

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 12/8/2019, Matthew 3:1-12 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

If you have attended Advent services here in previous years, then you probably know that John the Baptist is one of my absolute favorite biblical figures. Of course Jesus is number one, but other than that, JBar tops my list. I love him. He is passionate, ethical. I am sure that in real life, he would drive me absolutely nuts, and I definitely would not want him as a parishioner; but in the Bible, I admire him so much. He's my hero.

Last week, the first Sunday in the new church year, we started a year of the Gospel of Matthew. John the Baptist appears every year on the second and third Sundays of Advent, and each Gospel has its quirks when presenting John's story. Matthew is the one that has him eating locusts and dressed in camel's hair and shouting "You brood of vipers!" This is John at his most colorful. But Mark, Luke, *and* Matthew all set John the Baptist in the wilderness, so I want us to spend a little time in that wilderness today.

In the Bible, the wilderness often functions as a liminal space—that is, a transitional space. A space of change. For example, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness with Moses for forty years before they got to the Promised Land.

Right after Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he fasted for forty days and nights, and then was tempted by the devil. This seems to have been a liminal or transitional time for Jesus like it was for the Israelites. After this time in the wilderness, Jesus doesn't enter the Promised Land, but he does begin his public ministry after his time in the wilderness.

Sometimes we think of the wilderness as something negative. Something we have to make our way through in order to get to the reward, the Promised Land, the place flowing with milk and honey. This is probably exacerbated by fairy tales, which make the wilderness sound scary.

Sometimes the word "desert" is used synonymously with wilderness—we talk about Jesus being tempted in the desert for forty days, or the Israelites wandering in the desert for forty years. For me, desert does not have a negative connotation. I grew up in the desert, in Arizona. I just spent a wonderful Thanksgiving weekend there. I see the desert as incomparably beautiful.

I ran a 5K just over a week ago in the desert, and that's given me a bit of a visual when thinking about today's reading when it comes to wilderness. Here at St. David's, as you know, Caroline Peters started a Pew to 5K program two years ago. Starting in January, when people are filled with new year's resolution fervor, Caroline meets up with parishioners on Saturdays and helps us to train for a 5K. The first year she did it I didn't want to quash her enthusiasm but I didn't think anyone would show up; but then it became so popular that even *I* did the Pew to 5K last year. So then I pitched the idea to my desert family: how about we do a 5K right after Thanksgiving to burn off some of that turkey? I found a Fat Turkey trail-running 5K that sounded perfect.

They all turned me down except one niece and one nephew, and then the niece had to work a double shift and couldn't, so then it came down to my nephew David and me. We decided we would go pick up our T-shirts the day before and then just go out to breakfast and skip the run.

But then it rained on Thanksgiving when I visited family. Deserts don't get much rain, and Phoenix is a city with an unfortunate amount of pollution, so the day after rain is just gorgeous. So, the air was so clear when we went to pick up the shirts that we thought a trail-running 5K would be stunning.

When we looked up the route the night before we were confused, because this was trail running. That's wilderness. But, the map showed us crossing the freeway in a couple spots. When we showed up on race day, we saw that underpasses would take us from the start and finish line to the hilly trails.

We started at Tempe Town lake, a lake by a freeway, surrounded by parking lots and buildings, and we ran underneath a freeway to desert landscape, complete with red gravelly earth and cactus. I had told David that my strategy for "running" was to walk uphill and jog downhill, but this didn't work very well with trails, because downhill was often jagged with rocks and ditches, so, my time was extra, extra, extra slow. But running in the desert in the middle of a city helped me to think differently about John the Baptist and the wilderness.

So that's my visual: a beautiful desert landscape right up against an ugly gray freeway and parking lots and buildings. "Civilization." Normally I "run" in my suburban neighborhood, very close by, Loch Braemar, and see home after home after home. Lawn after lawn after lawn. But during this Fat Turkey trailing running 5K, which was mostly an asthmatic walk for me, I saw cars whizzing by *and* red rocky hills dotted with pale green cactus.

For John the Baptist, the wilderness was not a scary place. Remember that Jesus and John and all of their colleagues lived under Roman oppression. Romans considered their cities to be the height of civilized society. Jesus, John, and other Jews did not see Rome that way. For them, the desert was an alternative. The values of the desert, of the wilderness, were different than Roman values.

One commentator¹ I read this week even described the wilderness specifically as a "safe space," where Jesus withdrew with his disciples after hearing about the death of John the Baptist. The wilderness was a place to flee the violence in a society where a prophet like John the Baptist could be beheaded on a wife's whim. The wilderness was a place of refuge for those seeking to escape violent values of an occupying empire.

The Advent message that we hear from John the Baptist every year can be an escape from the values of our culture. In our culture right now, it's Christmas; and in our culture right now, Christmas mean consumption and excess. We'll feast on rich foods and go into debt and give each other presents we don't need and in many cases don't even want. Some of us will eat too much and drink too much and won't feel very well during Advent.

That's not Episcopal Advent. In Advent, St. David's can be a place of wilderness refuge for you from the excesses of our culture's celebration of Christmas. In this wilderness, Christmas doesn't

¹ Nadella, Raj, "Matthew 3"1-12, in *Connections*, Year A Vol. 1, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019, 30.

come until December 25th, or at least not until our first Christmas eve service after sundown on the 24th; and Christmas will last for twelve days, not just one.

Our church Advent values and Christmas values are different than the values that surround us. St. David's can be a place of wilderness respite for you this month.

But the wilderness is not just a place to escape. John the Baptist colorfully calls for us to repent, to actually change the direction of our lives. One of the gifts of the church calendar is that every year we get another chance to do better. How are you going to observe Advent this year? I don't want to scream at you and call you a brood of vipers and ruin your holiday fun; but I invite all of us, in the next week, to ruminate on the wilderness. On the values of the wilderness. The values of church. On repentance, and on preparation: not for a bunch of fattening food and gifts under sparkling lights, but preparation for the light of Christ. A humble light in the midst of darkness and chaos.