

The Stewardship of Wilderness

John Wilkinson

Third Presbyterian Church

December 10, 2017 (Advent II)

Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-9

My mother was an English teacher. She knew that good grammar was much more than good grammar. She knew the power of punctuation, and passed that conviction down to me. For example, “let’s eat, grandma” vs. “let’s eat grandma.” So much power in a comma!

Biblical grammar matters, therefore, and this morning we encounter a prime example. In iconic words from the prophet Isaiah, we hear “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.’” The writer of Mark knew those words. Yet either in misinterpretation or mistranslation from Hebrew to Greek we’ve received: “...the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘prepare the way of the Lord...’” In Isaiah, the way of the Lord is prepared in the wilderness. In Mark, the voice cries out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord.

Does it matter? Yes! Biblical scholar Ralph Klein writes that “The punctuation in (Isaiah 40:3) is crucial. When this passage is quoted in the New Testament it is applied to John (the Baptist)'s cry for repentance. In Isaiah it is not a voice crying in the wilderness, but a voice crying, “In the (literal) wilderness.... (build a highway for the Israelites to return from exile...”

Two biblical understandings of wilderness, one more realistic and one more figurative. But both treacherous, dangerous places, where either bodies or souls could be harmed, where one becomes easily lost. In either wilderness, we are called to prepare the way of the Lord, by smoothing and straightening, by removing roadblocks and obstacles.

Brene Brown writes that “Theologians, writers, poets, and musicians have always used the wilderness as a metaphor, to represent everything from a vast and dangerous environment where we are forced to navigate difficult trials to a refuge of nature and beauty where we seek space for contemplation. What all wilderness metaphors have in common,” Brown writes, “are the notions of

solitude, vulnerability, and an emotional, spiritual, or physical quest.” (*Braving the Wilderness*, page 36)

Each us has experienced, or is experiencing right now, that first kind of wilderness – that vast and dangerous environment where we are forced to navigate difficult trials. You know yours. I know mine. Cancer, grief, unemployment, betrayal, addiction, loneliness, depression, estrangement. Some we create for ourselves. Some happen despite our best efforts. Emotional, physical, spiritual, or all three.

Such wildernesses are magnified in a season like this, with carols happily playing and expectations for joy mounting and mounting. That’s why we hold a “blue Christmas” service, to acknowledge a heightened sense of wilderness in this so-called “most wonderful time of the year.”

Finding a way out of the wilderness is never easy. It takes courage and hope and vulnerability and community. GPS won’t do it, but more so markers on the way, and traveling companions. And faith, but never easy faith.

The priest and writer Richard Rohr says that “...There are two wildernesses, two darkneses in the spiritual journey. One you go into by your own stupidity, by your sin, blindness, ignorance and mistakes. We all do that. But there’s another darkness. The holy darkness is the darkness that God leads us into, through and beyond. This is a necessary darkness for the journey. In a certain sense, God’s darkness is a much better teacher than light. There comes a time when you have to either go deeper into faith or you will turn back, when you have to live without knowing or you lose faith altogether.”

Your wilderness will be yours and mine will be mine. We sojourn *in* them to emerge *from* them.

But what about our collective wilderness, the vast and dangerous environment we find ourselves in now as a nation, as a culture, as a body politic, as a community? What would it look like to prepare a way for the Lord in this wilderness, to speak comfort to discomfort, to reveal God’s glory?

There are many wildernesses in which we are living right now. If you are at all like me, you are living in this rock and a hard place place, where you want to know what is going on in the world because you care about it and at the same time want to disconnect, put down your device because the news is so, so troubling and toxic.

So much wilderness: racism, gun violence, with Las Vegas and Sutherland Springs only the latest examples, failing public education. The litany is long, and familiar, and difficult.

I am thinking of two this morning, that are on my mind more than just this morning.

The first is the “#metoo” movement, defined by accelerating reports of sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, mostly, but not exclusively, by men in power toward women. Each new day brings revelations about politicians, or academics, or executives, or media members, or entertainers, or athletes.

Some are sensing that we are at a tipping point, in terms of reporting and believing and adjudicating. Perhaps, and if that’s the case, then thank God. We are certainly at a new place. But it feels still like wilderness to me, even as progress has been made, and each new revelation will certainly move us ahead in the wilderness.

These revelations are the tip of the iceberg in what has happened over decades and to this present moment. Just this week I read accounts of sexual misconduct in the church, from decades ago, which triggered memories of so many more. And all that came with it – pain, guilt, blame, culpability, denial.

