

Advent 2, Yr. B
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St. Paul's, Fairfield
Rev. Mary Anne Osborn

“Safety in the Wilderness”

I get a lot of travel catalogues in the mail, with a similar theme: wilderness travel. This is a niche market that has taken off in recent years as people seek to go places that are way off the beaten track, places that are isolated and unspoiled by development...places like Antarctica and the Sinai and Gobi deserts and the North Pole. It seems that wilderness is a popular destination.

The prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist were both very familiar with desert wilderness, but I highly doubt they would have paid to travel there. For them the wilderness was a hostile and terrifying place, where the struggle to survive was fraught with uncertainties, and where the possibility of death was a constant reality.

In the bible, the wilderness is a profoundly significant place of struggle and encounter with God. Geographically, it was where the Israelites wandered for 40 years in pain and misery, facing immense challenges to their life and faith. And it was where they met God and learned the ways of God. It was in the desert that the Israelites were formed as God's own people and the Lord became their God.

The desert wilderness was also where Jesus went after his baptism and where he was tempted for 40 days and nights by the devil. It was here that Jesus' own identity and purpose were strengthened and clarified.

Spiritually, the wilderness is often understood as a wasteland of the spirit, a place where we are bereft of God and besieged by demons of all sorts. It is a place where despair threatens to undo us, and where the darkness obscures the light.

There are many kinds of wilderness experiences in the world today. There are people who are dying from hunger, AIDS, violence, and loneliness. There are people living in extreme poverty with no home or job or health care.

And closer to home, maybe you are somewhere in the wilderness today or you know someone who is. Perhaps you or someone you know is suffering from chronic illness or the loss of a loved one or the loss of a job. Perhaps doubt or cynicism has driven you into the wilderness, or maybe a sense of failure and meaninglessness has brought you there.

...And there comes a voice, crying in the wilderness. //That is the wonder of Advent. That as you and I and all the world wander through the wilderness, there comes a voice...crying in the wilderness.

And if we are very still and quiet, and if we listen, we can hear the voice saying...

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid.

[Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.]

Behold, the Lord your GOD comes with might.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

There is hope in the wilderness, for there is God in the wilderness, tenderly caring for us and cradling us as a loving shepherd.

We can hear, if we listen, the voice in the wilderness saying to us, "Comfort, in the face of your illness;" "comfort in the midst of your grief;" "comfort as you go through a painful divorce or face an agonizing decision." "Comfort."

God's voice is crying out to us in whatever wilderness we are going through. But if we are focused on trying to deny or hurry through the wilderness, then we won't be able to hear God's voice. Hearing God's voice in the wilderness requires us to *stay in the wilderness* to listen.

And that is the promise of Advent. That as we listen and watch and wait, we *will hear and see* God coming again. There is no threat or suffering or sorrow that is too heavy that can undo God's promise of new birth.

Now I invite you to do some Advent listening...to listen to the music of Bach's "Sheep may safely graze." Let this music wrap around you and hold you just as our God holds each one of us like a loving shepherd and carries us in our wildernesses.

[organ plays "Sheep may safely graze"; after about 2 minutes, the I read the Isaiah portion again while the music plays in the background]

"Sheep may safely Graze" can be downloaded for .99 at itunes .com