

Sermon: "A Way Out of the Wilderness"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee
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Dr. Frank J. Allen, Pastor

POLK COUNTY WILDERNESS

Several months ago a friend and I drove to a golf course in the wilds of Polk County for our weekly game. We'd been there before so we "assumed" that we knew the way home. Indeed, we even thought that we knew a shortcut home.

Not exactly.

Both of us suspected that we were on the wrong road from the very beginning, but we were loathe to say it out loud. There was a little compass in the car, and we said, "Well, it looks like we're going in the right direction sort of. We can't be too far off course."

But, after forty five minutes on a road that was getting ever more narrow and rural, we were finally forced to do what all men hate to do worse than anything else.

That's right. We had to admit that we were lost, stop our car at the local gas station (it looked like the only one we might see in the next fifty miles) and ask for directions.

We found out that we were actually going in the wrong direction. But, if we would just turn around we could make it to where we wanted to go. Fifteen minutes later we passed the same golf course that we left an hour earlier. We had been driving for an hour in one big circle!

I guess if we hadn't turned around we would have eventually made it homebut not before visiting the east or maybe the west coast somewhere. Of course, our little sojourn in the wilderness was not all that big a deal. It just provided me with more grist for the homiletical mill!

THE DANGEROUS WILDERNESS

But, in days gone by, being lost in the wilderness could be a very serious matter indeed ... even a matter of life and death. For example I was reading recently that in the settling of the old West, the ill fated Donner party had an inaccurate map to follow. They became lost in the wilderness of the high mountains during winter and many of their number died from starvation.

And sadly, others resorted to cannibalism in order to survive.

Even today the wilderness can be a very dangerous and unforgiving place. From time to time we hear stories of how a hiker or mountaineer dies or almost dies because they become lost in the wild.

But, the wilderness of biblical times was even more dangerous. The vast desert wastelands in Palestine were without landmarks to guide the pilgrim. In some places the wilderness was filled with bleak mountains from which robbers could and often did hide ... descending upon their prey suddenly from above.

Some commentators think that this danger is represented by the first line of Psalm 121.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills--from where will my help come?" Psalm 121:1

Pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate an important religious festival were always in danger. Looking up to the hills they realized that there would be no one to help them in that lonely place should a brigand descend from hiding in the mountain.

The wilderness was a very dangerous place.

A SPIRITUAL STATE

But the wilderness came to represent more than just a dangerous physical place. It also came to represent a dangerous spiritual state. The wilderness represented a place where Israel was punished for her sins a place where people were not only separated from other people but also a place where they were separated from their spiritual roots.

For example, after the Exodus from Egypt God's people were not allowed to enter the promised land. Instead, for forty years they were made to wander in the wilderness as punishment for their lack of faith.

Finally, the people of Israel were allowed to enter the promised land. But, unfortunately they were still not faithful to the God who redeemed them.

And after many generations of disobedience, it seemed that God would finally put an end to their nation once and for all. The Bible tells us that God's people were punished for their sins by defeat in battle. The Babylonians conquered the nation of Israel.

God's people were taken to Babylon in captivity. The city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. Her temple was utterly destroyed. The royal family was either killed or imprisoned.

For forty long years God's people languished in exile. They barely remembered what it was like to celebrate the festivals of the Lord in the friendly confines of the temple at Jerusalem.

And their children had never known anything but Babylon. They were fast learning the ways of the Babylonians. Even if their captors would let them go, there were no guarantees that anyone would even want to go home.

There in Babylon, removed from their homeland by distance and a great expanse of wilderness, God's people lost all hope. They lost hope in themselves, they lost hope in their country and most importantly they lost hope in their God.

Their feeling of despair is represented well by Psalm 137.

The Psalmist wrote,

"By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy;

They said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!

How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?"

OUR WILDERNESS

That's a good question ... not only for the Israelites in captivity but for all of us when the promises of God seem far away.

How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

What hope do we have when disaster overtakes us? What can we do when we find ourselves in the wilderness with no familiar landmarks and steep mountains which seem to be filled with scoundrels and brigands?

We might not live near a physical wilderness, but all of us live in or at least near a spiritual wilderness. We are such fragile creatures. Reversals can come to us so quickly. In the twinkling of an eye we can find ourselves in that lonely place from which there seems no escape.

The Bible reminds us that we are all (to a certain extent) captive to the principalities and powers of this world. We are, in a way, in exile in our own land.

How many of us are disturbed because our children are learning values and actions that are different from what we would have them believe?

How many of us feel helpless in the face of tremendous pressures at home or on the job?

How many of us look at our life and wonder,

"What has it all meant? Does it mean anything at all?"

CHRISTMAS WILDERNESS

In many ways we all are in a wilderness ... especially at this time of year.

The wilderness we experience is not one of rocks and sand and thirst. It is instead the equally dry wilderness of busyness and pointless commercialism.

Instead of mountains, this desert features seemingly endless rounds of shopping and meetings and parties. It leaves us exhausted physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Now wonder so many of us feel a sense of despair and loneliness and longing.

We too are captives.

We too can sing the Advent hymn with conviction,

"O come, O come Emanuel. And ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here ... until the Son of God appear."

Like my friend and I on our ill fated golf trip to Polk County, we need to first recognize our position in life. We need to acknowledge that we are indeed lost in the wilderness and need to go in a different direction. We need help.

A WAY OUT OF THE WILDERNESS

But, the big question is this, "Where do we go for that help?"

How can we find our way out of the wilderness?"

I think that our lessons for today give us a clue.

Today's lessons teach us that salvation must come from a source that is above and beyond us. Salvation comes from trusting not in our own ability to protect ourselves but in God's decision to forgive and save.

