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2nd Sunday in Advent Sermon—Proclamation in the Wilderness (12/06/2020)

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- I. Visualization exercise for the gospels as works of art. Imagine a painting of the Golden Gate bridge...
 - a. Description of the image. Hinting at something familiar about the sky.
 - b. Is the golden gate bridge in this painting “real”?
 - i. A tricky and unhelpful question for a work of art.
 - ii. Rather than asking “is it real?” asking, “what does this work reveal?”
 - c. Why do we even have paintings of the golden gate bridge when the physical landmark is still there and there are plenty of proportional photographs of it?
 - i. Because people are creative, and because art can help convey and reveal reality in a way that data can’t. They do different things.
 - ii. There’s something about the way a painting captures some of the experience of the magic and delight of witnessing the golden gate bridge at nighttime that a photograph wouldn’t. Art portrays differently and so it is also able to reveal differently. It draws us into an experience that may leave an impression on us, depending on how much the work of art really speaks to us.
 1. Rather than asking “is its representation real?” “Is it real?” asking, “what does this work reveal?”
 - d. Hinted that there was something familiar about the sky. The painting is a real painting by artist Aja Trier. She humorously named it “Van Gogh Never Saw the Golden Gate Bridge”
 - i. Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* is considered one of the most recognizable works of art in the Western world. The way that Aja Trier painted the sky in her golden gate bridge painting intentionally evokes the style of *Starry Night*.

- ii. The brush strokes in Aja’s painting that evoke *Starry Night*, the cultural familiarity that would strike us when we see that painting, would very much impact how we experience and receive that painting, for those who are familiar with *Starry Night*.
 - e. What I just told you about this painting, I want you to imagine for the gospels in the Christian New Testament. This morning, I want to invite you a bit into how I approach scripture.
- II. The Gospel of Mark is like a work of art about Jesus. A written work of art, but still a work of art. A story.
 - a. When we use the word “story,” sometimes we can get caught in that very factual scientific binary between “real” and “not real.” “historical” and “mythical.” Did this “really happen”? Is this story “real”? But I think the gospels are a little non-binary. They’re works of art that don’t neatly fit these categories. They’re both and somewhere outside of and in-between.
 - i. So perhaps the more helpful question, just like with our golden gate bridge painting, is not “Is this real?” but “what does this reveal?” What is Mark trying to reveal about Jesus with his gospel story?
 - b. And Mark, as the artistic gospel writer, will have his Van Gogh elements too. He will include references and details that are culturally familiar and evoke something for his 1st century Jewish audience that may not be familiar for us. Like looking at Aja Trier’s painting when you’ve never seen Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. You’re still able to experience it, but there are some layers that are missing in how you’ll receive it.
- III. Today, in the second week of the season of advent, we’re going to look at the beginning verses of the gospel of Mark. But, in doing that, we’re also going to re-visit a couple of verses from chapter 40 of Isaiah. They’re verses that we looked at earlier this year in our series on the exile. And they’re also a part of a tradition that Mark evokes on purpose as he begins his gospel of Jesus. So I encourage you, as you listen to these verses, to think of Mark as a painter with words. And together we’ll consider, “what is Mark trying to reveal about Jesus that might be relevant to us today?”
- IV. ***Reading: Isaiah 40:3-5 and Mark 1:1-8 (John & Kim)***

³ A voice cries out:

**“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.**

**⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.**

**⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”**

1 The beginning of the good news^[a] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.^[b]

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,^[c]

**“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,^[d]
who will prepare your way;**

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

**‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”**

⁴ John the baptizer appeared^[e] in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with^[f] water; but he will baptize you with^[g] the Holy Spirit.”

- V. Last week Leah kicked off our advent series “Journey to Joy,” a phrase we’ve borrowed from our December book discussion read *Light of the World* by Amy-Jill Levine. We’re looking at what it means to lean into the hopefulness and the expectation of the advent season, and the joy that is meant to accompany Christmas, following a year that has been and continues to be incredibly difficult for many. We’re acknowledging that Joy, especially joy in difficult circumstances, requires cultivation. It’s something we pursue. It’s a journey. So today, as we consider the advent journey to joy, we’re going to look to the wilderness with John

the Baptist. We're going to look at the significance of the wilderness as an advent symbol.

