
Advent: Into the wilderness
Chapel in the Park United Church
December 3, 2023
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

I just want to open by saying how delighted I am to - finally - be with you all. And it's just wonderful that our first Sunday together is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is a journey which we get to begin - together - today. And our new pastoral relationship is also a journey that we begin - together - today. My hope and prayer for our future is that we all journey well together, learn from each other, come to care for each other in important ways, and help each other grow.

It's great to be with you for Advent anyway. I love Advent. I suppose I love Advent for lots of reasons, but one reason is that we seem to be constantly face-to-face with interesting tensions during Advent.

For example, we have the tension between the idea that Jesus was born in a humble stable with the reality that Canadians will collectively spend an estimated \$65 Billion on Christmas this year. We have the tension between singing about Jesus as a baby who "no crying did make" with the amount of racket that we ourselves will be making over Christmas.

But my favourite tension in Advent is from the image we read in Isaiah, where we are told that God will come in the wilderness, but also, that we should level out the hills and make the paths straight. So during Advent, we are called into the wilderness. And we are also called to civilize that wilderness. But if we do that, it would make the wilderness much less wild. During Advent, are we called to go to the wilderness? Or are we called to civilize the wilderness? We can't really do both at the same time!

Think about camping. I mean, wilderness is fine, right, as long as I can charge my phone and get decent Internet service. Wilderness is fine if I don't have to get cold, or wet, or hungry, or miserable. Wilderness is fine as long as I am a short walk from a Tim Hortons. Wilderness is fine - as long as it is not really very wild at all.

But I suggest that the word "wilderness" should actually be pronounced "wilder-

ness”. And wilder-ness is about being wild. Wilder-ness is about us not being in control. Wilderness is about being wilder than what we are comfortable with.

The famous Canadian singer / song writer Joni Mitchell wrote a song along those lines, called “Big Yellow Taxi”. A famous line from that song is, “They paved paradise, and put up a parking lot”. That line is a reflection of an experience she had herself in Hawaii. In her own words, Joni Mitchell said, “I wrote 'Big Yellow Taxi' on my first trip to Hawaii. I took a taxi to the hotel and when I woke up the next morning, I threw back the curtains and saw these beautiful green mountains in the distance. Then, I looked down and there was a parking lot as far as the eye could see, and it broke my heart... this blight on paradise. That's when I sat down and wrote the song.”

It seems like human nature that we do NOT like wilderness, and certainly not, wilder-ness. We humans refer to be in control.

Actually, the text that we read from Mark has also been “civilized”. In our reading today from the New Revised Standard version of the Bible, it was stated without comment that the Old Testament quotation was taken from Isaiah. Which is sort of interesting. Because if we had read Mark from the King James Version, it would have stated that the Old Testament quotation was from “the prophets”.

What’s going on here you ask? It’s another example where human beings prefer control.

Because verse 2 in Mark, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” is not from Isaiah. It is from Malachi 3:1. Verse 3 in Mark continues with “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the lord, make the paths straight” is from Isaiah 40:3.

So - what's going on here and why should we even care? Well, biblical scholars seem to agree on how this came to be. The earliest written versions of Mark credit the quotation to Isaiah. Remember, the Bible was not assembled into anything resembling its current form until hundreds of years after Jesus. And before the printing press and computers, copies of the Bible we made by hand by monks.

And these monks knew the biblical texts very well. The monks would have known that the reference in Mark did not come from Isaiah. Scholars believe that at some

point when Mark was being copied, the monk who was doing the copy simply decided to “fix” the reference by writing “in the prophets” in place of “in Isaiah”. The monk was only making a logical “fix” to the text. That’s why King James has the phrase “the prophets” in Mark. But when Greek New Testament scrolls were discovered that were found to be more original than the scrolls that were used for the translation of the King James Bible, scholars realized that the more original texts said, “in Isaiah”. So, modern biblical translations use “in Isaiah” even though it's not true.

OK - so much for the history lesson. But perhaps I have to work a bit harder to convince you that you should care about this minor, obscure, point. Why might we care today? Well, I care because it is just one more example of how we - as humans - inherently prefer simple, logical stories to actual reality. We like the controlled, the managed, the civilized. We don't like the wild. We are even inclined “fix” the Bible rather than to simply let it tell its own story. It’s just human nature. For all that John the Baptizer was wild, and for all that Jesus spent time alone in the wilderness - we humans do not like the wilderness! And I think we don’t like it because we cannot control it.

A few years ago I went on a spiritual retreat. I only had a single day. I knew I needed to find some wilderness. If I had a teleporter, I would probably have gone to a place up north. Perhaps a nice wetland surrounded by Black Spruce trees or somewhere remote like that. I enjoyed places like that many times when I worked as an environmental scientist in Labrador, northern Ontario, northern Quebec, and Nunavut. For my 1 day retreat I could not travel that far. But when I thought about it, I realized that finding wilderness is pretty easy, even in a big city like Toronto. The key to finding wilderness is to simply go somewhere you are not in control. To go somewhere wilder than you might be comfortable with. So I knew I had to get on a city bus.

