

## **Isaiah 40:1-11**

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. \*

## **Out of Our Wilderness** - December 6, 2020

*Isaiah 40:1-11*

The great naturalist John Muir once wrote, “I care to live only to entice people to look at Nature's loveliness. Heaven knows that John the Baptist was not more eager to get all his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God's mountains.” John Muir, as you may be aware, was that naturalist instrumental over a century ago in encouraging our country to set aside huge tracts of undeveloped land to serve as national parks.

Muir, as he just told us, had a religious devotion to preserving nature because he knew how much we human beings need some wilderness in our lives to offset the pressures of our technologically stifling society. Imagine, if society was technologically stifling a century ago, how much more is it today! He knew that the outer beauty of the wilderness had the power to kindle an inner beauty in our souls because it is in the wilderness that we can directly experience the awesome presence of God.

And when I use the word “awesome” I mean it in its intended sense. Awesome is one of those words which has been stripped of its meaning in recent years. Nowadays, “Awesome” is just another word meaning “cool,” or “great,” or “rad,” or “groovy.” But originally, the word “awesome” was meant to convey the sense of being in a state of transcendent awareness of God. An awesome experience filled you with, well, awe, filled you with such a feeling of God's presence, power, and love, that you felt your mind, body, and spirit, was taken to a totally different dimension of life and living. That is what awesomeness is about: God in us, God with us, God all around us.

On the other hand, we may have a completely opposite understanding of the wilderness. Far from being an awe-inspiring, God-encountering place, many see the wilderness as a place of loneliness and emptiness. I have little doubt the many of view this year of 2020 as a wilderness journey. We all know people, perhaps ourselves, whose wilderness journey this year had found them struggling to stay afloat in a sea of Covid, unemployment, and social distancing. We miss being with friends and family. We hate working, educating, and worshipping by means of this rather inadequate technology. We yearn for some semblance of normalcy but may find that if we let our guard down to be with people even for a moment, we stand the risk of getting sick — sick to the point of death.

Rather than appreciating the beauty of the wilderness, as John Muir did, we view the wilderness with fear: a place from which we seek to escape as soon as possible.

I suspect that Isaiah had that understanding in mind when he spoke of a prophet making a path for the Lord through the wilderness and proclaiming the coming of a savior. In Isaiah's view, the savior comes out from the desolation and emptiness of the wilderness to meet the people living in towns and villages and cities. The empty places become filled because the Lord would be coming our way.

Such is the good news Isaiah proclaims: the Lord is coming. Restoration is close at hand. Isaiah was writing these words to a people who were very dispirited, almost broken. Isaiah's audience were a large band of exiles who had been forced to move from Jerusalem to Babylon because they had been defeated in war. Never mind that for decades prophets had been telling the people of Israel that unless they changed their ways and turned back to God they would be destroyed. The people did back then what people of all generations do when confronted with the Word of God: they rejected it. They ignored it. They even tried to hurt or expel those daring to speak the truth.

That is, until cold reality struck and the prophets were proven correct and Israel was conquered and destroyed.

Into the wilderness, they went. Into exile. Into a total disruption of their lives. Our Covid crises of 2020 gives a little hint of what Israel experienced when they had to enter the wilderness and go into exile for 80 long years. Indeed, for Israel, the wilderness was a place from which they yearned to escape and so Isaiah, by telling them that their Messiah, their savior, would emerge from the wilderness, must have resonated well with them.

Friends, 2020 has been a wilderness year on so many levels. We all feel the loneliness on some level. Yes, some of us are extraverts and some of us are introverts and we all differ in how much alone time we can stand or welcome. But human contact, mask free, face to face, handshaking, hugging contact is part of who we are as human beings and we miss it. At the elementary school where I teach, we had a Halloween gathering. Parents were supposed to drive to the school with the children in costumes to receive a gift bag and see their teachers in person. Needless to say, it was a disaster. Adults with their children stopped their cars, parked, and got out to see each other — friends they had not been with in a long time. As for masks, well, what masks? I think because the drive-thru was outdoors we avoided it becoming a super-spreader event. But it just went to show how much we yearn to be together.

However, there is another level of being in the wilderness, a level that has existed long before Covid arrived on the scene. I'm talking about the wilderness of our souls.

Loneliness takes many forms and the lack of human contact is very much one of them. However, it is very possible to feel isolated from our very selves. Sometimes, perhaps a lot of times, we can use the excuse of being with others to mask our own personal loneliness and pain. What is a stake are two things, how we relate to ourselves and how we relate to God.

