

When asked who he is, John the Baptizer quotes from Isaiah, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ and these words have become so familiar to us that its easy to gloss right over them.

But imagine that you live in a wilderness area – somewhere where its hard to live, you don’t see many people, but you just about get by. Perhaps you’re a goat herder, walking your goats wherever there is scrub for them to eat. Now imagine that someone comes by saying, no yelling, that the King is coming. At first you would dismiss it as fake news, then being Americans you might wonder why anyone cares. But what if, rather than a King, they were saying that your favorite musician was coming to give a concert in the desert and to meet the people living there?

Dolly Parton has been called the Queen of Country, though she doesn’t like the title, so I’ll go with her... suppose in your scrubby barren life someone arrives shouting that Dolly is coming! Dolly is coming right here to meet all the goat herders and other people scraping out a living and so we should build an amphitheater so we can see and hear her better. Now you might still think it was fake news but maybe not – maybe there would be a glimmer of hope – even of excitement and as you started bringing together earth and rocks to make the amphitheater it would get more and more real. There would be hope in your life because you listened to the voice crying out in the wilderness “Make an amphitheater for the Queen!”

Wilderness is such an important idea in the Biblical narrative that if we were doing film criticism we might say that it is a character in its own right. John the Baptizer preached in the wilderness, the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and Jesus himself spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness. Some of the most powerful images of hope used by Isaiah and other prophets are rivers in the desert and the wilderness blossoming with beautiful flowers.

It is a liminal place, a place where things are not what they have been and not what they will be. A place of change, of character building and of turning to God. If the Hebrews had used the direct route they would have gotten to the Promised Land a whole lot quicker. It is only a little over 5000 miles so if they walked 5 miles a day they could have done it in 3 years or about three and a half years as they would have rested on the Sabbath. But no, it took them 40 years. In the Book of Exodus we read that “God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds” (Ex.13.18)

God led them by a roundabout route. And although the journey through the wilderness from slavery to freedom was undoubtedly filled with trials and tribulations, yet ultimately, through that circuitous route, they became a unified nation, a People of Israel.¹ They could not have imagined when they left Egypt in such a hurry that there was no time to make leavened bread that they would spend generations getting to the Promised Land – the life that they longed and hoped for.

We could not have imagined back in March that this journey through the wilderness of Covid would be so circuitous, would take so long and would be so costly. Yet God used the time in the wilderness to form his people the Israelites; God used Jesus’ time in the desert to form his character and teach him about living spiritually and intentionally; God took people into the desert to hear John and to be baptized as they realized they were sinful and in need of repentance and forgiveness. God uses the wilderness to form her people into something new and different.

While we are wandering in the wilderness, longing for the Promised Land of freedom to see friends and family, to travel and to play together; as we are wandering in the wilderness of Covid, just like the ancient people, God is forming us into the church we are becoming. New forms of church are always continuous with old ones even as they emphasize new understandings of God and discard rituals and beliefs that no longer

¹ <https://www.jweekly.com/2013/01/25/torah-why-did-it-take-40-years-to-reach-the-promised-land/>

fit. God is leading us forward so we need not be afraid of this process of change even though there seems to be no clear direction.

That succinct reading we heard this morning from Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica tells us exactly what we are to do in this time.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.”

That's worth putting on your fridge.

Having been called by God and reconciled to him by the loving and fearless work of our Redeemer, we get to be faithful and look to be sanctified – to be made holy. And our part in that is to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us.”

This is what we do in the wilderness. It is not always easy. Life in the wilderness is rarely easy. We are all touched by grief. Some of us are battered by grief and loss. Some of us are weighed down by mental illness and family stress. The rest of us need to do their rejoicing and praying for them. It is difficult to pray when you hurt all over or you can't stop crying. Which is why we hold one another in prayer and hold fast to the knowledge that God is good and that nothing, nothing, can separate us from the love of God.

As we go through this wilderness experience together we are being formed into something new, into the Body of Christ in a different

form, and we don't know what that will look like. But along the way we are called to be the voice of hope, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'

We are the children of the light and we have a message of hope for our time. That message is simple: "God is here with us, rejoice and be glad for we are not alone and our God is the God of resurrection." That is the voice we need to hear, that is the voice we get to be – the voice of the people of God amplifying the voice of the Christ. Christ is here and Christ is coming so let's get busy building the amphitheater.

I'm going to end by reading you a beautiful blessing written by Jan Richardson:

Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light

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Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything
seems
in shadow
and grief.

Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives,

in whom
the brightness
blazes—
your heart
a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable
faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

