

Wonder and Wandering
Isaiah 40: 1-5; Exodus 40: 1-2,34-38; Mark 1:1-8

Our Advent theme, 2023, is “I Wonder as I Wander”, from the folk carol by John Jacob Niles. It has a fascinating story. In 1933 in Murphy North Carolina, a family of evangelists had camped out in the middle of the downtown to preach and sing the gospel. The city told them they had to leave. They were a public nuisance. They asked if they could hold one more service to raise enough money to move to another town. During the service, the little girl of the family began to sing three lines of a song. John Jacob Niles, a folklorist and song writer happened to be nearby. He quickly scribbled down in his musical shorthand what the girl was singing. Enchanted, he went home and wrote out the full song, which is sometimes called “Appalachian Carol.”

It seems a gospel kind of story on its own. The song of a girl, the child of a family of traveling evangelists who were being booted out of town during the Depression, becomes one of the most beautiful and oft sung carols of Christmas.

I wonder as I wander out under the sky
that Jesus my savior did come for to die
for poor on'ry people like you and like I
I wonder as I wander out under the sky

(That word *on'ry* is a captivating word. It was a mountain pronunciation of “ordinary”, sometimes taken to be “ornery”. Both pertain!)

The carol goes on:

When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow's stall
With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.
But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall.
And the promise of ages it then did recall.

Now the last verse:

If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,
A star in the sky, or a bird on the wing,
Or all of God's angels in heaven for to sing
He surely could have it, 'cause he was the king.

It's all there, the Christmas gospel. It's about God coming to ordinary people, and it's about wonder and wandering.

I

The Hebrew people were a wandering people. And some of their greatest moments of wonder came from when they were wandering.

Abraham began the journey of God's Hebrew people as he left the security of his home *and* his inherited religion to make the long journey to an unknown land. God called him to begin a new religion in a new place, and so he went.

800 years later the Hebrew people were bound in slavery in Egypt, and God delivered them from slavery. A wonder to be sure. Then high on Mount Sinai God gave to them the Ten Commandments. Another wonder!

From Sinai they set off across the desert toward home and wandered in the wilderness 40 years before they arrived! The wonder of those wandering years was that God's presence was with them all the way. They built a moveable tabernacle and took it with them. God's presence filled the tabernacle everywhere they went.

It was a sacred journey, however difficult. Sacred journeys are not always easy. In Numbers 33, there is a travelogue naming every place they stopped along the way. From Succoth to the Jordan, forty places by my count. They named and remembered every single one.

We've had such places where we have stopped and lived as part of our sacred stories, places where God has been with us, even in the painful places, with us in healing and help and direction.

For me, born in Statesville, then Mineral Springs, Winston-Salem, Raleigh, Miami, Charlotte, Deland, Florida on to New York City, High Point, Louisville, Asheville, Louisville again, Ft. Worth, Texas, back to Charlotte, then by kind Providence back to my birth home, Statesville, and to you. And I'd add holy places like Iona and St. John's Abbey and schools with their teachers.

What would be on your list of stopping places, places where you've lived, and holy places which have become part of your sacred journey?

II

A second miracle time of deliverance for the Hebrew people was when God brought them out of exile in Babylon. After many years and generations, God was returning them home. The prophet of the Exile, the "second" Isaiah announced the good news: "Comfort ye my people, the time of your ordeal is over!"

Advent begins in me every year when I play a CD of Handel's *Messiah* and I hear that first tenor solo: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Who has made a pathway for God in your life? We can do that for others, too. Every Advent bears the hope that a way will be made once again, perhaps in a whole new way, for the Lord into our lives.

Isaiah's tenor sings: "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed!"

Wandering, now Wonder.

But God had been with them *in* the Exile too. Those long years were one of the most creative times for the Hebrew people in their history. Theology was being rewritten. The final collection of the books of the Hebrew Bible were established. From the ruins of the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem came Judaism as we know it today. A *Temple-less religion* has spread across the world.

They were going home. The wonder of it! Every coming home is a sacred thing, coming home to family, to those who have become your family, home to ourselves.

Church can be our home-base, our home. It became so for the writer Anne Lamott, who found a little church across from a flea market in Marin County, California. They took her in. There, as she recounts it, she got sober, got Christ and got pregnant. There's a "Christmas story"!

She tells the story of a little girl who got lost in the city. A policeman found her and offered to take her home. She said yes, but that she didn't know her address. "Ok", the policeman said, "hop in and we'll drive around and see if we can find it. At one point the little girl excitedly said, "You can let me out now. There's my church, and I can find my way home from there."

Ram Dass, Buddhist teacher, has said, “In this life we’re all just walking each other home.” That’s our holy journey together.

III

Mark’s gospel begins there, in the wilderness, in what he called “the beginning of the gospel”, quoting our prophet Isaiah: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness...Prepare the way of the Lord!” And Mark pointed to John the Baptist baptizing in the river Jordan and calling the nation home to itself. And *he* pointed to the one he would soon baptize, Jesus of Nazareth.

In the Bible wilderness has been a place of spiritual testing, and of spiritual awakening and reawakening. So too in our lives. Where in your life have wilderness and wonder met? Wandering and wonderment? You didn’t think you could make it, but you did, and the *you* that emerged was a different you, a truer you, more compassionate and more thankful you.

Wendell Berry has written some words which have been important, even saving words to me:

It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

Those words can be true in our personal lives. They can also be true for the church, especially in times of momentous change, especially for the church in America now. And for us.

The pandemic was such a time, and we were thrust out into the wilderness. But for some, it was also a portal to somewhere new.

During the years of Babylonian Exile, some of God's people whined: "You worked wonders in the past and delivered us, why aren't You saving us now?" And God said,

Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:18-19)

IV

In Stephen Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods*, we hear these words in the song "No One is Alone." They are like God's words to us.

Mother cannot guide you

Now you're on your own

Only me beside you

Still, you're not alone

No one is alone, truly

No one is alone.

Sometimes people leave you

Halfway through the wood

Others may deceive you

You decide what's good

You decide alone

But no one is alone....

Witches can be right

Giants can be good

You decide what's right

You decide what's good.

Just remember....

Someone is on your side

No one is alone.

Someone is on your side now.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the woods. We wonder where we are, even *who* we are. But there's wonder in the wilderness. No one is alone.

The Advent gospel. Wonder in the wandering. And it's for *all* of us, those lost in the woods, those facing the biggest struggle of their lives, those anxious and afraid. The ones in line at the DMV, at the flea market, the teenager feeling all alone. But no one is alone. Truly. It's for people like us wandering into church, hoping *wonder* will happen. All of us someday, walking in the dark, waiting for the light.

Come holy infant, come.