

The Gift of Being Prepared

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Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-9

My mother was an English teacher. She knew that good grammar was much more than good grammar. She knew the power of punctuation, and passed that conviction down to me. For example, “let’s eat, grandma” is much different than “let’s eat grandma.” So much power in a comma!

Biblical grammar matters, therefore, and this morning we encounter a prime example. In iconic words from the prophet Isaiah, we hear “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.’” The writer of Mark knew those words. Yet either in misinterpretation or mistranslation from Hebrew to Greek we’ve received: “...the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘prepare the way of the Lord...’” In Isaiah, the way of the Lord is prepared in the wilderness. In Mark, the voice cries out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. Do you see the difference?

Does it matter? Is it more than just a peculiar piece of trivia? Yes! Biblical scholar Ralph Klein writes that “The punctuation in (Isaiah 40:3) is crucial. When this passage is quoted in the New Testament it is applied to John (the Baptist)'s cry for repentance. In Isaiah it is not a voice crying in the wilderness, but a voice crying, "In the (literal) wilderness.... (build a highway for the Israelites to return from exile..."

Two biblical understandings of wilderness, one more realistic and one more figurative. But both treacherous, dangerous places, where either bodies or souls could be harmed, where one becomes easily lost with no clear way out. In either wilderness, we are called to prepare the way of the Lord, by smoothing and straightening, by removing roadblocks and obstacles. That makes preparation – whether *in* the wilderness or *for* the wilderness – a necessity for the life of faith and a true gift for we who travel.

What do you think of when you hear the term wilderness? The deep woods? A forest with tall trees? A desert, perhaps, similar to the wildernesses imagined by Isaiah and John the Baptist? Or an urban wilderness, perhaps, the narrow streets between towering buildings or block after block of decayed housing? Biblical images of wilderness are rarely about the actual physical reality; rather, they serve as a very powerful touch point about our internal and communal wilderness journeys. The Israelites 40-year journey in the wilderness is both a physical and spiritual quest. So is Jesus’ 40-day wilderness journey.

Or think about Tolkien’s wilderness imagery, or Harry and Hermione and Ron searching for the horcruxes, or Thoreau’s Walden, or Jack London’s Buck in “The Call of the Wild.”

Brene Brown writes that “Theologians, writers, poets, and musicians have always used the wilderness as a metaphor, to represent everything from a vast and dangerous environment where we are forced to navigate difficult trials to a refuge of nature and beauty where we seek space for contemplation. What all wilderness metaphors have in common,” Brown writes, “are the notions of solitude, vulnerability, and an emotional, spiritual, or physical quest.” (*Braving the Wilderness*, page 36)

Each of us has experienced, or is experiencing right now, that first kind of wilderness – that vast and dangerous environment where we are forced to navigate difficult trials. You know yours. I know mine. Cancer, grief, unemployment, betrayal, addiction, loneliness, depression, estrangement. Some we create for ourselves. Some happen despite our best efforts. Emotional, physical, spiritual, or all three.

Such wildernesses are magnified in a season like this, with carols happily playing and expectations for joy mounting and mounting. That’s why we hold a “blue Christmas” service, to acknowledge a heightened sense of wilderness in this so-called “most wonderful time of the year.”

Finding a way out of the wilderness is never easy. Nor does it happen quickly. It takes courage and hope and vulnerability and community. GPS won’t do it. It takes faith, but never easy faith.

The priest and writer Richard Rohr says that “...There are two wildernesses, two darknesses in the spiritual journey. One you go into by your own stupidity, by your sin, blindness, ignorance and mistakes. We all do that. But there’s another darkness. The holy darkness is the darkness that God leads us into, through and beyond. This is a necessary darkness for the journey. In a certain sense, God’s darkness is a much better teacher than light. There comes a time when you have to either go deeper into faith or you will turn back, when you have to live without knowing or you lose faith altogether.”

Your wilderness will be yours and mine will be mine. We sojourn *in* them to emerge *from* them.

But what about our collective wilderness, the vast and dangerous environment we find ourselves in now as a nation, as a culture, as a body politic, as a community? Hard political division? Or the COVID wilderness that is magnified even more so as the numbers of cases and fatalities increases continually, and hospital capacities are stretched beyond thinness. I see the statistics on the news and am numbed by them. I read on my social media feed about friends being diagnosed, or parents of friends succumbing to the virus and am heartbroken. I see people not wearing masks and shake my head. I pray for doctors and nurses. I pray for a safe and timely vaccine.

COVID is our shared wilderness right now, that includes deep fatigue, isolation, medical anxiety, financial uncertainty, grief, a shared wilderness that plays itself out with poignant specificity depending on our context, whether we are stuck at home with our kids or prevented from seeing our aging parents or unsure about our work prospects or fearful that one unmasked moment will be our downfall of one we love.

First, Isaiah offers us – in God’s voice – comfort. Comfort my people. Like faith, this is not easy comfort, but comfort received in hope, with trust, that holds out the promise that even when we journey in the wilderness God journeys with us. Can we take comfort in that comfort, not as some kind of sentimental anesthetic, but as a foundational piece of spiritual scaffolding that makes the journey navigable? We need to pay attention to that offer, and accept it.

And then we, like Isaiah, pivot to what’s next. What would it look like, having received comfort for our deep discomfort, to prepare a way for the Lord in this wilderness?

I remember a presentation by the Duke theologian Gregory Jones, about, of all things, wilderness. He acknowledged the real crises in which we find ourselves, that we have, in church and culture, lost sight of our destination. Our hazard now, Jones said, as we wander in the wilderness, is “death of the imagination,” that we can’t imagine a future different from our wilderness present.

That is true for us as individuals, I would add, and it is certainly true for us as a church and as a culture.

Jones said that the longer we are in the wilderness, the more entrenched we become, the more it eats at our soul. That resonates with me. Jones referenced the Jewish biblical scholar Avivah Zornberg, who suggests that the wilderness is both a time of peril and a time of promise, that the wilderness presents us with an opportunity to reflect, to refocus, to stay close to God.

That feels true to me also. And it feels very much like Advent.

Isaiah calls us to be prepared. John the Baptist calls us to be prepared. What if, as we navigate the wilderness, we hone our imaginations, imagine in new ways what a post-pandemic world will look like – a world filled with medical justice and economic opportunity, with racial equity and environmental accountability. We can prepare for that right now, imagine that right now. We imagine it now, we prepare for it now, so that when it comes, we will act not so much surprised but as if we were expecting it. The preparatory work of imagination is so very Advent.

We do so with hope. We do so in faith. We do so expecting and anticipating that we will emerge from the wilderness into something new. We do so preparing a way.

T. S. Eliot wrote: “We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.”

We join our forebears. We join the prophets. We join John the Baptist. “A voice cries out: ‘in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.’” “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’”

We are not the way, but we prepare a way. For one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, who will redeem our journey, who will lead us out of the wilderness, who will lead us home. Amen.