

In the Wilderness

Malachi 3:1-12

Luke 3:1-14

“...the word of the Lord came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

“In the days of King Herod of Judea...,” Luke begins; and then continues, “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus...when Quirinius was governor of Syria...”; and again, “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontus Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas....” It is as though Luke, with good news to tell us, first turns on Fox and MSNBC; then dials up Rush Limbaugh and All Things Considered; then clicks on the New York Times Breaking News and posts a link to the Wall Street Journal’s lead editorial. He begins with the news we hear every day: news of power politics and religious authoritarianism, of money and fame, of movers and shakers, of despots and death-dealers. He names the newsmakers: the emperors and governors, the rulers and high priests, the cities of significance and the centers of power, the terrorists and, by implication, the terrified. On one hand, he is telling us that this orderly account of the events fulfilled and handed on to him by eyewitnesses is set in the midst of human history as we know it.

On the other hand, he is readying us to hear the news of God’s reign come near, news that cannot be fit into our usual ways of knowing what we know. So when Luke begins the third chapter of his Gospel, after prefacing the birth of John and of his cousin Jesus with the names of those who would rule over them, Luke subtly relegates Tiberius and Pilate and Herod and Philip and Lysanias and Annas and Caiaphas to the subordinate clause of a long sentence, a sentence whose subject is the word of God. What God is about to say turns out to be the *real* news, the *good* news Luke has to tell: the news that will turn human history inside-out and upside-down. This news does not come to the emperor or the governor or the rulers or the high priests. God’s word comes to John, son of Zechariah, a nobody in relation to the headlines save that he soon will lose his head by Herod’s decree. Yet of John, his mute father finally sings, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace.” Again I tell you, this is news our ways of knowing cannot comprehend.

Even more remarkably, the word of God comes to John *in the wilderness*--no idle detail in Luke’s Gospel, nor is it a neutral place in the biblical narrative. In the life of God’s people, there is the land that is inhabited and cultivated by human beings: the land “of brooks and fountains and wells springing out in valley and on hill, a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates, a land of olive-tree and honey,” according to Deuteronomy. This is the land God has promised God’s people, the land where God’s blessing abides.

The opposite of the land is the wilderness, the desert, “where there is no seed, nor figs nor vines nor pomegranates, neither is there any water to drink.” It is a place of danger, of evil, of terror. There is no order, no kingdom, no law. “There the poisonous adder makes her nest,” Isaiah writes, “and lays and hatches and gathers under her shadow; there the vultures gather; the one shall not miss the other.” “The wilderness is the land of chaos, because the law of life does not operate there.... [The one] who wanders there may suddenly be led astray, for there is no road,” writes the man who first taught me to read Scripture as a budding theologian, “How,” Johannes Petersen asks “should a road leading to a goal be found in a ‘land’ the essence of which is disorder and confusion?” Syria and Gaza, Iraq and Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, and Nigeria come to mind.

But think again. The desert, the wilderness in Scripture, was more than a literal place marked off from the land of blessing on an ancient map. It describes what threatens the condition of the soul and the nation. The wilderness was never far away—or to put the matter more actively, the desert was ever lying in wait for the land where God’s people dwelt. “Outside the world of [the human] is the wilderness,” Pedersen writes, “and yet so close to it that [humans] must constantly strive to keep it away.” We know this for a fact, you and I. “The connection between the nature of the country and the blessing which is to be maintained by [the people] is so powerful,” Petersen says, “that the country *is* a wilderness as soon as sin prevails. Even though desolation has perhaps not yet developed, it still lies under the surface, ready to burst forth.”

