

*"Into the Wilderness"*  
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Advent, Peace Sunday, December 5, 2010  
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Texts: Isaiah 40: 1-11      2 Peter 3: 8-15a      Mark 1: 1-11

**Isaiah 40**

*Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.*

<sup>2</sup> *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.*

<sup>3</sup> *A voice cries out:  
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

<sup>4</sup> *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.*

<sup>5</sup> *Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

<sup>6</sup> *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.*

<sup>7</sup> *The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.*

<sup>8</sup> *The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

<sup>9</sup> *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!"*

<sup>10</sup> *See, the Lord GOD comes with might,*

*and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.  
<sup>11</sup> 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.*

## **2 Peter 3**

<sup>8</sup> But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. <sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. <sup>10</sup> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

<sup>11</sup> Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, <sup>12</sup> waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? <sup>13</sup> But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

### *Final Exhortation and Doxology*

<sup>14</sup> Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; <sup>15</sup> and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

## **Mark 1**

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;*

<sup>3</sup> *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’ ”*

<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Church Treasurer Nancy Shealy wrote a sermon for today.  
Acutually, she gave me a sermon to preach this morning,  
consisting of six words.

*Alleluia! Christmas trees are selling. Amen!*

That is a good word.

Here is some more good news.

Mark 1: 1-5

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and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

### **Into the wilderness.**

John the Baptizer calls to us to prepare

for the Advent, the coming of the Son of God.

But something has been lost in the translation of the call to repentance,  
of the call to reconcile our lives with the will and word of God.

Something has gotten lost in the telling of the good news of Jesus Christ  
and what has become of the popular experience of Christmas.

A traveler to Japan recently returned to tell what she had seen  
in a major shopping mall display -

there was a gigantic display to attract crowds of shoppers,

a display of Santa Claus holding the infant Jesus

standing in a sleigh being pulled by the 7 dwarfs.

Enter John the Baptist.

He is a prophetic preacher of legend, clearing a way in the wilderness  
of people's lives for the anointed one of God.

John intrudes - not quietly, not gently, not saying,

"Ah, excuse me, pardon me, may I have a moment?" -

no, John noisily intrudes on our Christmas cheer,

reminding us that Jesus comes,

Hallelujah! Jesus comes to save sinners,

sinner like you and me.

Recently a blessed soul said,

*"Pastor, I am so ashamed of my sin I am not worthy to go to church."*

Heaven help us

so we may be a healing home for the lost and the broken.

Heaven help us

as we carry out the mission one of our elders described  
as posting a sign on the front lawn that reads, *"We Buy Ugly Souls."*

Heaven help us

if we shrink from our mission to become a shrine for the perfect,

Heaven help us

if instead of being a Christ-centered community of faith  
we devolve into a finishing school for the unblemished.

Somehow, knowing you, knowing me, knowing Christ,

I'm not so worried about that one.

With confidence borne of experience this pastor told our repentant friend,

*"Our elders are wounded healers,  
our deacons practice servant leadership,  
our choirs sing and ring with a faith borne of love lost and found,  
and the Prodigal Son is your pastor.*

*Christ has heard your confession, forgiven you, and already forgotten it.*

*Now come out of the wilderness, my friend, and come home."*

### **Into the wilderness.**

Interestingly, John does his preaching out in the wilderness.

He moves out and away from the mainstream of modern life.

John the Baptist is suggesting in his own way

that an encounter with Jesus Christ  
will require taking a different path.

So John calls us out, too,

out into the wilderness.

He beckons us out of our familiar confines

into a wilderness world where sins are confessed,  
lives water washed, and the way of God prepared.

### **Into the wilderness.**

For some of us John may be calling us to physically move out,

to get up and go, to depart from normal routines and places  
in search of a wilderness experience which will connect us to the holy.

When John says, "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,*"  
is he inviting you to revisit your vocation?  
to clarify your call and purpose?

For some of us the wilderness we need to get to may be within us,  
to reach a secret place or unmask a hidden face,  
to find a silence to break or an offering to take.

When John says, "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,*"  
is he calling to you to accept the joyous light of Christ  
and let it shine in the shadows and illumine your spirit?

For some of us the wilderness is the wall of fear that has been built,  
brick by brick by hopeless brick,  
to divide and separate and distract the whole people of God.

We fear what we do not understand.

Rarely do we discover true disagreement; usually we find misunderstanding.

When John says, "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,*"  
is he calling us as a Christian Church to be a safe place  
for the engagement and empowerment of disciples  
from all walks of life,  
a church that boldly breaks down social barriers that divide  
in order to open lines of communication and commonality?

And what better place is there to prepare the way of the Lord  
than the Lord's Table, where Jesus invites you and me.

The Gospel teaches that Christ welcomed sinners & broke bread with them.

He did then and he will do so again here this morning.

I cannot tell you how proud and delighted I am

to be a participant in a congregation that stands out as a beacon of light  
simply because we accept and do not judge

those whom John and Jesus call to confession and baptism.

It is no small thing to be a people of courage,

a people who stand firm against prejudice and fear,

a people who preach and practice unconditional love.

Surely we are journeying together into the wilderness.

For some of us the wilderness is right next door,

right by you at work,

right there in your classroom, right beside you at home.

When John says, "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,*"  
is he pointing out a hurting, broken soul in our midst  
as if to say, "Go there, and help to make a way to peace."

For some of us the wilderness we are called into to meet our Lord and Savior  
is right here in our day-to-day lives, at work, at home, at play, at the store.

Donna Ross imagines what might happen if John the Baptizer  
were to set up preaching camp in the middle of modern-day shopping mall.

Now imagine this: in comes John, right into the mall.  
It is deep winter, but he is wearing sandals on his bare feet,  
shorts like the seniors wear at Lakeside High Schools on the coldest day,  
and, yes, he is wearing his camel hair coat, tied with a leather belt.  
Now he strides through the double doors of the mall  
and comes out into the open space near the fountain,  
and he is crying out, "*Repent!*"

Unreal. What has this awful man got to do with Christmas?  
Get him out of here, so we can get our shopping done.  
But wait: imagine this.  
John is a powerful preacher,  
and the adults cease their frantic buying and start to gather round him.  
The teens stop their wandering to laugh,  
but then they find themselves listening.  
The children hear him, and start to leave Santa's line,  
tugging on their parent's coats and asking questions.  
"*What is he doing?*" "*What is he saying?*" "*Why is he here?*"

John is crying out: "*Repent! Turn around! Change your lives!*"  
And John is such a powerful preacher that the lights,  
the Musak carols, the crèches, the shopping, even Santa's line  
-- all are forgotten,  
and the people begin to ask, "What shall we do?"  
And John says, "*Repent, and be baptized.*"  
Then he begins to baptize them  
in the beautiful mall fountain.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*