

"In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord . . ."

It's the season of waiting.

Oh, *wait* – that's what we've been doing since – when, March?

Waiting for this pandemic to pass. Waiting for test results.

Waiting to see loved ones. Waiting to get back in to church, to life.

Waiting for 2020 to end and a new year to begin fresh.

Can you believe that it was Lent when this all started?

I remember people saying that it was the "Lentiest" Lent ever.

But maybe it's Advent we've been waiting for all along.

A time of anticipation. Expectation. Preparation.

My daughter texted me a video yesterday afternoon from the hospital

in Austin TX where she's studying to be a pediatric nurse practitioner.

It was a wall of makeshift hospital rooms that hadn't been there that morning.

Workers had hurriedly installed a sort of field hospital within a hospital

in anticipation of opening up her children's hospital to adult COVID patients.

"They're preparing for a huge nightmare," she wrote.

"I'm so scared for it to get even worse."

This from someone already sent home from work last summer

for being exposed to COVID by a patient.

"They're preparing for a huge nightmare. I'm so scared for it to get even worse."

Truth be told, in varying degrees,

isn't that how a lot of us are feeling these days?

How – ironic – that those of us blessed to live so close to

world-class medical care are now warned that we should be extra-concerned

if we do get sick that our medical system is overburdened.

Many an evening, watching the news, I'll look across the room

at my husband and worry,

Who will be among the last infected before the vaccine rolls out?

That's one kind of anticipation, I suppose.

Today's readings show us another kind, in times no cheerier than our own.

In all of today's readings, God shows up where least expected
but most needed.

In the wilderness – Biblically, a place of trial and testing,
and also transformation.

Our gospel reading is the beginning of Mark's Gospel,
with whom we'll spend much of the next year.
It's described as the "beginning of the good news"
implying that it comes in the midst of bad news.
John the Baptist appears as a harbinger of change.
Calling us to prepare the way of the Lord, to repent,
(to use a Way of Love word) to TURN to One more powerful
who comes baptizing not just with water but the Holy Spirit.

Much of the imagery in Mark is from our majestic first reading,
the Hebrew prophet, Isaiah:
In the wilderness, a call to turn and prepare the way of the Lord.
And although this is from Isaiah chapter 40,
it's about as much of a beginning as that 1st chapter in Mark.
For this chapter 40 begins a new phase of the prophet's writing,
sometimes called Second Isaiah,
addressed to a later era than the previous chapters.
Here begins a section addressed to people in the wilderness of Exile –
disrupted and disoriented in a place unlike any they'd ever known.

They were waiting. For Exile to end.
To see what's next. To see just how much they could endure.

These were people who needed the "Comfort, O comfort"
with which this passage famously begins.
But – wait! – there's a twist.
It's not God showering them with comfort,
but God telling the prophet to go comfort the people.
That's a twist because we usually think of prophets as making people
un-comfortable by holding them accountable.
There are plenty examples of Isaiah doing just that.
But here, at the beginning of this section addressed to downtrodden, despairing
people,
Isaiah is commanded to be accountable for *comforting* the people.
"Speak tenderly," says God. Prepare the way of the Lord.

And in a passage reminiscent of the original call of Isaiah back in chapter 6, the prophet has his doubts.

What shall I say and do? What shall I cry?

After all, people are but grass that withers and flowers that fade.

Ah, but God – “our God” -- stands forever.

Proclaim “Here is your God!” right in the midst of the desolation.

Right there in the wilderness, where one would least expect.

That’s where your hope and expectation lie.

That’s exactly where we should expect to see God.

As Frances said in her delightful homily last week, when she generously offered her home altar as an inspiration for our own Advent devotions, *Jesus is coming for a visit*.

Advent is not only a time of waiting, but *preparing* for his arrival.

To borrow some imagery from Isaiah,

we as Christians might say that God in Jesus came here in the wilderness to share our lives as fleeting as grass that withers and flowers that fade.

To borrow that same imagery as echoed in Mark’s Gospel,

we could say that God in Jesus came here in the wilderness

to proclaim good news.

That’s what we’re invited to turn toward.

That’s what we’re to hope and long for, and to EXPECT.

It’s for that that we’re to prepare – even now -- the way of the Lord.

We’ve already noted that today is not only the 2nd Sunday of Advent,

but the feast day of St. Nicholas,

a time in previous years of a costumed visitor coming through that door bearing candy canes,

children in mismatched socks with shoes left outside,

and perhaps some chocolate coins.

It’s a lighthearted way to make a serious point:

That the God who came in Jesus sends messengers to prepare the way -

Isaiah, Mark, John the Baptist, Nicholas, to name a few,

and even us –

here in this pandemic wilderness of 2020.

Sent by God to do what God’s people have always done –

expect to see God in the least expected places,
prepare the way so that others might see God too,
bind the broken and broken-hearted,
and to "Comfort, O comfort".
To proclaim in the wilderness, to proclaim in word and deed:
"Here is our God!"

What, O what, are we waiting for?

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