

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
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Second Sunday in Advent B – December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, 2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

C: AMEN!

On August 1, 2020, the Sarah K. Evans Plaza opened in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. (“Sarah K. Evans Inclusive Public Art Project,” accessed August 20, 2020, <http://sarahkevansproject.com/>.) Evans, known formerly as Private Evans, is now 91 years old, and reflects on the seemingly unremarkable event that has led to public recognition almost 70 years later. In 1952 Private Evans was on her way home from her first military assignment, when she refused to move to the back of the bus. Upon refusing, she was taken to jail and detained for 13 hours. Evans sued the Interstate Commerce Commission for discrimination. Despite a judicial victory in November of 1955, the ruling was not enforced until 1961.

Meanwhile, in March of 1955, a young black teenager, Claudette Colvin, refused to give up her bus seat to a white person. Having been exposed to the actions of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, Colvin was emboldened to resist the injustice she experienced on the city bus. As a result, she was handcuffed and arrested. And like Evans, her story was hidden until recent years.

Before there was a Rosa Parks, the Civil Rights icon attributed with prompting the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, there was Sarah Evans and Claudette Colvin. These trailblazing young women set in motion that which would be later attributed to Parks. Their names are scarcely, if at all, associated with the Civil Rights Movement, yet their actions precipitated one of the most pivotal events of the time. Evans preceded Colvin who preceded Parks. Just as John preceded Jesus.

We are gifted with this historical and theological observation by the Rev. Dr. Courtney V. Buggs, Visiting Assistant Professor of Homiletics at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, IN. Buggs, Courtney V., “Commentary on Matthew 1:1-8, Working Preacher,” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-mark-11-8-5>.

Although we usually don’t pay attention to forerunners – often because we don’t even know about them – they are necessary to the work of the world-changing actors who

come after them; the names of the people who have bought about significant cultural change are those we **do** know and remember.

Today we consider how John came before Jesus, how he prepared the people and the structures of their society for Jesus' ministry. We will be spending most of this liturgical year with Mark as our Gospel guide. His account of Jesus' ministry doesn't include a genealogy like Matthew's or Luke's, it doesn't contain the beautiful and compelling narratives of Jesus' birth and childhood, as Matthew's and Luke's do. Mark's doesn't have the magnificent poetry of John's Gospel, as he describes the beginning of Jesus' rule at "the creation of the heavens and the earth." Mark's Gospel is shorter than the three others of our Bible, but it provides us with a rich understanding of the impact of the incarnation of God through Jesus of Nazareth which deepens our faith.

Mark introduces us to John with words from the ancient prophet, Isaiah. They are the Word of God, delivered to the people of Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, when the people were deported to Babylon, to serve as servants of the leaders of one of their traditional enemies.

And then Mark describes this intriguing figure:

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. (1:4-6.)

Although John didn't live like the people to whom he proclaimed the coming of a new reality for them, they apparently weren't put off by his attire and diet. They flocked to hear him: both the urbanites (artisans, and the like) from the city of Jerusalem and the rural, agricultural residents of the Judean countryside. In order to hear John, people abandoned their usual social groupings and traveled into the severe

People in first century Judea didn't do much traveling. Most of them lived a hand-to-mouth existence, with their daily work focused on obtaining the food they needed to survive that very day. Travel was primarily by foot, and people went in groups for safety. The wilderness didn't provide plants or animals fit for food that the crowds could consume, so they had to bring their provisions for the time they were in the wilderness hearing John's proclamation and receiving a baptism of repentance – unless they were inclined to join John in dining on locusts and wild honey.

Why did John preach – and offer this ritual washing far away from the Jerusalem Temple and synagogues in surrounding areas? Mark doesn't give us a pedigree for John, as Luke does. (Remember that Luke describes John as Jesus' cousin and the son of Zechariah, the priest (1:5-80)). So in that society, if John wasn't born to a priest, he wasn't socially permitted to function as a priest. He couldn't offer the familiar rite of washing or baptizing in a religious institution. But he had the independence to do so in the wilderness.

What brought the people into the wilderness to receive John's ministry? It was not a new experience for the people of Judea to be in the wilderness. Their ancestors had experienced two generations of wandering in that inhospitable terrain after they fled from slavery in Egypt and before they settled in the area that had been called Canaan, that ultimately became Judea and Israel. And God had cared for them, had provided for them, and had guided them throughout those years. They wandered for so long because they had to repent of their complaints about losing the pleasures they'd had in Egypt, and while they repented of their idolatry with the golden calf while Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the law from God.

It can be said that John was proclaiming a **new** exodus to the people of Judea; maybe one free of Roman oppression. More likely, it was to be one that would bring an entirely new way of living to the people. Maybe it was the institutional memory of what the chosen people had gained and learned in the wilderness 1500 years before, that brought the people of Jerusalem and Judea to the wilderness to accept John's proclamation.

What else might it mean that Mark locates John in the wilderness? We think of the wilderness as a dry, barren, unwelcoming place; one where survival is a challenge. Another term for it is "desert." What's it like to try to survive in the wilderness? Many of us may feel that we have been living in a type of emotional desert for the last nine months. We've only been able to get our necessities under carefully controlled conditions, and many of us have been able to do our work only from our homes. But many others have been confined, without any of our former joys from public interaction through dining out, arts events, or travel, for example. There's not been much to brighten the days for many of us. Others, whose work has been prohibited by the required separation we've come to understand is the safe way to live, have had to try to find new ways to fill their days – and to make a living. And then there are those of us who have worked almost without ceasing, to provide medical care and other services and items that are essential to others for their survival. They accepted this demanding and challenging work schedule, despite the fact that participation meant repeated exposure to the virus.

But the wilderness is not always a dangerous, desperate place. Pastor Buggs enlightens us again, this time with theologian Delores Williams'

different version of the wilderness, one rooted in the experiences of enslaved persons and that remains present in the traditions of many American Black churches. Rather than a place to be feared, Williams reinterprets wilderness through the lens of the biblical Hagar: wilderness is a place of struggle *and* Spirit, both problematic *and* promising. For in the wilderness, Hagar meets God. Hagar's experiences become symbolic of the African American experience of wilderness as both sacred and struggle-ridden. "For African American slaves," writes Williams, "the wilderness did not bear the negative connotations that mainline white pioneer culture assigned to it." Further, "The wilderness was a positive place conducive to uplifting the spirit and to strengthening religious life."

(Williams, Delores S., *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2013).) (Ibid., Buggs.)

Have you felt yourself to be in the wilderness? Has it been a desert for you, or a place of struggle **and** Spirit? Have you continued to hear John's proclamation even though your life has been turned upside down? Have you felt your spirit uplifted and your religious life strengthened? Have you confessed your sin and repented, to receive forgiveness?

Isaiah spoke the word of the Lord to the people of Judah while they were in exile in Babylon,

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 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."
(40:1-2.)

How have you derived comfort from this time when we have been protecting ourselves from COVID-19? If you have felt yourself to be in the wilderness, what in that wilderness has brought comfort to you? Can you share that comfort with others to bring peace to them, as well?

Let's pray. Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to hear your word of comfort, to hear the call to repentance, to receive your strengthening love and share love with all creation in the name of Christ. In the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. **C: AMEN**