

Preparing a Wilderness
Rev. Chris Glaser
Virginia Highland Church
Second Sunday of Advent – December 6, 2009
Texts: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

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What immediately follows our Gospel reading is a sermon from John the Baptist that begins, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Though such directness may be admirable, I don’t think such a beginning would have the desired effect here at Virginia Highland Church! John the Baptist is obviously not worried about the offering or his 401K!

Please pray with me...

Last Sunday I talked about waiting patiently in expectation for the day of the Lord, even as we remembered the great things God has already done for us. But though this requires of us the effort to trust God as well as rehearse God’s blessings to date, it’s not as proactive as preparing the way for God. This is the more challenging task of the spiritual life, for which waiting patiently in expectation is the mere foundation.

Many people never make it to this second stage of preparing the way. The psychological term for this is “waiting for Santa Claus,” where some people spend their lives waiting for someone to “fix” them—a partner, a therapist, a motivational speaker, sometimes even, a pastor. Or they wait for some thing to “complete” them, a Ph.D., a career, a house, the lottery, or sometimes even, a church.

But I believe the spiritual life requires a bit of a “do-it-yourself” approach. Or, to put it another way, as a feminist theologian has, “we must learn to drink from our own wells” (Nelle Morton, I believe), which implies we need to dig our own wells.

Now, we live in an age of eclectic spirituality—that is, there are so many great places to dig wells that can quench our spiritual thirst. But as Franciscan priest Richard Rohr has observed, [and here I’m paraphrasing] are we going to dig one thirty-foot well or thirty one-foot wells? In other words, to dig deeply enough to find water requires focus on our part, as well as depth on the part of the spiritual tradition where we divine water is to be had.

The paradox is that though spirituality requires a do-it-yourself attitude, we don't have to do it alone. Maybe it's better said that we do our own work. For we really can't do spirituality alone. Spirituality is ultimately about relationship—with the sacred, with God, with earth and sky and stars, with fellow creatures. And we need teachers—messengers whose spiritual authority we recognize just enough to be open to their spiritual guidance, whether in person or through writings or art or music. We need messengers who help us prepare our own wilderness for the coming of the Lord through digging our own wells.

Prophets like Malachi and Isaiah talked about the need for such a messenger as we await the day of the Lord, the era of God's reign. Malachi's very name means "messenger." He reports God as saying, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." The messenger will be "like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap" that will refine us like silver and gold and cleanse us like detergent and bleach. Malachi is speaking of refining and cleansing the priesthood of his day, but since we believe and practice the priesthood of all believers, Malachi is speaking about us.

Why is the messenger being sent? In the verses immediately before our text, Malachi explains, "You have wearied the Lord with your words. ... By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and God delights in them.' Or, by asking, 'Where is the God of justice?'"

And what is the day of the Lord that the messenger prepares us for? In the verses that follow our passage, Malachi quotes God: "Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts."

Here when I read "sorcerers" I think of those who practice religion as if it were magic, bringing us prosperity; and when I read "adulterers" I think of those who can never seem to keep their commitments to others. These will be confronted alongside deceivers, exploiters, oppressors, and those who fail to care for the most vulnerable—the widow, the orphan, the alien.

Our Gospel writer Luke, to describe John the Baptist, paraphrases the prophet Isaiah, the more complete text of which was used in today's Lighting of the Advent Wreath: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make God's paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

While the final verse of the brief book of Malachi associates the messenger to come with the return of Elijah, one of the great Hebrew prophets, Luke associates the messenger described by Isaiah with John the Baptizer. And later in Luke, Jesus also associates John the Baptist with Elijah, obviously not being a literalist regarding Elijah's return.

Now, only two of the Gospels—Matthew and Luke—tell the stories we associate with Christmas. But all four of the Gospels that made their way into The Bible speak of John as this messenger from God.

All of this gives John credibility as God's messenger, proclaiming "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." For John the Baptist, the way to prepare for the coming of the Lord is through confession, that is, letting go of all those things, behaviors, attitudes, distractions, and ways of living that get in the way of our relationship with God. Preparing the way of our God in the wilderness, again, paradoxically, means at the same time *embracing* the wilderness, even *creating* a wilderness—absent of all distractions, a wilderness in which we may find God—or better, where God may find us.

Last Sunday I quoted Simone Weil, a young Jewish mystic who lived in France during the early part of the 20th century: "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life" she wrote. It's interesting where she chose to wait patiently in expectation, the wilderness where she prepared the way of the Lord. She had considered joining the Roman Catholic Church but decided not to because, she wrote, so much of what she loved, so much of what God loved, was outside the church. So she found her wilderness standing, to quote her *Spiritual Autobiography*, "on the threshold of the church, not moving, quite still, *en hupomene* [transliteration]," Greek for "patient endurance, steadfastness, perseverance." There she waited for the advent of a new Christianity, as she says, "a truly incarnated Christianity" that addressed the true perils of her time.

Living during the same perilous period in Europe as Simone Weil, another young Jewish woman named Etty Hillesum kept diaries published later under the title *An Interrupted Life*. Her spirituality was so expansive it has been claimed by both Christians and Jews in her native Holland. She writes of her own wilderness facing deportation to Germany when Holland was overrun by the Nazis. She vows to protect that little piece of God within her and within others as well. And, no matter her confinement, first in a deportation center and finally in a concentration camp, she affirms, "There will always be a small patch of sky above, and there will always be enough space to fold two hands in prayer." She died at Auschwitz.

Christian mysticism flourished in the wilderness during the Fourth Century as abbas and ammas, spiritual fathers and spiritual mothers, found their way into the wild places to pray in Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, Persia, around the Mediterranean and eventually northward into Gaul, Ireland, and Britain. As the church grew more worldly and too closely associated with earthly power, these early monastics embraced the wilderness to pray for the church and the world. In doing so, they became messengers to the rest of us about the need to prepare a place for God in our lives, away from the world's hustle and bustle, resting in God, praying always, refusing to judge others, showing compassion.

So what is your wilderness?

Is your wilderness an unaccepting family? A world that marginalizes you? Or is it a house full of possessions? A career that takes all of your time? Or a demanding obsession? Or inordinate suffering?

And what wilderness can you prepare to receive the advent of the Lord? What space in your home can you set aside or at least transform as a place to pray? What time in your schedule can you carve out to take moments to ponder what God or Jesus means to your life? Who are the messengers you can go to for spiritual guidance and advice, in person, in writing, in art, or in music?

As many of you know, one of my spiritual mentors was the late author Henri Nouwen. One of my books consists of 100 meditations on his legacy of forty books on the spiritual life and forty years as a Roman Catholic priest. My Christmas gift to each of you is a copy of the book, which I urge you to collect in the narthex as you leave today. I have a homework assignment for you—and that is, to use the book on a regular basis in the days to come. My only request in return is that you don't ask me to sign it until you have read it through and tell me something about your experience.

When God's messenger Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I have a dream speech" in 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., it was not the speech he had prepared. In the wilderness of segregation and inequality he was trying to prepare a place for God through the strategy of nonviolence and the concept of the beloved community. And so he spoke from the heart as one crying from the wilderness, interpreting Isaiah for our time, "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountains of despair the stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing we will be free one day."

Prepare the way of the Lord!