- VI. The gospel of Mark doesn't begin with a pregnancy, it begins with a proclamation. This is very interesting. It doesn't begin with a pregnancy. There's no infancy narrative like in Matthew or Luke, the nativity stories that we associate with Christmas. Mark's gospel begins with a proclamation in the wilderness. And so we ask, what is he trying to reveal about Jesus by choosing to start here?
- a. The beginning of this gospel starts with a person named John, often called John the Baptist. Now in the gospel of Luke, John the Baptist is introduced through his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth, who've had trouble conceiving. We learn about the prophetic circumstances of his birth, and how it closely parallels Mary's pregnancy. John and Jesus are born just a few months apart. But here in the gospel of Mark, we start with John the Baptist already as an adult. He is the one who proclaims the coming of Jesus, but not his birth. He proclaims the start of his public ministry.
 - b. And Mark sets the scene for all of this with two verses that point to two major Hebrew scriptural traditions and he draws them close to one another, like swirls of blue and yellow, distinct but starting to make a vivid green. *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight."*

He says he's quoting Isaiah, because that's the primary framework for the meaning of the proclamation, but he's actually quoting two different prophets- Isaiah and Malachi.

 - i. The Malachi part is the first half. Now, Malachi is a short prophetic book. It's considered one of the "minor prophets." What matters to us here and for this gospel, is that the last two chapters of Malachi prophesy the return of Elijah.
 1. Some of you may know this history, Leah has touched on it briefly in the past. But just as a recap, Elijah was one of the first major prophets of the Hebrew Bible, he shows up in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. He challenged the ruling authority of Israel at the time. What he saw as an unjust monarchy and an abandonment of Yahweh for a foreign god. He was a sort of eccentric figure in his appearance. He was famously described as having a garment of

hair and wearing a leather belt around his waist. Backlash against his prophecies forced him to flee to the wilderness a couple of times. So there's an association between Elijah and the wilderness. And Elijah is also famous for disappearing suddenly. Not dying, but like he was taken up and away by God.

2. Malachi, who came much later, is known in the last two chapters for prophesying the return of Elijah. The return of this original prophet who challenged the ruling authority and made way for God. The verse that our gospel writer is quoting here- *See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way-* this is the beginning of Malachi's prophecy about the return of Elijah. And Mark's 1st century Jewish audience would recognize that.
- ii. Now let's take a look at the second part before we bring it together and see what picture this gospel is painting of John the Baptist and Jesus. The first part is the Malachi allusion to the return of Elijah. The second part is obviously quoted from the Isaiah section that we read first. *"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" Mark quotes. You may remember Leah talked earlier this year about this section of the book of Isaiah being composed during exile. Many of the Israelites were forced away from their homeland and taken into captivity in Babylon. And this part of Isaiah prophesies a future hope—the return of Yahweh to Yahweh's people, and the return of Yahweh's people to their homeland. When Isaiah chapter 40 says to prepare a way in the wilderness for the Lord, to make straight in the desert a highway, it's not just about a path to return from exile.*

As Leah has mentioned before, a direct path through the desert is a powerful symbol of return but it's likely not the way they'd actually travel to get home. This highway in the desert is less about their way and more about God's way. It's about prophesying a way for God to directly show up for God's people, in the midst of oppressive circumstances. For God's glory to shine forth. It's about preparing for that to happen. And I believe that's the image that our gospel writer is evoking here. This image that would be so familiar and really resonate with his audience.

- iii. So now let's bring it together. What are Mark's Van Gough elements of his gospel introduction? What picture is he painting here? John the

Baptist is like the spirit of Elijah, Mark is saying. This is why he quotes that part of Malachi, and why he describes John in verse 6 as being clothed in camel's hair and wearing a leather belt. Just like Elijah was described in 2 Kings. And John is going to prepare, to make a way for God to show up for God's people again, in the midst of oppressive circumstances. Now under the rule of the Roman Empire. This time God is going to show up as a human person in prophetic ministry, as Jesus. As Immanuel. God with us.

1. We learn that John prepares by proclaiming this message to people who will listen. And that he begins baptizing them, as a ritual of repentance and preparation.

VII. Right here, with these two quoted verses, the gospel writer is painting a picture with the images of his cultural tradition to reveal something about who Jesus is. And this picture is deeply theological *and* it is deeply political. The very first verse says that this is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

- a. That phrase "good news," from the Greek *euangelion* which became the Latin *euangelium*. It's where we get the word evangelist, or evangelical. But in Jesus' time that word was used by the Roman Empire to make announcements about events or actions that had occurred for the good of the world. But of course, for the good of the world in their eyes meant for the good of empire. This word *euangelion*, good news, was used when the emperor Augustus was born. And one of the terms for an emperor was *divi filius*, son of god. The emperor was given a semi-divine status.
- b. So when Mark writes, "*the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*," this is political and subversive in a way that's often lost on us today. This is a dangerous and powerful claim.

