

Rev. Adrienne Meier
December 6, 2020, 2nd Sunday in Advent, Year B
St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana
“Begin in the Wilderness”

The nonprofit Vitamin Angels, which works to end malnutrition, commissioned a study ahead of Giving Tuesday, the kickoff for many nonprofit organizations’ year-end fundraising. They asked 2000 people how they were coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. While the vast majority of participants agreed that all the bad news of 2020 - COVID, the election, murder hornets - while all of this had taken its toll, nearly everyone surveyed said they responded by trying to do something positive each day - to make people smile or count their blessings. The headline about the study said, “Good news wanted.” Indeed. Good news is wanted. Today’s gospel claims to begin some good news: the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Today’s gospel says the Good News begins in the wilderness.

In the ancient world, heralds would come to town ahead of a victorious king of general and pronounce “Good News!” The entire town would assemble outside the city gates to welcome the victors home. Mark’s gospel begins with Good News - news good enough that all of Jerusalem comes out to see it. Jerusalem had long been occupied by that point. What message would bring all the people out? What message did they hear from John? It had to be a message of hope. John, dressed like a prophet of old, told them to get ready. Get your priorities straight, turn around, believe that there is Good News on the way.

Why, though, did they go out into the wilderness? The wilderness is a place of utter dependency. There is no 7-11 in the wilderness, no Motel 8 with the light left on, no fields from which to glean. Your money is no good here. What is there to eat, you eat. Where there is a place to lay your head, you sleep. The wilderness is the place where everything is stripped away.

I tried to wax poetic about the wilderness of our lives, but I just don’t have it in me. The pandemic is a wilderness. Virtual work, school, and worship - wilderness. Grief, mental illness, social injustice - wilderness. The wilderness forces us to triage our lives. What is most important? What do we really value? What really matters?

And, according to Mark, this is where the Good News comes. This shouldn’t surprise us, because God has a history of meeting God’s people in the wilderness. Abraham, Jacob, Hagar, the Israelites fleeing slavery, Elijah and Elisha. The wilderness is where all is stripped from us, not as punishment, but in order that we might see God. In order that what is taken from us is the baggage that keeps us from God. What is taken from us are all the lies that we somehow have it all handled; that we can climb the mountain to God on our own accord.

In her poem, “The Birth of Love,” Madeline L’Engle wrote,

To learn to love
is to be stripped of all love
until you are wholly without love
because
until you have gone
naked and afraid
into this cold dark place
where all love is taken from you
you will not know
that you are wholly within love.

There's an old story about a man who came upon a boy who was whittling. The man asked the boy what he was making. The boy said, "A bird." The man wondered, "How do you know to do such a thing?" The boy said, "Oh, it's easy. You just cut away all that isn't the bird." That is what the wilderness will do to us. It will take from us anything and everything that would keep us from flourish in God's kin-dom. It will take from us everything and anything that would prohibit our neighbor from flourishing in God's kin-dom.

Advent is a wilderness. Thomas Merton once said, "Advent is the beginning of the end of all that is in us that is not Christ." The Good News assures us that God comes for us where we are, as we are. But that will not be enough. The Good News asks us to go out into the wilderness and repent. To turn from our anger and greed, our pride and arrogance, our laziness, our lust and hunger for what is not ours.

We are in a wilderness now. We hunger for good news. The challenge will be to not settle for our average, run-of-the-mill good news. That news will make us feel good for a moment, but the Good News, that is something else entirely. The Good News is what sets us free. The real Good News - capital G, capital N - is not easily described. It takes Mark sixteen chapters, eight of which are about the arrest, sham trial, torture, and murder of Jesus. In this account of the Good News, John, whose words of hope roused Jerusalem, will also be murdered. But for two thousand years, we have said that these are the words that set us free. All week, I've been musing on this quote by the Christian writer G. K. Chesterton, which says,

"Good news; but if you ask me what it is, I know not;
It is a track of feet in the snow,
It is a lantern showing a path,
It is a door set open."

Beloved, I'm not sure where this leaves us. Should I instruct us on the work of repentance? Can I utter a word of hope that will sustain you through whatever is to come? Is any of that enough? Maybe it will be enough for us to simply begin by waking up to the wilderness that we find ourselves in and the work that is being done in us for the sake of the kin-dom of God. Throughout the coming week, when you notice discomfort - the

pang of loneliness, the frustration of talking while on mute on Zoom, the concern about whether the kids will be alright, the sour stomach of reading the newspaper, the unrest deep inside about the injustice of the world - pay attention. Something is being taken from you - a hardened heart, a misplaced self-reliance, a false hope. As you watch it go, look within yourself for what remains.

Has a space been hollowed out in you where the Christ child may be laid?

Amen.