

**Sermon for Advent 2B      Dec. 10, 2023**

Fr. Nick Smith

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

I'm telling you, it's like the wild west out there! Really, you can tie it up with pretty ribbons and put lipstick on it, but life is still a wilderness, with the emphasis on 'wild'. And we are traveling through it, wheels down and rolling, over the crooked highways and the relentless rough places. And the wilderness is a wild, chaotic, unpredictable place which, at first glance over each morning coffee cup, seems forbidding and even hostile, waiting for us to dare continuing through its deserted streets and desert wastelands. It is foreboding. It is rigorous. It is frightening. It is lonely. It is, well, the wilderness, after all. But, is it really that empty, that devoid of joy? Life is, I think, God's workshop, or God's workstation, where creation is happening each and every moment. Sure, it's a wild and crazy place, and times seem weird, but that might just be the creative process at work. It challenges our sense of security, of course, and begs lots of questions, but if you dare to look closely, even out of the corner of your eye, the 'wildness' is full of opportunity.

And it's this very wilderness that John the Baptist steps out into. Now, all the gospel records agree that John was a wild and crazy guy. He ate insects and wore animal skins instead of designer tunics. He was loud and offensive, and probably hadn't seen a dentist in years. But he had an insight about the wilderness; he came out here to perform ritual baptisms, rather than doing them at an ornate marble font in the inner sanctum of the Temple. Instead of beautiful musical chants in the background, his rituals were accompanied by rushing river currents and the cawing of crows. But he knew that life was really out here in the wilderness, and that this was where it all became serious and sincere. It was out here that all those things from which we desperately prayed for deliverance in the Great Litany last week were most obvious. Remember that we prayed, "Good Lord, deliver us" from wickedness, from all want of charity, from pestilence, fire and flood, from dying unexpectedly and unprepared, from racism, from hardness of heart, from self-deprecation and doubt, from accelerated and unreflective lifestyles, from unintended consequences and from all things that go 'bump' in the night. Good Lord, deliver us. Out here in the wilderness, they are all plain to see, and frightful to experience.

We pray for deliverance here in our wilderness, but does God even know what it's like for us? Does God even care? Enter Jesus of Nazareth, God's own beloved Son. Jesus comes to join us in the wilderness and be baptized himself. And Mark calls this 'the beginning of the good news.' Mark was the first gospel, at least the first we know of. We aren't even sure it was written down right away, it might have been memorized and told by storytellers for years before it was put down on paper, or papyrus. There is no Christmas story in Mark's Gospel, no stable or manger, no shepherds or wise guys, no swaddling clothes or mysterious star, there is only John in the wilderness and Jesus coming here to meet him, and us. And the message that God knows and cares. In those days that Mark's gospel was being told, there were wars and rumors of wars, that the brutal Romans had just about lost all their patience with the Judeans, and that they were about to send their legion of outlaw wild west gunslingers into Jerusalem and wantonly destroy the city. The audience for Mark's Jesus-story were probably wondering if it was a good time to get out of Dodge, to escape the inevitable destruction of their civilized home. But, really, there was no place to run...the Romans ruled the whole world around. There was no real escape. And yet, Mark says there is indeed Good News.

In Mark's story, John is hoping that a good dunking in the cold river will wake people up to see their world, their wilderness, their own lives, differently. But he also professes that one is coming

who is way beyond him and his ability to turn their lives around. That person will be full of God's Spirit, and will immerse them in a great and life-changing experience. And prophetically sure enough, along comes Jesus to be among them and participate with them there where the river cuts through the rocky landscape of their lives. And, we find out, he is indeed filled with the Holy Spirit, and has come, is always coming, not because he has to, but because he wants to! God wants to join us as we wait and endure, and wants us to be spiritually and sacramentally baptized, not just by water. And if we read further, just a few more run-on sentences, we find that after being baptized with us, Jesus goes where...to some preferred seat of power at the Temple? No, Jesus goes out even further into our wilderness. And what does he find there? Well, we could have warned him: there is temptation out there, wild beasts and bad food, and fear and demons, and all those things from which we long to be delivered. But, Mark tells us, there are also angels, who attend to Jesus and nourish him despite the wasteland of real life. There is also determination to overcome temptation, and behold, there is justice for those who are determined to live rightly. Jesus experiences it all with us, and by his incarnation, by his coming in human flesh, God can find out just what that's like. Jesus shares our lives of craziness, our fears, our disappointments, our challenges and our joys. 'He became what we are, that he might make us what he is.'

Prophets like Isaiah reassure us that God will faithfully restore the creative dream, and apostles, like Peter in the letter we read this morning, proclaim that, through Christ, God is making all things new, even a new heaven and a new earth, but meanwhile both agree that we have a task: Comfort, comfort ye my people, speaks God through the voice of Isaiah; that's a grammatical imperative, dear friends, a plural command given to all the faithful. And so is Peter's line 'Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting, strive to be found by God without spot or blemish'. We have a task, a purpose, a baptismal commitment to make, and while we're riding in the back seat on this journey through the wilderness, there's much more for us to do besides just asking 'Are we there yet?' As we travel on these wheels of ours, where the Incarnate Jesus is the reliable hub of all our energy, and the spokes of scripture, reason, and tradition support our lively rims, we have a mission. As rough and crooked as the highway is, we have the authority and the power to make it straighter and safer. We have a calling from God to improve the infrastructure, to bridge the deep ravines of life and accommodate those proud, lofty peaks. Those of us who care about such things are told by prophets and apostles to do our part, not just for ourselves, but for anyone else who might be in danger of getting a flat tire. God, dear friends, will transform the landscape of our lives, but we need to pick up a shovel and get to work. And we will be cheered on by angels sitting in the bleachers.

And the one who John the Baptizer says for whom he is not worthy to bend down and tie a shoelace, this Jesus of Nazareth, this Incarnate Son of God, is our foreman. The blueprints from which he supervises reveal, as the letter from Peter says, a place where righteousness is at home. And that voice of his, which is crying out in the wilderness, telling us to work on making a straight highway through the desert, level out the uneven ground, and get up to a high mountain to lift up our voices with strength in proclamation, is demanding that we fulfill our baptismal vows. And you know that shepherd? The one who carries the little lambs and lovingly feeds the sheep? Well, he is barking out instructions here in the wilderness, too, telling us sheep what to do and where to go next. If you recognize his voice, if you trust in his Incarnation, then you ought to joyfully join in his work. "Make ye straight what long was crooked. Make the rougher places plain; let your hearts be true and humble, as befits his holy reign. For the glory of the Lord now o'er earth is shed abroad; and all flesh shall see the token that his word is never broken." Amen.