For every high-profile story, there are, I am sure, thousands, if not millions of stories – no less grievous, that will only be told in a small circle, if told at all, for fear of reprisal or disbelief or shame.

And if a woman has not been physically assaulted in some way, she has certainly been denied or diminished or objectified in some other way.

- How can we create safe space for women to tell stories, bravely, and be affirmed and believed?
- How can men repent of their behavior, either, as the prayer says, for the things they’ve done and ought not to have done, or things they’ve not done and should have?
- What does justice look like?

I have been reading and thinking and praying and discussing a great deal in these past weeks. Some of it is very complex; some of it is very clear. What is clear is

that in order to move through this wilderness, in order to prepare the way, we must have the conversation that is more than a conversation, and live into a new reality, or we will remain lost as a culture and a church in this wilderness for a very long time.

The second public wilderness in which we find ourselves is pernicious as well, and pervasive, and difficult to define. I will call it religious bigotry, or religious intolerance. We experienced it even this week as we debated Jerusalem, and a Supreme Court case about a wedding cake, or an Alabama election.

Perhaps I am too midwestern polite. Or perhaps I am too Calvinist, with a belief that we all swim in the waters of total depravity. So, I am loathe to say that someone is not Christian for what they believe or say. But that does not mean that I can't say that a belief or a practice is not Christian, does not reflect Christian values as I understand the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

That is what is different about this moment, I feel, and perhaps you do too, and so discouraging. Debate matters of faith, yes, and disagree, even strongly, yes, when those matters of faith take us into the world of politics. But never, ever, can we practice the vilifying and dehumanizing of other humans, nor can we tolerate it when it happens to others, or ourselves.

I am no less Christian for saying "Happy Holidays" to a Target check out person, believe me, and though that seems simple, almost trivial, it is not.

This is new, this wilderness in which we find ourselves, the toxicity of our moment, when my Christian faith is questioned, when I am called a non-Christian, or worse, because of the places my faith takes me in the public sphere. Where is civility and respect?

On some matters, there may be two sides. On some matters, like race and racism, faith takes us always to reconciliation and justice. But even then, it cannot take us to demonizing others. And it cannot take us to accepting being demonized. Certainly, we can have a thick skin, and certainly we don't troll the online comments section to make it worse.

But to read any article right now, to join any debate, leads us into a wilderness where religion, and in particular Christianity, has been weaponized, where some partisan political positions have been painted with the patina of faith, so that

those who disagree simply don't disagree politically, but theologically, thus turning them into heretics.

And yet, even as we can't shrug it off, we can't let being recipients turn us into practitioners, even as we hold fast to our principles and values.

Just as we must have the "#metoo" conversation, we must have the difficult conversation about faith in the public sphere. As difficult as the first conversation is, so will the second be, because rather than finding conversation partners on the other side, we are mostly speaking into, yelling into, an echo chamber.

This week I heard a very good presentation by the Duke theologian Gregory Jones, about, of all things, wilderness. He acknowledged the real crisis in which we find ourselves, that we have, in church and culture, lost sight of our destination. Our hazard now, Jones said, as we wander in the wilderness, is "death of the imagination," that we can't imagine a future different from our wilderness present.

That is true for us as individuals, I would add, and it is certainly true for us as a church and as a culture.

Jones said that the longer we are in the wilderness, the more entrenched we become, the more it eats at our soul. That resonates with me. Jones referenced the Jewish biblical scholar Avivah Zornberg, who suggests that the wilderness is both a time of peril and a time of promise, that the wilderness presents us with an opportunity to reflect, to refocus, to stay close to God.

That feels true to me also. And it feels very much like Advent.

What if, as we navigate the wilderness, we hone our imaginations, imagine in new ways what just and equal relationships between women and men might look like, imagine what a new vision of religious tolerance and acceptance would look like, imagine what a new vision of public life would look like?

That doesn't mean we don't protest and resist now, nor speak out when speaking out is required. Yet we do so with hope. We do so in faith. We do so expecting and anticipating that we will emerge from the wilderness into something new. We do so preparing a way.

T. S Eliot wrote: “We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.”

We join our forebears. We join the prophets. We join John the Baptist. “A voice cries out: ‘in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.’” “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’..”

We are not the way, but we prepare a way. For one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, who will lead us out of the wilderness, who will lead us home. Amen.