

Think back with me to the prayer we spoke a few moments ago, the Prayer of the Day. Look back at it if you like. Our Episcopalian siblings have a similar prayer in their service that they call the Collect. The purpose of this prayer, whatever you call it, is that it gathers up some central themes from the readings and provides some focus to the service. Well the “focus” this 2nd Sunday of Advent is to be found in those first few words. “Stir up our hearts, Lord God...” Into focus comes the word Hope.

It’s a great word for Advent. For this season that ends on Christmas Eve is not only a season of expectation/anticipation, it’s the season of hope (Hopeful expectation/anticipation). It’s the hope that God will do something incredible, that God will intervene in this world, that God will come - this is the hope that we carry through this season. We hear a vision of that hope with Isaiah’s description of The Peaceable Kingdom. Our psalm cries out in hope that (to the king God will give God’s justice). Paul reminds the Romans of their inheritance of hope, but also the responsibility of hope to broaden its borders and welcome in those without it, those in need of it.

But our prayer of the day continues. “Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way of your only Son.” Preparation for his coming gives Hope an unsettling bump. “By his coming nurture our growth as people of repentance and peace,” we read.

The hope we started with - the hope of those first few words, the hope of the season - has been muddied by “preparation” and even more so by “repentance.” And that mud thickens in our gospel reading.

John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, proclaiming “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom Isaiah spoke: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord!”

Repentance means to “change your mind.” It doesn’t strike our ears as a hopeful message, but it must have sounded with some promise in those days because people from all over Judea, Jerusalem, and even officials of the Temple and leaders of the people came flocking to John - way out in the middle of nowhere. And they were baptized by John, “confessing their sins.”

There is a lot here and so much of it is just shocking! John is yelling at people to change their minds! To confess their sins, to prepare, to be baptized. And people are not running from him (like they would me) - they are running toward him, to him! To go to such a place for any of us, hope would be the reason. What is the hope that drove them out to him? What was the hope that sent them running to that place of wilderness?

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber preached a sermon on Zechariah (the father of John the Baptist) in a women's prison this week. The story of John's miraculous inception is actually the first story we hear in the gospel of Luke. Do you remember it?

Elizabeth and Zechariah are old, and all their life together they have prayed to have a child. Well an angel shows up and tells Zechariah that they will conceive and have a son, and that they are to name him John. Zechariah basically says, "How do you know this will happen? We're so old." For not believing, the angel strikes Zechariah mute (unable speak) until the time these things occur.

Pastor Nadia writes,

I wonder if Zechariah was reluctant to believe (this good news that Elizabeth would bear a son) **because he thought he already knew his own story...** Maybe he was so used to (him and Elizabeth) being the "childless old couple" that, even as he prayed for children, he had actually [already] foreclosed on any other story ever really being possible for them... I wonder if maybe his enforced period of silence was actually what allowed him to receive a new story. (The Corners. November 27, 2022)

We get stuck in stories sometimes - the stories we tell about ourselves and those we tell about each other. I think Pastor Nadia gets that right. She goes on to say more about how that stuckness actually grows those stories and makes them truer than they might have been. I think of the political divide running rampant in the US and the West today - what are the stories that have cemented that divide. Pastor Nadia names her stories of "who I am and what I've done and who has hurt me and what I deserve" — stories that she has "worn smooth" in her re-telling of them that the question recedes into the background — are they "the most true thing?"

The repentance John is proclaiming sounded like hope to all those people because it was a direct assault on exactly what stood between them and the hope we all long for. In other words, the stories we tell ourselves - stories about who we are and what we're capable of; stories about this world - what's possible and what's not; stories about our communities, our church, our past and our future; stories we tell and retell (in so many ways and so often) that they lock us into certitude about what is true and what could actually 'be.'

These people (perhaps not unlike us?) had foreclosed on the idea of Isaiah's Peaceable Kingdom, for instance; the idea that God would intervene in history and flip the regular program. But John is telling a **new** story - a story about one who is coming who will bring such stories and more near. John comes to shake our certitude, telling us to look at our stories (confess them) and to "Change our minds."

It's no coincidence then, that John appears in the Wilderness. He's not on a street corner in a major metropolitan city. He's not in a place people congregate naturally, where he can get access to the most ears. He's in the Wilderness, the wild - an uncertain, unstable place that lies between where people are coming from and where they are going. Wilderness is the middle of nowhere. Far from home, from the familiar. Wilderness puts distance between "one'self" and the stories we tell ourselves - it's uncharted territory where anything could be possible. To go to the Wilderness is to find yourself in a liminal place.

You heard last week (the first Sunday of this new year) about liminal space. Do you remember? It's the place between something ending and a new beginning. It's a place both individuals and communities can find themselves when it's clear that the old stories no longer apply. It's a place of uncertainty "in which old structures are released, new identities and possibilities are explored, and power is reassigned" (Beaumont 3).

It might still sound unfamiliar, but liminality is the space in which the Christian story itself takes place. The story of creation and Adam & Eve eating the apple inaugurated the liminal wilderness-wandering that culminates for Christians in the story of Jesus. And because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, we live in the "already, but not yet" of God's promises in Christ and their fruition in Christ's coming again. Advent is not only the liminal season of waiting for what's been promised, it's the space in which every Christian life is lived.

And it's within that space that we experience other times of liminal space, like the one we find ourselves in today - not only as the Church, not only in this church (Calvary), but as this church (Messiah). Do you have some questions about the future of our life together as a congregation? Do you have some concerns? Are the stories we tell ourselves about who we are still true? Are the stories about what we believe is possible for us still "the most true thing?" And finally, what stories might these (stories of ours) be keeping us from hearing?

These are big questions and it's scary asking them, isn't it? But it's scarier to avoid them, to avoid exploring them, because it's only by engaging them that we can be led out of this liminal place in our life as a church.

But there's a truer story that gives us the hope we require to do such work - such "wilderness wandering" - and that is the story Jesus tells. He tells a story about the world, about who we are, and what is truly possible. It's a story that breaks open the "locked certitude" of our own. That story, John tells us, is going to be told (not by him) but by the one coming after him.

So John calls us out of our familiar places, our familiar stories, and into the Wilderness. He's welcoming us into Advent, preparing us for what's to come by helping us confess what no longer serves, washing us of what's no longer true and baring us open to what comes next. John brings us into this Advent space of stillness and quiet - our stories falling silent. It's here that we wait, open and listening (for a new story of what's possible) to draw near.

AMEN