

Laura Smith Conrad

Fort Hill Presbyterian

Malachi 3:1-4

3:1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight--indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

3:2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap;

3:3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.

3:4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

This year we are reading through Luke's gospel. While we pick up today with John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, you may recall that John was foretold by the Angel Gabriel as the one who would be born to Elizabeth and Zechariah. He would prepare the way of the Lord. He is the messenger of which the prophet Malachi speaks. We pick up with the adult John.

Luke 3:1-6

3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,

3:2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

3:3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,

3:4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

3:5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;

3:6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Communion Meditation

Have you ever been in the wilderness? That is where we find ourselves today with John. Sometimes a place of testing and challenge.

Sometimes a place of reliance on God and others.

Wilderness can be a place of desperation, danger and pain, and it can be a place where hope, courage, and growth are born.

This is why Scouts go on wilderness trips and groups like *Outward Bound* exists.

As the prophet Malachi describes- in the wilderness a refining and purifying takes place, preparing us to meet God and that great Day of Judgment, the Second Coming (Advent) of Christ.

The wilderness. God's people have been there before.

After being delivered out of Pharaoh's grip of slave labor, they spend 40 years in the wilderness. It is in that wilderness that they learn to rely on God, to trust, and to live as a community. It is also where they mess up, struggle, and sin.

God's people spent years in the wilderness of exile, cut off from home and security and peace, longing for God to save them.

God's son Jesus is sent by the Spirit into the wilderness for testing before beginning his public ministry.

Some describe our wandering today as a wilderness time. We may feel lost.

- upheaval in institutions and the deterioration of public trust
- dire natural disasters seem to occur with more regularity
- Just last week Ronda and Ralph Rick's daughter Savannah was working at the mall in Birmingham where the shooting took place. Churches, theaters, malls, schools, and nightclubs are littered with shootings- there have been 54 school shootings since Parkland.
- Not to mention people fleeing violence in the Sudan, Yemen, and Honduras.

Closer to home, we have invisible neighbors living on the edge in the city of Clemson. I asked Karen Carter at Clemson Community Care to tell me how our community is doing. She described some members of town who feel like this town, their home, is a wilderness. Their neighborhoods are being sold to the highest bidder. Lower income homes once seen are now hidden behind high rises. It would be easy to have a false sense of affluence. Example- one man comes to Clemson Community Care for a bucket of fresh water each day, and keeps a toothbrush in their bathroom. Wilderness.

It is into this kind of world that the prophet John comes crying out in the wilderness.

Luke describes his world. He introduces the world leaders of his day: Tiberias, Pilate, Herod Agrippa...a G20 Summit of power players.

Luke makes sure that we know these are dangerous guys.

John and Jesus will meet death at the hands of these rulers.

They are the so-called civilized ones, in the city.

In contrast, John is in the wilderness where God works.

The story of God's salvation takes place in real time and in real history.

God will work through economic, social, political context to bring about his reign.

We believe God is sovereign of all that is.

God is King of the universe and Lord of creation, not just a therapeutic, personal God of our sin sick souls.

These pretend rulers are foes of God's humble, hidden ways.

And a new king is coming...an advent.

We are to seek first the kingdom of God, not of the kingdom of Herod.

Herod holds power at all costs even hunting down the infant Jesus sending his parents into hiding in Egypt.

In this who's who of rulers, comes Zechariah's boy, John, a nobody- the son of a small town country priest. It is into this context that he cries out, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

John is crying out in the middle of the wilderness. We would do well to listen.

Story goes that as a child Bill Munroe, the father of Kentucky bluegrass music, would hide in the woods next to the railroad track in the "long, ole, straight bottom part of Kentucky."

Bill would watch World War I veterans returning home from war walking the train tracks. The weary soldiers would sometimes let out long hollers- loud, high-pitched, bone chilling hollers of pain and freedom that cut through the air...

it's a holler that's thick with both misery and redemption.

A holler that belongs in another place and time.