Then in addition to being a place or a state of being, wilderness is a verb that acts to paralyze a soul touched by evil, to paralyze “a town or a people which has lost its strength and its power to live...[to paralyze] the inhabited land which no more shelters” human beings. From the verb come more nouns: “the paralysis, the terror, the destruction, the curse as well as the paralyzed, the destroyed, the accursed.” God knows that we know this wilderness is after us, but in what way? In the form of refugees or terrorists, some think, threatening us from without. If so, enter the figures in Luke’s subordinate clause, the emperors, governors, rulers, and high priests of every age, those who presume to have the power to keep the wilderness at bay; the very same ones who fuel the people’s fear of chaos and death so that the fearful will remain in their thrall. But Scripture speaks of wilderness as the sin which, from the beginning, was lurking at Cain’s door, “Its desire is for you,” God says, “but you must master it.”

Given the evidence of human history and the nightly news, we cannot. That is why the word of God comes to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness—God’s word spoken in a place of danger, of evil, of terror--where there is no order, no kingdom, no law. The word of God comes to John for people who are in the wilderness, as we all are in the wilderness: the wilderness of fear, of uncertainty, of loneliness, of hopelessness, of sin, of violence, of death.

And the word is “Return.” That is to say, there is a way out of the wilderness—both the wilderness without and the wilderness within. “Return to me and I will return to you,” says the Lord of Hosts” in the mouth of Malachi. “Repent,” God says in the mouth of John. And in response, the people of 5th century B.C. and the people of 1st century, soon to be A.D., ask how: “How shall we return?” “What shall we do?”

God knows the prophets did not answer, “Pray and think about it!” Malachi tells the people to stop robbing God. Stop hoarding what you have been given by God’s hand for yourself and return the tithe that is God’s so that all may be fed. Then God will remove the curse from the land and all nations shall count the land blessed. In other words, the wilderness will again become fruitful; a path and a purpose will be given. Likewise John says to those who have come to hear him in the wilderness, “Share your coats with those who have none, and your food likewise. Deal fairly with those over whom you exercise authority. Do not extort another by threats or false accusations.” In both cases centuries apart, the word is first a word of justice and judgment leading to a change in behavior and direction. Stop living the life you have chosen to live without God and return to the life for which you were made: loving God and having compassion toward the stranger, because you once were a stranger.

To tell you the truth, the word of God spoken by Malachi and John leads me first to despair. God knows, I want to return and start a whole new life except, to borrow Paul’s words, “I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil [the wilderness] lies close at hand.” Even given a second chance, a seventy times seven chance, we do not turn, we cannot master it. Consider the week just past. Every time I think senseless human carnage might wake us to our complicity with death-dealing powers and move us to an amendment of life, the wilderness encroaches further into the land of blessing. We are numbed, anesthetized, paralyzed all over again. As it was with Newtown and Sandy Hook, so it is with San Bernardino. How can this be? Karl Barth reminds me, in his soaring rhetoric, that it can be because, “...from the sleep of covenant-breaking humanity, of the world in conflict with God, there can be no awakening, not even by the greatest catastrophes, by the crashing in ruins of whole cities, by the imminent threat of the worst personal evils, by the thunderous voices of the very greatest prophets...The sleep which [we] sleep is the sleep of death, and what is needed is that [we] should be wakened and waken from death. There is thus required a new and direct act of God Himself...”

That is to say, *believe it or not*, and in spite of the New York Daily News, only God can fix this, only God has fixed our collective sleep of death, our collective terror before death’s power. Here in the wilderness that is the season of Advent, thank God the question is not “What shall we do?” but “What has God done?” and “What is God doing?” God has turned toward us in the vulnerability of our own mortal flesh; God has come to reign precisely in the place where death exercises dominion; God has chosen in the freedom God’s love is to dwell with us, here and now and eternally, in Jesus Christ. We would not know where to turn or how or to whom in this present darkness were it not for the love that has turned toward us in Jesus Christ. This is Luke’s great good news, news that trumps the nightly news any day! So if you do nothing else in preparation for the celebration of Christ’s birth, now and again consider turning off Fox and MSNBC; dialing down Rush Limbaugh and All Things Considered; taking a break from the Breaking News and the Wall Street Journal. Instead, listen in the silence of the night and in the words of Scripture for the voice of one crying in the wilderness, daring to speak the only news that will never cease to be new, “Emmanuel, God with us.” Thanks be to God.