

TEXT: Isaiah 40:1-11  
THEME: The glory of the Lord shall be revealed  
SUBJECT: God  
TITLE: Wilderness

Second Sunday of Advent  
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Messiah Moravian  
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Hostility to wilderness has a long history. Wilderness is perceived by some as a dangerous force that frustrates the order-bringing pursuits of human culture and agriculture. "Except for the true civilization builders," cried the preacher James Stalker in 1881, "the very land in which we would live would still be an undiscovered wilderness!"

"These men see teeming cities, and thriving factories upon the desert, where others see only sage brush and alkali plains . . . these men have tunneled our mountains, have spanned our great rivers, and opened our mines of wealth!"

John Muir had a different take on wilderness. He identified with John the Baptist because the Baptist was a voice from the wilderness - a prophet who lived in the wilderness where he heard the Spirit. Muir found in the Baptist a model for his own sense of vocation, though Muir would speak not just from the wilderness but also on behalf of the wilderness, calling people to repentance.

In a letter to Mrs. Carr, Muir wrote, "Do behold the King in his glory, King Sequoia. Behold! Behold! seems all I can say. Some time ago I left all for Sequoia: have been and am at his feet fasting and praying for light, for is he not the greatest light in the woods; in the world. Well may I fast, not from bread but from business, bookmaking, duty doing, and other trifles, and great is my reward. There is balm in these leafy Gileads for all defrauded civilization."

While Stalker and Muir were contemporaries, I have found no evidence they knew or were even aware of each other. For Stalker the wilderness was a quality to be vanquished, for Muir wilderness was a quality to be cherished. The wilderness, for Muir, was an exquisite and creative energy, a realm of miracle, diversity and abundance.

For the Jews wilderness was a place of transition between slavery and freedom, between exile and restoration. The God of Sinai forces God's people into wild and wretched climes where trust must be absolute. When Pharaoh let the people of Israel go, God did not lead them by the shortest route to the Promised Land, but by the longer route that took them deep into the desert, toward Mount Sinai.

In the reading from the Isaiah, the people of Israel are once again in the wilderness. They are leaving captivity in Babylon to return to a homeland in ruins. Their time in the wilderness is meant to lead them to radical faith in a God who has so ordered matters that injustice becomes its own punishment. After a season of suffering, of returning to their right minds, God will gently lead the people in rebuilding their country.

Jesus repeatedly leads people into hostile landscapes, away from society and its conventions, to invite them into something altogether new. In early Christian tradition, the desert was perceived ambiguously, usually as an unfriendly, intimidating domain; but for those able to endure its purifying adversity, an image also of paradise. If desert terrors can be sustained as the self is laid bare under its harsh scrutiny, dry land becomes an avenue of hope.

We are in the wilderness, wilderness not in the tradition of John Muir but in the tradition of the Jews. Alessandro Baricco in *The Barbarians: An Essay on the Mutation of Culture*, claims what we understand by experience and even the tissue of our existence is mutating because we privilege surface over depth, speed over reflection, sequences over analysis, surfing over deep understanding, multitasking over specialization, and pleasure over effort. The political victory of irony over the sacred is dismantling the last vestiges of the divine in everyday life.

We cannot survive this wilderness with a house-broken God whose chief end is to glorify us and enjoy us forever, who only asks how he can more meaningfully enhance the lives of those he serves. A God who is solicitous of our every need, fawning for our attention, eager for nothing in the world so much as the fulfillment of our every desire, God as royal butler, this God is exposed by the wilderness as a fraud, an idol of our own making.

In John Updike's novel *A Month of Sundays*, the Rev. Thomas Marshfield, a lapsed vicar who longs for transcendence, attacks the marshmallowy worldliness of his younger assistant, Ned Bork. Marshfield calls Bork's theology "limp-wristed, a perfectly custardly confection of pop psychology and shallow mysticism swimming in a soupy caramel of modern theological blather, all served up in a dime-store dish of his generation's gutless give-away friendliness."

Marshfield wants nothing of a religion made amenable to human demands. In a society that emphasizes the limitless possibilities of the individual self, it comes as a strange freshness to be confronted by an unfathomable God, indifferent to the petty, self-conscious needs that consume us. As Thomas Merton knew, "Ultimately what we want is not the wilderness but the womb."

The wilderness is God's location of choice for drawing us into a deeper understanding of who we are. God frequently moves to the boundary in order to restore the center, calling a broken people back to justice and compassion. In the wilderness, unsettling and terrifying as it may be, the core of our identity is reconceived.

The three richest Americans own as much wealth as the bottom half of the American population. The current tax proposal in Congress will exacerbate this disparity, with 80% of the tax cuts going to the top 1%. Josh Hoxie, coauthor of an Institute for Policy Studies report on billionaires, said, "So much money concentrating in so few hands is not just bad economics, it's a moral crisis."

St. Salvian the Presbyter lived during the fall of the Roman Empire. He thought he could explain its collapse: the elite kept all the resources for themselves, which burdened the poor. The poor became so dissatisfied with the Roman system that they identified with the barbarian invaders, who they thought treated them better.

When the poor lose hope, when they have nothing left to lose, when they are told they do not deserve a tax cut because they would only spend the money on booze, women and movies, the poor prepare the way for the coming of the barbarians and the wilderness reclaims the shining city upon a hill.

We are in the wilderness. Our identity as a people is being challenged, our commitment to justice and compassion over heedless greed is being tested. How we respond is how we prepare the way for what is to come.