

OUT IN THE WILDERNESS
Preached by: Sandra Olsen
Center Church on the Green in New Haven
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Luke 3: 1-6

Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman were two great American 19th century poets, but they could not have been more different. Emily was the reclusive maiden of Amherst, MA, and Walt Whitman, well, let's just say he had a flair for the dramatic. The Dickinson family would sometimes take a vacation at the beach, and though Emily did not like to leave her home, she would on occasion accompany her family. Whitman also loved the beach, diving into the waves with exuberant joy, sometimes even running naked along the water's edge. Now imagine the very proper Emily Dickinson spreading her blanket upon the sand and suddenly meeting a wild and naked Whitman. Quite a shock, similar to the shock created by John the Baptist, who came upon the scene half naked, wearing a camel haired shirt and haranguing the crowds about the coming fire of judgment.

Of course, John was not on a beach holiday, but rather he was out in the wilderness. Now this word wilderness in the Bible is code language for a dangerous place where unusual things can happen, a place where God or Satan can make a claim on lives. Jesus, immediately after his baptism, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan for forty days and nights. Wilderness for the Jews would immediately spark memories of Sinai and the perilous journey of Moses and company for forty years before finally arriving at the Promised Land. That journey was far from easy, and it was especially

difficult for Moses, who had to put up with a lot of complaining and whining people, who blamed him for leading them to God knows where. And that is the most challenging thing about the wilderness: One does not always know where one is going. No wonder there is this powerful temptation, while traveling through the wilderness, to return to the known security of the past. No wonder the Jews lamented the fleshpots of Egypt they had left behind.

John the Baptist came from the wilderness to the River Jordan in order to baptize people. We can hazard a guess that those who came for a baptism of repentance were people on the edge, people who did not quite fit in, people who were so spiritually hungry they were willing to take a chance on a character who also did not fit in. The Temple elite did not apparently satisfy with too many rules and regulations about ritual purity and temple taxes. And then there were the outlying groups like the Essenes, who preached and practiced radical separation from society in preparation for the coming of God's Kingdom, and the Pharisees, who tried to renew the tradition by introducing new concepts---like oral interpretation of the law and the resurrection of the body. You see, there were different spiritual options around, and so people came to see what John the Baptist had to offer.

His message was radical, going to the root of the human condition, where sin lurks, but it was also familiar in that his words came from the prophet Isaiah, words spoken during another wilderness time, when in 587 BC, the Jewish elite were led in captivity to Babylon. It wasn't that they were slaves in Babylon; it was just that they were not home in Babylon. Jerusalem was a fading memory, especially as the original generation of captives died, and though many would adjust to the new life in Babylon, there were others, called the faithful remnant,

whose sole desire was to return. They felt themselves to be in the wilderness, but their hearts were turned toward Jerusalem, and in the midst of that exile, Isaiah spoke words of comfort and hope. And those words were repeated by John to the people coming to him for baptism: **“Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. Every valley shall be lifted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”**

Babylon was the past, but in John’s time the wilderness still was very real, at least for some Jews. They were not an independent nation, and Rome had a firm grip on their lives. Caesar Augustus had established the peace of Rome, but still there was a yearning for more than Rome could ever supply. And so notice how Luke names the concrete situation in which the Jews find themselves. This is the time, the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and King Herod was the ruler of Galilee. In other words, in this specific time and place, God acts and God will act. The Jews were a people of history, and their God acted in history. God was not some distant, ethereal spirit, who had nothing to do with time and place. No, God met and meets people in time and place, in the midst of their concerns and troubles, including political and economic issues. Just as God had met the people in the wilderness of Babylon, so too would God meet them where they were, in the land of Judea in the time of Tiberius.

Most of us at one time or another have experienced or will experience the wilderness. It may be when you lost a job and could not see around the corner to a new one, as the Jews in Babylon could not see the possibility of a new beginning. Perhaps you were in the wilderness after the love of your life walked

out on you, and you could feel the foundations shake beneath your feet. You were moving, but not going any place. Maybe you found yourself in the wilderness when someone whom you loved became seriously ill, and the only thing you could do was watch him or her descend deeper and deeper into the illness. Or perhaps your wilderness was when you became sick, and realized that your chronic illness would be a long, slow staggering journey through the wilderness. Or maybe you found yourself in the wilderness when nothing of any import has happened, but life just seems dull with no particular desire or goal moving you forward.

Churches too can find themselves in the wilderness. The culture changes, and the established ways of doing and being and worshipping just do not work in the same way. The sanctuary empties out, and we wonder why. What has gone wrong? On whom or on what can we place the blame? But what if there really is no blame, but only change that none of us fully understands. But God does not rely upon our understanding. If Isaiah and Malachi and Luke have anything to teach us, surely it is that God is always in the midst of things, always acting in the midst of concrete time and place, doing something new. As Isaiah would ask the people: Do you not see it?

Well, sometimes we do not see, just as there were Jews in Babylon who did not see, just as people in John's time did not see. Oh, they knew something was up; they realized things were out of joint, the same way many of us here recognize that things are out of joint. But what to do? Where is the King's Highway, as it was called, that highway leading through the wilderness that brings one to new life?

John came among the people preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And as that applied then, so too does it apply now. The premier sin of which all are guilty, no matter the time or place, is thinking it is all about us, about the survival of our own little realm. But it is not all about us; it is all about God, the God of Jesus Christ, who came and comes that all might have full and abundant life. How best can that life be made available to the people of New Haven and beyond? How best to respond to what God is already doing among us? Those are the questions demanding both your thoughts and your prayers. So think hard and pray hard. You can think and work as if it all depends upon you, but our prayers should know that it all depends upon God.