



Space for God in the Wilderness

December 5, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Sixth Sunday of Advent

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord: take our minds and think through them; take mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

The summer of 2018, our family drove to the Grand Canyon. Along the way there and back, we experienced the iconic grandeur of some of the wilderness spaces of the American West. There were moments where the staggering beauty nearly overwhelmed us: coming over a hill on Interstate 70 from Colorado into Utah and seeing the vast, flat, and parched landscape; watching the sun score its beauty onto the rocks in Zion National Park as it set for the evening; viewing the Grand Canyon from the North Rim, and being struck dumb and breathless by its enormous, silent magnificence. Rather than feeling small and insignificant, I felt blessed and loved.

And yet, I didn't actually have to *live* in any of these places. The Gospel tells us that John lived in the region around the Jordan, and if you look at the map, his habitat encompasses the Judean desert, the wilderness that the text refers to. East of Jerusalem, running up and down the Jordan river, then south along the coast of the Dead Sea, this was the harsh and beautiful place where John made his home. Modern pictures of this area reveal apparently barren and exposed terrain that is simultaneously gorgeous and dangerous.

It's no coincidence that the three major religious traditions of the West are born in the desert wilderness: Judaism in the desert wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula; Christianity in the desert wilderness of Judea; Islam in the desert wilderness of Arabia.

There is something about being stripped down, exposed, living at the mercy of, and/or in cooperation with, the elements, in apparent emptiness and isolation that must make us more receptive to the movement and activity of God.

A couple of our texts make that clear this morning. The prophet Malachi describes a preparatory moment for the awareness and experience of God's presence that he compares to a refiner's fire or a fuller's soap. We're probably aware of the process of metal refining which uses high heat to burn away the impurities trapped inside precious metals. But a fuller may be new. A fuller was a person who cleaned wool and fabrics using harsh, alkaline plant-based soaps or human urine, which were beaten with clubs or human feet into sheep's wool or other textiles to strip out oil and dirt, and to toughen up the fibers to make a more sturdy carpet, fabric or garment.

The introduction of the adult John the Baptist this morning in Luke's telling stops just short of the harsh, purifying words of John's first public sermon. We'll get them in full next week. But the first words out of his mouth to those who came to hear and be baptized by him, are "You brood of vipers."

And yet these harsh remedies are not meant as ends in themselves.



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All these images from our texts – of refining, cleaning, emptying, leveling, smoothing, elevating, purifying – are meant to illustrate the space that the Holy One needs to inhabit, in order us to guide us into right thinking and action. We are meant to be freed.

Hear again how John's father, Zechariah, joyfully sings in the canticle this morning, a song celebrating God's actions in his infant son, a song which lays out the purposes of this refinement and scrubbing: We are to be set free; to worship without fear, to have knowledge of our salvation (from the Latin word for *health*) to have our sins forgiven.

One of the things about desert wildernesses is that they seem to be barren. But to the patient, quiet, and observant eye, to the soul who has had unnecessary distractions perhaps painfully stripped away, the desert wilderness is actually vitally alive with vibrant ecosystems and oases that have adapted to their environments.

Obviously, a wilderness doesn't need to be a desert. A wilderness can be any place where there seems to be chaos, injustice, destruction, isolation, lack of hope or direction. Many of us have experienced a wilderness of one kind or another. Maybe we are even in one right now.

But think of the places where God has formed God's people. God encountered the Israelites in the wilderness. The Holy Spirit formed Jesus in the desert as he was discerning his call to public ministry. John found his voice in the desert. In the wilderness new life can come into being. It can be painful. But the point isn't the pain. The point is the new life, the point is preparing a way for the Holy One to take up residence within us and around us.

I'm reminded of what Michelangelo reportedly said about his manner of creation: "The sculpture is already complete within the marble block before I start my work. It is already there. I just have to chisel away the superfluous material."

And so it is with our spiritual lives, lives that when refined and scrubbed, either by circumstances or by the Holy Spirit in love, will burst forth in blossom, in what seems to be a barren place.

Or put another way: sometimes when we try too hard to do too much, to gin ourselves up into justice and compassion, we need to step aside, simplify and cooperate with God in a little divine subtraction. I'm grateful to Pam Goody for a poem by Martha Postlethwaite that she shared with the staff a few years back, that gets at this: "Do not try to serve the whole world or do anything grandiose. Instead, create a clearing in the dense forest of your life and wait there patiently, until the song that is yours alone to sing falls into your open cupped hands and you recognize and greet it. Only then will you know how to give yourself to the world so worthy of rescue." ("The Clearing")



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Perhaps that wilderness we encounter is the clearing, is the refining, the very place that we need to receive God's as yet unseen, yet verdant and vibrant, wisdom, instruction, and love.

Amen.