



need to make, but are not clear about when and how. What are some of the personal wilderness experiences touching your life this Advent?

God spoke to John in the wilderness of his time and commissioned John to “proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The word repentance means to change, to turn around, to move in a different direction. John’s message from God was to call people to change the way they had been thinking and living from a self-centered, fear and greed motivated way of life, to a God guided way of life, with a relational moral compass of love for God and all their neighbors, especially the poor and marginalized.

Luke points out that John, following in the tradition of the Jewish prophet Isaiah, is “the voice crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” so you can receive the healing, renewing, life-transforming, saving power of God’s justice and peace coming through Christ for the realignment and renewing of all people.

I wonder, this Advent, what is the change, the repentance, the realignment God is inviting you and me to make to prepare us to receive the fresh coming of Christ into the wilderness places in our lives and world?

In next Sunday’s Gospel we will hear more details about how John taught people to repent, to change, so they could prepare the way for Christ’s fresh coming into their lives. In today’s reading from Philippians, we can see how God helped Paul prepare the way for Christ’s fresh coming into his wilderness experience. The first thing we might notice is that Paul did not find a life-giving way through his wilderness experience by trying harder, or by self-help strategies, or by sheer will power. Jesus taught us that he is the vine, we are the branches. We can’t bear the fruit of God’s life and love in our lives unless we stay organically connected to the Spirit of Jesus flowing into our lives. People who have found the 12 steps helpful in their recovery from addictions will tell you that the first step to change is admitting that we are powerless over our lives and that our lives are unmanageable. That takes humility, honesty, deep recognition that apart from God’s help, we can’t change and live the way God created us to live.

As we reflect on Paul’s letter, written from his prison wilderness, we can notice several practices that helped Paul stay grounded in his relationship of love with God and his neighbors. Paul begins by saying “I thank my God every time I remember you.” Gratitude helps prepare the way to receive fresh awareness of Christ’s presence coming into our lives. For what are you most grateful today, at this time in your life?...

Next Paul says he constantly prays for the Philippian Christians “with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing with me in living the gospel.” Paul prays constantly, and prayer connects him with God in the middle of his wilderness. Notice that he is not praying, “Lord get me out of this mess.” Instead, he is thinking of others, finding joy in praying for others. Those early groups of Jesus followers shared their lives together, ate in each other’s homes, listened to each other, cared for and prayed for each other, found support from each other and tried to help their neighbors in need to prepare the way for Christ to enter and guide their lives every day.

While it is more difficult during Covid restrictions, God might be reminding us that we need the prayers of others and the joy of sharing with each other to prepare the way to receive Christ coming into our lives in fresh ways, in these wilderness times. We may make a phone call to friends with whom we can share. It may help to take a few moments before and after worship, either in the

building or outside, to check in with each other. We might ask each other, what are you most grateful for this week? And, what are your greatest concerns these days? Community sharing and prayer lifts us out of isolating loneliness and helps us find support and even joy in our wilderness challenges.

Next, Paul says that he is confident that the God who began a good work in and among those Philippian Christians will bring it to completion. Do you have the trust, the confidence that Paul had, that the God who has been at work in your life over the years will continue to work in and through you to help you be the person God created you to be and become in this wilderness time?

Paul was also addressing the congregation, confident that God would help congregation complete the good work God had been doing in and through them. God has been doing many good things through this congregation. And, we are feeling the draining impact of covid. Except for our Zoom groups, we can't meet together in person to learn or to serve others in need in as many ways as we did before Covid. Yet Paul invites us to live through this wilderness season with the confidence that God will guide us as a parish through this disruptive season and help us continue the good work God has begun to do in and through us as a parish.

Then Paul prays that their love may overflow more and more, helping them recognize what God expects them to do in their wilderness situation, through the help of Christ, for the glory and praise of God. Like Paul, we can dare to pray "that our love may overflow more and more" in this wilderness season.

You and I do not know what the future will be for Covid, for our nation, for our lives, or the lives of family, friends and neighbors we care about, or for this parish. We do know that you and I will be tempted to live with constant anxiety and fear about all these unknowns. John and Paul remind us this morning to be aware of these temptations, and to repent and turn away from getting stuck in anxieties and fears. The unknowns are real, but so is God's presence, with all of us, in our wilderness experiences. Like Paul, we can ask God to help us focus on finding gratitude, joy, confident trust in God, overflowing love for others, finding God's guidance when we don't know the way, and praying for others in their wilderness situations. This is the kind of change, repentance, renewed focus God calling all of us to practice in our experience of wilderness during this Advent.

I invite you to take your Scripture insert home with you this week, and to read the Philippines passage every day. Ask God what changes God might be inviting you to make in your life each day, so you can experience God guiding and sustaining you through this wilderness time, as God guided Paul through his wilderness time.

Let us pray. Be aware that Jesus is here among us, looking at each of us with his eyes of knowing love,...soak in the warmth of his love for you right now...in the silence, ask Jesus what little changes he might be inviting you to make to sustain you and prepare the way for him to come into your life in new ways this week, in the midst of your wilderness experiences...

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.