

“The Gospel That Begins in the Wilderness”
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
First Presbyterian Church of Greenlawn
The Rev. Frederick Woodward December 4, 2011

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NIV)

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

A voice says, “Cry out.” And I said, “What shall I cry?” “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!” See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Mark 1:1-8 (NIV)

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” – “a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, and make straight paths for him.’”

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The Gospel That Begins in the Wilderness

If it were your story to tell, how would you begin the Gospel or good news about Jesus Christ? Would you start it with a genealogy as Matthew did? Or would you launch into the birth of the baby Jesus as did both Matthew and Luke? Or would you skip the story of Jesus’ birth altogether, and start the Gospel at the very beginning of time, as did John?

Mark, like John, chooses to skip all the baby pictures, and begins the good news instead with an analogy. An analogy is a comparison or correspondence between two or more things.¹ For Mark, the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus in the wilderness preaching of John is analogous to or corresponds with an earlier word of prophecy. And that prophecy, which you heard read in verses two and three is: “*I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way- a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’*” (Mark 1:2-3).

If you want to know what the beginning the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the wilderness preaching of John is like, it’s like that earlier prophecy. But the prophecy to which Mark refers is not actually a single prophecy at all, but three prophecies all wrapped up in one.

The first prophecy, and the easiest to spot, is from Isaiah: “*a voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God’*” (Isa. 40:3). In its original context, that prophecy concerned the role that God’s angels or messengers would have in preparing the way through the wilderness for the return of the Israelites who had been living in captivity after their exile to Babylonia. As scholar Raymond Brown put it, “Like a modern bulldozer the angels were to level hills and fill in the valleys, and thus prepare a superhighway. But John the Baptist is to prepare a road, not for God’s people to return to the promised land, but for God to come to his people. His baptizing and preaching in the desert was opening the hearts of men, leveling their pride, filling their emptiness, and thus preparing them for God’s intervention.”²

But Mark has intertwined that first prophecy from Isaiah with a later one from Micah: “See, I will send my messenger who will prepare *the way before me*” (Mal. 3:1). That messenger, identified with Elijah (Mal. 4:5), would clear the way by calling God’s people to repentance before the Day of the Lord. That Mark associates John the Baptist with Elijah is clear even from his description of John the Baptist as wearing “clothing ... made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist,” for that’s the very way Elijah himself was previously described (2 King 1:8).³

But that’s not all. Also intertwined with these two prophecies is a third one, a promise really, one given to the people of Israel in the wilderness, after they were freed from their captivity in Egypt. There, during their long wilderness wanderings, YHWH promised them, “See, *I am sending a messenger ahead of you* to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared” (Exodus 23:20). That angel or messenger of God had appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3:2), was associated with the pillar of fire and cloud (Ex.14:19, 24), accompanied the people as they crossed the Red Sea (Ex. 14:19), and continued to lead the Israelites on their way to the land flowing with milk and honey (Ex. 32:34; 33:2).

Now Mark didn’t patch together all these prophesies into one because he didn’t know his Bible. He knew Holy Scripture far better than any of us here. By combining

¹ Mark signals that he has an analogy or a comparison in mind by using a Greek word meaning “just as” (*kathos*), a word which is unfortunately left untranslated in NIV.

² Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John I-XII, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 50.

³ In a reference to John the Baptist at Mark 9:13, Jesus tells his disciples that “But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished...”

these prophecies all together into one and attributing that combined prophecy to Isaiah, Mark was letting these various prophecies and promises stew in each other's juices like a fine meal. Even more, by giving an intentional echo to key moments in the salvation history of the people of Israel, Mark was anchoring Jesus in Israel's historical faith and reminding his readers that neither John nor Jesus dropped out of the clear blue sky. Beginning the good news about Jesus in John the Baptist's wilderness preaching helps us to better understand Jesus in the context of the faith of Israel as it has been given us in our Old Testament which was, of course, Jesus' Bible.

And because it is so important, Mark also gives special emphasis to the wilderness motif (Mark 1:3, 4) that appears throughout our OT and NT. But because Mark is concerned more with the symbolism of the wilderness than with any precise geography, he doesn't trouble to report precisely where it was in the wilderness that John was preaching and baptizing, as did Matthew, Luke and John.⁴ It is enough for him to note that John was in the wilderness when he preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, and that he baptized all those who came to him in the River Jordan.

