

“Where the Wild Things Are”

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Advent 2

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

Today’s scripture speaks of wild things: a wilderness, and a wild man of God speaking wild words.

I found myself lost in the wilderness once. I had been a camp counselor at Calvin Center, the Presbyterian camp and conference center in Georgia. One day, I was taking my 2-hour break away from the kids, so I grabbed my running shoes and went for a jog on the trails around the camp. For the sake of adventure, I forked onto a trail that I had never explored before with my campers. Sunlight fell across my face between the heavy green canopy the tree leaves gave me. Birds called back and forth to one another. “I’m having an awesome run!” I thought to myself happily. The trail started to narrow, but I wanted to see where it would go. It seemed to go a few yards along a barbed wire fence, but then get wider on the other side of the fence and looked like it picked back up again. According to my calculations in relation to the sun, I thought that if I continued in the direction of that trail, I would be able to cut back to camp in half the time of my meandering route, and I wouldn’t have to backtrack. I *hate* backtracking. And so, I ducked between the wires and continued to follow the trail.

On the other side of the fence, I came to a clearing-- still surrounded by trees, but with a soft, pine needle carpet covering the ground. But what was in the distant trees? Was that a treehouse some campers had built? What fun! I ran ahead to check it out. No, it was not a treehouse! The yellow sign nailed to the tree, “Warning: Hunting Area! Use extreme caution!” clued me into the fact that this was a deer-hunting perch, and I wasn’t at Camp Calvin anymore. And several more trees featured similar perches. I did not see any hunters, but just to be safe, I started calling out, “It’s me, I’m just a runner, not a deer” as I headed back to my trail. But where was that path? As I scanned the periphery, all I saw was an army of trees. And suddenly, I felt very small.

I looked for the sun again, even though my earlier sun navigation skills had failed me. I knew I needed *something* to just pick a direction and follow it. Eventually, the trees gave way to bushes and grass, so at least I could see the sky again. But the grasses were

tall, and tangled with thorny vines. I tried not to think of snakes slithering across a ground I could not see. The birds were no longer calling back and forth; instead, I heard a loud chattering of insects. I kept walking, and then my foot sank into a hidden stream. Somewhere, I had heard to follow water when you're lost. So, I followed the water. That eventually led me to a clearing in the grasses, where large, metal towers carrying power lines were lined up, one after the other. And so, I followed the power lines. Suddenly, I started to hear a rumbling in the sky. It wasn't thunder. From a distance, I saw a wobbly airplane come out of the clouds. It was descending. I followed the direction of its descent until I could see the runway of a tiny, country airport. I walked down the runway until, with relief, I could see a road. Finally! Civilization! I was exhausted, thirsty, bitten, and bloodied from my thorny path, so I had lost all inhibition. I stuck my thumb out for the first truck that headed my way. He pulled over and I asked him for a ride back to my camp. "My company policy tells me I can't pick up strangers," he told me with regret. Another truck came up, and this driver kindly took me back to camp-- but it was the 4H camp, not my camp; however, they called my camp and someone rushed out to come get me. Turns out I had wandered 5 miles away.

Have you ever found yourself stuck in the wilderness? I was literally lost in the wilderness, but I think that all of us have had times when we found ourselves in a symbolic wilderness, either of our own making, or one that had been thrust upon us. You might be in a wilderness if you experience any of the following:

- Regret for not having taken an easier path
- Uncertainty about what the right pathway should be
- Loneliness
- Fear that you will not be cared for or won't have what you need-- whether that is food and water, or safety, or love.
- A sense that you are not in control

Have you ever found yourself in the wilderness? Is there a possibility that you might be in one right now? I'm sorry. And, take heart. Our faith bears witness to a God who meets people in the wilderness, over and over again. God showed up to Hagar, who wandered in the wilderness with her son Ishmael, fearful that they would die of thirst. God provided them with a well and a promise that they would have a great nation. The Hebrews wandered in the wilderness for 40 years-- I certainly hope it won't be that long for you-- but what they had when they got out was something they had when they were driven into it: that is, the freedom of an entire people. And, in the wilderness they learned what it means to utterly rely on God, who provided them *not only* with manna, quail, and water struck from a rock. God also provided them with a covenant, written in

words and also on their hearts, that God would be their God, and they would be God's people.

John the Baptist met people-- they *streamed* to him-- in the wilderness of Judea, to be baptized in the River Jordan. The wilderness can be a terrifying place. At the same time, there is something about the wilderness that grants the path to our salvation.

Ironically, the trail, which one would expect to lead me to safety, was what got me lost. Sure, I should have interpreted some signs along the way as big, flashing red "TURN BACK!" signs, such as the narrowing trail and the barbed wire. But really, it is what I found in the wilderness that led me back: the trees, the birds, the sun, the stream, the insects, then these gave way to the power wires, the airplane, the runway, the road, the truck.

