Sunday, December 8, 2002
THE WILDERNESS
Isaiah 40:1-5; Mark 1:1-8

The main characters in the Advent and Christmas stories found in the Bible are familiar to most of you — Mary, Joseph, the baby, the shepherds, and the Wise Men. The central themes are also known to most of you — God's love uniquely revealed in a human being when no one expected it. The mother of the baby is an unknown young woman, pregnant while not married. The baby is born in an out-of-the-way place. God can be found in unexpected places and events.

However, there are other lesser-known characters and themes in the story that are also important. There's Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, who is some sort of cousin to Mary, the mother of Jesus. There's Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, who was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. And of course, there's John the Baptist himself. One more important theme in the Advent and Christmas story, though not often thought of as being related to Advent and Christmas, is "the wilderness."

What does the wilderness have to do with Advent and Christmas? To understand the connection, you also have to look at John the Baptist. Here's why both the wilderness and John the Baptist are important parts of the Advent and Christmas stories. You can't truly understand Jesus without first encountering John the Baptist and the wilderness. In the same way, you can't truly get to the inner meaning of Christmas without going through Advent.

Here's the background. John the Baptist was the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. According to the Bible story, for some unknown reason, Elizabeth and Zechariah had been unable to have children. When she was certain she was beyond child-bearing age, she discovered she was pregnant. Zechariah learned of his wife's pregnancy in an unusual way. One day when he was serving his assigned shift in the temple, he had a vision. In it, he was told that Elizabeth would bear a son, and they were to name him John. He was also told that their child, when an adult, would be a "preparer of the way" for the Messiah.

As the child began to grow and mature, it was obvious that he was a deeply spiritual person. He seemed to sense at an early age that he had a unique mission in life. We know nothing else about his growing up. In the gospel stories, we meet him next as an outspoken and dynamic preacher. The main location of his preaching was not in the temple or in a church building with air conditioning and padded pews. He called people away from the cities and the bright lights, away from their positions of prestige and power. He invited them into the wilderness. Listen to Mark's gospel: "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him."

In his sermons, John called into question many of the deeply cherished beliefs of the most religious people of his time. It was the kind of preaching that most religious people do not want to hear. He even called them insulting names, saying, "You brood of vipers!" to the Pharisees and Sadducees. "Just because you are the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, that doesn't give you any special standing with God." No one I know appreciates having their religious heritage and way of practicing questioned.

In his own ministry, Jesus got into trouble for the same thing. He was constantly calling into question the conventional piety and religious practices of his day. People who do that are often considered subversive. Historically, many authentic religious leaders fall into that category.

Within Eastern religions, the two best-known leaders who questioned worldly conventional wisdom were Lao-tzu and the Buddha. Lao-tzu spoke of following a “way” that led away from conventional perceptions and values, and instead living in accord with the Tao. At the center of the Buddha’s teaching is the image of a way, “the eightfold path,” leading to enlightenment and compassion.

But now let’s return to the theme of the wilderness and John the Baptist. In the same way that you need to go through John the Baptist to get to Jesus, you need to go through Advent to get to Christmas. And just as John the Baptist was a contrast to Jesus, so Advent is a contrast to Christmas. The secular celebration of Christmas knows nothing about Advent, the wilderness, or John the Baptist. It wants to go directly to Christmas, with no time for preparation, without any wilderness.

Like many themes in the Bible, “the wilderness” can be a real place, but it’s equally significant as a metaphor. The wilderness is a term used to describe a desolate or deserted area devoid of civilization. It signifies a place of danger and deprivation. It can be a desert or an area that is steep, wild, rocky, and barren, almost always having little vegetation. It is where you can easily get lost and where survival is difficult. In the Bible stories, the wilderness is a place of testing and learning, and it could become a place of failure. It can also be a place for encountering God.

Moses had a powerful experience of the “Holy” in the wilderness, as did Elijah. After Moses led his people out of Egypt with the promised land as the destination, the story then tells you that they spent 40 years in the wilderness as a place and time of preparation.

