

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT - YEAR B

Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

Our readings for today are filled with stories of Gods' people finding themselves in the wilderness. The word *wilderness* means a *desert* place, a solitary place, a lonely and desolate place. God's people spent forty years traveling through the wilderness to arrive at the Promised Land.

In the Gospels, we read about Jesus spending time in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry, where He is tempted by satan to reject God's plan for his life and instead choose an easier path. The wilderness is a risky place to be in the scriptures.

We may not live in a desert climate here Newfoundland and Labrador, but in the midst of the season of Advent, it is not too hard for us to see ourselves in the middle of a wilderness, wandering in a desolate place. Christmas is just two weeks away, and though we are in the midst of a season of preparation, journeying towards a day of joy, a celebration of Christ's birth, sometimes on the way, things can get overwhelming. We may, in the midst of all the hustle and bustle, in the midst of trying to buy presents, preparing our homes, finalizing travel plans, and planning and attending activities at home, school, work, and church, we might feel a bit like we've lost our way, and that we are just wandering in the wilderness, waiting for someone to show us the way out and beyond this exhausting season. The holidays may be meant to be a season of joy, but actually, people often experience them as a season of distress, a season of

loneliness, a season of hard work. Somewhere in the midst of Advent, we tend to lose our way, and forget our destination. It is just when we have lost our way that prophets are called to speak, to give a message. And so, today, we read two passages, each with words from a prophet meant for people struggling through a wilderness. Through the words of Isaiah and the preaching of John the Baptist, we find messages meant for such a time as this, messages meant for those who find themselves in the wilderness, wondering what to do.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to the people of a time in Israel's history when the people had been taken from their homeland and exiled to Babylon. It was, for them, a time of deep pain as a people, when they were separated from their homes, when they were jumbled together and living in a foreign land under unfriendly rule. They longed for the day that they could return home and end this time of limbo, this time of waiting, this time of wilderness. Where was God? How would God get them out of this situation and to their destination, back home, back to the holy land and the holy city. And so God speaks to the prophet Isaiah and tells him, "Cry out!" "What shall I cry?" Isaiah wants to know what he could possibly say to the people. The response comes, "Comfort, O comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together. Here is your God, God will gather the lambs in His arms."

In our Gospel reading, Mark starts things off with a bang.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, who talk about Jesus' birth, describing the Christmas story, Mark gets right down to business. Who needs a nativity story when you can get straight

to the point? John the baptizer appears in the wilderness proclaiming baptism, repentance, and forgiveness, and that someone was coming, the kingdom had arrived. As is was in Isaiah's time, the people of Israel find themselves in a wilderness time. Israel was then under Roman occupation, and the Roman government was ruling over the people. Though the Jewish people were in their own homeland, they weren't at home, because their lives were monitored and controlled by occupying forces. A wilderness time. So people were coming to John, repenting of their sins and being baptized in anticipation of the one John said was coming, the one who would bring with him God's kingdom.

These two voices, Isaiah, and John, separated by centuries, both cry out to be heard in the midst of people who are lost in the wilderness. They had a message from God to share. What did their words say to those who needed to hear their voices?

Let's look again of the Israelites when they were wandering, led by Moses, in the wilderness. One of the reasons why the Israelites had such a hard time when they were in the wilderness is that they were always trying to get *out* of it, so that they could get on with their lives. Forty years is a long time to live in transition with no set home. And it certainly doesn't seem that the Israelites tried to make the best of it. Forty years is a long time to live in transition, but it is a good amount of time to *live*.

A lot of living can be done in forty years. But the Israelites seem only to have done a lot of wishing they were somewhere else, wishing they were already in the promised land.

Advent is only *in part* about getting to the destination of Christmas. But it is also in part just about the journey of preparation itself. Sometimes we forget that the process is as important as the product, that what happens on our *way there* is

as important as what happens when we *get* there. We can spend all of Advent wishing it was already Christmas, or even that it was past Christmas, or we can spend Advent relishing every day of this precious and short time of reflection and preparation.

The prophets' message is to tell us that we don't have to wait to find God at our destination points. God is in the wilderness.

God is in the journey. God is in the wandering. God is in the desert. Isaiah cries, "*Here*, here is your God!"

That is the comfort that God seeks to bring to us, in the midst of a season that can fill us with so much anxiety. We don't have to wait until Christmas to experience the God with us that will come in the Christ child. We don't have to wait until we exchange gifts. We don't have to wait until the Christmas Eve Eucharist. We *are* waiting, waiting for the baby, but while we wait, God is here. So let us prepare, right here in the wilderness of time, for God to come again, and soon.

AMEN.