

Title: Beauty in the Wilderness

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, your prophets called on your people to prepare a way in the wilderness; may we too prepare our hearts and minds for your son, making us ready to share Christ's love, peace, and joy; celebrating Jesus' presence with us in whose name we pray. Amen.

In the mid-1970s, we lived in Ely, Nevada. Our oldest son was born there. Ely seemed to be equidistant from everywhere and anywhere. It was a four-hour drive to Salt Lake City, a five-hour drive to Las Vegas, and a six-hour drive to Reno. It might a little shorter now that the 55 mile an hour speed limit was lifted. We knew of people who drove to Salt Lake and back on Saturdays for shopping. There was no Amazon in the 70s.

We made numerous trips between Salt Lake and Ely. Once a while, we flew. That was back in the day of airline regulation and Nevada had a powerful US Senator who required United to fly from Salt Lake to Reno, with stops in Ely and Elko.

The drive from Ely to Salt Lake or Reno or Las Vegas is stark. The Reno and Las Vegas drives have an occasional town, but not the Salt Lake drive, except for Wendover. From Ely to Wendover, there is a lot of sage brush. From Wendover to Salt Lake, it is mostly salt flats and very little vegetation. It is a wilderness.

The drive from Wendover to the Cedar Mountains is a drive of a white, salty flatness, left from ancient Lake Bonneville of which the remnants are the Great Salt Lake and Utah Lake. On occasion someone tries to drive out on the salt and get stuck, abandoning their cars. That was the scenery.

I have had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land two times. From Jericho, looking east, straining to see the Jordan River, which I could not do, there was a vast waste land. It is not white like the salt flats, but brown. Barely a plant can be seen. It is a lot of dirt.

We have the advantage of driving a car through the salt flats. The people who went out to see John the Baptist walked. The salt flats are at about

4,000 feet above sea level. Where John the Baptist preached, it is about 1,000 feet below sea level. It tends to get hot there.

In spite of the physical challenges of going to the Jordan River in the first century, many people went. They abandoned the ritual cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem to go see a wild man in the wilderness. Where there are few distractions, it is easier to get our heads straight. We can get spiritually straight in the starkness of the wilderness.

Mark begins his gospel with a lot of theology. John says a lot of similar things to begin his gospel, but uses a lot more words. Mark begins with the beginning, the Genesis. The good news, or gospel, of Jesus begins with a quote from Isaiah and John the Baptist. John the Baptist sets the scene and prepares for Jesus' entry in the good news. Mark also adds that Jesus is the messiah, the Christ. Jesus is also the Son of God. If a non-Christian were to read the first sentence of Mark, an impression that Jesus is important was definitely left. Son of God is a big deal. After that first sentence, what follows must be important to read.

Mark then links Isaiah and Malachi to John the Baptist. The beginning of the good news is found in prophecy, both an Old Testament prophecy and a New Testament prophecy. (Although, Mark had no concept of a New Testament like we have.)

As with any prophecy, it is the words of the prophet that are important. We might say that actions are just as important, but history only judges legitimate prophets as ones whose actions match their words. The words of the prophet live on for centuries after the prophet proclaims them.

For Mark, Isaiah's prophesy is not about Jesus. It is about John the Baptist. Mark introduces John the Baptist so that John the Baptist can introduce Jesus. That is the whole summary of the first eight verses of Mark.

Mark mashes the prophets Isaiah and Malachi together. Malachi 3:1 reads, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts." The Hebrew word translated messenger has at least three connotations in Hebrew. The first is almost literally a messenger or herald,

who may also be a spy or assassin. The second use is of a prophet proclaiming God's word. The third is an angel. Given the context, Malachi is likely referring to a prophet. I am sure that this what Mark was thinking. The people thought John the Baptist was a prophet.

Before I continue with Mark, further examination of our Isaiah passage bears investigation, because Mark thought it important enough to quote. Isaiah 40:1-11, our Old Testament lesson, is famous for being part of Handel's Messiah. This is part of what scholar's call Second Isaiah. Isaiah 40-55 was written by Isaiah's disciples during the Babylonian exile. Jerusalem and Solomon's temple are in ruins. Anybody who was anybody was exiled to Babylon. This is a message of hope to a hopeless situation, to a people with no hope.

