
Go Wild!
Martin Grove United Church
December 9, 2018
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 3:1-18

This week is the second Sunday in Advent. Traditionally that means 2 things, two things that - on the surface at least - are contradictory. We have the fact that the Advent candle we just lit is called “peace”, and we have stories about John the baptizer. John was a wild man who lived in the wild, who did some pretty wild things. “Wild” is often thought of as uncontrolled, unrestrained, out of control, undisciplined, unruly, rowdy, disorderly, riotous, unrestrained abandon”. Peace is often thought of as calm, controlled, disciplined, ordered. On the surface, “peace” and “wild” seem like opposites. How do we understand peace and wild at the same time? But perhaps if we scratch below the surface and get down to deeper meanings, we will find that peace and wild are in fact absolutely and completely and irrevocably opposites to each other. Perhaps peace and wild are incompatible not just on the surface, but even at their cores. Perhaps this reflection will not end with closure - imagine that! And if at the end of this reflection you are disappointed, just remember that Advent is a journey, and the journey will continue.

But I hear you objecting already. Sometimes, when we want to feel a sense of peace, we head into nature, into the wilderness, away from the distractions of modern living. Surely peace and wilderness are sometimes compatible, you say. I’m sorry, but I really do not think so. Yes, it’s true that many people find peace in nature, and we often think of nature as the wilderness. But that’s not the wilderness I’m talking about. You and I can find peace in nature when we have car keys tucked safely in our pockets and we know we can get back to civilization any time we like. We can find peace in nature when we have good camping gear that keeps rain out, and lots of food. We can find peace in nature when we already have the closest Tim Hortons programmed into our GPS. In short, we can find peace in the wilderness when we stay in control. Sure, we can do that, and it can be a lot of fun. But I’m not talking about that.

I’m talking about wilderness when it is pronounced wilder-ness. And “wilder”

means “more wild”. More wild than what? More wild than what we are comfortable with. More wild than what we can control. More wild than we can manage. More wild than we can handle. That’s wilder-ness. That’s what the second Sunday in Advent is inviting us to. If your only image of wilderness comes from the song, “Teddy Bear’s Picnic”, then we are not yet on the same page. We cannot embrace wilderness and be in control. Something has got to give. And we can either give up control, or else we have to acknowledge that we are not willing to go into the wilderness. Most of us decide to not give up control and we miss the blessings that are only found in wilderness.

Last Sunday, the first train in over 500 days left Winnipeg heading for Churchill, Manitoba. The picture on the bulletin cover is (I think) a section of track somewhere between Winnipeg and Churchill. I selected that image because it shows in glaring contrast the idea of wilderness and the idea of control. The track is completely straight. The wilderness is everything else (there is a power line too). And I do hope we all realize that if the photographer turned 90 degrees, there would be nothing at all to see except wilderness. Are you drawn to the straight track (“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”) or are you wondering what you might find if you got off the straight and narrow and explored the wilder-ness that makes up most of reality?

Last Monday I was putting together the bulletin for this Sunday. And I got to the closing music which we are using throughout Advent this year. And I made the mistake of reading it over again, and I realized that the words are completely inappropriate for the second Sunday in Advent. “May the light of God shine down on us as we leave this quiet place.” Sure, that’s a comforting image - but who says that - particularly today - that this church will be a “quiet place”? What if - heaven forbid - God shows up?

I find it odd - and perhaps you do too. If last week I had told you that George Clooney might show up today, this place would be packed and it would be complete pandemonium here. But last week I did tell you that Jesus might show up today- which I believe actually - and here we are looking like we do when we watch commercials on TV. Where is the pandemonium? Did anyone even bring an airhorn today? Is the possibility of meeting George Clooney really more exciting than the reality of Jesus being present with us, in us, and through us? Or is it just that we are so used to the message that Jesus

is coming into our midst that it doesn't generate any fanfare? One of my friends says that the best proof that God does not exist is the lack of energy and excitement we find in our churches, and I have yet to think of a snappy comeback to that.

