

Mark 1:1-8
December 6, 2020

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Both our Gospel and Old Testament passages are situated in the midst of the wilderness, which we often find the biblical narrative taking place in. Where we too often find ourselves in. Therefore, it seems somewhat fitting for Mark to begin his account of “the good news of Jesus Christ” smack dab in the middle of the wilderness.

What do you envision when you ponder the wilderness? My mind immediately gravitates toward a vast location barren of any life in which I scan the horizon for an oasis of green trees and fountains of blue water. It is a place in which I feel alone, helpless, and questions continually scroll through my mind such as “Where is God? How did I get here? Why is this happening?” My mouth so dry from the heat and lack of life-giving water that I wonder if anyone will hear my muted plea for help?

Metaphorically, a wilderness can take the shape of so many places we find ourselves in during life. In this season of Advent as we await the coming of the celebration of the birth of our Savior and as we await His eventual return to usher in the advent of a new heaven and a new earth many of us, much of the world, find ourselves in the wilderness waiting. Waiting for a vaccine. Waiting in line for a COVID test. Waiting for that application to qualify for unemployment benefits to go through and that first payment to hit to pay rent. Millions waiting, bumper to bumper, in line for boxes of food to feed their families as the number of Americans living in the desert of food insecurity grows. Waiting to return to a classroom for the first time in months or one that is filled with all your peers or students and not just a small cluster seated six feet apart. Waiting to see and hug loved ones for the first time in a long time. Waiting for rest from an exhausting year. Waiting for a new beginning.

Most of us do not need to imagine being in a wilderness this morning, because we already are. Tired. Alone. Ready to throw in the towel. Consumed by fear. Grieving. The wilderness of this pandemic seems to grow even more dire each day. It seems to grow darker with every new positive case or each precious child

of God's life cut all too short by this deadly virus. Lord, deliver us from this wilderness we pray.

Theologian Frederick Niedner calls the wilderness a "wordless void ... where over and over our theologies get tested, fail, and disintegrate."ⁱ Yet, it is into this wilderness God comes to the people living in exile in the book of Isaiah uttering the words, "Comfort, O comfort my people." It is in the wilderness the prophet is led to proclaim, "Here is your God." It is in the wilderness where the forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist, is found preparing the arrival of the Lord's advent as he calls the people to reorient their lives, turn from their sinful ways, and set their sights on the One coming who is more powerful than He is. This One will bring the water of life that will nourish us in our wilderness wanderings and the promise that God's Spirit will always be with us.

Brothers and sisters, I cannot tell you why we so often find ourselves in the wilderness. I cannot explain why one person gets COVID-19 and experiences no symptoms and another gets severely ill and recovers or still another loses their life. I cannot answer why one person hears the good news of Jesus Christ, comes to faith and another does not. I cannot explain so many things, but I know without a doubt that our God meets us in the wilderness. In the words of the beloved song from our days in Sunday school, *Jesus Loves Me*, ... the Bible tells us so.

Tells us God comforts us in the wilderness. Transforms us and shapes us through our wilderness wanderings. Our God, perhaps, is most visible when we are in the wilderness because ultimately our God most vividly reveals His love for all of creation alone on a hillside in a barren wasteland hanging upon a cross. The theology of the cross tells us that we are never alone in the wilderness. The theology of the cross tells us that through His resurrection our wilderness wanderings will not be the end but only the beginning to a better day and a new life. At times we lead ourselves into the wilderness due to bad choices or turning from God or trying to go it all alone. At times, life is just life and things happen for whatever reason that eventually lead us to being smack dab in the middle of the wilderness. Whatever the reason, most assuredly the Bible tells us and reveals to us God meets us there and through our time there, the questions we ask there, the silence we encounter there, the Holy Spirit finds a way for us to see and hear the God who calls out, "Comfort, O comfort my people!" Our pleas, questions, and cries from the wilderness, no matter how faint they may be, never go

unheard. God is always listening! God is always with us in our wilderness wanderings!

¹ Frederick Niedner, *Sundays and Seasons Preaching Year B 2015* (Augsburg Fortress, 2014) 23.