The message is clear: the desert between Babylon and Jerusalem is to be prepared, because God is going home to Jerusalem. Jews believed that God lived in the temple. With the temple gone, God was gone. God had abandoned them. But this godless time has come to an end. God will return to Jerusalem and God will gather God's people together. Like sheep, the people will be fed and loved.

Mark's point of quoting Malachi and Isaiah was to introduce John the Baptist. John appears in the wilderness. The likely place where John was doing this is in the lower part of the Jordan River, before it enters the Dead Sea. The people of Jerusalem going out to see John the Baptist would have to go down to Jericho, fill up skins of water and then set out into a barren landscape to get to the Jordan River. In essence, they would travel through a wilderness to hear the voice preparing the way of the Lord.

There must have been a strong sense of sin for people to go to John and have sins washed away. People abandoned the temple rites forgiving sins and going out of their way to go to John. There must have been some spiritual anxiety among at least some Jews to also abandon the temple for a wild man in the wilderness. This means that there were people who abandoned the priests of the temple to be baptized by John. The priests were likely not pleased by this.

John baptized people for a forgiveness of sins. The Greek *baptizmo* literally means to bathe. John washed them with the waters of the Jordan, washing

away their sins. Ritual bathing was common in Judaism. For devout Jews, bathing was a spiritual as well as a physical cleansing.

John's message was so compelling that people went to him with some sacrifice to get there. We don't know how word about John's preaching began. Perhaps he gathered a following in Jerusalem or another place and then went out to the Jordan. We do know that followers of John the Baptist continued long after Christianity became a religion. Christians in the first and second centuries struggled to convert John's followers to Christianity. The Mandaean religion continues following John the Baptist, their primary prophet.

Mark portrays John as an ascetic. John wore camel hair and ate locusts and wild honey. Perhaps not coincidentally, the prophet Elijah wore camels' hair. Mark is likely making a connection between John and Elijah. John may have picked his spot on the Jordan as the same place where Elijah crosses the Jordan. It was thought that Elijah would come back proclaiming the coming of the messiah. It is interesting that in John's gospel, John the Baptist denies being Elijah.

John must have called people to turn their lives around. Our word, repentance, means in Greek to turn around. Repentance means we turn our lives toward God. Mark was less interested in that message than he was to John being a herald of the messiah. John baptizes with water, but someone who is more powerful than John is coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

What we hear in this passage is a call to humility. We never enter a job, a task, a function, whether it is in the church or in the world when someone, or more appropriately, some people prepare the way for us. There are always others who prepare our way. There is only one savior in the world and in Advent we still wait. Waiting for a savior is also an act of humility.

On this Second Sunday of Advent our anticipation of the coming messiah, the Christ, the Mighty One is heightened. At the same time, we are anticipating a baby in a manger. Our preparations include parties, shopping, and decorating. But how much of our busyness includes getting ready for the Mighty One who will come and baptize with the Holy Spirit?

How are you preparing for Jesus? Is humility part of your preparation? Are you studying the Old Testament? Do you examine in what ways you participate in a servant ministry? Are we turning from our ways to God's ways? We need not linger at a manger that has a baby yet to arrive. A baby can be demanding. The adult Jesus is infinitely more demanding.

Text: **Mark 1:1–8** (NRSV)

1 The beginning of the good news^a of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.^b

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,^c

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,^d
who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’ ”

⁴ John the baptizer appeared^e in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with^f water; but he will baptize you with^g the Holy Spirit.”¹

^a Or *gospel*#

^b Other ancient authorities lack *the Son of God*

^c Other ancient authorities read *in the prophets*

^d Gk *before your face*

^e Other ancient authorities read *John was baptizing*

^f Or *in*

^g Or *in*

¹ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version](#). (1989). (Mk 1:1–8). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.