

“The Voice in a Spiritual Wilderness”

We have arrived in the second week of Advent, the season of preparation, and waiting upon the Lord. Although we can often get caught up in the material preparations of the season---putting up decorations, purchasing Christmas presents, lighting advent candles, sending Christmas cards---today’s Bible verses remind us that there is another kind of preparation that has little to do with our homes or hearths but with preparing pathways through the wilderness in our hearts.

The wilderness is a common theme in the Bible. We have looked at the Israelites’ struggle in the wilderness after they were freed from Egypt. We know of Jesus’ being in the wilderness for forty days before he is tempted by Satan. It is a place where people examine their relationship with God. In our scripture today from Isaiah 40:1-11, the people are receiving the word as exiles in Babylonian captivity. There is a vast wilderness here, hundreds of miles long between Jerusalem and Babylon, that separates the exiles from their home and families, their traditions and their temple. The distance was not only a physical measurement but how far the people felt from God. The Israelites believed that God resided and remained in the Jerusalem Temple, and since the exiles were separated from this place of worship, they felt separated from God. This was like a spiritual wilderness

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that grew in their hearts. Long they waited for God to rescue and redeem them, but as time passed, they felt abandoned and forgotten by God. That distance seemed to be a chasm that could not be bridged, a wilderness too wild and dangerous to be traversed.

We may not know what it is like to be an exile living in the diaspora, but we may know what it feels like to believe we are apart from God, like there is an insurmountable wilderness between us and God. Separated, lost, broken, and forgotten. Perhaps it is grief---you may have lost someone very dear to you and were not able to say goodbye or embrace one last time and you blame God. Perhaps it is conflict with a relative or close friend---a consuming darkness that pushes any meaningful relationship from you. Perhaps it is the pandemic that keeps you from your family, community and place of worship. During the three months we were not able to hold services at the physical church, you may have felt you were in a spiritual wilderness overgrown with grief, with deep valleys of sorrow and pathways of bitterness. That wilderness can make the distance between self and God even more overwhelming with feelings of loneliness, isolation, hopelessness and abandonment. Even if you have not felt this way, you may know someone who has felt separated from God during this odd time of strained human contact.

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God is not oblivious to those feelings of brokenness but is deeply moved by them! God yearns to go where broken and lost people are, to bridge the gap, to go the distance to meet the lost and hold them in comfort. The prophet Isaiah overhears God command the heavenly council, “Cry out to them! In the wilderness cry out: ‘Comfort! Oh, Comfort!’” The word that come to the prophet Isaiah to the broken, lost and hopeless people in captivity, a wilderness away from God, is strength and courage. The broken people are to be built up again like a mighty fortress, and what shall fortify them but God who is mighty and sovereign, who comes with power.

And what shall give one this comfort of strength and courage? It is the coming of the Lord! The Lord sees the broken and lost people and is coming with justice, and redemption, love and compassion. The Lord comes, but we do not wait idly in despair. As we talked about last week, we work while we wait. We can actually participate in the coming of the Lord by preparing the way for him. Yes, there is a wilderness of brokenness, grief, and despair that distances us from God, but that wilderness can be overcome. With God’s strength it can be overcome.

God has always partnered with people to clear paths for him, most notably through prophets like John the Baptist, who we read about today in Mark 1:1-8. John the Baptist personified the wilderness. He represented those who lived in the

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country, those who were often the victims of oppression of the Roman Empire and the Jewish elites who ran the Temple complex. In the wilderness, away from the city of Jerusalem, he was able to provide a way for the needy to receive salvation and freedom. Wearing camel hair clothes and eating locusts and wild honey. He embodied the words of Isaiah 40, as one in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord. He preached repentance and baptized sinners, which prepared the hearts of the people so they would be ready to receive Jesus Christ. He knew his role and purpose as one who comes before Christ, preparing for his arrival, saying in Mark 1:7: *“The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.”* John is busy at work while he waits for the Lord, and behold he looks up and Jesus is coming.

