

FROM THE WILDERNESS

[Written in oral form]

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28
Advent 3, Year B

December 13, 2020
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Advent 2 and Advent 3 both include passages about John the Baptist. A week ago Saturday, I emailed Carmen and asked if she would be preaching about John. She replied yes, and she would focus on the Wilderness aspect.

I responded, "Oh Poop."

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Instead of changing directions for my sermon, I concluded that if the Lectionary selection considered John the Baptist important enough to use twice, then so be it. After all, John did do the preparation for Jesus.

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Carmen wonderfully presented a lot about "wilderness." She noted it exposed vulnerability. It can be a place of depravity and struggle. Carmen highlighted that Wilderness often prompts ontological questions, such as: What is important? What can I do without? What to release?

I will build on that,... with a slight twist.
I think Wilderness is a place of balance, even wholeness, especially in regards to nature. Pristine wilderness is in balance.

We humans can go out into the wild and fight it, and that is miserable existence. We can even defeat it, yet self and much more will be lost. Consider the Amazon Jungle.

Wilderness is nature in balance, with little interference and few conquering humans. Interestingly, an invasive human will rarely see an animal in the wilderness.

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My place of restoration has been nature's wilderness.

I first realized this in 1974. Previously, I had done a fair amount of backpacking, to such places as provincial parks and the Appalachian trail. None of those places were what I consider "wilderness."

Searching for a bigger challenge, I went to Jasper National Park, with two friends, to explore the back-country beyond the beaten trail.

We had to register at the park office so they would know when to go searching for us if we did not sign in after our estimated time frame.

They warned us that area we were going was known to have lots of grizzly bears. We had our invasive bells on our backpack, so we felt prepared.  
*I found out years later, that annoying dingle does not deter bears.*

Early the next day, the three of us commenced the daunting 7 hour, serpentine hike up Old Horn mountain. The climb was exhausting.

I call this part of the backpacking hike the "purge."  
Meaningful backpacking needs a purge. It is the shedding of civilized comfort and conveniences.

The purge is like repentance.  
It is the letting go in the pursuit of a better place or better way.  
It is being on the road to restoration.

However, the purge need not be physical, yet it usually is painful, and even may include tears.

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Once we reached the tree line, we ventured away from the trail.
Getting above the tree line was essential for sanity's sake.
The trillions of vicious mosquitoes were left behind.

We climbed a little farther up and found a suitable area for camping.
There was a stream of melted snow nearby and the view of the Tonquin Valley was breath taking.
After setting us the tent and making a fire pit, we explored the area around our campsite. In a field of snow, nearby, there was a significant disturbance and lots of blood in the snow. Large bear prints were visible, too.

This was chilling, and not because of the snow. We were relieved that our search did not discover a carcass, which would have been revisited.

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We took the necessary precautions.  
Even though our tent was a good distance from where we ate and our stored food, and we changed clothes after eating, it was still very unnerving to settle down in the tent.

It was a unique sensation trying to fall asleep knowing a grizzly bear was in the area.

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Following a batch of sincere, hyper-ventilated prayers,... I eased into a wonderful calm. I was being restored.

I ceased praying for protection, and entered into formless prayer of presence.
I felt part of nature.
I was no longer the powerful, the selfish or the arrogant creature.

I was no longer buffered from threat or calamity.
I was just a speck in the universe. I was part of the whole.

I came to the awareness of **God**,.....but NOT my personal God, not a God who waited to serve me.

No, this awareness was a God for all / a God in all, including me.
I was no more or no less important than a bear or a mosquito.

It was a holy moment.
I slept peaceful that night.

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From the wilderness is the call to be restored.  
From the wilderness we can find wholeness.  
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For over 30 years, I have gone to the wilderness to find restoration, sometimes twice a year.

I did return to the Tonquin Valley, but the mountains are a long way off. So, I found an area about two hours north of Sudbury.
The nearest town is Sultan. Maybe 100 people live there, and it is surrounded by an 8 foot electrified fence... to keep the wilderness out.

