

Wilderness. This is a word we hear from both Isaiah and Matthew this morning. Wilderness. Let me tell you for a moment about a picture that comes to my head when I think about wilderness.

While we were living in Connecticut a few years ago, Anna and I decided to take a trip into the White Mountains of New Hampshire to do some backpacking. We had heard that these were beautiful, gorgeous mountains, that it was some of the best hiking *anywhere*, etc.,

So we made careful plans and headed into the mountains on a three-night camping trip. We made sure to bring our cameras in order to capture the magnificent sights we would see.

And then, for three days, we carried heavy packs over boulders through nothing but rain and wind and ice and fog. We were not prepared for this kind of weather. To be honest, it was miserable. Now I know you want to hear about the payoff of this trip – about how we saw great views and about how you need to struggle and face challenges in order to receive the sweet reward at the end.

Well, let me show you exactly how beautiful the White Mountains of New Hampshire were. Here's a picture we took from one of the highest summits of that entire trip:

{PHOTO} (Literally inside a cloud – we were supposed to have views as far as the eye could see in every direction!)

That's as good as it got, folks. Every day we walked through clouds, and every day we wished the whole thing would be over. I still have no idea what the White Mountains actually look like!

Wilderness. I thought of God's people. How, in the book of Exodus, they follow Moses into the wilderness and had to spend *forty years* wandering there. Through Moses, God liberated them from slavery, but they weren't home yet. They needed to spend time in the wilderness before they could reach the promised land.

But, my friends, the people of Moses long ago—and we who are here today—we all journey forwards through wilderness towards a promise. We put our faith in a God who calls us to walk through wilderness towards a better future, towards a life of wholeness and peace and justice.

As miserable as I was on that hike through the White Mountains, the wilderness we traveled that week was nothing compared to the wilderness spaces that we must

navigate on a regular basis – wildernesses that are spiritual or emotional or very, very physical.

One of these wildernesses is grief. When a person we love dies, or is suffering, we journey through a period of wilderness. Our ordinary patterns and routines change. We hold on tight to those who can provide comfort in loss, who can help us to put words to what we are experiencing.

Many in our community have been grieving in this Advent season for Bridget and Stephanie, students at Mounds View High School, who were killed earlier this month in a car accident. Surely today their families and friends are at the beginning of what will be a long journey of grief, a wilderness in which healing or hope may feel a long ways away.

Another familiar wilderness is that between addiction and sobriety. Those brave enough to recover from chemical dependency and other addictions know the challenges that come in this wilderness. When we relinquish the ways of death and destruction that have power over us, we must learn to depend on a higher power, on a God who promises to provide manna in the wilderness, even though it's hard to know what the future might hold.

A third wilderness is that of injustice. It is waking up as a community and a people to the powers of sin and death that hold us captive as a society and keep us from being a beloved community. It is difficult to confront the pain that we inflict on our neighbors based on race or class or sexuality or gender or religion or citizenship status. But nonetheless we must journey together through wilderness, moving ever forward towards God's vision of a community in which all of his children are loved, valued, and afforded the dignity that God has given to all of us.

In all of these wildernesses, there is a promise, there is a vision that we share. It is a vision given to us by God our Creator, by the One who created this world and called it good. It is a promise we hear in our baptisms, when God claims us as God's children and promises to be with us always, in life *and* in death. But living out these promises, being faithful in this messy and complicated world, is not without periods of challenge and wilderness and growth.

John the Baptist was a prophet who resided in the wilderness. Hundreds of people traveled beyond the city walls, to the banks of the Jordan river to hear what he was saying. And, in today's gospel reading, Jesus reminds us of this. He reminds us that wilderness is a hard place to go, but a necessary place.

"What did you go to the wilderness to look at?" he asks. "A reed shaken by the wind? Fancy robes and palaces?" In other words, "Are you here, in the struggle, simply to wear fancy clothing or to witness some kind of spectacle? Are you here just to watch plants blowing around in the wind?" Of course not!

Jesus pushes us to name what it is that we long for, to confront the healing we so desire. Jesus, the one who is our hope, encourages his disciples to name out loud what their hopes and fears actually are.

When is the last time you've spoken your deepest hope and longing out loud to another? I invite you all to do that with a trusting companion sometime before the end of Advent. "What did you go to the wilderness to look at?"

Of course, the people that Jesus was talking to went to the wilderness to see John the Baptist. They sought out a prophet who could point the way forward, who could guide them through the wildernesses of their own hopes and fears.

Look again at my magnificent picture from the White Mountains. There, in that wilderness, Anna and I could not see ten feet in front of us! Just like when any of us journey through grief or addiction or injustice or countless other things, it can be hard to know what the way forward is.

But there is one beautiful thing in this photo. Do you see it? It is that huge pile of rocks. These were piles that strangers – sisters and brothers who had come before us – had set up for us so that we could make our way through. Like John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, these piles of stones pointed the way forward for us. Every time we passed a pile like this one, we knew we were getting closer to freedom. They gave us hope.

And God gives us John the Baptists, God gives us piles of stones, to mark the way forward through every time and season. I was touched by the simple gestures of many high school students and others in the community who showed support and solidarity with those who today suffer and grieve in Mounds View.

Faithful men and women who have been through the wilderness of addiction before gather with one another to say, "I've been here and I know the way out." So there are groups and sponsors and times of prayer and support. The more you and I share testimony – the more we tell the truth about why we journey into wilderness – the more we help each other through. The more we are prophets.

I've seen other prophets around our own community and country who are putting their bodies on the line in order to encourage us towards the vision of justice and unity that God so desires. We would be wise to listen to protestors and water protectors who not only speak truth to the sins of racism and environmental degradation but who, more importantly, ask us to imagine a future where we will all be whole again.

This, my friends, is Advent. We look to one another, to those in our midst who point the way forward through wilderness. And, most of all, we look to God in Jesus Christ, to the One who has come to set all of us free.

Listen again, now, to these words from the prophet Isaiah. They are for you:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad! Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God! He will come and save you.

My friends, *be glad*. We travel this wilderness together, and, when we trust in the hope of Christ, we journey not in fear but in joy. There is real joy to be found in the knowledge of God's love for you: A love that became human, a love that came to be with you, a love that is here with you now. Even when it's hard to see forward, even when the temptation to be afraid is great – we must hold each other closer. We must hold fast to the promises of God, to the hopeful vision of a world made whole.

So Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel has come to you, O Israel. Amen.

CHILDREN'S SERMON

Talk about mural

What do you see?

God in Jesus is also God who creates and the Spirit who is with us now. Sometimes feels kind of hidden...