John 1:29-33 captures John the very moment when that preparing work meets the coming of the Lord. It says, *“The next day (John the Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him and he declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed in Israel.”* John knows that he himself is not the Messiah, but he also knows just how important his work is as one who prepares for the prepares for the coming of the Messiah. What we are witnessing in this narrative is a voice in the wilderness (John the Baptist)

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making a pathway in the desert for Christ to come. Through his ministering, baptizing and preaching, John paves the way.

A great description for John's work is found in the Interpreter's Bible Commentary; it uses an old English word "*pavior*," which means someone who paves a road, thus making the path straight and easy to traverse. It says, "The world needs a Savior but it also needs paviers...Christ needs preparers of his way." John knew he wasn't the Savior but was essential in paving the way for Christ to come.

This is what we are called to do today. We are called to be paviers, making the way for the Savior to come. God needs us to be partners in this important work, and when we participate in preparing pathways for Christ, we become agents in God's prevenient grace. Prevenient grace is a divine love God has for us, that comes even before we realize we need such love. It awakens in us our desire for God, stirs our hearts, and prompts us to respond to God in faith. Prevenient grace prepares a highway in the spiritual wilderness in a person's heart to accept God's healing, redemption and salvation.

Think about how you came to know Christ. Not one of us has come to Christ on our own. Someone had to come before us to pave the way for Christ to come into our lives. Who was it that paved a path for you? Was it a parent who faithfully

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brought you to church every Sunday? Or was it a teacher who was particularly patient and kind toward you?

In my own life, my parents were critical in getting me to church and Sunday school each Sunday. They were active in teaching me the Bible and the meaning of a need for a relationship with God and Christ. But others were needed to ultimately needed to show me the path. By the time I started high school, I still was not convinced that there was an active God in my life. High school was difficult. I was at one of the largest high schools in the state, (Irmo), but was having a hard time making friends for really the only time in my life. We had just moved to the Irmo area but I felt more alone than ever. I felt I was in a wilderness. I could have turned to loneliness or to drugs or alcohol like others in my school did.

But fortunately for me God had “*paviors*.” One was my mother’s father, Gene Hembree. He had a new spiritual experience in his sixties and had rededicated his life to Christ. When I visited with him during the summer recess, he influenced me and really showed me that God was active in his life. This got me thinking again about whether God was active in my life. I began a journey of spiritual reflection in my freshman year of high school.

And God continued to work through the leaders in my MYF to finally bring me to a point where I realized I needed to make a commitment to Jesus Christ.

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Towards the end of my first year of high school, they took our MYF group on a weekend retreat to a camp in the foothills of Greenville County. That weekend I heard stories and scripture from camp leaders that finally convinced me to accept the justifying grace of Jesus' death and resurrection. God had provided *paviors* in my life to bring me into right relationship with God. No longer did I feel lonely; no longer was I in a wilderness.

So how do we partner with God's prevenient grace and pave pathways in a person's heart? How do we make the mountains low and fill in the valleys? How do we cry out in the wilderness, "Comfort, oh comfort, be courageous, your Lord comes?"

Look again at John the Baptist, whose work was in the desert wilderness. William Barclay writes in his commentary on Mark that John lived in the desert so that he could not only hear the voice of God but be the voice that calls out on God's behalf in the wilderness. If we are to pave pathways in the desert of someone's spiritual wilderness, we must also venture into that wilderness to be with them. Seek out the people who are grieving, who are broken, and be present with them. By listening and receiving the experience of others and through invitational prayer, you can make a highway in the desert for Christ to come. You do not need to take away their grief. You do not need to mend what is broken. You

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do not need to be the savior. That is Christ's work. But you can be a pavior---pave the way and point to the one who comes and say, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

If grace is how we experience God's love, venturing into someone's wilderness (perhaps no one else will), to speak words of courage and strength is an expression of God's love that you can give. So, go, therefore, and be a voice in the wilderness, speak life into someone's exile, and make a pathway for Christ to come into a person's heart.

Credit is given to Rev. Karen Lail Jones for use of her sermon outline and excerpts from her sermon in the preparation of this sermon.