

Pastor Jon's Sermon for the 2nd Sunday in Advent on 12/8/2024 based on Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6.

"We need to go through wilderness before we get to the manger"

How are your Christmas preparations going? I know for some, it is going well, and others I talked to this week... it's hard, especially if you are grieving a loss. It's hard to try to carry on the traditions when you don't have the get up and go.

But I did notice a lot of hustle and bustle out there when I picked up a gift at Scheels that I ordered online. It was packed and hard to get in and out of there. On my way out, I thought to myself, boy we really got this part of Christmas down. The whole shopping thing.

In church, however, during the season of Advent, before we get to the manger, we first need to head out into the wilderness... to hear John the Baptist Preach. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. To hear his message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Repentance means to have a change of heart or mind. To turn from the things that are destructive and hurtful in our lives... to make an about face. To have a broken heart over things we have done or left undone. Then God's grace enters in, clean us up, and send us out to share the love of Jesus with others.

In our first lesson, the prophet Malachi speaks of a messenger who will come on the scene to prepare the way for the Messiah to come. His message will be compared to a refiner's fire and fuller's soap. We read that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of this prophecy.

A refiner works with metal, separating the impurities... the dross... from the pure metal under high heat. A refiner knows that all the impurities are out when he or she peaks into the crucible and looks for their reflection in the metal. When the reflection is absolutely clear, no spots, or blemishes, then they know the silver is pure. A refiner's fire when applied to our lives sounds painful. Fire changes things. And Change is hard for us.

Fuller's soap is a strong, alkaline soap, made from the ashes of Asiatic soap plants, which were burned to create a pasty mass. The soap was used to bleach things like wool and remove stains and spots. For

example, dirty, sheared wool goes to the fuller, whose job it was to scrub the wool with soap to clean and untangle it, making it fuller, so it can be made into yarn. In our early American history, the fuller's soap would be akin to lye soap like fels naptha. Because of the alkaline properties of lye killed most of the bacteria and helped people stay healthier.

By listening to the prophet's words to repent and acting on them, the purified people then presented offerings to the Lord in righteousness. They were changed and wanted to give back to the Lord in thankfulness.

In our Gospel from Luke 3, it reminds me of the Beatles song, nowhere man. John the Baptist was a real nowhere man living in a nowhere land. And yet people travelled out to the wilderness to hear his alternative message of repentance for forgiveness of sins and hope of a new king coming to town in Jesus.

Luke sets the scene for John's ministry in history. The really important people... the powerful political and religious leaders, like Emperor Tiberius, Governor Pontius Pilate, Herod the Ruler of Galilee, and the high priests of Annas and Caiaphus were not the ones to whom "the word of God came". It didn't come to the temple or the city center. Rather, it was sent to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. It came to a camel fur wearing, bug eating, honey loving prophet.

This is how God works in the story leading up to Christmas. God works through the most unlikely people in the most unlikely places. God lifts up the voices crying out in the wilderness for peace and justice. That means God works through us too. We too can relate to wilderness times in our lives and give testimony to God's presence in the wilderness. Times of grief. Times of the unknown. Times when we feel lost. God wants to level the playing field so all people could have access to God's love and justice.

Today, God's Word is like a refiner's fire and fuller's soap. The word can turn us, convict us, and change us. It can make us more generous. It can give us more grace and love for others. It says you are forgiven. It can make us less judgmental. It can give us hope. And even though

we continue to struggle with our sin and the impurities in our hearts and minds, our faith and baptism cleanse us daily. Holy Communion gives us a fresh start... it creates a new and clean heart in us.

Debie Thomas points out in her lectionary blog from 2021 says it this way: “Maybe, if we can get past our baggage and follow John out into the wilderness, we’ll find comfort in the fact that we don’t have to pretend to be perfect anymore. We don’t have to deny the truth, which is that we struggle, and stumble, and make mistakes, and mess up. We can face the reality that we are fallible human beings, prone to wander, and incapable of living up to our own ideals. And — most importantly — we can fall with abandon and relief into the forgiving arms of a God who loves us as we are.

And when we know this, we can’t help but to be changed, to have repentant hearts, and want to give back. And may God use our voices too crying out in the wilderness for peace and justice in our world.

Amen