

"A VOICE FOR THE BEWILDERED"

Advent 2, Series C

Luke 3:1-6

December 4, 1994

revised December 10, 2006

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord...the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." (Luke 3:4-6)

It was a Sunday afternoon in December, sixty-five years ago, to be exact. Lovers of fine music had just finished listening to Handel's Messiah. Their ears were reverberating with Handel's majestic rendition of "Unto Us a Child Is Born," and the famed "Hallelujah Chorus." They had listened intently to the tenor soloist sing the words of Isaiah the prophet, *"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."* They heard the him sing of every valley being filled, every mountain made low to make way for "the salvation of God."

But, as the crowds filed out the auditorium doors on that Sunday afternoon of December 7, 1941, they immediately noticed men and women gathered around their automobiles intently listening to the radio. They were listening to the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Not a single life in that congregation that fateful Sunday afternoon would be the same.

War was a shocking reality, not only in the Pacific, but across the Atlantic. While the tenor sang of every valley being filled, and every mountain being made low, cities in Europe and North Africa were being leveled by bombs. The whole world was engulfed in conflict, and civilization was marching deeper into the wilderness of war.

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord...the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

These words from today's gospel reading are actually a quote from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. They were originally addressed to the

people of Israel living in exile in Babylon. The people of Israel had been conquered by the Babylonian armies. They were gathered up and forced to march through the wilderness to live against their will in Babylon, a land far far from home, a land we now call Iraq. They were stuck in Iraq. Sound familiar?

There they would be Jews living among pagans, God's people hearing Babylonian perceptions of reality, submitting to Babylonian authority, hearing Babylonian news, Babylonian hopes, Babylonian fears. God's people in Babylon, were told that they were privileged to live within one of the greatest, most noble, most beautiful civilizations ever devised. But God's people knew they were stuck in the wilderness.

What comes to mind when you hear of "the wilderness?" I discovered some years ago that when I spoke of wilderness, my confirmation students thought of verdant pine forests, mountain streams and A-framed cottages by the lake. That's not the wilderness of the Bible.

The wilderness of the Bible is a barren limestone desert. It looks warped and twisted. It shimmers in the haze of the heat; the rock is hot and blistering and sounds hollow to the feet as if there were some vast furnace underneath. Huge unscalable cliffs drop into to the Dead Sea. That's the geography of the wilderness in the Bible.

But wilderness is more than a geographical landscape. In the Bible the wilderness is the place where Israel lost its way and couldn't find home. It is where Israel bowed before pagan gods. In the wilderness, Jesus was tempted by Satan to abandon God's will. In the Bible the wilderness is the citadel of Satan.

Wilderness. It reminds me of the word, "bewildered." I'd like to say that wilderness is not necessarily a place, a geographical location. No, wilderness is a state of mind, a bewildered state of the soul. Wilderness is a metaphor to describe a terrifying situation where wild beasts lurk. There are no clear paths in the wilderness.

Chaos, temptation, and bewilderment reign in the wilderness.

What I'm saying is that wilderness is the address of many of us. It is where we find ourselves as a nation. And the wilderness is where too many of us live as individuals and as families. We get lost in the pre-Christmas wilderness of a pagan temple called "Stuff-Mart" where we bow down to TMX Elmo, and keyboard telephones, and personalized laser-engraved iPod nanos. We get lost in the wilderness of drugs, caffeine and partially hydrogenized soybean oil.

Around the world the dogs of war jump at the push of a button. 180,000 killed by genocide in Darfur. 2.5 million are chased from their homes, fleeing the violence. AIDS transforms the face of an entire continent where tens of thousands of children either die or are orphaned daily, while in America the majority of babies are born without wedded parents. And in Pierce County the rate of divorce outpaces the rate of marriage and two thousand six hundred people live in poverty. Would you call this home or the wilderness?

Isaiah's prophecy only makes sense to people who understand that they live in a wilderness, a place of crooked, treacherous paths; high, unscalable mountains; dark unreachable valleys. Isaiah's prophecy cuts through the denial of our "feel good society" and makes it possible for us to be honest about our situation. Yes, we do live in a wilderness.

But the gospel good news is that the word of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah sets us free because it proclaims a way out of the wilderness. In a wild place where only the shrieks of beasts are heard, there is a clear voice announcing, "**Prepare the way of the Lord.**" It is not only the voice of Isaiah crying to exiles living in a wilderness called Babylon. It is not only the voice of John the Baptist crying in the Judean desert. It is also a voice crying out in the wilderness of Iraq, Africa, America and Pierce County Wisconsin announcing that the Lord is near. "**Prepare the way of the Lord!**"

You cannot find your way to him, but the Lord finds his way to you. The Lord is coming to

you!

"Prepare the way...the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

It was Isaiah's job, and it was the job of John the Baptist to proclaim to you and me that wilderness is not the only reality out there. There is another realm, another world, another home.

The Lord come to loosen the tight-fisted grip that the wilderness has on you and me. The Lord comes with a new reality, a vision of a changed world, a people transformed, where the crooked are made straight and the rough places smoothed out.

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord." We've heard those words so often that we sometimes miss the way in which Isaiah and John the Baptist want to change our view of reality and to call forth in our hearts and minds a totally new way of seeing the world around us.

These two Bible guys are shouting that our true home is not in this wilderness where the surrounding culture falls on it's knees to corporate profits, glamorous celebrities and hot sex. Our true home is not in this wilderness where politicians are mired in their partisan power struggles and the special interests reign.

Isaiah and John want to announce to you and me that there is an alternative home very much different from the home where the television anchorpersons define for us what is good, and true and perfect, very different from the home where Madison Avenue tells us what we want and need and where infomercials convince us of those things that will make our lives complete.

You don't have to call the wilderness your home. You don't have to stumble in the dark, bewildered. Hear the announcement. The Lord is coming.

"Prepare the way of the Lord...the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." (Luke 3:4-6)

Jesus Christ the Lord is coming for you. Prepare a way for him in the desert of your hearts,

the desert of your homes, the desert of your streets and highways and country lanes. Our God bulldozes a way through the wilderness to get to us because we couldn't get to him. Jesus is coming to you and to me and to every neighbor in your neck of the woods.

And when Jesus comes, he promises to reign as Lord and King in your life, to reign in love and mercy. He will straighten out your crookedness. He'll lift you out of your dark valleys. He'll level out the road ahead so you no longer stumble, and he'll bring you home, home to dwell in the presence of God, both on this side of heaven and on the other.

Let us pray: *Lord, we await your Advent here, here in the wilderness which we have come to call home. We have lost our bearings, and can't find our way. We have lived as we ought not to have lived, done those things which we ought not to have done. We have wandered in the darkness, without chart or compass to guide us. We sought freedom, but became slaves to our passions, our greed, our selves. We wanted happiness, but found the sadness of unfulfilled desires, disappointed dreams, and superficial highs.*

Even in our wandering, Lord, we cannot forget home. Even in our lostness, we remember you and your love for us. So we are bold to pray, Come to us, Lord. Bring to us that which we cannot summon forth by our own efforts: direction for our wayward lives, light for our darkness, peace to our troubled souls. Come to us, Lord, offer us true joy, bring us home.

For troubled souls and confused minds, for hurtful relationships and broken families, for sick friends and diseased loved ones, for recovering addicts and abused spouses and children, for orphans and widows, for refugees and injured soldiers, for grieving families and for nations lost in the grip of violence and strife—for all these and all the those we name in the silence of our hearts we pray: Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come. Amen