I mean, in your own car, you are in control. You pick the route, the music, the temperature. You decide when to wash the windows, when to pull over for coffee. You might be stuck in traffic, but in many respects you are in control. On a city bus however, you often don’t know when the bus is coming. You can’t decide who will sit beside you. You can’t control the temperature. You can’t control the racket coming from the headphones of the person beside you. You can’t control the smell of the person behind

you. 1 bus ticket is all it takes to find some wilderness.

I actually was not that random on this particular retreat. I had decided to take the bus to Pearson Airport, and to spend the day simply being present. Taking in the environment, the sounds, the smells, and in particular - the emotion energy of the space. Being ... well, just being. It was a wonderful retreat. Wilderness can be anywhere. And the bus ride contributed to the wild.

So on one hand - the call to go to the wilderness that we read from Isaiah and from Mark makes sense to us. Perhaps the call to the wilderness is like a spiritual time out. It's a call to not be in control for awhile. To making the personal time and personal space we need in order to engage with the spirit in deep, meaningful, and unpredictable ways. It's a call to find space to be away from normal distractions. It's a call to see God more clearly. It's a call to see our own selves more clearly.

On the other hand what's all this about building highways, smoothing out the terrain, making rough places smooth? If the whole point of going into the wilderness is to find the time and the space for solitude - why build a highway? Are we supposed to invite people into the wilderness with us? How many people could we invite to join us before the wilderness became a lot less wild anyway?

According to some sources, the idea of making a clear path was a common demand - for a king. In particular, for a warring, conquering king, who - after a victory - was expected to ride into town in triumph, and on a smooth road. I suppose it's hard to look like a victorious ruler if you are riding in a chariot and your head is bopping around like one of those dogs you see in the back of cars.

A smooth road is a reasonable demand from a conquering king.

But is that the right image of Jesus for us - a conquering king? Well, maybe. But in Mark, the image we see of John the Baptizer hardly fits that description. John may be a prophet, but he is not the sort of person that would demand smooth paths. I get the sense that John would in fact delight in the crooked, the narrow, the rough.

He would be more than happy to situate himself at the end of a long, rough path. So that those who chose to visit him would have to endure challenging conditions to reach him. That would help ensure that those people coming for baptism were at least

humble. John was a hermit living at the end of a dirt path - if there even was a path. He was not royalty. He was not like a Wizard you might find at the end of a yellow brick road.

The way that leads to John is not fancy, but I believe it is a two-way road. A road that connects people from different backgrounds. And the two-way nature of the road enables cultural mixing, sharing, and new life. What John brings - or at least what John points to - does not come from the centre of society. It does not come from the religious centres, the social centres, or the educational centres. Instead, it comes from the margins. The unknown and the unknowable, the unsanctified, the uncomfortable, the uncontrolled, and the uncontrollable. It comes from - in fact - the wilderness. John points us to the wild.

This is the first Sunday in Advent. And as we begin our Advent journey, let us all remember - first of all - that Advent is a journey. I'm sure we are all tempted to think we know where the journey will end - with the coming of Jesus (or Santa, depending on your theology). But if you already know where the Advent journey is leading, are you truly open to being on the journey at all? Are you truly open to finding unexpected blessings along the way? Just how open are we to the call into the wilderness?

For all that the pandemic was a pain, I did appreciate the fact that the pandemic forced us to consider wilderness in new ways. Because during the early stages of the pandemic, most of us did NOT feel in control! We were forced to realize we did not know what to do or where to go. One of the true gifts of the pandemic is that it forced us to rethink our expectations. The pandemic forced us to live - at least a bit - in the wilderness.

And in the process of dealing with the pandemic, we found new expectations, new relationships, new ways of being. I realize that the pandemic is now in our past, but we can still embrace the gifts of wilderness.

This year, I encourage all of us to begin our Advent journey without expectations. Without thinking that we already know where the journey will take us. Without any sense of being in control. With open minds and open hearts. And to start our journey with only one thing - a deep longing in our hearts. What is it that you long for this Advent? I don't mean something that you know you will get. I mean a longing inside you that is so deep

that you perhaps pretend your longing isn't there at all. What do you need to find healing, wholeness, peace. Spend some time in the wilderness - wherever you find it - and give yourself permission to really long for what you need. And during the journey of Advent, be open to finding what you need in unexpected places.

Our journey of Advent has begun. It may not always be comfortable. It may not always be what we expect. But it is still our journey. And we get to share the journey together. I'm very excited! Let's journey well together!

Amen.