VIII. A different kind of authority is coming. One that challenges and undermines the imperial powers. But his coming is not proclaimed in the city, it's not proclaimed outside the courts or the temple, in seats of power. John the Baptist appears in the wilderness when he proclaims, "*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.*" The people go outward all the way from Jerusalem, from the Judean countryside, to the wilderness. John proclaims and prepares a way in the wilderness. Christ is proclaimed in the wilderness. There is a theology in the geography here.

- a. The wilderness is the place away from ruling powers. For Hagar, it's the place away from unjust and exploitative masters Abraham and Sarah. For the

Israelites, it's away from the Egyptians who enslaved them. For Elijah, it's away from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. And later for the Israelites, it's away from the Babylonians who held them captive. The wilderness is the place away from ruling powers. But the wilderness is also being away from protection. It's a place of being exposed to the elements and being dependent on God.

- b. In the Israelite tradition, the wilderness is where God shows up for people in powerful ways. To protect and deliver them. To test them. To instruct them. To make a way for God's people. In the wilderness, God shows up and makes a way of out no way. And this is where Christ is proclaimed—from the wilderness. This is the picture of who Jesus is that Mark is painting for us. The God who shows up to save in the wilderness, at the margins, and becomes God with us.

- IX. This year, people of faith have sought words and images from their traditions that speak to what this year has been like. When everyday words alone aren't enough, we look to words and images that have symbolic power and can help hold and name what we're holding.

In a year marked by so much grief, anxiety, anger, and loneliness, we look to the symbols that can hold it and name it for us. So I've seen a lot more Christian references to the wilderness this year than I ever remember seeing before. The wilderness is also an image and a tradition that's been gaining popularity in certain post-evangelical circles, as a way to name the experience of deconstructing faith. We could say the wilderness is "in" right now. It's having a moment.

But in looking to this imagery for wisdom in this time, I think it's also really important to name that this has been a significant and life-giving tradition for some folks for a long time. And if we want to learn well, about what it might mean for us today that Christ was proclaimed in the wilderness, then that wisdom is an important place to start.

- X. In 1993, Delores Williams published a book that became one of the early foundational books for womanist theology, theology that centers the perspectives and experiences and theological wisdom of Black women. It was called *Sisters in the Wilderness*.
 - a. One of the things that Dr. Williams writes about is how there is a strong African-American Christian wilderness tradition that goes back to the experience of enslavement. She writes about how enslaved people took this biblical wilderness tradition and had their own positive and life-giving view of it. The wilderness is, in a literal sense, the land you wander out to when you can, away from the

oppressive forces surrounding your life, and Jesus meets you there. And he gives you spiritual renewal and strength. Dr. Williams shares lyrics from a spiritual that circulated at that time. Here's what just some of the words say—

- i. *If you want to find Jesus, go in the wilderness, go in the wilderness, go in the wilderness.*

Mourning brother, go in the wilderness.

Afflicted sister, go in the wilderness.

Jesus is waitin' to meet you in the wilderness, go in the wilderness, go in the wilderness, go in the wilderness.

- b. And this wilderness tradition has continued, even after the abolition of slavery, as way to name the experience of confronting and making it through an isolating and oppressive reality with the help of Jesus. The wilderness is not just a physical place. It is also a state of being. And in those wilderness moments, when you call on Jesus, Jesus meets you in your place of need and helps you make a way out of no way. Like the verse in Isaiah says, *"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."*

XI. As we turn back to our passage from Mark, I want to consider--- What can we learn from this wilderness wisdom during advent, without appropriating or diminishing the important specific context that it comes from? Here are a couple things that stand out to me:

- a. The first is that the wilderness is a place to journey through, not a place to conquer.
 - i. Dr. Williams writes about how the way Christians, especially white Christians and those influenced by white Christian culture, think about the wilderness today is influenced by a settler mentality. The wilderness is viewed as something frightening and outside of the control of human willpower and technology, and so it must be conquered, and subdued, and settled. This mentality continues in the way we can tend to see wilderness places as frightening, or maybe overly romanticized, but either way often as an object separate from us.
 - 1. I know that for me, growing up in Southern Arizona in the Sonoran Desert I often used to think that way. I would see these vast expanses of desert outside the city, going for miles and miles, exposed to extreme heat, no water in sight. I would think of the

sparse spiky plants and poisonous snakes and scorpions, and wonder what it would be like to wander out there. How scary it would be. And if that's what the Israelites experienced in their desert wilderness. But Indigenous perspectives and developing a greater familiarity with the land shifted my perspective.

