God in a new and life-giving way. One time I experienced this was in college. I had a challenging passage through my teen years. But it was precisely there in the wilderness of that season that I began to make the faith I had inherited from my parents my own. There in the wilderness God used a community of faith, a church, to reveal God's self to me in a new way, through relationships, through Scripture, and through prayer. It was there, in the wilderness, that God built something new in my life.

This is the story of the Bible. That story became your story when you were baptized. If you find yourself in the wilderness today, I'm sorry. But I'm also glad for you. Because God is there. The more desolate your wilderness, the bigger work God is doing in your life.

We don't have to like the wilderness places in our lives. We're not supposed to! We pray for them to go away. But even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, even today, God is present. This is what the Israelites discovered, what John the Baptist proclaimed, what the church affirms to us today: God is present. God is present in the good times, yes. Even more importantly, God is present in the wilderness. Emmanuel, God is with us, even and especially in the wildernesses of our lives. This is what was meant by the incarnation of Jesus Christ, whose birth and second coming we look forward to as we journey through Advent together.

Amen.