

Peace in the Wilderness

Luke 3:1-6

When the Bible introduces important people, particularly prophets, it is not uncommon for them to be framed by a short list of famous people or events that create a context for understanding their place in history.

In the case of John, son of Zechariah—better known to us as John the Baptist—that list includes the Roman Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate who was the Roman procurator over Palestine, a trio of puppet rulers named Herod, Philip and Lysanias, and a pair of high priests named Annas and Caiaphas.

But sometimes the Bible tells us more by what it *doesn't say*, than by what it does. It *doesn't say* that the Word of God concerning the coming of God's chosen messiah came to any of those powerful people. The Word of God came instead, to John, son of a priest named Zechariah. Neither was the Word of God delivered to an Imperial palace, a royal residence or to a Temple. It came to John, son of Zechariah...in the wilderness.

For you and I the word "wilderness" might conjure up tranquil images of mountains and forests of snow laden evergreens. But in the corner of the world from which the Bible emerged, wilderness was an inhospitable—even dangerous place--that one did their best to avoid. And yet, the Bible also declares the wilderness to be a place of opportunity. It is frequently in the wilderness, and through the ways that harsh environment tests people, that they encounter God more meaningfully, and are prepared to serve God more effectively.

The time between the Hebrews being freed from a life of slavery in Egypt and their settling into the home of their own that God promised would be theirs, was spent wandering in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. It was an often-hazardous journey. It was also a time of learning to trust in God's care and abundant provision. For every desperate seeking for food and water to sustain them, there was God's gift of manna for them to eat and water from rocks to quench their thirst. So, as they traveled, their anxieties about what lay in store for them were soothed by the peace that comes only with trusting in God.

Even Jesus went into the wilderness to prepare himself before beginning his public ministry. With every temptation that the Devil put in his path, Jesus learned to rest more fully in his heavenly Father's love. And it was in a wilderness place, when his disciples were panicked about how they could feed thousands of people with only a few loaves and fishes, that Jesus prayed confidently to Heaven and that insufficiency was transformed into a super-abundance.

It was in the wilderness that the Word of God came to John the Baptist. He carried that Word out of the wilderness and shared it throughout the whole region around the Jordan River, with anyone who would listen. The Word that he received and now proclaimed was a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John knew that God's plan for the salvation of humanity was about to take a climactic step forward, and that people needed to be prepared to

recognize and receive it when it arrived. Preparation called for them to examine their lives and acknowledge whatever ways their lives did not reflect God's purpose for them. Not out of fear of punishment, but so they could experience the peace that only God can give. And, through knowing God's peace for themselves, could be instruments for transmitting that peace to others.

John invited them into the wilderness to find that peace by quoting to them the words of a long-ago prophet named Isaiah. Isaiah preached to Jewish exiles who had been forcibly uprooted from their homes and resettled in Babylon. He proclaimed to them a hopeful vision in the midst of their despair about ever returning to the life they had known. He proclaimed it with these words—words which John applied to the people of his time. “A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his 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.’”

The journey home for those exiles would entail a long trek through a harsh wilderness. But no less important was the spiritual journey required of them. Because not all wildernesses are defined by physical terrain. There are also metaphorical wildernesses. Sometimes the two go hand in hand. Some wildernesses are located in very personal trials like grief, despair and hopelessness. Other wildernesses encompass nations and continents.

One wilderness we have all been wandering through has been this pandemic. For the exiles, peace would be recognizable in their return to the homes they had lost. For some of us, peace looks like a return to our comfortable pre-pandemic ways of life. But what if genuine peace is more than an end to the pandemic; it is about a new beginning that starts with examining and addressing the lack of peace within us and between us? John's message to those who came to be baptized by him in the Jordan, peace came through repentance for the way things were and hopes for a new and better future.

Advent invites us to explore the deep peace which only God can impart to us, and develop new habits for integrating that peace into our inner selves and our external relationships. In the course of doing that, we might even discover that peace in the world around us is ultimately dependent on our reconnecting with the potential for peace that lies within us because of what the Prince of Peace has done for us.

© 2021 Raymond Medeiros

Preached FCCW, December 5, 2021 Virtual Service