

2nd Sunday of Advent
Luke 3:1-6
December 5&6, 2009
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The wilderness: a barren and empty place, a place of desolation. It is a lonely place, for there seems to be no life there, it is deserted. If there is life, it is wild, it is overgrown. It might be a dry place, or a dark place. It can be confusing, disorienting, even downright scary. It is a wasteland. No one would ever want to go there. We are not meant to be there.

Yet, I'm sure many of us *have* been there. You've been in a vast desert in Arizona, or among the shifting sand dunes along Lake Michigan. You've been on the frozen plains of North Dakota, or the thick forests of the U.P. In these places you might have gone for hours without seeing another human being. While in the wilderness you became hot and thirsty longing for water, or you became cold and longed for a warm fire. Maybe you were even lost for a while, as you struggled to regain your bearings. Yes these are all experiences of wilderness, of wild, barren, and desolate places in nature.

But nature is not the only place where we find the wilderness. Do we not experience places of wilderness in ways that are not as easy to identify, yet still very real? We experience emotional wilderness in times of sadness, grief, or anger. We experience relational wilderness in times of loneliness, abuse, conflict, or estrangement. We experience spiritual wilderness in times when God seems distant, because of seemingly unanswered prayer, or when our faith seems lifeless. These are times when we are thirsting for something or are chilled to the bone. We are lost, struggling to find our way again. Have you ever experienced wilderness in this way? I'm sure you have. I have. I have grieved the loss of loved ones. I have been away from home in a new place. I have felt like God doesn't hear me. I am acquainted with the wilderness, and it is not a place where I want to be.

However, the wilderness is not always a foreboding, desolate place. Though I have yet to set foot in the U.P., based on what I've heard and pictures I've seen, it looks like a place full of incredible natural beauty. And the sight of the dunes along Lake Michigan on a clear sunny day, which I have seen, is an amazing sight. I'm sure you can imagine other wild places you've been to, such as deserts, plains, or forests, and you can visualize the beauty you've seen there. For some, the wilderness is a place that is refreshing. It is a place to rediscover ourselves, or a place to become more aware of God's presence. The wilderness is both barren and beautiful.

If we look carefully we can also find beauty in the wilderness of *our lives*. The barrenness of the wilderness can give us a new perspective. A few weeks ago on an unusually pleasant November day, I drove out to Muskegon State Park, and took a short hike along the dune ridge. It was my first time at the park since the leaves had fallen. As I drove down Scenic Drive I observed the barrenness of the leafless trees. Yet I also noted how that barrenness also opened up new views. Because the leaves had fallen, I saw things I had not seen before. As I hiked, I noticed how much more clearly I could see the profiles of the surrounding tree covered dunes. Yes even in the barrenness there is beauty, and what is true of nature is also true of life.

Often in the pain of our grief, loneliness, or dryness we see things from a new perspective. We see our challenges in a different light. The barrenness of our situation opens up new views. We see people, places, or things we have taken for granted, or maybe never even noticed. We see that even though circumstances are spinning out of control, we still have reason to hope. We discover God is closer to us than we ever realized. Wilderness is both a barren and beautiful place.

The experience of wilderness in our lives is often marked by a sense of longing, a longing to be *out of* the wilderness, as if we are not meant to be there. Even when we are in the natural wilderness surrounded by beauty, don't we long to go back to our homes, family, and work?

Now there are exceptions, such as people who in the past felt called to the wilderness to live simply, or in meditation and deep thought. And yes, there are times when we are so taken in by the wilderness, or so fed up with life that we never want to go back. But if we're honest, I think we all experience a longing to depart from the wilderness, to return to where life is familiar.

When we are struggling in the wilderness of *life* do we not also experience a longing? A sense that our lives are not what they are meant to be? That things are not whole? That we are in a place where we do not belong? When we grieve we do so because someone or something is missing, and we long to see that someone or something again. When we feel lonely we long for meaningful connections with other people. When we feel like our faith is stale or lifeless we long for those times when our faith was new and fresh, when we were learning about God in new and exciting ways. While we are in the wilderness of life, do we not long to go back to where life is familiar?

These longings are natural, and part of being human. They sometimes can move us to despair or helplessness. Often we try to run from our longings, or try to fulfill them with things that are harmful to our bodies or souls. But these longings also can move us to action, to work to make right what is wrong, to make whole what is broken. For example, the longing that comes with loneliness can move us to reach out and connect with other people. The longing that comes with depression can move us to seek out and accept help. The longing that comes in a time of spiritual dryness can move us to step back and listen to what God is telling us. The longing that comes with frustration about our broken world can move us to work for justice and peace.

The season of Advent is a time of longing. It is a season of longing for Christ to come, more than just preparing to celebrate the birth of Christ. It is a longing for Christ to come into our lives, not just in the future, but *right now*. We experience that longing because our lives are *not* what they are meant to be. Things are *not* whole. We are *not* in the place where we belong.

This longing moves us to *prepare*. It moves us to do as the prophet Isaiah wrote, to prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight.

We prepare by examining our hearts, and looking closely at our own disobedience. But we don't like what we see there and try to run from it. We resist the white hot refining fire of which the prophet Malachi speaks. But if we stay in that fire we begin to see things from a new perspective. We begin to turn our hearts toward God. God patiently waits as our impurities are burnt away and the pure gold emerges. As we are refined we are moved to action. We long for changed lives and a changed world, and as God refines us, we act. Our longing becomes action. We work for justice, peace, and wholeness, not because we can somehow on our own solve everything that's wrong, but because God is coming, and this compels us to *do something*.

We prepare because we know God is coming. Even now God is here, and someday God's purposes will be brought to completion.

The valleys will be filled,
the mountains and hills will be made low,
the crooked will be made straight,
the rough ways will be made smooth,
and all flesh, *all flesh*, will see the salvation of our God.

On that day, God will come to us in the wilderness, and the wilderness will be no more. Our deepest longings will be fulfilled. The light will shine in the dark and desolate places of our lives. That which is broken will be made whole. That which is empty will be filled. No longer will we long for things to be made right, because at last they will be.

Amen.