

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“WILDERNESS FAITH”
Luke 3:1-6
DECEMBER 6, 2009
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES

Throughout most of human history the city was the center of civilization and security. The wilderness, on the other hand, was a region of disorder and danger. The wilderness threatened the old patterns and practices, but this led to new ways and traditions. The wilderness precipitated a crisis. It was both a place of danger and of opportunity.

John the Baptist fulfilled Isaiah’s vision of a herald in the wilderness making ready the way of the coming Messiah. The crooked paths of life were made straight by repentance, and the rough places were made smooth.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a map for finding our way through the wilderness experiences of life. Our Redeemer guides us through the wilderness toward the fulfillment of God’s promises. Throughout this Advent Season, our aim will be to provide you with the courage to embrace a wilderness faith to help you navigate your way through danger and despair.

Remove the wilderness from the bible, and its story cannot be told. The Hebrew word most often used for both “*wilderness*” and “*desert*” means “*that which is desolate and deserted.*” It also means “*that which is beyond,*” that is, beyond the limits of human settlement and control. The wilderness was perceived by city dwellers and villagers as dangerous, as it contained wild beasts and savage tribes. Despite its wild and threatening nature, the wilderness played a central role in the making of the Hebrew people. Without our personal wilderness experiences, our stories could not be told either.

The terrain of every human life has both smooth highways and rough roads, both wide-open spaces and over-grown places. For most of us life is lived primarily in well-organized and efficient human environments. Our families, our

neighborhoods, and our workplaces tend to provide stability and security for us. We belong to various kinds of communities and groups that enhance our lives with meaning and purpose. Despite all these civilizing and socializing influences, however, we are never far from the wilderness. Sometimes it encroaches upon our predictable, safe little worlds. When chaos intrudes, when danger threatens, when tragedy strikes, we need the resources of faith in God.

The famous Serenity Prayer begins, “**Lord, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change.**” There are many things in life that are amenable to being altered, modified, or changed. We have a responsibility to change things that both can and should be changed. But there are other things that we are powerless to change, things to which we must adjust because they will not adjust to us. Accepting the things we cannot change does not necessarily mean we deny or alter our feelings about them, but we make peace with our limitations regarding them. Dealing effectively with some wilderness experience may begin with an acceptance of what cannot be denied. A cancer patient may find that there is no known cure for his or her disease. The challenge is to realistically accept this probability, so that other possibilities may be found for coping with and managing the disease. Denial tends to give the disease more power over the patient. Acceptance, however, may open the door to an unanticipated kind of healing.

John the Baptist is one of the most dramatic figures in the Bible. In all four Gospels he has a pivotal role at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as the forerunner of the Messiah. John was an eccentric individual who lived and preached in the wilderness, and was in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. He wore a camel’s hair cloak and ate locusts and wild honey. John baptized those who repented of their sins, and he announced that a greater one than he was coming who would baptize with the Spirit. John is understood by Luke as fulfilling the words of Isaiah: “*The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’*”

There is often a voice of help and hope in our wilderness experiences. It may be the encouraging voice of a friend or family member. It may be the warning voice of a concerned colleague or neighbor. It may be the clarifying voice of a physician or counselor. It may be the still, small voice of God deep within us. Wilderness experiences are occasions for openness and listening. Robert Browning’s *Pippa Passes* tells of a girl who sings as she goes on her way, unaware of the effects her singing has on those who overhear her. The right voice, or the right word, at a critical moment can be the difference between hope and despair for the hearer.

Everyone knows the basic story of the Exodus. If you haven't read the book, you may have seen the movie! The Hebrew people were in slave bondage in Egypt, far from their Promised Land and home. Ask almost anyone who is the hero of the Exodus story and they know it is Moses. Born a Hebrew child, Moses was raised as an Egyptian prince and came to great prominence and power. With God's help, he would defy Pharaoh and lead his own people out of Egyptian bondage and through the vast wilderness to the Promised Land. There were forty years of wilderness wandering, however, and they were filled with deprivation, desperation, and danger. Finally, Moses led them all the way to their long-sought destination. What a man . . . Moses!

What many people do not know about the Exodus story is that Moses was not allowed to finish the journey. From the heights of Mt. Pisgah, on the east side of the Jordan River, Moses looked across to the land his people would conquer and call home forever. But Moses died and was buried in the mountains of Moab. He was given a panoramic view of the fulfillment of God's promise, but he never entered the land. After so many years of struggle and wandering, was it enough for Moses to only see the Promised Land? For a weary veteran of a great pilgrimage of faith, perhaps it was enough.

Faith always involves seeing beyond our present place and time. All of the promises of God are not fulfilled in anyone's lifetime. In our limited span of years all our personal aspirations may not be achieved and all of our wishes and dreams may not be realized in our limited span of years. Still, faith is given hints of God's "*not yet*" and glimpses of the Promised Land. For faithful pilgrims, it is enough, and we journey on.

There is great value in having life reduced to its bare essentials from time to time. This is seldom pleasant, however. A journey into the wilderness, whether forced upon us or chosen by us, is a way of seeing past the non-essentials. Without the distractions of our self-centered preoccupations and our noisy culture, we can listen for the voice that calls us to a God-centered and self-giving life.

I invite you on this personal wilderness experience. It is an experience where your stories can be told. Let meet here each week of Advent! And if you are looking for a place like no other, may I suggest this morning that you have found it. Welcome to Park Hill.