

Pathways in the Wilderness

Malachi 3: 1-5 Luke 1: 67-79

Neither of our scriptures actually use the word “wilderness,” yet it is a key biblical reference point, particularly for those called by God and indeed for the people of God. The primary word in both readings has to do with **preparation**, but it *anticipates* a wilderness. I saw an anonymous quote: *The Promised Land always lies on the other side of a wilderness.*

I don’t know what image pops up in your mind when you hear the word “wilderness.” In biblical geography, it tends to be a rock-strewn, barren desert. We found the Hebrews of the Exodus wandering in the wilderness, and we know the desperate flight of Elijah, the place where John the Baptist was established, and the temptation of Jesus as all engaging the motif of “wilderness.”

We understand a wilderness as a place that is uninhabited, inhospitable (which accounts for the lack of inhabitants; no one in their right mind goes there). It’s isolated, considered off-the-map, with no cell phone signal at all – a step even worse than Fairfield’s dead zone. Frankly, the wilderness bears many serious dangers, even for the wisest and most experienced. Removed from the supports of common life, cast into a remote area where few venture, the wilderness experience quickly become a major test.

In some societies, venturing into the wilderness is a rite of passage. Australian aborigines have a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood called a "walkabout." A boy coming to puberty is sent into the wild for six weeks without food, shelter, or weapons. During this time, he must test all of the survival skills he has learned during childhood. He must also be creative when he meets the unexpected. How's that for a final exam? One mistake and he's dead. If he survives to walk out of the jungle, he is celebrated as a man, a hunter, and a warrior. If he doesn't walk out, then he failed the test.

Biblical scholars are familiar with an ascetic group called the Essenes in Jesus’ era. Over time, scholars have understood that there were a number of Essene-like groups. The remote community that used the Dead Sea Scrolls may have derived from the Essenes, and even John the Baptist may have taken his cue from a group like the Essenes. These true believers formed communities of the true faith outside of the establishment religious institutions, believing that those institutions had become corrupt and failed to serve God’s purposes.

Wilderness was a major theme in their self-understanding. They saw themselves as purified and righteous by their separation from the Temple and establishment religion. Many were physically in the wilderness regions, but there was also a group in the middle of Jerusalem – hardly “the wilderness.” Yet they believed they were indeed “in the wilderness” since they were surrounded by the impure, the unfaithful, and the ungodly. The city of God had become a “wilderness” for them.

Scripture reminds us that the wilderness experience is not unique, but a common trial for God's faithful. Indeed, it can occur at any time and any place for any person. It is the wilderness when you find yourself in an uncertain environment, with only a tentative grip on what you're up against, and only a short view of what's coming, readily aware of threats besieging you, and with your acquired skills, experience, and resources seeming inadequate to meet the challenges. Feeling puny, vulnerable, even a bit helpless at times, you realize that the wilderness has got you in its grip. There is a whole new way of coping that you need to learn quickly.

The prophecy from Malachi relates the tradition of the forerunner, the one who comes to prepare the way of the Lord God. This one preparing the way is known in some streams of tradition as the prophet Elijah who returns, gathers together, and brings healing to those who seek to be saved. (Elijah is directly mentioned in Malachi 4:5 near the end of the volume.) In other prophetic streams, the forerunner prepares the way for a divinely authorized king to restore and purify the Temple of Jerusalem, establishing a sacred kingdom of peace and purity.

Malachi has a blend of traditions or multiple editorial hands, but you can see two distinct traditions within this text quite clearly. As vss 2-4 talk about what must happen in the Jerusalem temple, in vs. 5 the aim is entirely different – there, it's judgment time for wicked exploiters and oppressors and others who mock God. In both traditions, the background to the coming of the Lord is that the people of God are lost in a wilderness, falling prey to predators, and needing salvation to be freed from their bondage to worldly powers.

The safety and well-being of God's people is at stake. For one tradition, the temple in Jerusalem must be restored from its sinful and unclean ways, purified and refined so that God can establish sacred authority, bringing righteousness and peace to the place of God in the holy city, taming the sinful, threatening wilderness.

For the other tradition, the messenger brings a call for repentance to those who have been 'defrauding laborers, oppressing the widows and orphans, and depriving workers and peoples of other nations of justice, and generally failing to heed and obey God's clear desire for justice.' It responds to the question posed just prior to today's Malachi selection. Here is the full text at the end of chapter 2:

You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, 'How have we wearied him?' By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and [the Lord] delights in them.' Or by asking, 'Where is the God of justice?'

