

## *WHAT DID YOU GO OUT INTO THE WILDERNESS TO SEE?*

Isaiah 35.1-10; Matthew 11.2-11

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### **Isaiah 35:1-10**

<sup>35</sup>The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus <sup>2</sup>it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the LORD,  
the majesty of our God.

<sup>3</sup> Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.

<sup>4</sup> Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.'

<sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

<sup>6</sup> then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;

<sup>7</sup> the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,\*  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

<sup>8</sup> A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;

the unclean shall not travel on it,\*  
but it shall be for God's people;\*  
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

<sup>9</sup> No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.

<sup>10</sup> And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

### **Sermon & Matthew 11.2-11**

We have just heard the promise of Isaiah that the wilderness shall bloom and the desert will rejoice!

So I want to invite you to take a field trip with me in your mind this morning and find yourself in whatever wilderness you know.

For me, I'll be on the banks of the Beckler River where I can hear the water and I can see the stars.

Maybe you will be on a deserted beach somewhere.

Or on a mountain path.

Or driving through miles of empty desert.

Or maybe it's not some place you have ever been at all but it's that vision of a place away from the crowds and immersed in nature.

So close your eyes. Settle yourself. Take a deep breath. And whatever wilderness presents itself, go there ...

Now, as you are holding that place in your heart, listen:

*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

While you are holding that wilderness place in your hearts, this poem by Wendell Berry is important because it reminds us that the wilderness is not just a metaphor. It's a place.

It's a place we can go to in our bodies and in our consciousness to remind ourselves that we are part of something bigger than ourselves; a place that offers us beauty as a gift we have not manufactured; a place that has the power to scare the living daylights out of us and the power to heal us.

It's the place our Desert Mothers and Desert Fathers knew to be sacred.

It's "in the solitude of wilderness," Rod Romney says, that "we learn what it means to be at home."

And, if Wendell Berry is right, it's the place we can go when despair for the world grows in us and it's the place that helps us trust the grace of the world again. It's the place that sets us free.

Now I invite you back to this place this morning by pointing out that the text for today begins in a very different place – not in the promise of the wilderness but in prison.

John – this wild mountain man we met last week, this wilderness-wanderer who has been calling people out into the desert to purify themselves and to commit themselves to begin again the promise of the Promised Land – John himself in a place where he is not free:

“When John heard *in prison* what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to Jesus, ‘Are you the one who is to come; or are we to wait for another?’”

Now imagine how difficult a question this must have been for John, sitting in prison, with the handwriting on the wall, wondering if all his work had been a mistake. Did he get it wrong? Was it all for nothing? Imagine being caged up with your doubts and your second-guessing.

And imagine how painful it would have been for Jesus to hear this - his own cousin, with whom he shared this work, questioning whether he was doing the right things or the most important things or doing enough.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that there would have been good reasons for John to wonder: “While Jesus sat down to fancy suppers in town with people who drank too much and laughed too loud, John lived an austere life in the wilderness;” with those strange clothes and that strange diet and that hell-fire message.

It wouldn’t be surprising if now – now that his life was in the balance – that their differences would become a question less about strategy and more about the ultimate goal.

“Are you the one we have been waiting for or should we look for another?”

So Jesus invites John to take a field trip in his mind; to go back into that wilderness again; back into that promise of the prophet Isaiah about the wilderness blooming and the desert rejoicing.

“Go and tell John,” Jesus says, “tell him what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.”

“It was Isaiah’s prophecy come to life,” Taylor says, “not the part John had been focused on, about God coming with vengeance, with terrible recompense – but the other part, about the lame leaping like deer and the tongue of the speechless singing for joy.”

Go back to the wilderness, Jesus tells him. When that despair for the world grows in you and you fear for your own life and the lives our children, go back to the peace of wild things. Go to the place where you were calling us away from the center of religious and political power and out into the desert where we were free to imagine beginning again. And this time, not with military conquest or a divine scorched-earth policy, but with the simple power of good news.

Maybe that didn’t sound very dramatic. Maybe it didn’t promise busting John out of jail. Maybe it didn’t scratch that itch of righteous revenge that was so popular.

But maybe it did mean that the promise of Emmanuel – God-with-us – was nearer to us than we had ever imagined; that it could reach us anywhere, even through the bars of a prison cell.

Tell John, Jesus says, to remember the promise of the wilderness.

And then Jesus comes to John’s defense:

“As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: **‘What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,**

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.”

I keep being struck by this question: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see?” What did you expect? A little entertainment? Something to make you feel comfortable? An interesting challenge?

But this is wilderness we are talking about. It’s a place that defies expectations.

Before Beckler River, there was the Troublesome Creek Campground on the road out of Index. We loved it there. And every year we expected to return to our favorite spot on the river.

And then one year there was a storm that wiped out the road and closed down the campground.

Later we discovered that you could still get there but you had to drive up a gravel road, over a mountain pass, and down again into the site. And so one morning we did.

It took us a long time. And when we got there it wasn’t at all what we remembered or what we expected. The river had changed its course. The river bank had given way. Trees were down. The campsites were overgrown. The place we held tenderly in our memories was barely recognizable.

I stood there realizing that the wilderness has a life of its own. It doesn’t depend on me. It doesn’t wait for me to tame it. It’s not something I can completely control. It defies my expectations.

What did I go out into the wilderness to see?

When Jim Segaar writes about this Matthew text in his book of Advent reflections, he says that “[a]t times [expectations] help us know what we are looking for, but they can also keep us from seeing and appreciating what actually exists around us.”

That day in the wilderness of Troublesome Creek, I was reminded that the world around me and even my own life, isn’t always subject to my expectations. And sometimes those expectations can blind me to the mystery and the wild beauty that is all around me.

What did I go into the wilderness to see?

And here we are in the middle of a season with a lot of expectations. Perhaps it will help us to remember that it all started in the wilderness – in a place the defies expectations; in a place that reminds us we are part of something bigger than ourselves; in a place that offers beauty as a gift we cannot manufacture.

Whatever prisons of doubt and second-guessing you may find yourself in; whatever painful questions you are facing about whether you have done the right things, or the important things, or enough; when despair for the world grows in you; go back to the promise of the wilderness - a place where you can discover the mystery of a wild grace that is all around us if only you will open our eyes to see it.

And today, if you hear that voice calling you into the wilderness, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

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