

“Lessons in the Wilderness”

Today we lit the second Advent candle—the Candle of Peace. The biblical vision of peace is NOT the ceasing of all wars. Warring seems to be what we like to do as humans. Wars will not cease on Planet Earth until Jesus comes again. Jesus himself said, “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.” (Matthew 24:6, NIV)

What happens to the Nation or State of Israel has always been a lightning rod for careless speculations when the Second Coming will happen. Every time things heat up in the Middle East, wild predictions about the end of the world are made. However, our epistle lesson from 2 Peter serves as a level-headed corrective to us:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.*

In plain words, we know that God is loving and patient with us, however no one knows God’s timeline for the world or for us individually or as a human race. Our job is to make for peace. So, in the meantime we are called to pursue, work for, pray for, those ways that make for peace in ourselves and peace in our world.

Years ago, in 2006, there was [an article in the Christian Century](#) about a small group of Presbyterian Christians in Beirut, Lebanon, faithfully lighting the candles of their Advent wreath despite the dangerous, political chaos in their lives. With disillusionment and desperation growing all around them, the Christian Century article quoted Pastor Joseph Kassab: “We have no choice here but to hope in a better future ... As people of faith, we don’t rely on hope in the situation around us ... It is very politicized, and there is no hope in that. Our hope comes from believing that history is firmly in the hands of God.”

This is Lesson #1 we learn in the wilderness—our hope comes from believing that history is in the hands of God.

In Hebrew, the word “Israel” means “the one who struggles with God”. Let this settle in and allow yourself to remember the ways that you struggle with God. In a sense each of us can be called “Israel”. Advent is sometimes called “little Lent”. It is a time to make self-examination and consider the ways that we struggle with making our own peace with God.

The Advent hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” captures this idea:

O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

Think about this, as one who struggles with God, Immanuel—God with us in the form of Jesus, this patient parent of a God comes to ransom us from ourselves. We are all Israel because we all have struggled with God. In the wilderness of our own struggle God comes to us. Peace begins by acknowledging our own struggle to God—in the wilderness there is peace. This is Lesson #2 we learn in the wilderness.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus comes to his cousin John to be baptized in the wilderness. John the Baptist was calling people into the wilderness for a baptism of repentance. People were ceremoniously washed in the waters of baptism as they confessed sins and were renewed as they found peace with God. They stood in line to do this. They flocked to John like he was a rock star. They came to be ransomed. They came to be bought back and brought back in a right relationship.

This old year of 2023 begs for a cleansing and peace—political strife in our Congress, more war in the Holy Land as the State of Israel responds to the terrorism of Hamas with their own brand of terrorism. It begs for cleansing and peace in our own land ...

“O come, o come, Emmanuel and ransom captive me” is our personal prayer, our confession that we need help this Advent 2023.

We have to ask for salvation before we can receive it. We have to ask for forgiveness before it can be offered. We have to want to change. This is Lesson #3 we learn in the wilderness.

Let me conclude with this—Wilderness experiences can come to us in all kinds of ways:

- Physical Wilderness: Journeying through deserts, forests, mountains, or uninhabited areas, facing the challenges of nature and the elements.
- Personal Struggles: Enduring periods of isolation, loss, or hardship, where one feels emotionally or spiritually isolated, a personal wilderness.
- Transitional Phases: Times of significant change, like starting a new career, entering adulthood, or facing a major life shift, can feel like wandering in a wilderness.
- Spiritual Journeys: Seeking deeper meaning, faith exploration, or questioning one's beliefs can lead to a spiritual wilderness where clarity and direction may be sought.
- Testing and Growth: Experiences that test one's limits, morals, or beliefs, offer opportunities for personal growth and self-discovery.

These wilderness experiences, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual, provide us opportunities for learning, growth, and eventual transformation.

Isaiah 40 tells us that there's a promise of comfort from God, reminding us that even in desolate places, there's an assurance of companionship and eventual restoration.

Know that Hope comes from believing that history is firmly in the hands of God.

Know that Peace begins by acknowledging our own struggle to God—in the wilderness there is peace.

Know that Redemption comes when we seek it. We have to ask for salvation before we can receive it. We have to ask for forgiveness before it can be offered. We have to want to change. We have to make straight our own paths. These are lessons that are to be found in the wilderness if we are open to them.

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