- ii. And that's also what Delores Williams points out. The people who were enslaved were still in a different relationship with the wilderness because of their indigenous West African spiritual roots. The wilderness was a place to journey through, not a place to conquer.
- iii. I think this also applies in the more metaphorical sense of wilderness, when you feel like you're in a wilderness place, mentally, spiritually, in your circumstances. There's that white Western idea, often from a place of privilege, to just conquer the problem, conquer that wilderness moment. Figure out a solution. Resolve it quickly. Subdue it.
 - 1. This year, maybe it's been something like—we're sheltering in place, so I'm going to become an expert homesteader and make a bunch of homemade bread. I'm going to come up with the perfect homeschooling schedule and system. I'm going to prove myself and continue my pre-COVID momentum in this work from home environment. I'm going to go protest as a part of Black Lives Matter, and it will defund the police this year. If we can just get a vaccine everything can go back to normal. And these are human responses. I've certainly felt some of them and others too this year.
 - 2. But, as many marginalized folks know, conquering is often not the way to get through and to get to joy. A different relationship to the wilderness is required.
- b. The second thing that we can learn from this wilderness wisdom is that Christ was proclaimed in the wilderness, and the living Christ continues to meet people and communities in the wilderness.
 - i. maybe you don't relate as strongly to this language of the living Christ or encountering Jesus in this way. maybe for you it's more like the Spirit, or the Divine that surpasses understanding. That's ok. I'm using the language of Jesus or the Christ here to honor the Jesus-centered language of the womanist tradition that Delores Williams shares, and also

to point to the specificity of Advent, traditionally a season in preparation for the coming of Christ.

- ii. the living Christ continues to meet people and communities in the wilderness. And that means that in the journey to joy, God also journeys to us and meets us in the wilderness places.
 1. Last week, Leah shared a “step” in the journey to joy of this advent season, a possible starting place. She encouraged people to look up, from within the places of lament and longing. This week, on the journey to joy, the advent proclamation in the wilderness encourages us to listen out. Listen out, with your ears, your eyes, your touch, to where Christ is showing up in places of wilderness. The more common expression might be listen up. But I’m saying listen out, outwards, because the wilderness places are often the places on the margins. The people who go to hear John the Baptist, they go out from Jerusalem, from the center of political and religious power. They go out even from their homes in the perimeters, the countryside. They go to the edges, where the wilderness is. The geographic margins. That’s where John is, preparing a way, and where Christ is proclaimed. But the wilderness is also in the political margins, the economic margins, the margins of physical and mental well-being. And God challenges that very marginality by showing up *there*, and proclaiming those spaces as the Divine center.
 2. That’s not to say that we’re not all probably experiencing some of the wilderness right now. This has been a really hard year. Socially, relationally, politically, economically. The isolation, anxiety, and despair of this year has cast a wide net. And it can be especially hard to face that moving into the holiday season. I know many of us are facing difficult choices, about if or how to gather for Christmas with loved ones.

And I know for me, there was something about this week that was so discouraging. To know that we’re beyond the point of California’s tier system and we need to be at a level of shutdown similar to where we were in April. That shut down is now being measured in terms of ICU capacity and there has still yet to be more federal economic relief for folks. I’m grateful that our

governmental leaders are doing some of what's necessary, but it's still hard. There's something about the symbolism of the wilderness that resonates pretty broadly right now. And what I'm saying is- wherever you feel the wilderness places, let it draw you into solidarity with others who are in the wilderness, perhaps in ways different than you. Listen out. Listen out for where God is showing up there and how you might show up there for folks too.

- XII. Mark's gospel doesn't begin with a pregnancy. It begins with a proclamation in the wilderness. And he paints a powerful, subversive, hopeful picture of what that means for us. In a season where it can be hard to find joy this year and to lean into the hopefulness of Christmas, we are reminded that the proclamation doesn't come to us in places where we're already happy and comfortable, where we're already joyous. The proclamation comes to us in the wilderness. And so for all who feel like they're in the wilderness right now, know that that experience is not separate from advent and Christmas. It's a part of it. There is room for it. And Christ is proclaimed and present there.

Discussion Questions

- How does Christ being proclaimed in the wilderness resonate or not with you in this advent season?
- What might "listening out" as a step in the journey to joy mean for you?