In the words of author and poet Annie Dillard, "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear straw hats and velvet to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return"¹ Does that perhaps start to give a sense of what "wild" might look like?

It's Advent and we claim to be waiting for Jesus to appear in our midst. Now in Jesus day, if you wanted that sort of experience, you had to venture into the wilderness and you had to deal with John, which must have been an event in itself. I wonder why 2000 years later we expect to find Jesus staying all cozy and warm in the comfort of our living rooms, or in this "quiet place". The basic truth is that we don't like wild because we would rather be in control. Even the word "sanctuary" suggests a place of calm and peace, in other words a place where nothing exciting or interesting ever happens. But on the second week of Advent, perhaps a better name for this place is "launch pad". A launch pad being a place of energy, sounds, smells, light, transformation, and departure, and above all, a place of daring, risk, and uncertainty. A place of wild.

Given our own preference for peace and control, we might wonder why did so many people flock to John? Well, perhaps we don't know for sure. But we do know that John represented the anti-establishment. John likely resembled a homeless person back then. "His dietary fare was that generally consumed by the poorer elements of society. He stood in bold relief to the wealthy, indulgent Jews of his day." As one commentator

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 1982.

said, “He was a veritable walking sermon!”² If you lived in Jerusalem those days, you could find your salvation through the approved channels provided by the temple and the priests. Why on earth would people have gone to John? Clearly, the temple/sacrificial system wasn’t working. The temple system was organized, controlled, calm, simple to understand (because the priests would explain it to you). But perhaps the system was so controlled that there was no space left for God. And even if the priests could not figure that out, normal people - people like us who long for deeper meaning - certainly did figure that out.

In fact even today, many people of faith - even people of deep faith - find they need to look beyond their own institutional church from time to time to help them grow spiritually. How many United Church people flocked to Billy Graham when he was in town, and after that experience - which they loved - were quite content to go back to their own churches? How many teenagers grew up in church and found that their faith only started to make sense to them when they went away to a Christian summer camp? How many people grew up in church and their faith didn’t quite gel until they started volunteering at a soup kitchen?

Now I do understand that many people came to this church today looking for a certain amount of comfort, or certainty, or peace. And yes, we will close this service singing about leaving this “quiet place”, although I might be saying “launch pad” under my breath. But we are all old enough to know that this is the second week in Advent. It’s time for wild. As Advent thunders forward and we continue to wait for Jesus in our midst, if you know what you are looking for, you are not trying hard enough. Advent is not about us being in control, it is about looking for Jesus in our midst - a Jesus who is beyond our control and very likely beyond our comfort zone. Any Jesus that we can control is too small to be part of the openness we call “divine”.

Well, it appears that you were all right and I was wrong today. I’m very disappointed to realize that I did not need to wear my motorcycle helmet to worship after all³. The hoped for “wild” did not seem to become manifest in our midst. But as I said

² <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/266-who-was-john-the-baptist>

³ Rev. Paul entered the sanctuary wearing a motorcycle helmet.

earlier, Advent is a journey, and the journey continues. I have not given up my search, and I hope that you have not either. What exactly are we to do while we keep looking for Jesus in our midst?

And the crowds asked John, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply John said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ John said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’

In John’s day people found Jesus not within the religious institutions, but in other places. 2000 years ago that meant in the wild. Perhaps in 2018 it means speaking to a stranger at a bus stop this week. Perhaps it means listening deeply to another human being who is fussed while we are sharing in our common humanity by waiting in line to check out at a store. Perhaps it means participating in one of the many community meetings that happen right here in Rexdale.

Richard Rohr said, “How odd it is that God's salvation is so seldom recognized. How strange that what God is offering is so rarely experienced. We have presented salvation so poorly that much of the world does not even take it seriously. Oh yes, we want help, we want solace, we want magic, but I am not sure that we recognize or even want the scary freedom that God calls salvation.”

Go wild this week, and find Jesus in our midst.

Amen.