That is very telling. We humans tend to regard the wilderness as a threat. We put up walls and barriers. Too bad.

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I would usually go to that place in the fall when it was cooler and the parks were closed.

One time, a friend from New York City joined me.  
*He did NOT find that peaceful, easy feeling.*  
In fact, it freaked him out.  
With fearful intensity he bemoaned, "It's too quiet. I can hear my brain. .... No one knows where we are! .....We are hundreds of miles from anywhere!"

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The wilderness calls one to release / to change / to let go.

My friend refused. He refused to repent the past.

We left earlier than planned.
He did not leave the wilderness refreshed and with a passion for wholeness, justice and healing.

In way, he fought the wilderness, and did not receive the gift of wholeness.
It was not a good experience for him, and his definition of wilderness is the one too often used.
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In the early 1980's, I discovered another, different wilderness.  
I was introduced to Cape Hatteras for the purpose of surfing.

Cape Hatteras is on a sand bar 55 miles out in the ocean from the North Carolina mainland. It is a fairly desolate place, but it is near the continental shelf. This means the waves are bigger.

I went to Hatteras almost every year, for over 20 years.

The surfing is fun, but surfing is not that wilderness experience.

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To catch the even bigger waves, a person has to go farther out, beyond where most of the waves are breaking.

Every 20 to 30 minutes, a set of bigger waves will arrive.

It is out alone, rising up and down in the ocean, waitingis where I found wilderness.

I was far from the beach, out where the sharks and big fish travel.

One time, a huge pilot whale nearly ran into me.

Again, I felt like a speck in the universe.

I was neither prey nor predator. I was merely present, and the cadence of time disappeared.

Rarely did I catch a wave that far out.

I was simply searching to be restored,.....and I was.

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I still have my backpack I bought in 1971. It is like a relic / an icon that reminds me of some astonishing experiences. I no longer have my surf board. It broke, and I don't want to talk about that.

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To be sure, the "Wilderness" is not really a place or location.

And, it need not be in nature's pristine domain. The wilderness is wholeness and balance.

The wilderness is where and when we find clarity and wholeness.

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For physical reasons, I can no longer go out into nature's wilderness, and that is disappointing. I miss that.

However, I am discovering that now **the** wilderness is coming to me.

Moreover, I think it always did. For whatever reason, I rarely recognized it when I was younger.

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God will and does call us from the wilderness.

It may be through the words of Isaiah with his message of wholeness, justice and healing for all.

Can you hear the beckoning call?

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me....

.. go... do.. bring good news, bind up the broken,..... comfort all who mourn... proclaim liberty."

Find the wholeness / restore the wholeness.

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God spoke through John the Baptist.

He called out IN the wilderness; he was IN the wilderness.

He called out: Prepare.... Be ready.... change.... Repent.... to receive the fullness of time / the light of the world, the peace we so desperately need.

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I am convinced that no matter where we are, who we are or what we believe, there will be times in our lives that God will call to us from the wilderness.

The profound call may happen just before surgery,..... or during a beautiful sunset.....or with friends.....or without friends during a pandemic.

The situation or context matters little.  
What matters is how we respond when invited to transform / to find wholeness.

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My New York friend resisted and fought back, and that is an option.

Another option is to risk something big for something good.

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One of my favourite theological concepts is Ex Nihilo.  
Ex Nihilo is Greek for "from nothing."  
It is from Genesis one. God created out of nothing.

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I do think we need to discover "Nothing" in order to be recreated.

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The hymn of response is "It came upon a midnight clear."
We will hear us singing it a year ago.

The song was written in 1849 by Edmund Sears, a Unitarian minister.
He wrote it during a difficult time in his life.
It is a song for peace in response to the Mexican-American War.

We now consider it a Christmas carol, yet that was not it's intent. There is No mention of Bethlehem or baby Jesus.

Nevertheless, it has the same message of hope, wholeness and peace.

The song is a voice from the wilderness heard 2,500 years ago, 2,000 years ago, 171 years ago, one year ago.....and we hear it NOW.

God is calling from the wilderness.

Peace be with you.