

Sunday, December 5, 2021

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

In The Wilderness

INTRODUCTION

One of my favorite questions to ask people in a small group setting is, "Where is your most sacred place?" Do you have a special spot or place in the world where you consistently find that you are at ease in the depths of your soul, a physical space that feels particularly connected somehow - at one with a larger whole? Envision that place or places in your mind. Conjure up the aromas, the sounds, the movement. It could be a corner of a room, or a grandly adorned basilica, digging in the garden or summers at the family lake house.

Interestingly enough, I have found that across all the boundaries of age, gender, ethnicity, spiritual acumen, or the full spectrum of religious identity, the vast majority of people connect most easily to the sacred somewhere in the natural world. I know I do. For me, one of the most spectacularly awesome and sacred cathedrals I have ever toured took place in a kayak, paddling alone just as dawn yawned into being and a strong summer sun peeked over the eastern peaks. Silently I felt my body rotating in rhythm with the entire planet, simply by effortlessly in flow with the Androscoggin River. As the morning fog slowly burned away rolling out of the carved valleys between the steep granite mountains, I felt part of it all. My Grandfather's words echoed clearly from my past, "*This is God's country.*" Amen and amen. For me, the sacred mystery of God is revealed most clearly in creation.

For other people, a most sacred place might be less wild and more specific. Perhaps an elegantly crafted synagogue, or simply the visceral memory of your grandmother's kitchen, or maybe it's sitting in a small country chapel. Even strolling down Broadway at 3am can be a sacred space. Now imagine that treasured spot suddenly and violently laid waste, intentionally and maliciously reduced to only ash and rubble, utterly ravaged beyond the point of recognition.

The Gospel of Luke was written to a people who lived through that kind of tragic horror. Here's what happened, in the year 70, to put an end a Jewish Zealot rebellion, the Roman Empire's occupying forces unleashed its full power and might on Jerusalem. Shock and awe violently rained down on the holy city. The vicious attack obliterated every stone, pillar, alter and artifact in the Holy Temple. Nothing was spared. Nothing was left to salvage. The most holy and sacred place in all Judaism was suddenly reduced to ashes, splinters and dust..

Once again, the Hebrew nation found itself spiritually crushed, emotionally battered and physically pummeled. To these broken, traumatized and hopeless people, a learned and prominent physician named Luke wrote the preposterous yet oddly subversive story about God, in flesh appearing. The Gospel of Luke documented a life that liberated captives, healed the sick and suffering and through the power of humility and love forged the way of peace and redemption for the entire world.

Luke's first two chapters chronicled what we call "the Birth Narrative" (You know, the Christmas story) then suddenly, chapter three jumps the story 25 years later. A 30-year-old John the Baptist is wondering deep in the Palestinian wilderness. This is the same John whose miraculous birth is described in chapter one.

As I read the first 6 verses of chapter 3, hearing it in the middle of a national crisis. How do you react to these words? A reading from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 3 verses 1-6. Found on page 60 in your pew Bibles.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 3:1-6 (NRSV)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,

as it is written in the book of the-words-of-the-prophet... Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

The Word of God for the people of God...

SERMON

Please pray with me...

Lord God, when all is lost and we are rudderless and beaten down, You come to us and we remember Your faithfulness. In You we can put all our HOPE and somehow know peace in the shadowed wilderness. You are all our PEACE. This morning we wait for you with eager expectation in our shadowed wilderness of uncertainty, mourning, and unease. May these words penned by your servant Luke speak through to our hearts and guide us toward a vibrant and tangible faith. AMEN.

How do you think this Gospel was received in the year following the destruction of the Temple? This freshly penned, curious real-life chronical was about one of their own people. It's the story of a Jewish man named Jesus, who lived and died only about 40 years ago. Anyone over the age of 50 would remember. He was famously executed as a political enemy of the State by the Roman Empire, then it was widely rumored that 3 days later he actually rose from the dead. The Temple authorities had publicly denounced him as a lying heretic, a common troublemaker who disrupted the good and orderly systems that carried on the tradition of the institution. But hidden truth was that Jesus continually undermined the authority and threatened the power and privilege enjoyed by the elite leaders. It frightened them to see how Jesus empowered the disenfranchised and brought forward the marginalized.

Luke's Gospel is a surprisingly investigative and compelling account of Yahweh, the *Great I Am*, the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, who willingly took on a physical body and inserted the transformative power of God into human history. It's no wonder that Luke was compelled to write this epic story of hope, specifically for a traumatized and shattered people. The entire nation was in crisis mode. The central place that had given meaning and structure to their entire life was summarily and thoroughly annihilated by an unstoppable force of evil. The home that rooted them in history and framed the rich tapestry of their ancient faith had been torn to shreds.

