

“In the Wilderness”

These days I’m suffering a bit from seasonal disorientation disorder. I truly hope I’m not in a situation where I have to take one of those quick mental status exams where they ask you what the date is and who the President of the United States is, because from day to day those are two pieces of information I find elusive. With the rush of Christmas events, I have been working well ahead in the calendar. So, since Christmas Eve has already happened in my head, what day is this? And with the caucuses swirling around us, everybody in Iowa is pretty much focused on who the *next* President of the United States might be, and we’re not hearing so much about the current one, whatever his name is, and nobody from either party is talking about him very much. Don’t ask, don’t tell.

Advent serves mostly to heighten my confusion. Which week is this? It’s the third Sunday, right? There was one of those extra Sundays after Thanksgiving and first week of Advent coincided with the 150th Anniversary Celebration, so we got something of a late start this year. We had a little Plymouth clergy caucus this week regarding the designation of the weeks of Advent according to themes. Hope and peace come first. But what really is supposed to be next? Some calendars say it should be joy that comes before love, but others seem to think it should be the other way around. Some sets of Advent candles have a pink candle thrown in there for joy Sunday, and in some places they’re lighting that one today as a sort of joyous interlude before the serious introspection and quiet waiting of the remainder of Advent. But we don’t have a pink candle: all our candles are blue. Our big banner says hope, peace, love, joy—in that order—probably because they asked me about it last year and that’s what made sense to me. We lit the love candle a bit earlier in the service, so that’s our story and we’re sticking with it. So... what date is this? Who’s the President?

I’m not the only one with seasonal disorientation disorder. A lot of folks are feeling out of sync. The music and the decorations and TV shows tell us how we’re supposed to be feeling—deliriously joyful and relentlessly acquisitive—but I know for a fact that some people have trouble getting there and resent the reminders. The most glorious time of the year? Tis the season to be jolly? Well, for some folks instead of turkey and mistletoe it’s duck and cover.

Sometimes Christmas is just difficult. It's the time when being separated from loved ones hurts most acutely. It's the time when broken relationships wound most deeply. It's a time when sadness and depression and burnout are pretty common; when the stress of trying to make everything just perfect seems overwhelming. Nothing is harder than forced frivolity.

At first glance the scripture lesson for today only throws gasoline on the Yule log. It is an over-the-top description of joy, an extravagant and excessive cascade of images radiating bliss. "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing." I googled "crocus picture" and came up with some absolutely glorious images of great beauty. But even that's not enough for Isaiah. It's not just flowers in the desert, but *singing* flowers in the desert—take that, Walt Disney! The hills of Lebanon have their glorious vegetation—cedars and all—and the Plain of Sharon has its roses. But the prophet is telling us that the desert will put them to shame; that the desert and the people in the desert places, literal and figurative, shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of God. Therefore, exhorts the prophet, "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.'"

These words were first addressed to Israelites living in exile, far from their homeland, struggling to cling to the hope of return to Jerusalem. They were cut off from their sacred places, their rituals and traditions, living as aliens in a foreign land of strange customs. They were separated from everything that meant "home" to them. They were separated from everything that meant God to them. These words of encouragement are intended to strengthen the people for a journey of return. Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. A homecoming is at hand.

The promise and hope of these images is then expanded and universalized. "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." Those who are broken—which is to say all of us in one way or another—in whatever way they are broken will be made whole. Eyesight, insight, hearing, understanding, singing and dancing and praise; and then there's that word again: "joy."

The whole creation gets into the act in images that boggle the mind and stagger the imagination. Life-sustaining waters break forth in the desert and transform wasteland into oasis. And a highway right through this garden of delights will lead back to Jerusalem. Not like your typical wilderness road, which twists and winds and doubles back on itself, creating places for

predators—both the human and the animal kind—to pounce on their prey, this road for God’s people will be safe. It will even be foolproof for the directionally impaired: “no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.” When the ransomed return to the holy places with singing, “they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

As I said, it’s over the top; or at least it would be over the top were it not addressed to exiles. This expression of hope to the hopeless comes to people in godforsaken circumstances to tell them that they are not godforsaken, after all. This invitation to the party is not only a come as you are invitation, it is a rejoice where you are declaration. Nothing is presupposed here about getting dressed up and going somewhere else to be with people you don’t really like and pretending to be happy when you’re not. This is joy that comes to get you through the wonders of God’s love. It doesn’t decorate the house for us or send out the cards. It just tells us that God is here, after all. God is here, right here... in the wilderness.

That’s the way it’s always been. The wilderness is where the liberated slaves wandered after they came up out of Egypt, where they saw God as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night; where they ate the manna and the quail that came to them by the grace of God, and drank water that flowed from the very rocks of the parched desert. The wilderness is the place of trial and temptation, where Jesus goes just before he begins his ministry. The wilderness is a place where there is no hiding beneath a cloak of civility; it is a place of truth and testing, a place of refining. The wilderness is where Jesus feeds the multitudes, people in need of bread but with an even greater hunger for the word of God. The wilderness, which seems to be utterly without the things we need for life, is the place where God’s people encounter life that is true and abundant. The wilderness is the place that appears to be without God; but it is in the wilderness that we meet God face to face.

With Christmas, the illusion of making it all happen gives us a false sense of control, making our lists and checking them twice. We struggle with the burden of keeping it all going. We put all our energy into the party or the celebration; and when everybody goes home and the mess is cleaned up, what is left?

But the wilderness is the place of no illusions, where there is no pretense of perfection, where Martha Stewart’s tips for setting the perfect table don’t help much. When Christmas is a reminder of brokenness, then brokenness is where we have to begin. We can rant against it, rail against the storm, flee and avoid and ignore like crazy. But it is precisely in the midst of the brokenness

that God comes. It's *in* the wilderness. To prepare for the coming of a savior, we begin by admitting that we need one.

If Christmas is a place of pain for you this year, be assured: the place you are in is not godforsaken. In their essence, the Gospel stories of Christmas tell us precisely this. Ours is the God who chose an obscure place to enter the world, born to a poor family, pushed around by imperial Rome, refused hospitality in Bethlehem, terrorized by Herod. Too poor for a blanket, his loving parents wrapped him in strips of cloth. No bed to lie in, he lay in an animal's feeding trough.

Most of the world ignored the event. Only the truly simple, like the shepherds, or the truly wise, like the magi, took notice. But to all who hear and believe, the Christ child comes again with healing for hearts that are broken, purpose for lives that are lost, hope for the living of a life where God is not a distant stranger, but a constant companion. Christ comes to meet us in our wilderness places, with the assurance that in him we find everything we need for life that is full, meaningful and abundant; that preparing for his coming is not a matter of disguising the wildernesses in which we live, but a matter of being willing to be there, to watch and prepare, to meet ourselves in the starkness of honesty and so to discover that we were never alone there, after all.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus, it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.”

He comes. In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Let every heart prepare him room.

Amen

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