"TURN BACK!" Did you know that the Greek word for repent, *metanoia*, often gets interpreted as "turn around?" More accurately, the Greek means "to change one's mind after the fact"-- or, a turning around of the mind. Luckily for those who do not like backtracking, that is not the same thing as going back to who or where exactly you were before you were lost. And so, repentance is not going back to the way things were. That moment has already passed. ***Repentance asks that you become the person you are called to be in light of what has happened.*** If *regret* is what has brought you into the wilderness, know that our faith offers a pathway beyond regret, a way of redemption that helps you to live as the person you are called to be in light of what has happened. God's grace and forgiveness is generous and abundant, but it is not cheap. It asks that you become someone different in light of that grace and forgiveness. Rabbi David Blumenthal says that in Judaism, there are two different kinds of repentance. One is repentance rooted in fear-- that's called *teshuva mi-yir'a*-- and it's a change that happens because we are afraid of the consequences if we don't change, whether that is a compulsive gambler who changes because she is afraid of losing all her money, or a sinner who changes because he is afraid of God's wrath. This kind of repentance still counts, the Rabbi says, but a repentance rooted in love-- *teshuva gemura*-- goes even deeper, because this love leads you to become a different person.

If your wilderness experience includes ***uncertainty*** about the right pathway, consider this: John the Baptist does not tell us to find the right pathway. Instead, he tells us to make straight the pathways of the Lord. Even when we do not know which way we should go, we can do things that open up the pathways for God into our lives. For some, it is a regular prayer practice. For others, it is taking time to breathe or to meditate. Spending time in service to others puts us on a direct pathway to

experiencing Christ himself, according to Jesus' words in Matthew 25: "For I was hungry, and you fed me." Being part of Christian community reminds us that we are not alone in finding our path, and sometimes it is those who can see outside the spinning interiors of our own minds who can point the way out better than we can. As disorienting as the wilderness is, it unveils the truth that we really are not in control-- and that is okay, if we can trust in God's control. The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, which is part of our confessions of faith, goes like this:

Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

For any of us who are lost on our paths, that one certainty can give some orienting guidance, if we allow it to.

For those who are **lonely** in the wilderness, consider this: your loneliness is a pathway to connection. Act on your yearnings for community, and with persistence, you will find it. Coming out of my wilderness adventure, I felt deflated and alone when the first trucker did not pick me up. But I stood on that road and eventually another driver came around, and he was my Good Samaritan who restored me to my community. My cousin's daughter is in her first year at high school-- a new school system for her-- and I was surprised to learn that she is eating lunch alone in the library because she has not yet found a crowd to sit with. She said that she has even tried texting people to form friendships, and they just didn't respond. Of course, this awakened every teenage insecurity I experienced, and I felt so sad for her, remembering that high school is an awkward and sometimes cruel place to move from childhood towards adulthood. I remembered my fragile confidence, and how quickly I would give up, defeated, if one effort towards friendship failed. I would go months without trying again. But I discovered there were others as nervous as I was about brokering friendship, and we formed our own little awkward circle, and by the time we were seniors, we were confident and happy with each other and who we had become, and the social hierarchy wasn't even a real thing anyway. "Keep texting, girl. You'll find your true friends," I told my cousin.

We often have, in the wilderness, **fear that we won't have what we need**. It is a legitimate fear to worry that we will have enough to eat, shelter, health, and the things that we need to feel safe. But when we look around, and only see scarcity, we miss the abundance God is setting before us. Never underestimate what God can cultivate from the scarcest of resources-- after all, the earth was a formless void until God spoke, and then, all of creation began to unfold. Note that the prophet in Isaiah says "A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse." Now, what good is a lousy old stump? A tree cut down does not have its life in it anymore. No one expects anything to grow out of a

stump. However, many types of trees actually do sprout shoots that grow into trees. Sometimes, we have more blessing around us than we can see, especially if our lens is only focused on scarcity. No one thought that the Messiah would come in such a humble way: a vulnerable baby, born in a stable far from home, to two people who had not even been formally married. And yet...

When all else fails, we can head for the water, as those streaming to John the Baptist did. Our sacrament of baptism connects us to all who passed through those waters before us, and they will find us when nothing else will, and remind us that God makes a home with us, whether we are in the terrifying wilderness or in a peaceful, green meadow. We can know this because God showed up as one of us, in Jesus the Christ, and lived into the contours of our joyful and painful human experiences. And God will make a home in us again, in you, in me. That is the Advent promise. That is what we are waiting for. To find a home: that is why we go into the wilderness, where the wild things are. We get lost, so that we can be found. Thanks be to God. Amen.