I have to wonder what their reaction was when Luke wrote about John the Baptist quoting from the prophet Isaiah, "*Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*"

Do you think this reads as "good news" to a people in a severe crisis? Maybe, but it's hard to see blue skies when you are wandering in the depths and cold darkness of the abyss. I've been down there, I know. When crisis rips through your life all you want is an actionable solution that will resolve the trauma. The problem is that the choices we make in crisis are critically important for our future. Crisis choices usually have great impact for the rest of our life. Luke is offering a pathway out to these broken

people but even still, everyone knows that to choose to follow Jesus will have dramatic consequences and there will be no turning back.

We do know that some of those the first century hearers of the Word responded. They believed the words of Isaiah were fulfilled though Jesus and the Church was soon born. Luke writes about that too. He went on to tell about it in the Book of Acts.

Today, all these years later, we are still reacting to these Gospels. Like the very first readers we too find that to seriously confront the teachings of Jesus is to confront the crisis in our own life. To truly engage in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus forces every serious reader to make a terrifying, far-reaching crisis decision. This moment is THE critical moment. To believe in Jesus as Christ and choose to follow in the way of Jesus means that your entire life will have to be reoriented. It's a total make-over. Instead of living primarily for your self-interest you will have to live for the common good of all people. Instead of wielding your power, money and influence in a zero-sum game that intends to crush your opponents, you will have to somehow learn to pray for the welfare of your enemy. You will have to be willing to lay your very life down for the sake of another and love your neighbor as yourself. Especially in the beginning, being a Christian can be quite annoying and often inconvenient. Following in the Way of Jesus is really hard and failure is expected and frequent.

This is because the Gospel of Jesus radically turns upside down the value we place on things and people. We stand in awe before power and wealth and fame, while heaven laughs. The people we find insignificant or unworthy or unredeemable are the very ones through whom God changes the world.

These Gospels have always been very dangerous because Jesus has always been a threat to the ruling class. He specifically and intentionally upends the predictable safety of the status quo. He vehemently exposes the exploitation of false religion and generally is in open opposition to the prevailing systems of power and wealth and privilege in our world. I think that's why so many are quick to dismiss the Bible as irrelevant. The ideas here simply don't make sense in the real world. And so, the Bible is easily misunderstood or even worse, weaponized and twisted to completely justify a corrupt and insatiably greedy ruling class. The Bible has actually been successfully used to validate atrocities such as slavery and genocide. It has been warped to support the myth of financial privilege as evidence of divine blessing and severely distorted in a way that actually defends blatant sexism, sanctions racism, champions colonialism, and inflames homophobia and wide spread hatred! No matter what your view is on these texts, the Bible and particularly these four Gospels are always going to be dangerous books. If you take the Gospel seriously, it will force a wrestling match with your own value systems and call all of your actions and motives into question. When we compare God's economy to what we value, support and invest in, we often find a wide gap. So, if the Gospels don't make you uncomfortable, you are probably not reading it. The story of Jesus is not for the faint of heart.

For those who have risked the choice to follow Jesus, this season of Advent doesn't begin in the warm glow of lights and colorful decorations. It begins in the disorientating darkness of a world on the brink of disaster. Yet, we defiantly hope in the God that saves. In stark contrast to the condition of our world, we find that hope is the condition of our soul. Today on the second Sunday of Advent we continue to prepare for God in flesh appearing. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, comes to offering the blessing of deep and abiding peace. The blessing flows as a healing balm into our anxiety riddled hearts. In humble gratitude, we light the candle of peace, boldly proclaiming that the Prince of Peace comes to dismantle the death-dealing forces and set the captives free.

The joy of Advent is that, step by step, we are remade in the dark. Waiting, as if in the quiet of some kind of cosmic womb. We find blessing in the season's heightened awareness of God's sacred movement. Advent awakens in us the original blessing, that Divine Spark that is embodied in every single one of us, and it is on-the-move to bring about a new day of peace and justice. Advent gently lifts us up into the flow of Love so that we ourselves might become the blessing, carried forward, daring to walk into the very heart of the world's darkness. During Advent we undeniably sense that the Way of God's liberation is for all people and it is very close at hand. With eager anticipation tinged with trepidation, we who dare to surrender, find peace in the flow, fully immersed in a profound hope for the dawn of a new day; God's unconventional, non-conforming, radically surprising, transformative power has already come and will once again intrude into human history. Get ready, take courage, be the blessing. Amen