Isaiah knew the story of Moses and his people in the wilderness. Thus, in the reading from the prophet Isaiah for today, he is quoted as saying, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

Then he goes on to describe what our world will be like when God’s realm is complete, and when you have gone through the wilderness. And it’s not good news for those who love the hills and mountains. “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every hill and mountain 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.”

John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, began his ministry in the wilderness, and it is there that he quotes the prophet Isaiah: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” It is also significant that Jesus is reported to have spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness as he prepared himself for his ministry. It was where he was tempted and tested. The early church understood these 40 days to be symbolic of the 40 years in the wilderness which their ancestors had spent as they followed Moses out of Egypt.

What these stories tell you is that this season of Advent is to be a kind of wilderness experience as you prepare for Christmas. It is to be a time of preparation and anticipation. The secular culture, of course, wants to skip Advent, avoid the wilderness, and jump instantly from Thanksgiving to Christmas. It does not want to have any kind of delayed gratification.

Both concepts, Advent and the wilderness, are important, and they are connected to each other. Advent reminds you that life itself is filled with yearning. It is a time when you remember that God is always, in some sense, coming to you, that full communion with God is never within your total grasp or control. Throughout your human existence, you always see, as the Apostle Paul said, “in a mirror dimly.”

If you are like me, you are always waiting, hoping, and anticipating a fuller revealing of God’s will, God’s presence in your life. God is always coming.

The wilderness, as already noted, is also an important metaphor, especially in the season of Advent, and it is significant in your overall life as well. Each one of you has had your own wilderness experience, and you will have more in the future. There is the wilderness of grief. A loved one dies suddenly, and you are in the wilderness, lost and lonely. There is the wilderness of going through a divorce, the wilderness of losing your job. As you grow up and mature, there is the wilderness of adolescence, and later in life, the wilderness of aging and, for some, loss of memory. There is the wilderness of trying to find your way in life as you seek to discover what you are going to do with your life.

If you are a stockbroker, the past two years have been a kind of wilderness experience for you, and the same is true if you are an investor.

There is the wilderness of a serious illness. You are diagnosed with cancer or some other disease that could be terminal. If you have struggled with any kind of addiction — with alcohol or some other substance — you know the meaning of being in the wilderness. The wilderness is also where you meet yourself coming and going, rushing around, sustaining a level of activity that is crazy-making, and all of it designed to accomplish what? In whatever wilderness you find yourself, the words of Isaiah and John the Baptist now take on new meaning: “In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.” The wilderness can be the place of meeting God. I hope you have made this discovery, and if you haven’t yet, I hope you will.

The experience of the wilderness tells you that God meets you not only where things are neat and tidy, where the halls are decked with holly and cookies baked, but also in the places where you are at loose ends and things are in a mess. God comes to you in the broken places, the unexpected places, the out-of-the-way places. God was not born in a palace in Jerusalem, but in a small out-of-the-way place.

God comes in the broken places, even when you try to avoid it.

Here’s the story of one young woman. As a teenager, Beverly got herself into the wrong kind of crowd. She started experimenting with drugs in her junior year of high school. She dropped out of college midway through her freshman year and drifted into a life of sex and drugs. Her distraught parents heard from her only when she needed money, and when they stopped sending it, she broke off all contact.

They had no way of knowing where she was living or even if she was alive. Then one morning, she woke up in a shabby room in the bed of a man she barely knew. She looked in the mirror and said to herself, “I can’t live this way anymore.” She was in her own kind of wilderness.

She went home. Her parents welcomed their prodigal daughter with open arms. The first thing she did was take a long, hot bath and wash her hair, not only for relaxation and hygiene but as

a symbolic way of washing away the sordid past she was leaving behind. It was a kind of personal baptism. Instinctively, without realizing why, she felt the need to immerse her body as a symbolic dying and rebirth to a new, cleaner sense of herself.

Next, she told her parents she wanted to go to church. She felt she had messed up her life and had to find her way back to God. In church, she heard the good news, which she described this way: “God knows how fouled up your life has been, but God’s love has never forsaken you. God is prepared to lift you out of the mud, wipe away your filth, and accept you as God’s own beloved child. You are loved. You are forgiven. Welcome back.”

During this season of Advent, whatever wilderness you are in, let it be a way of preparing the way of the Lord. Amen.