

The Wilderness
Christ Episcopal Church December 9, 2018
Advent 2C The Rev. Dcn. Alberta Brown Buller

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.

Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.” Please be seated.
Today, Luke’s opening words might look something like this:

In the second year of the Presidency of Donald J. Trump, alongside Attorney General Jeff Sessions- Oops, I mean acting Acting Attorney General Matthew Whittaker,

when Jerry Brown was governor of California and Justin the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and Marc the Bishop of the Diocese of California... You get the idea.

Back then, people didn’t measure time the way we do now. They measured time by tracking the reign of important people.

I think that Luke wanted to let the hearers of this Gospel know these are important people he is naming. People who held lives in their hands. And then he brings John the Baptizer into the mix. Compared to this group, John is a nobody from nowhere. It doesn’t even say he comes from a town. He’s from the wilderness.

In our scriptures, we are often reminded that God often chooses unlikely people. God chose David, a young boy whose father didn’t even include him to stand with the sons he presented to Samuel for consideration. God chose Mary, a young girl living in a small town. Some paintings depict her in a magnificent gown with gold jewelry when the angel Gabriel comes to her with the news she is to be the mother of God. But I prefer a painting I once saw: In it, Mary is a young woman walking along a dusty road in a simple dress, carrying a bucket as she walked to the well, when she is surprised by an angel.

And what about Abraham, Moses, and Noah? They’d been ordinary guys when God chose them. They never would have imagined we would still be talking about them today. I think of one of my favorite women in the bible, the Samaritan woman (Remember, she’d had 5 husbands and the man she was with presently living with, was actually not her husband?) She and Jesus meet at the well. She came to the well during the hottest part of the day, maybe to avoid stares and the gossip of her neighbors. But it is while in her own personal wilderness that she is able to meet Jesus. No matter her history or the gossip spread about her, she met Jesus!
Unlikely places. Unlikely people.

I feel as though we are all traveling through the wilderness. Children taken from their parents and placed in jails, human suffering at our borders on a scale never before seen, Fires. I thought last year’s fires were the worst of the worst. That was until this year.

What will next year be like? The natural disasters, the endless wars in the Middle East, the devastation of Yemen and its people that doesn't make it to the nightly news, the rise in bigotry and prejudice in my own country. The bullies not only in our school yards but in our government.

What has happened to us? How have we turned so far from love and for caring for one another? Author Anne Lamott says, "This is a hard planet to live on."

Sometimes it is easy to feel that all is lost. But now more than ever the Church must rise up and be a visible presence of love in the world.

It's up to us to carry the Gospel message out into the world. It is the time to let neighbors, co-workers and everyone know that you're a Christian.

How? I defer to Matthew Chapter 5: "And so let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven."

I defer to words attributed to St. Francis: "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary use words."

What better time of year to do so when even our atheist neighbors are putting up Christmas trees? When those who haven't set foot in a church since their baptism, are singing "O, Come all ye faithful and Joy to the world. "

Our Presiding Bishop reminds us that we are the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement. We are those voices crying out in the wilderness.

Here in Marin, here in this wilderness, you may be the only bible a person ever knows.

John the Baptizer asks us to prepare the way for Christ to come again. The word repent occurs in Luke / Acts 14 times and 34 total times in the New Testament. How best do we do this?

Repent. Not in the PTL Club or Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker way. Not by going door to door on Saturday mornings.
But by Metanoia.

Metanoia, which means making a decision to change by turning around and taking a new direction, a new path. Taking a new aim. By refocusing.

Put on new eyes and see the world and one another a little bit differently.

When we are transformed we begin to transform the world around us. And little by little this goodness spreads.

Little by little we become ready to receive the grace of God.

Little by little we share this grace with those around us.

Little by little like a ripple in a stream, this grace and goodness spreads farther and farther out into the world.

There's a sweet story I enjoy telling about my mother. She began showing signs of Alzheimer's at a fairly young age.

Years later when she worsened and could no longer care for herself, my siblings and I placed her in a nursing home.

Now my mother had worked in a factory for 25 years. She was a college graduate, but because of the times we lived in, she could only find work in a factory. She'd punched a time clock day in and day out for years.

Although she was living in a nursing home, and although her mind may have failed her, she still wanted to work.

So she'd follow the aids around imitating what they did-cleaning up and making beds.

That was all great until she saw the workers punching their time cards into a time clock. This must have brought back memories because she began to imitate that too.

You see, she'd had a time card and time clock in the factory. I suppose she thought this was the same thing. She worked. Then she started punching time cards.

Everyone's time cards. She'd just pick a time card and punch it at whatever time made sense to her. You might imagine this made a mess of payroll for the nursing home staff. But one of the aids put on a new lens. She took a moment and saw things in a different way. This aid continued to give her jobs to do. But most brilliant of all, she gave her a big hot pink colored time card that stood out from all the other beige ones.

My mother understood this was her time card and that she could punch in and out to her hearts content.

This worker transformed my mother's world for her. She adjusted her lens and was able to see things in a new way and give a very sick woman who was trying to navigate through the wilderness of dementia, a bit of joy.

Advent is the time to reflect on these questions: Where can I adjust my own lens just a little bit?

Is there any clutter in the path that needs to be cleared away? Am I heading in the right direction?

Am I the person God expects me to be?

Unlikely people. Unlikely places. That's each and every one of us.

This isn't a perfect world. Everything is not the way we would want it to be. We are each journeying through some sort of wilderness of our own.

There are wars being fought across the globe, we've done irreparable damage to our planet, people suffer from terrible diseases, neighbors fight against neighbor, families live in turmoil.

During these quiet, contemplative days of Advent, I invite you to pray for the 96 people who are killed by guns every day in our country. More than 600,000 have been either killed or injured since the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy six years ago, when 20- 6 and 7 year old children and 6 adults were killed. Our children and grandchildren are spending more time in active shooter drills, at school, than they do in fire drills.

After Sandy Hook I thought, "Surely, this will never happen again". I was wrong.

Salvation cannot come soon enough. Can it? But, guess what? It's here.

It's here when we come together in Jesus's name. It's here because Jesus is present in the lives of all of us, speaking to us through the Scriptures, present in the person next to you, the one behind you and also present in the one in front of you.

Metanoia. Like taking hold of fine binoculars in order to see the most beautiful sight, re-focus my lens.

I leave you with one of my favorite quotes: Life is short and we have too little time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind. Amen.

Henri-Frederic Amiel