

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – December 6, 2020 – Forever
Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

“Fred Craddock remembers a little girl from one of his earliest pastorates in Tennessee. Her parents sent her to church but never came with her. They would pull in the church’s circular drive, the little girl would hop out of the car, and they would go out for Sunday breakfast. The father was an executive for a chemical company, upwardly mobile, ambitious.”¹

“The whole town knew of their Saturday night parties, parties given not for entertainment, but rather as part of their whole upwardly mobile program. That determined who was invited. But every Sunday, there was that little girl.”² Once, during worship, “Craddock says he looked out over his congregation and thought, ‘There she is with a couple of adult friends.’ Later, he realized she was there with Mom and Dad. When, at the end of the service, the invitation was given, Mom and Dad came down front to join the church.”³

“‘What prompted this?’ asked the youth pastor, after the service.”⁴

“‘Do you know about our parties?’ they asked.”⁵

¹ Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year B, Part A*, (Abingdon Press, 2017), 16.

² Willimon, 16.

³ Willimon, 16.

⁴ Willimon, 16.

⁵ Willimon, 16.

“‘Yes. I’ve heard of your parties,’ said the pastor.”⁶

“‘Well, we had one last night again. It got a bit loud, a little rough, there was much drinking. And it woke up our daughter, and she came downstairs and she was on about the third step. And she saw the eating and drinking and said, ‘Oh, can I have the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food. Goodnight, everybody.’ She went back upstairs. People began to say, ‘It’s getting late, we really must be going,’ and ‘Thanks for a great evening.’ Within two minutes the room was empty.”⁷

“‘Mom and Dad picked up crumpled napkins and spilled peanuts, half-sandwiches, and took empty glasses on trays into the kitchen. And they looked at each other, and he said what they were both thinking, ‘Where do you think we’re going?’ God had come for them.”⁸

Friends, Advent marks the coming of Jesus Christ into human history. The Greek word for repent means “‘to change one’s mind.’ Behind it lies the Hebrew

⁶ Willimon, 16.

⁷ Willimon, 16.

⁸ Willimon, 16-17.

verb, ‘to turn around;’ that is, to change one’s heart, will, and conduct.”⁹ And in Advent, as in Lent, such transformation is often inspired in the wilderness.

Will Willimon writes that “Wilderness is that place, which is no place, where we lose our way, wander from the path, get lost. Exile is that time when we become enslaved to false gods, serve an alien empire, sell out, forget.”¹⁰ This is why “getting free from Pharaoh was not the toughest exodus task.”¹¹ You see, “between Egyptian slavery and freedom of the promised land lay wilderness.”¹² And the “wilderness for Israel was a place of wild beasts, temptation, sin, and bewildered wandering with no star for a guide.”¹³

You may recall that “it took Israel forty years of wandering the wilderness finally to find their way home.”¹⁴ And in our second lesson, “it was from the wilderness that John the Baptist appeared, quoting Isaiah, proclaiming, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”¹⁵ In our first lesson that John quotes, Isaiah was speaking directly to people in exile. Because earlier that century, the

⁹ Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 31.

¹⁰ Willimon, 15.

¹¹ Willimon, 13.

¹² Willimon, 13.

¹³ Willimon, 13.

¹⁴ Willimon, 13.

¹⁵ Willimon, 14.

Babylonian army had attacked the Hebrews and taken away as captives a large segment of the population of Judah. And there, in Babylon, the Hebrew captives were surrounded by the worshipers of other gods.¹⁶

In exile, the Israelites faced the natural “temptations of hopelessness and despair,” along with common doubts which afflict those enduring grievous suffering; namely, the questioning of God’s power to change the situation, and the questioning of God’s goodness and love.¹⁷ While in captivity, the Hebrews desperately longed to return home. And Isaiah sought to reassure them with the message “that life is not driven by arbitrary forces but is guided by a loving God who remains true to a universal plan of justice.”¹⁸

And so, this vision emerges of something that sounds too good to be true. The promise here is for a safe passage where one did not previously exist. A reliable, traversable highway in the wilderness. “Ordinarily, the way back from Babylonia to Israel followed the Fertile Crescent, going out of the way to avoid the desert wilderness.”¹⁹ But this vision is different. And with it comes the hope of “the

¹⁶ Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 4.

¹⁷ Hanson, 24-25.

¹⁸ Hanson, 4.

¹⁹ Willimon, 13.

return of God’s people to Judah.”²⁰ You see, not even an inhospitable, desert wilderness is able to deny God’s gracious presence, which will finally “comfort and carry those abandoned through the rough places.”²¹

But how will it happen and who will receive the credit? Typically, when we think about highways or other technological feats, we are quick to pat ourselves on the back on account of our ingenuity. But here, we learn of the triumph of God’s initiative. Fundamentally, this is a passage about “what God will do,” and “where God is going.”²² For even in the midst of exile, God’s hopeful word involves “dragging Israel along, down the straight road home.”²³ Fulfilling a promise made to Abraham, and finally brought to completion in Jesus Christ.

Friends, what is the wilderness for us? Surely, we’ve all noticed that there are many different gospels vying for our attention. There is “the prosperity gospel that promises material blessings as a sign of God’s faithfulness; the consumer gospel that promises healing and wholeness through shopping, consumption, and the accumulation of things; the feel-good gospel that promises escape from the pressures

²⁰ Jerome F.D. Creach, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 19.

²¹ Glen Bell, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 20.

²² Willimon, 15.

²³ Willimon, 15.

of the contemporary world through drugs, alcohol, sports, or media and entertainment. Then there is the gospel of Jesus Christ, which promises salvation through a human being who was also the Son of God.”²⁴

Earlier, I mentioned that upwardly mobile couple whose raucous house party was disrupted by the keen insights of their young daughter. On account of her faithfulness, they were shaken to reconsider their earthly priorities and to wonder aloud where their lives were heading. Like most stories of repentance, theirs was grounded in the knowledge that “life without God is doomed to confusion, futility, and finally the dread of eternal darkness.”²⁵

And yet, the story of repentance is not all doom and gloom. While changing one’s heart, will, and conduct is often treated as “a dreary act, a resistance to temptations that we might otherwise enjoy,” even this misses the point.²⁶ For “Mark’s story makes clear that ‘people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to [John the Baptist].’ The gospel attracts people who are willing to travel some distance from their routines in order to

²⁴ Andrew Foster Connors, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 31.

²⁵ Hanson, 25-26.

²⁶ Connors, 32.

experience the promises of good news that it announces.”²⁷ And those who dare to venture forth in the wilderness soon discover that “life with God has a center, has meaning, has a source of healing and reconciliation and great joy.”²⁸

And so, as John the Baptist stands before us this day, reminding us of safe passage in the wilderness, we hear not the grating judgments of a religious zealot, but the promise of a passable highway in the desert that will finally carry us home. Indeed, “Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened... ‘Here is your God!’”²⁹

May it be so, and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.

²⁷ Connors, 32.

²⁸ Hanson, 25.

²⁹ Willimon, 17.