

Preparing in the Wilderness
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Isaiah 40: 1-11, Mark 1: 1-15

If you've ever been tent camping and heard the creatures that can roam around hunting in the middle of the night, you know that the wilderness can be a scary place. If a bear doesn't get you, you're still at the mercy of the weather and the wild. The Israelites knew a little about wilderness. They knew about the wilderness of being slaves in Egypt for 400 years. After they got out, they crossed through the Red Sea and wandered around in the wilderness for another 40 years.

Ironically, it was during that season of wandering that the Israelites were solidified as a people. That was when they grew to trust God, to know God, and they were given the commands of God, solidifying them as a nation.

The commandments they were given could be summarized in two categories. One was that they would be a people epitomized by love, they would love God and that they would love others. The second was that they would be a people of justice. All throughout the Old Testament, Israelites were reminded "you came out of slavery, remember what it's like to be on the bottom". But they didn't. As soon as they got a little power, or a little wealth, it became more like "every man for himself". Even in the season of judges and the season of kings, there's this slow drift that starts to happen to the nation of Israel until God finally puts a holy foot down and says, "This isn't what I had in mind for you."

"You were supposed to be a people of love and justice, but you're a people of idolatry and injustice and I just can't have it anymore." So, God sends the Babylonians in 586 to completely wipe out and destroy Israel. The people are taken off into exile... just another wilderness to endure. And it's into that exile that Isaiah is prophesying.

There's a lot of debate about the book of Isaiah — when it was written and whether it's Isaiah standing in exile or just looking forward to exile. In order to really understand what the prophet is saying, you need to understand the heart of a wilderness wanderer.

It's like when your child throws a temper tantrum or is just having an absolute breakdown. If you're a parent, you've experienced that moment when it almost feels like your kids are inconsolable. They may be hungry,

or tired, or coming down with a cold, or bored out of their mind because the pandemic has ripped nearly every fun thing like movie theaters, play dates, and cousins getting together for the holidays (I have a feeling it's not just my house experiencing that!). You know that they are emotionally dysregulated because they've experienced a total loss of control and hope.

This is the same emotional state Isaiah finds Israel in. Is there anyone to comfort? Is there anyone who hears? Is there anyone coming to our aid? Comfort could be defined as relational, that which comes alongside us to fortify us, to strengthen us, to build us up. Comfort points us to a better day, like a loved one throwing their arms around us.

We experience the wilderness in all sorts of situations. Maybe it's a circumstance that you're walking through right now. You say to yourself, "I don't know how this is ever going to work itself out." Maybe it's problems with a relationship and there's a seed of bitterness you just can't seem to stamp out. Is there any comfort? Maybe you are experiencing spiritual wilderness and you feel like you're wandering, and God seems so distant. It's a common lament of humanity. You've cried it and I've cried it. It's part of our universal language because we live in a world that's broken. Is there any comfort?

In 1741 George Frederic Handel wrote one of the greatest Christmas pieces ever written. He began his oratorio *The Messiah* with these words, "Comfort. Comfort is coming." Comfort is on the way. Your God is coming. Your God is on the move. Can you imagine for Israel standing so many years in exile how hard that would have been to believe?

It is a wilderness-wandering type of a comfort. Your God is making a highway that's coming to you, not to just take you out of the wilderness, but to meet you in it. Comfort is coming and it's coming IN your wilderness. That's the power of this passage. It's not just taking you out of it, it's meeting you in it.

And a voice, clear as day, says, "Prepare the way." Does that sound familiar to anyone? There's a new promise that's being fulfilled and it's happening right in our midst. If you've ever watched a movie about Jesus, it probably had John the Baptist in it. He's one of my favorite gospel characters, with his crazy hair, a coat made of camel skin, he's eating bugs and honey. Right? They always get John the Baptizer right in the movies because he makes you go, "Oh, he's a lunatic!" And he was!

John is doing what the prophets often did... he's acting out what he's talking about. He doesn't just go to the civic center of Jerusalem and say that God's

coming. No, no, no. He goes out to the wilderness. Outside of the city, where the land is barren, where the water is sparse, and where the ground is dry, and he says, "Prepare! Get ready!" You don't have to leave the wilderness to encounter your God. He builds a highway to meet you there. In all the dryness. In all the desolation. In the barrenness, and the pain, and the failure, and the regret.... God comes! That's what Advent is supposed to remind us: God uses the barren wilderness to birth beautiful life.

God's promise is that the mountains will be made low, the valleys will be lifted up, and the rough and uneven ground will become a level plain. The way will be prepared. This is not so that we might get out, but so that God in Christ might get in.

There is no situation in which God cannot come to you. Isaiah ([sounding a lot like Diana Ross](#)) reminds us that there is no mountain high enough, no valley low enough, no ground rough enough to keep God from coming to you.

I would argue that this is the point, and the power, of the wilderness. It's the moment when we throw our hands up in the air and go, "I don't know what else I can do here." That's when the wilderness pushes back against our rugged, Western individualism, reminding us that we cannot do this on our own. Self-sufficiency dies in the wilderness.

We need to get this, this Christmas season: you don't need to leave the wilderness to encounter God. There's a highway being built and God is coming to meet you there! Everybody's going to see it and every valley shall be raised up and every mountain will be made low. Get ready.

Friends, this is the good news of the gospel: it's safe to cry out. Our hope is rooted in the assurance that God pays personal, tender, and powerful attention. What wilderness do you need God to meet you in? What comfort are you crying out for? The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Hope has an arm around our shoulders, even now. So the prophet says, "Prepare!" Stir your heart, anticipate. Like kids on Christmas Eve night putting out milk and cookies to welcome Santa to their house. Get ready! Get ready in your dryness, get ready in your despair, get ready in your barrenness, in your wilderness. Get ready to encounter your God. Amen.