God's message of salvation and forgiveness never grows old.

The message of Isaiah continues to be a source of hope because we too are a captive people captive not to a foreign power but captive to sin. And so in the midst of our captivity, the message comes to us as it did to captives long ago. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed ... "

"Your sins are forgiven."

God's people knew why they were in exile. They had not kept their covenant (their agreement) with God. After years of idolatry, it seemed that the judgment of God was final. But, the message of Isaiah was now a word of unspeakable comfort. "Your sins are paid for."

In a spiritual sense, what really kept Israel in exile was not the Babylonians. It was their turning away from God. In that sense, the Israelites were in the wilderness of despair long before the exile. They sought comfort in "other gods" and forgot about the one true God who had saved them and formed them into His special people.

But, though they were faithless, God was faithful still.
God offered His people forgiveness and a way out of the wilderness.

OUR WAY OUT, REPENTANCE

And God offers us a way out of the wilderness as well. It is called repentance. God knows that we have done the wrong thing. God knows that we have lost hope. But, the message of the prophet is still the same for us today,

"You no longer have to remain in exile. God forgives you. Your sins have been paid for. Repent. Come go in a different direction. In a dangerous and fearful situation, I will show you a way out of the wilderness."

But, how exactly do we repent? Is it merely saying that we are sorry and trying to go in a different direction? I think that it is more than that. Repentance means replacing the old way of life with a new way of life.

In the Zen tradition of the far east this idea is expressed in a story about a university professor who went to visit the great master Nan-In.

"Master," he said, "teach me what I need to know to have a happy life. I have studied the sacred scriptures, I have visited the greatest teachers in the land, but I have not found the answer, please - teach me the way."

At this point Nan-In served tea to his guest. He poured his visitor's cup full and then kept on pouring and pouring so that the tea began to run over the rim of the cup and across the table, and still he poured, until tea was cascading upon the floor.

The professor watched this until he could not longer restrain himself. "Its overfull, stop, no more will go in" he cried out.

"Like this cup", Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you the way unless you first empty your cup?"

How can we welcome Christ into our hearts if our hearts are full of our own ideas and opinions? In the season of Advent we must prepare. And we prepare by repenting ... by emptying our cup that God might fill it with something new.

AN INHERITANCE

Eric Sloane, a famous artist, was at one time in a state of despair. He said, "I was a very young man when I inherited a million dollars in cash from my father. You wouldn't believe how quickly I spent it all!

I woke up one Sunday morning and realized that I didn't have one dollar left. I was terribly depressed. My inheritance was gone. My father was dead, and I had nothing.

I went into a little church although I was not very religious ... and I heard the minister say, 'God's providence is your inheritance.'

The minister didn't know about me, but he was speaking about me as he continued, 'God will provide, now matter how bankrupt you are. But, you have to trust him and turn your whole life over to him.'

That message changed Eric's life, and it can change our lives as well. It's only when we recognize ourselves as totally bankrupt that the word of comfort can come. It's only when our cup is empty that God can fill it with something new. Only by the waters of Babylon can we hear and believe the precious promise.

"God's providence is your inheritance."

GOD'S HIGHWAY

Though we lose everything, God can give us a new way of life. The prophet compares this new way of life to a highway built by God himself.

The prophet said,

"In the desert prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."

Have you ever lived in a place where the terrain made it impossible to build roads?

I have. The mountains were so steep and the valleys were so narrow that we used to say that it was necessary to pipe sunshine into the area where we lived.

A lack of decent roads really changes the character of any town. There's a sense of isolation. It's difficult to do any business. And the people even become despondent because they feel trapped by their

geography. We use to joke about leveling off the mountains and filling in the valleys in order to make a better place to live.

But, it was just a joke.

Only God could do something like that.

Well, the prophet tells us that God is going to do something exactly like that. God is going to build his superhighway straight through the desert ... right in the middle of the toughest obstacles. You won't need a map to find your way back home to the promised land. It'll be as big as Interstate 95.

God is building the road for you this very day.

God is building a way out of your wilderness.

God is preparing your deliverance.

The prophet spoke a word of greater comfort than he knew at the time.

Many years after the Babylonian exile a prophet named John, a voice crying in the wilderness, let us see just how big that highway in the desert really is ... pointing to the Lamb of God ... Jesus ... who takes away the sins of the world bidding all who would listen to repent and believe .. the kingdom of God is at hand.

A WAY OUT FOR US

What about you? Are you in exile?

Are you one of those homeless ones ... lost in a foreign land?

Are you in the wilderness?

Have you lost your way?

Have you hung your harp in the tree of despair?

Have you forgotten what it means to worship God?

The message of Advent is the message of Isaiah and the message of John the Baptist. It is possible to leave the wilderness. It is possible to repent. It is possible to make a U turn on the road of life and go in a different direction.

But, do we really want to change direction? Are we willing to stop and admit that we don't know where we are going? Are we willing to empty our cup that is filled with so many things?

In a "Hagar the Horrible" cartoon, Hagar is addressed by a Monk.

In the first frame, the monk, Bible tucked under his arm, an expression of peace on his face, says to Hagar, "Remember, it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

In the next frame, we see the monk disappearing over the horizon, and we see Hagar, looking out at us - saying - "But I enjoy cursing the darkness!"

The only thing that will keep us in the wilderness is our own desire to stay where we are, our own perverse joy in cursing the darkness.

But, the coming of God's Son is not about darkness. It is about light. It is about learning a new way that begins with repentance and ends on a highway which takes us out of the wilderness.

May God help us take that way.

Amen.

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