"How are you doing?" That's a question we hear every day. And in polite human society the expected response is simple. We say, "Fine, how are you?" Now of course we need a way to greet and acknowledge each other, but what happens inside of us when we are asked how we are doing and the real answer is, "I don't know," or "Terrible," or "I'm sad," "I'm upset," or "I feel totally out of control."

Of course, we never, ever say such things out loud. We keep it to ourselves, don't we? Why is that?

Several reasons spring to mind. First, we all know people who seem to do nothing but complain non-stop even when it seems they have nothing to complain about. Most of us do not want the label "whiner" or "complainer" so we keep it all inside, even when our problems are intensely significant. At the same time, we may feel that if we do actually open up and share our real feelings, actually say that life is going badly or we're angry or we're depressed, nobody will listen. No one will care. That's worse than being thought of as a whiner — our pain, our problems, are met with stone cold silence. And frankly, when we are on the receiving end of someone opening up about their lives, how willing are we to spend the time to listen — really listen? After all, active listening, genuine listening, takes a lot of work. It is a real investment of our time and our spirit to hear and feel the pain of another person without dismissing it or offering quick, meaningless advice so we can get away.

On the other hand, if we assume that no one cares about us, that no one wants to listen to us, we can all too easily take the next step and persuade ourselves that we are, in fact, people not worth listening to. So many of us, adults and children alike, are convinced that they are worthless human beings. There are many, many of us, some of you who may be listening now, who believe you are not loved, not cared about, all alone in this world. You may live with family members, you may know people at work — you may have a group of people you may hang out with, but you may still feel misunderstood and alone.

As a result, the biggest wilderness of all is not the desert, not the vast forest, not the mountains, but the wilderness that exists inside our own heads.

This is the season of Advent. This is the time when we realize how empty and incomplete our lives are when we attempt to go it alone. This is time to remember why we need to be saved.

There is so much pain and suffering in the world. Yes, there are the obvious things we can see: disease, hunger, malnutrition, inadequate education, non-existent health care. But there is the pain and suffering we all experience from time to time on the inside. It doesn't matter, does it, whether anyone else in the world agrees that our personal suffering is legitimate or not? If we, deep inside, deep in our heart of hearts, are feeling alone, isolated, rejected, misunderstood, inadequate, or just totally useless, those feelings are real to us. Others can minimize our feelings. Others can put us down. Others can call us whiners and complainers. It doesn't matter. Inside, deep inside, we are lost and we need to be saved. Saved, my friends, from ourselves.

The good news of Advent is not just about Jesus coming into the world to save a truly messed-up human race. No, the good news of Advent is God sending God's son to us, each of us, every one of us, individually and in person, to bless us, you and I.

Friends, how can Jesus save the world if he doesn't start with saving you and saving me? If we believe that the baby born at Christmas was born for everyone else, but not born for us, then why are we celebrating?

Hear the good news! Jesus came into the world to lead you out of your own personal wilderness! Jesus, the Son of God, the God who made you, loves you, and cares about you since before you were born, and walks with you every step of the way through this journey called life and beyond. Jesus knows your suffering. Jesus feels your pain. Jesus is totally aware of the demons telling you over and over again that you are utterly worthless.

But hear the words of Isaiah, "Here is your God! See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."

Friends, Jesus is coming into the world for you! Just for you! Jesus is coming to lead you out of your self-imposed wilderness. Jesus is here to tell you that far from being worthless, you are wonderful, and lovable, and beautiful. Jesus is here to free you from your self-created prison of self-doubt and self-hatred that is preventing you from blossoming into the incredible women and men God intends for you to be.

Prepare the way! Prepare the way of the Lord! Advent is absolutely about you and about me. In Jesus Christ, we are set free! We are released from our own personal wilderness and free to live our lives to the fullest. Jesus has come to give us the abundant life and give it to us fully.

The question is, do you believe it? Jesus is like a prison guard who has come your cell. Your own cell, into which you have locked yourself and thrown away the key. You may think that you have imprisoned yourself, isolated yourself, rejected yourself, separated yourself from the world. But Jesus is standing before you, looking into your personal prison cell, and holding in his hands the key of life.

Jesus is there, with the key of life, the key of your life in his hands. And all he wants to do for you is receive your permission to open the door of your personal prison cell so he can set you free.

But friends, do you want to be free? I ask again, do you want to be free? Do you want to be free or do you want to spend the rest of your days wandering aimlessly in your own self-created wilderness with no way forward and no way out?

Say yes, my friends, say yes to Jesus. Let Him set you free. Let Him bring you out of your wilderness. Let Him take you home.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.