

“Radical Landscaping”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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Isaiah 40:1-11  
Mark 1:1-8

Both Isaiah and Mark offer us visions of radical landscapes: wilderness, desert highway, mountains and valleys, flowers of the field, sheep...and John, a wild man, emerging from the wilderness wearing camel's hair and eating locusts and honey.

These days, the landscape captures my attention, more than I am normally inclined to notice. I count the outdoors and its creatures among my companions. We all look out the windows more, and have started to become familiar with the various deer that cross our lawn. Kai has started naming them-- Dasher, the young buck with just the beginnings of what will one day be an impressive rack of antlers, visits us the most often. The few social gatherings we do have are outside, so for Thanksgiving we were delighted to discover we could eat outside with our in-laws to have a safer holiday meal. With the trees towering over us added to our dinner guest list, the table did not seem so small.

I went for a long run on Friday, and had the Saddle River running beside me, with its geese and ducks cheering me along the way, and I even saw a deer swim across the river. Yesterday, as we visited with some neighbor friends on their lawn, the afternoon gave way to dusk. As the trees became black shadows against the mauve and purple sky, an owl flew over our heads. I suspect that if we were in the ordinary rhythms of pre-pandemic, I probably would not have been in touch with all the outdoor landscape was showing me, and if I had noticed, I might not have been as moved by it.

Both the prophet in Isaiah, and John the Baptist, want us to *notice* the landscape around us, and to be moved-- even changed-- by it, even as God changes the landscape itself. 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 landscape. 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. Mark designed this landscape so we will notice what will happen.

Living in big cities causes me to notice and appreciate natural landscapes. When I lived in Chicago, the landscape architecture I would see in Millennium Park and other urban, public gathering spaces often featured prairie grasses contained in the rough edges of steel retaining walls, rusted by the oxidation of the seasons. These parks marked off spaces where nature's wildness that was once indigenous to the region could again return, even as towering skyscrapers towered over it.

Likewise, in the 1850's Frederick Law Olmstead designed about 800 square acres in the heart of Manhattan as planned wilderness-- a space where urban dwellers escape the cramped, crowded, and at the time, unsanitary conditions of the city and feel a sudden freedom, a comparative largeness which invited, encouraged, and facilitated movement. It used to be that New York City dwellers would head to graveyards if they wanted green space to romp around. But Central Park gave birth to something bustling with life. "The giddy impulse you feel, upon arriving at the Great Lawn or Sheep Meadow, to burst into a full-out sprint—that is by design."<sup>1</sup>

In baptism, John was offering a design for return to God and a freedom of its own kind in the Jordan River, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He called us to look at the architecture of our souls. 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, and lead us toward our spiritual freedom.

Advent gives us a spiritual landscape to notice our location in relation to God, in relation to God's people, and in relation to the world where God has placed us. If you look at the progression of the Advent scriptures, it starts with wilderness and desert, flowers fading, stark warnings to repent, the Lord coming with might. We have to spend time in that landscape. But then, the scriptures will guide us to good news for the oppressed next week; then a young woman's vision for the world as she consents to the Holy Spirit's plan that she will bear God. And finally, we have the meekness of a child born in utter poverty. It is only moving through these different landscapes that we will move from those valleys of death, to Bethlehem, where we find our source of life and hope for the world.

This Advent, let us pay close attention to the landscape. As we notice what the scripture's wilderness, as we listen to what its mountains and valleys proclaim, 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? What injustices merit God's turnaround? Are there ways this season of Advent can give us borders into which the Spirit's wild plans might take seed and bloom in us? Are there ways we might discover the unbound freedom Christ brings, amidst the constraints this year has offered us?

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Rich, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Creation of Central Park" in *The Atlantic*, September 2016

I heard that Ollie raked the lawn when his moms were sick with COVID. We never expect a kindergartener to do such important work. And yet, that is what this season brings us: a child, Jesus, who does unexpected, landscape-changing work. This child is our hope. This child is our salvation. Thanks be to God.