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Isaiah 40: 1 – 11
2 Peter 3: 8 – 13

Ps. 85: 1 – 2, 8 – 13
Mark 1: 1 – 8

In a place where hills and ravines turn a golden-brown ochre against the deep, azure blue of the late afternoon sky...in a place where the slowly sinking sun casts jagged gashes of black shadows which play hide and seek on the rugged landscape...in a place where rocks and sand and seeming barrenness overwhelm any sense of life...in a wilderness, where the only sound has been the whispering and wailing wind, a voice breaks the silence. A single voice, neither male or female, but a clarion voice of authority, crying out, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

The voice echoes off the mesa-like ridges and rebounds out of the dry wadis. The voice blasts shrilly and piercingly, like the trumpet of a herald announcing royalty. "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God!" Images arise of knees bowing and cloaks being strewn across the dusty path of the approaching sovereign. Any life that is present in this wilderness cannot fail to take note of this voice; any life that is present is called to a sudden alertness; any life that is present is called to pay homage and to prepare. "Every valley shall be lifted up," the voice says, "and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain." As if someone could take up the dust of the ground, like the rumpled covers of a bed, shake out the folds and wrinkles, and smooth it all over to make it fresh and new again. To tidy everything up and remove any obstacles for God. To clean house and straighten out the wilderness.

This is the image with which we are presented by both the prophet, Isaiah, and by John the Baptizer in Mark's Gospel. This is the image of Advent, and this is also the opportunity of Advent: to prepare the way for the Lord through our wildernesses, to remove any obstacles for God in our lives and in our world. While the voice ricochets off the escarpments and out of the ravines of the physical wilderness, it also resonates and reverberates within our own hearts, our own emotions, our own souls. "Prepare the way! Prepare the way!"

Wildernesses are often frightening to us because they are places of desolation, confusion, isolation, challenge and silence. Wildernesses are directionless places where we sometimes fear for our sanity or our survival or both. Wildernesses are places of temptation and testing, where we don't know how we will measure up.

Wildernesses show up the dry, hard, seemingly barren places of our own lives. And the shadows that haunt us in the wilderness only seek to reveal the cracks and fissures in our veneers that we work so hard on to keep the illusion of perfection and control. Perhaps we dislike or fear wildernesses most because they strip us of our pretenses and expose our vulnerabilities and frailties. Wildernesses are places where we are naked and defenseless. But wildernesses are also, therefore, where we are most likely to encounter God and, with our defenses weakened, most open to receiving God.

"Prepare the way of the Lord!" the voice calls to us. But how do we prepare a way through a place where it seems as if there is nothing? Perhaps we must first approach the wilderness with acknowledgment and acceptance. We cannot prepare the way through a desert that we don't know or aren't willing to admit exists. Some of us may have no trouble identifying our wilderness, while others of us may have to search for it within ourselves under a pile of disguises.

There are precious few human beings who make it through life without wounds or griefs or broken relationships or failures or unanswered “What ifs?” Most of us have corners and crevices, some of us whole landscapes, where our love has crumbled to dust, our passions turned cold, our creativity stifled. At some point, or perhaps many points, in our lives, we find ourselves asking questions of purpose and meaning. When we find those things in ourselves which we least want to touch or look at and most want to avoid, when we find the place of our questioning and searching, we will have found our wildernesses. It is precisely in those places of pain and avoidance, confusion and unawareness, that we are called to make way for the Lord, make way for the healing, redeeming, loving touch of Jesus. It is in the silences of those holy places that we clear a path for Christ to come again and make the desert wasteland come to life and bloom.

Advent gives us time to prepare, to anticipate, to listen, to search out the wildernesses within (and without) and acknowledge them. Advent gives us a time and a place for our faith to be rekindled by the light coming into the world. Advent gives us time to turn with welcoming arms into the arms which first welcome us. Advent gives us time for conversion and repentance – a turning back to God.

Repentance is a reorientation of our inner compass that aligns our thinking and our will with that of God. And it can be on either an individual or a corporate basis. Reorienting our compass is critical in places where we are directionless, or heading in the wrong direction. Turning towards God gives us vision to see the world around us in new ways and with new eyes. Where once we saw seemingly barren, dry land, we now see a cleared slate of possibilities. Where once we felt so alone and defenseless, we now see ourselves in the freedom, the presence and the care of God. Where once we were deafened by the silence, we now find comfort in the wild tranquility and quiet communion. We find that the shadows and cracks, the dust and the dryness, are already known to God, and that the God of Creation has already imbued them with holiness all their own. We come to know our true selves more clearly and deeply, freed from the layers of masks and pretenses we all wear so much of the time.

A wilderness is wide open. Preparing a way in the wilderness means allowing ourselves to become detached from the structures and frameworks upon which we have depended to order our lives, give us an identity and status, and (perhaps) provide a false sense of meaning, purpose or security. Acknowledging the freedom of the desert is acknowledging that we really have nothing to hold onto, except the hand of God.

A wilderness incorporates a very different understanding of time. “Do not ignore this fact, beloved,” Peter writes, “that with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day.” There is a lot of waiting in the wilderness for things to happen in their due season, for things to come about, not as we wish them to, but as God has designed them to. To prepare a way in the wilderness is to wait, not with our eye on a watch, but with an eye out for the coming of God, and for what gifts God is giving us, even in the midst of the wilderness. As author and Benedictine nun, Joan Chittester, writes, “We can wait empty or we can wait full. It all depends on what we do with the time. Those who wait empty get irritated or dissipated. Those who wait full get richer as time goes by. Those who wait empty wait aimlessly. Those who wait full do something that changes even themselves by the time they get what they are waiting for.”

Preparing a way in the wilderness means taking stock of where we are and what are the seen and unseen possibilities. Preparing a way in the wilderness involves contemplation, reflection *and* anticipation. Because without the gift of anticipation, we can never fully appreciate the actual experience of that for which we wait. Yet even then, so much of what we anticipate, so much of what constitutes our expectations, is different from what we actually end up receiving or experiencing.

Preparation is the process of being ready for both. Preparation is, as the Celtic prayer says, saying 'thank you' for all that has been, and saying 'Yes!' to what is yet to come – whatever that may be. Preparation is also a way of reminding ourselves that there is more to life than what we know right now.

The voice echoes off the mesa-like ridges and rebounds out of the dry wadis of our lives. The voice blasts shrilly and piercingly, like the trumpet of a herald announcing royalty. "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God!" The voice also whispers and flows through us like a fresh wind, the Spirit of God hovering over the waters of chaos within us, ruffling the edges of our lives and our hearts, coursing its way to the center of our very being, waiting for the opportunity we give it to make us a new creation. This is the image of Advent. And this is also the opportunity of Advent. To prepare the way for the Lord through *our* wildernesses.

Let us close with a brief portion of a meditation from the Iona Community:

I am the Lord your God.

I have waited on you and have heard your prayer.

Now is the right time; I am coming soon.

So, prepare a way in the desert,

A cradle in the hay,

A meeting place in the market,

A table in an upstairs room,

A cross on a hill,

A grave in a garden,

A throne in your heart as in heaven.

For now again, I will bend down and remember you.

I will answer your prayer, and your waiting will end in joy.

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