Mark knew that the people of Israel remained hugely ambivalent about the wilderness. Although YHWH announced his intention to rescue his people from Egypt, and to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex. 3:7-9), the fulfillment of that promise was a very long time in coming. Between oppression in Egypt and life in the promised land were forty long years of wilderness wandering. Forty years! "Wilderness," as Walter Brueggemann has put it, "is (therefore) not simply an in-between place which makes the journey longer. It is not simply a sandy place demanding more stamina. It is space far away from ordered land."⁵

A place where nothing could grow, the wilderness was a land without promise or hope, a space both lifeless and formless, a symbol of chaos as potent as that of the waters at the time of creation. For the people of Israel, the wilderness juxtaposed the peril of landlessness with the promise of the land. As such, it posed a huge test of faith, a test the Israelites largely failed. For the wilderness was the site of their grumbling, protest and outright disobedience. It became a place of historical judgment (Ps. 95:8-11; Ezek. 20:10-16), and it was also the place where the prophets anticipated that the future judgment would later occur (Ezek. 20:35).

And yet, the wilderness was also a site of God's provision, where YHWH rained bread down from heaven (Ex. 16:4), gave the Israelites meat to eat (Ex. 16:8, 13; Numb. 11:31-32), and water to satisfy their thirst (Ex. 17:1-7). As such, "(t)he 'wilderness' represented the place where God would once again act to deliver the people."⁶ For the wilderness was the region through which God both led and sustained his people (Deut. 8:16; Neh. 9:21; Hos. 13:15). Even more, the wilderness was the place where it was anticipated that God might yet again show grace and mercy to Israel (Isa. 35:1-7; 43:19; 51:3; Hos. 2:14-15).

⁴ According to Matthew, John's preaching took place in the wilderness of Judea (Matt. 3:1); according to Luke, in the country around the Jordan (Luke 3:3), and according to John, at Bethany, on the other side of the Jordan (John 1:28).

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 29.

⁶ Robert A. Guelich, *Word Biblical Commentary, 34A, Mark 1- 8:26* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), p. 18. Guelich notes that "the 'wilderness' motif expresses the eschatological hope of the Exodus typology found in Hos. 2:14; 12:9 (cf. Micah 7:14-15) and especially in Isaiah (e.g., 40:3-4; 41:18-19; 43:19-20; 48:29-31; 51:9-11)."

And so it is especially appropriate that the Gospel or good news of Jesus begins with John's proclamation in the wilderness. And it is appropriate that this is an Advent reading for us today because many, if not most of us, also greet the Advent or coming of Christ with memories of our own wilderness wanderings, memories even of exile.

For some of us here, that experience was very concrete, as it was for my wife and in-laws, who packed up what belongings they could and left their homeland just after the Cuban revolution. But even those of us who have been raised in this land our whole lives long know about wilderness and exile in a *spiritual* sense. We experience the wilderness spiritually whenever the gap grows grown impossibly wide between promise and fulfillment. We experience the wilderness in a spiritual sense whenever we begin to lose what it is that seems to keep us rooted in this life. We are deep in a spiritual wilderness whenever our thanksgiving has turned to complaint, whenever we begin to lose confidence in the provisioning of God, whenever we hedge our spiritual bets by making other spiritual arrangements by which to live, and whenever we seek other forms of sustenance than have been given us by the grace of God.

There was a wilderness time in my own life when all the plans I had made for myself apart from God had begun to unravel almost all at once. My life became a holy mess. I had dropped out of graduate school where I had studied philosophy of all things. With little prospect of a real job, I had moved to San Diego, which everyone knows is a coastal desert. As if that were not quite enough wilderness for me, I also made frequent camping trips in those days to the deserts outside San Diego and Los Angeles.

To camp alone in the desert was an awesome experience, and one of the things that made it so was that it was possible to spend entire days and even weeks in the desert without either seeing or speaking to a single human being. It was the wordlessness of the desert wilderness made it especially haunting.

The Hebrew name for wilderness is *midbar*, a compound word formed from the noun *dabar*, which means "word," and the negative prefix "m." It was in the *midbar*, that wordless place of both threat and promise, that John the Baptist proclaimed a word of repentance, hope, and grace. It was in that wordless wilderness that John the Baptist became a herald for Jesus the Christ, the very One who came to be called the Word of God. And it is in the wordless wilderness of our own lives that the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Word of God, often begins to take particular hold of us. Can you remember when the Word of God first erupted in your own spiritual wilderness, and began to transform both it and you? Can you remember? I think many of you can. I know I can.

When I began this reflection, I asked how you might begin the Gospel if it were your own story to tell. And as I end it, I remind you that the Gospel is indeed your own story, even as it is my own, to tell. The Gospel is, of course, not our private good news. It is not even so much about us as it is about what God has done through his Son, Jesus the Messiah, in his birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection from the dead. But although it is not in the first instance about us, the Gospel has also come to include us.

And so, as we continue into Advent, let us listen for the Word of God John announced not only in the wilderness around the river Jordan, but in the wilderness that may surround our lives even now. For only that Word can transform barrenness into fertility, curse into blessing, and sorrow into joy. Only Jesus, the Word of God, toward whom John pointed us in the wilderness, can sustain us for the journey we are all still making to the land of promise. Halleluiah and amen!