

December 10, 2017

PREPARE A WAY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth be meditations to our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

AMEN

SERMON

As we observe the second Sunday of Advent, we begin to turn our gaze from the expectation of Christ's Second Coming, to the events that proclaimed the Jesus the Christ, the Messiah's First Coming. We hear in Isaiah the prophet, about the time to come that there will be a voice crying out, in the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord. The Lord would be coming, and he would find truly a wilderness of living out life in relationship to God. It was not a smooth path, it was not what God wanted for his people.

Isaiah speaking to a chosen people of God who were in the promised land, who were turning away from God, not following the covenant that they had made with God. And he was sent to proclaim that these people, the ones that he is speaking to should turn away from the path that they were walking. That they should renew their covenant with God. That they should live according to that covenant. And that meant repentance, that meant turning around. It meant that they should change their living. But he also proclaimed something that was to come. That there would be a voice crying out in the wilderness. Prepare a way for the LORD because the Lord would be coming to them in a new and profound way.

I am not sure that even Isaiah could have said specifically what that was, but he knew that he was inspired by God to proclaim this message so that it could be held in the hearts and the minds of the people. That there would come a time when God would send a Messiah, a Christ. So that what had been broken, might be mended. Might be as it should have been, and that was his message for the people.

When John the Baptist came on the scene in that first century, he was proclaiming, he was that messenger. He was the one who not only proclaiming in the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord. He was actually out in the wilderness proclaiming prepare a way for the Lord. Sometimes that gets misread.

As a matter of fact, in a Gospel according to Mark, who is trying to quote Isaiah, it's miswritten a little bit, it is misread. It is not the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord, it is the voice of one crying out, in the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord. There is that idea and understanding that God would find a wilderness. A wilderness of life. A wilderness of living or attempting to live in relationship with God. And Isaiah proclaims it in such a way that there should be a pathway that is swept away in the wilderness. So that God would have entrance.

The Lord would have entrance into that way on a smooth way. To enter in, to proclaim the God's presence and what God is now doing. And that is what John the Baptist was doing. He just happened to be in the wilderness as well. He was calling people out. He was calling people to repentance. He was proclaiming that the time that they have looked for is now here. That the one that Isaiah foretold is coming on the scene and the people are called to come and repent to be baptized by John in order to be prepared to receive the Messiah who is coming into the world.

And it was John the Baptist who pointed him out to the people who had come out. This one who is greater than he is. This one who was foretold. This one who has come to change the world. To change the relationship with God. To make it not a covenant between God and a chosen people but God and each person. A new relationship, a new way of living life in the presence of God because the presence of God would be with the individual.

I believe that we, as we go through Advent, need to hear that word again, that proclamation. In the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord. What is that wilderness now? Certainly, one could say that it is all of the world. That there is so much brokenness in the world that it seems and feels like a wilderness. Foreign to God. But I think maybe more importantly we need to see and hear these words for our own life. For each individual life. Because our lives, each life can be a wilderness. Can be a way that we clutter the way of God. We are called to prepare a way, we are called to open a way into this wilderness that we call our lives. That we invite God to come, not to brush away the wilderness, but we are called to prepare ourselves to receive this one who came into the world. We are called to clear that path, to make an entrance into our lives. So that the one who is proclaimed as Christ, and Messiah, Savior, and Redeemer might have that entrance into our lives. And then together we make that life what God intended it to be.

Last Sunday, Cindy (my wife and I), watched the movie "The Shack", it is on HBO if anybody has that. Is that a book and/or a movie that is familiar to you? (Audience: Yes.) Okay, that means there is less explanation that needs to take place here. If you remember Mac is the main character. He is struggling with his life. He has never had that deep relationship with God. And a very traumatic event in his life, where his youngest daughter is taken and killed, has caused him to be even more estranged from God. His life has truly become a wilderness.

And he is invited by God to come to that very shack where his daughters dress was found, where she had been taken. And the experience that he has there is to come face to face with God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. I hesitate to say Father, Son, Holy Spirit because if you remember God first comes to Mac as a black woman.

Get the book, I really recommend it and the movie is pretty true, so you can watch the movie. But if you remember in the movie and in the book, Mac is invited by the Holy Spirit, Elious to come with her to the garden. And they enter into it and Mac's impression of that garden is it is a mess. You know it is not easy to walk through to get to where she has taken him, and they begin to clear an area once they get to what we will know as the very center of the garden. They clear it for something to be placed in the center. Mac's feelings about this is this is the best. It does not make any sense from the level that he is experiencing it. And he is finally led to know and understand that this is his life. And he is absolutely right, it is a mess from that level. In the movie especially, I think it is more powerful in the movie than in the book. The scene goes so that you are being eye-level to being above the garden. And you see a pattern. You see a beauty that you simply can not experience from that eye level.

And I thought that was a very powerful symbol of our lives. That as we are walking through our lives even once we have invited God to be a part of this walking through the wilderness. It looks and feels like a mess. We do not know and always understand what is going on with ourselves, why things happen, how things are going to turn out, why things did not go better here, why things went wrong there, it feels like a mess. It feels like a wilderness. Rather than a garden. And in that movie, I was reminded we are in a very poor place to view our lives. To understand all that we are doing and how we are working with God.

The other powerful thing is that Mac was not going through his life alone, but that God was there. Whether he realized it or not, whether he acknowledged it or not, God was there. God never left him alone. The figure Jesus says that to Mac over and over again. I am not going to leave you alone. I am going to be with you. I am going to walk you through all this. That is what it is to invite God, once you have prepared that entrance in this wilderness we call a life. Then God says I am not leaving you, I am going to be with you. I am going to help you through this. You may not understand it, you may not always see it the way that I see it, but your life has meaning. And I will use the events of your life, I will use those for good. You may not always see it, but once you get to that place where you are not walking through the garden, but looking down on the garden. Once you get to that place where you are not walking through your life but have entered into that fullness of God's kingdom and look down. You will see a pattern. You will see a beauty there that God has seen all along.

We do not always know how we are fitting into God's plan. Sometimes things that seem very successful for us may not be exactly what God had planned for us or for those that we have touched. But the opposite is true as well, sometimes when we think we have failed. When we think that we have not done enough, when we think that we have let God down. Sometimes those are the events that touch someone else's life for good. That God used to build up, to make that pathway perhaps not in our life but in someone else's life. We do not always know. We cannot always say, all we can do is to try to faithful to the truth that we know that has been revealed to us. To live out our lives in relationship with God as best we can.

Opening ourselves in that path for God to be with us through our lives so that we might be able to fill God's plan, not ours. To allow God to use us, to lead us. To help us to fulfill God's plan in the world so that

lives can be touched. So that we can be disciples and apostles. So that we might fulfill the promises that we have made to God in our baptisms and in our confirmations.

We may not always feel like we are doing all that God wants us to do. But we are called to walk through our lives trusting that God will use us and use the events of our lives to fulfill God's purpose. It may seem like a mess to us, it may look like the wilderness but in God's eyes it is a pattern of beauty, it is a pattern of hope, and it is a pattern of love.

Gregory Hein – Rector

Renee' Evans – Transcriber