This sound that shows up in the wails of bluegrass music is called the "high lonesome." Think of the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou* and the song, "Man of Constant Sorrows." It sounds like...

Exhibit A- Raymond sings a few lines of the song.

(Just like in Luke's gospel, people keep breaking out into song.)

In her book *Braving the Wilderness*, Brene Brown writes, "Art has the power to render sorrow beautiful, make loneliness a shared experience, and transform despair into hope."ⁱ

Songs give us hope. John the Baptist cries out in the wilderness,

and for those who are alone, afraid, or desperate, John speaks of hope we have in God.

Now, someone understands, and we are not alone. When John speaks, we can picture the valleys filled and mountains made low...a place of peace and shalom.

I don't know how you feel, but to me the world feels lonesome and heartbroken in so many ways. We are in trouble. Brown, a social scientist at the University of Houston and a Christian, concludes that we are in a spiritual crisis. She writes,

"Rather than coming together and sharing our experiences through song and story, we're screaming at one another from further and further away. Rather than dancing and praying together, we're

running away from one another. Rather than pitching wild and innovative new ideas that could potentially change everything, we're staying quiet in our bunkers and loud in our echo chambers."ⁱⁱ

We do not need to be researchers to understand that we are in trouble collectively. We forget that we are inextricably connected to one another- called to love God and love neighbors because all are made in God's image. We are called to compassion and peace.

In this kind of messed up world John cries, "Prepare the way of the Lord."
We are to get ready to meet the promised one, Jesus, the Messiah.

Jesus' birth inaugurates the reign of God, but Jesus is coming again in judgment to make things right. Christ does not come into a perfect world, but into one that is a mess for that is precisely when we need God.

While we think we have to do all the preparations, preparing the way is God's work. God is faithful to God's promises. I think we get confused with spending our energy on the wrong preparations- the work that goes into this season, without a clue of God's work. We exhaust ourselves and our kids with activities and stuff rather than stopping to listen for that voice, to stop, and draw near to God.

Hear this good news. God promised our ancestors a prophet, a messenger, would come. John is that forerunner of Jesus promised by the angel Gabriel into a world that was a mess, God sent his Son, Jesus the Messiah, to inaugurate the new reign of a humble king. In contrast to the powerful pretenders of his day: Tiberias, Pontius Pilate, Herod, God sends a child to show us the path of righteousness and peace.

If it is all up to us, we are sunk.
So we draw near again to God.
We listen for that voice, God's voice, amid all the chaos and confusion of our generation. One thing we know for sure is that it is in the wilderness times, that God makes a way out of no way. And it is precisely in the wilderness that the word of the God comes. God has always worked in wilderness places, not the seat of power. God goes to the deserts, the margins, the edges of our world and brings salvation to all.

We are people of hope. And hope gives us courage in the wilderness- where new life seems impossible.

“Hope is not based on the possibilities of the situation,” writes Miroslav Volf.
“Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God.”

God is faithful to God's promises.

God sees God's people and is sending salvation.

Because of God's faithfulness, people of faith have defiant courage.

Although it is hard to see the way ahead in the wilderness, we trust that God is making a way out of no way.

Advent is the time when we look forward to what God is doing when all flesh will see the salvation of God.

Christ's coming again in judgment may be bad news for the Herods and Pilates of this world, and for those who do not seek God's will.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes of judgment in an Advent sermon he preached in 1928. He was well-acquainted with evil.

It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming, so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God . . . We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.

Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love.ⁱⁱⁱ

Friends, hear the good news of Advent.

Draw near, listen, pause, prepare, pray, sing- a lot.

For the word of the Lord comes in the wilderness times and in wilderness places.

And because our hope is in God and not in ourselves, or the Herods and Pilates,
we have courage in the wilderness.

ⁱ Brown, Brene, *Braving the Wilderness* (Random House: New York, 2017) 44.

ⁱⁱ IBID, 45.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) pp. 185-186. Thanks to Kathryn Schifferdecker at Working Preacher commentary on Malachi 2009 at www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=459