

“Wilderness Comforts”
Sermon for Advent 2B
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
December 10, 2017

Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8

These two Advent texts we share today are extremely familiar to me, and perhaps to you too. I have always been a big fan of Handel’s Messiah. I remember when my 7th grade music teacher performed the Messiah with the Atlanta Symphony Chorus, and it aired on public television. I recorded it on my VCR and was so geeked out about it that I listened to it over and over. These were the days before Netflix. Sadly, I am a much better audience than performer when it comes to Handel, so I will spare you a performance. But I cannot help but hear Isaiah’s “Every valley shall be exalted and every hill made low” set to Handel’s inspired music. As for the the Mark text, John the Baptist appears also in Matthew and Luke. His words come not just at this time of Advent but also with the baptism of Jesus, who is John’s cousin. John the Baptist shows up enough that he is a pretty familiar guy, even if he is a little strange.

But this year is not any year. This year, I was especially struck in my readings with the *physicality* of both texts. In Isaiah, we have a highway in the desert; valleys lifted up, mountains and hills made low. The uneven ground becomes smooth and the rough places plain. The people are grass, constant only as the flowers of the field.

Then God appears, but as a shepherd, gathering the lambs to God’s bosom and leading the mother sheep.

In John, we see an equally striking physicality. John the baptist emerges from the wilderness. You can feel the itch of his clothing made of camel's hair. You can smell the leather belt inched across his waist, the sweat on his skin, the bee pollen dusting his beard from all the honey he ate with his locusts. You can imagine the contrast of the dryness of the wilderness with the cool wetness of the Jordan River in which he baptizes.

In her writings that brought together ecology-- or care for the earth-- and Christian faith, Sally McFague often described the earth as God's body. She wrote, "We meet God in and through the world, if we are ever to meet God. God is not out there or back there or yet to be, but hidden in the most ordinary things of our ordinary lives. If we cannot find the transcendent *in* the world, in its beauty and its suffering, then for us bodily, earthy creatures it is probably not to be found at all."¹

I am not usually one to highlight events in nature and assign religious significance to them. I think that many people who do that are often misguided. However, if I think of the earth as a character of God's creation, there are a few things I notice it may be trying to tell us.

I lamented this week's decision to revoke protected status from the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase National Monuments in Utah. Though my feet have not touched on these places, looking at the pictures gave me a sense of the dramatic landscapes from which the prophets spoke. A desert highway leads to the two stone peaks that make up Bears Ears. Grand Staircase amazes with its formations jutting from the earth. Both places make me wonder what kinds of eruptions caused these ridges and folds to burst forth from the earth's body. While these sites are sacred to several Native American tribes, I can also imagine wild-haired John the Baptist emerging from the sacred isolation of these places, "A voice crying out in the wilderness."

¹ Sally McFague, "A New Climate for Theology"

The American Geophysical Union shared a recent report stating that the Earth hums. “It’s a low, ceaseless droning of unclear origin that rolls imperceptibly beneath our feet, impossible to hear with human ears.”² I like to think of this low hum as groaning, as if the Earth were in labor pains as it tries to bring forth a new creation. We have also learned that quiet New England may have a huge bubble of hot rock beneath it. The earth is pregnant with possibilities.

Early in the week we saw raging fires in Southern California. The scene was right out of an apocalypse. We have a couple of firefighters in our congregation, and I know they respect the power and danger of fire. The California fires look, especially at night, as if the earth is angry, perhaps with good reason; California governor Jerry Brown said of the blatant disregard for the effects of climate change, “This is the new normal, and this could be something that happens every year or every few years.”

To contrast fire in California, we had snow across the East Coast-- even as far south as Georgia. I know, being from Atlanta, that snow means for them that all the grocery stores sell out of milk and bread when snow is predicted. Why bread and milk?! What do people do with all that bread and milk anyway, make milk sandwiches?-- We in the North laugh because the threat of possible snow keeps Southern children home from school so they can make mud angels in the quarter inch of snow that melts once it hits the ground. However this time, to my snowman-making nephew’s delight, Georgia got even more snow than New Jersey.

Maya Angelou was known to say, “When people show you who they are, believe them.” The earth is not a person, but it is a character in God’s creation. What could the earth be trying to tell us?

² Avi Selk, “Humans can’t hear it, but Earth is always humming” in *The Washington Post* December 8, 2017

When I was an intern in psychotherapy and had my own clients for counseling, I noticed that some people came into therapy with one reason, as their sort of ticket to entry, but once we dug a little bit beneath that struggle we would find an even deeper hurt or need. For example, a graduate student having difficulty with study skills and focus after a few visits reveals he was abused as a child. For him, somehow coming to a therapist to talk about school and studying felt acceptable, but coming to deal with past abuse seemed too overwhelming. Talking about the first thing, however, prepared the way for the voice crying out for the deeper need.

John offered baptism in the Jordan River, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The Greek word that got translated as “repentance” in this passage is *metanoia*, which more literally means a changing of mind or of direction. The Greek word used for “sins” is *hamartion*, which can also be translated as a loss or a missing the mark. In baptism, John shows believers a transformation, another way, because they have been missing the mark of where God calls them. In Jesus, God wants to meet us squarely on the mark.

Interestingly, the Jordan River where the baptising happens is the same river where thousands of years earlier, the Hebrews crossed into the so-called “Promised Land.” The series of judges and kings that follow are marked by conquests and defeats. When believers come back to the river Jordan to be baptized, they are sent out again into the land-- this time not with the sword of conquest, but with the word of God’s presence and love. For many of us, the desire for and assurance of this love remains a deep need. In the Jordan River, we find a presence and love that has been flowing for a long time; it is the same water that was there when the Hebrews crossed into the Promised Land. It is the Living Water that flows from Jesus, and it is the same water we offer here in our baptismal font. What we come to understand in the good news of the gospel is something that has been there all along.

Kathryn Matthews notes, “The God we meet in the Old Testament has commonly been described as a God of fear and threat, while the God of the New Testament, it has been said, is all about love and tenderness. Second Isaiah paints a fuller portrait of God. Yes, “the God who comes” (like ancient deities, including the gods of their captors, Babylon) is mighty and glorious and powerful. But the God of Israel is also a gentle shepherd who feeds the flock, gathers up lambs and holds them close. “(Kathryn Matthews, *Sermon Seeds*)

This Advent, let us pay close attention to the landscape. As we notice what the earth is doing, let us also notice the landscape of our own lives. Where are the mountains and the valleys? Where do you need God to lift you up, and where do you need God to level you out? There is a saying that the gospel should comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable. In these times, we are finding that some of us need to be humbled, while others need to be lifted up. If you are confused as to which group you belong to, look to the wilderness, look to the water.

Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God! The pathway is before us. The prophets proclaimed it; John the Baptist preached it. Let the desert rejoice, for Jesus is coming, yes he is. Amen.