"Where is the God of justice?" they ask. The reply is that he is coming, this God of justice, and those who have dismissed God's call for justice will get a lesson in God's awesomeness. For God's people have been victimized by such predators for long enough and this wretched wilderness experience for God's people will come to a screeching halt, for the day of the Lord's righteousness is imminent. Malachi's words prophesy that it is time to prepare the way of the Lord, for the messenger of the Lord comes to meet God's people in their wilderness, minister to them, and prepare them for the coming day.

In the gospel of Luke, we hear what is called the Song of Zechariah or the Blessing or *Benedictus*. It concludes the birth story of John the Baptist, Zechariah being John the Baptist's father.

You may recall Luke's story about how Zechariah was made mute – unable to speak – for disbelieving the angel Gabriel's announcement that he would have a son. Still mute, but having correctly written down the name for his son at the child's birth (as instructed by Gabriel), Zechariah can speak once again. When Zechariah does speak, it is in this song which Luke emphasizes comes from being "filled with the Holy Spirit," empowerment by the Holy Spirit being very important to Luke.

Zechariah's song sees God's people in a wilderness where enemies dominate lives and society, and hinder God's people from their faithful and righteous observance of God's commands. The people are lost in this wilderness, living under conditions set by sinful despisers of their God. Unable to worship and practice their faith in righteousness, Zechariah pleads for the salvation of God's people.

It comes very close to calling for God to bring forth his royal messiah, *the horn of salvation [from] the house of David*. It recalls the ancient promise to Abraham, and echoes the plea of God's people in Egypt, that God would awaken and arise, remembering his covenant and liberating his people. The song comes very close to calling for national political revolution.

In the second section, the terms seem very different as Zechariah celebrates the role of his son, John. John the Baptist locates his ministry in a literal "wilderness," yet the wilderness is where the people of God reside in their isolation from the righteousness of their God.

John's mission will be as a teacher and a preacher who offers a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John is to sustain hope in God's people by giving witness to God's grace and mercy, offering hope to a people that has lost hope, lost direction, and lost its way. Baptism sets God's people apart from the corruption of worldly powers as they await the coming of the Lord who brings the Kingdom of justice and peace.

The section closes with words echoing Isaiah's hope-filled vision, as the coming light from heaven *shine[s] on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace*. Turning back the darkness, the fears, the anxieties, the wilderness itself, light breaks for the people trapped and imprisoned by other powers. This is their empowerment, their sign of coming liberation. This word from God turns back the specter of death itself that has dogged and shadowed God's people for so long. God's people are to be led by John into *the path of peace*, into the promise of God's blessing.

In Advent, we may have a difficult time recognizing the situation of God's people. Was it that much different from the predicament of God's people in any other time or

era? What makes it unique and outstanding? Frankly, we can see many times in the story of God's people when their times were dark, shrouded by oppressive circumstances, threatened with destruction of their way of life, and with death itself looming on their horizon. In this time, God's word, God's pledge, God's promise stands as the light in the darkness, and faith becomes the single greatest resource of the people. All that they have is insufficient for the task of surviving the wilderness, and faith alone is the beacon that enlarges their horizon, gives them a new perspective, and brings them salvation and liberation to meet life as God comes.

It is true in our personal lives that the wilderness draws us into its grasp, when darkness surrounds and lays claim to us, to the ones we love and cherish. Similarly situated as God's people in scripture, there comes the messenger who creates pathways to the promise of God.

There was a well-known missionary in China in the first half of the 20th century, a woman with the gift of charity and caring not unlike Mother Theresa in her faithful bravery in caring for orphans, intervening in a prison riot, and working for prison reform. Her work continued until the Japanese invasion in the 1930s when she was forced to flee. During Gladys Aylward's harrowing journey out of war-torn Yang Chen, she faced one morning with no apparent hope of reaching safety. A 13-year old girl tried to comfort her by saying, "Don't forget what you told us about Moses in the wilderness," to which Gladys Aylward replied, "Yes, my dear, but I am not Moses." The young girl replied, "Yes, but God is still God."

Like every people who walked in darkness, we can share that sentiment that it seems there is no Moses for us, no John the Baptist forging pathways to God's promise through our wilderness, and such faithful power certainly isn't in ourselves. But like our ancestors in faith, we must affirm the power and the presence of our God who is faithful to his people, and who does come to his people and show them his promise of life triumphant over all.