

So I'm not sure if you all have noticed but I've done something new to the bulletins that helps me and I hope helps you during this season of Advent. As you may remember the fourfold way to create a Sunday morning service has always been Gathering, Proclamation, Response, and Sending Forth. Well as you see I've rearranged that into Arrival, Appearance, Approach, and Advancement all of which are synonyms of the word advent. I didn't realize it until Will pointed it out to me that I had an Advent sermon series right there in the bulletin. So last Sunday we talked about what? Its right there in your bulletin. The Arrival! We as the people of God gather this season to celebrate and believe in the first arrival of God at Christmas in the birth of Jesus and we wait with patience and hope of Jesus' second coming. At what time no one knows but who? The Father. And so as we learned last week, we must live in a constant state of readiness until that day He comes. Which brings us to our lesson for today following the fourfold pattern of the service.... What must we do to be ready for His Appearance?

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, which means it's time to brace ourselves for John the Baptist. Dressed in camel's hair and fueled by locusts, the cranky prophet raises his voice and lets us have it crying out: "You brood of vipers!" "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

If you're looking for a soft, pillowy entry into the season before Christmas, John isn't going to provide it. There's nothing gentle or sweet about him. "You brood of vipers!" Repent. Wake up. Bear fruit.

The Gospel of Matthew makes a point of telling us that John both appears and cries out in the wilderness. This is where the crowds gather to hear him — in a landscape that is desolate and barren. Why the wilderness? Why the lonely desert for our Advent reflections? Isn't this the place we usually find ourselves during Lent? If you have any experience with real estate, you

know the mantra: “Location location location.” Location is key. The place where we stand, the terrain we occupy, the space from which we speak — these things matter.

Ya know, I’ve never seen John the Baptist featured on an Christian calender or Christmas greeting card, but all four Gospels place him front and center in Jesus’s origin story. John’s strictness and bone thin look is the only gateway we have to the seeing Jesus’ clothes swaddled, angel’s wings, and fleecy lambs we hold dear each December. As baffling as it may seem, the holy drama of the season depends on the disheveled baptizer’s opening act. So again, why the wilderness? Why this location?

For starters, because the wilderness is a place of vulnerability, risk, and powerlessness. In the wilderness, we have no safety net. No Plan B, no rainy day savings account, no quick fix. In the wilderness, life is raw and unsettled, and our illusions of the “I got this!” shatter fast. To find ourselves at the outskirts of security and power is to confess our neediness in the starkest terms. In the wilderness, we have no choice but to wait and watch as if our lives depend on God showing up. Because they do. And it’s into such an environment — an environment so far removed from safety as to make safety laughable — that the word of God comes.

But the Gospel of Matthew goes on. Not only is the wilderness a place that exposes our need for God; it’s a place that calls us to repentance in which God appears and we listen. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” John cries *from the wilderness* to those who seek him out. Elsewhere in the Gospels, we read that crowds stream into the wilderness to heed John’s call. In other words, they leave the lives they know best, they leave their homes in the surrounding villages and citie and venture into the unknown to save their hearts through repentance. Something about the wilderness brings people to their knees.

For us 21st century Christians, though, “sin” and “repentance” are loaded words we try to avoid. Many of us, particularly those of us who grew up in fundamentalist circles, dislike the word “sin.” We associate it with shame, guilt, and condemnation. Very much like the fire and brimstone preaching we were born hearing.

Many of us also distrust the word because we've seen how easily it can be manipulated to justify one moralistic agenda over another. And yet, Advent begins with an honest, wilderness-style reckoning with sin. We can't get to the manger unless we go through John, and John is all about repentance. Is it possible that this might become an occasion for relief? Maybe, if we can get past our baggage and follow John out into the wilderness, we will find comfort in the fact that something more profound is at stake in our souls than, "I make mistakes sometimes," or "I've got a few issues." What troubles us is something deeper, grimmer, and far more consequential.

What is sin, really? Growing up, I was taught that sin is "breaking God's laws." Or "missing the mark," as an archer misses his target. Or "committing immoral acts." These definitions aren't wrong, but they're incomplete — they don't go far enough. They don't name the fullness of what we struggle with. Sin, at its heart, is a refusal to become fully human. It's anything that interferes with the opening up of our whole hearts to God, to others, to creation, and to ourselves. Sin is estrangement, disconnection, sterility, disharmony. It's the sludge that slows us down, that says, "Quit. Stop trying. Give up. Change is impossible."

Sin is apathy. Care-less-ness. A frightened resistance to an engaged life. Sin is the opposite of creativity, the opposite of abundance, the opposite of flourishing. Sin is a walking death. And it is easier to spot, name, and confess a walking death in the wilderness than it is anywhere else.

John underscores his message of repentance with a harrowing description of the coming Messiah: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Are you squirming yet? How is this good news, this portrait of a Jesus who judges, sorts, and burns us?

I wonder if we squirm because we misconstrue the meaning of judgment. I tend to equate judgment with condemnation, but in fact, to judge something is to see it clearly — to know it as it truly is. In my dictionary, synonyms for judgment include discernment, acuity, sharpness, and perception.

What if John is saying that the Messiah who is coming really sees us? That he knows us at our very core? Maybe the winnowing fork is an instrument of deep love, patiently wielded by the One who discerns in us rich harvests still hidden by chaff. Maybe it's in offering God every particular of our lives that we give Him permission to "clear" us — to separate all that's destructive from all that is good, beautiful, and worthy.

Finally, Matthew suggests that the wilderness is a place where we can see the landscape whole, and participate in God's great work of leveling inequality and oppression. "Prepare the way of the Lord," John cries, quoting the prophet Isaiah. "Make his paths straight."

Unless we're in the wilderness, it's hard to see our own privilege, and even harder to imagine giving it up. No one standing on a mountaintop wants the mountain flattened. But when we're wandering in the wilderness, an immense, barren landscape stretches out before us in every direction, we're able to see what privileged locations obscure. Suddenly, we feel the rough places beneath our feet. We experience what it's like to struggle down twisty, crooked paths.

We glimpse arrogance in the mountains and desolation in the valleys, and we begin to dream God's dream of a wholly reimagined landscape. A landscape so smooth and straight, it enables "all flesh" to see the salvation of God.

Where are you located during this Advent season? How close are you to security and power, and how open are you to risking the wilderness to hear a word from God? What might returning and repentance look like for you, here and now? Where is God leveling the ground you stand on, and what will it take for you to participate in that uncomfortable but essential work in returning to the wilderness?¹

Prayer:

Location location location. John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, and people stream to him there, hungry and ready. May we stream there, too. Like John, may we become brave voices in hard places, preparing the way of the Lord.

¹ Debie Thomas, *The Voice of One Crying* <https://www.journeywithjesus.net>