

Advent 2B December 06 2020
Mark 1: 1-8 and Isaiah 40:1-11
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from the One who is more powerful: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

“Comfort, O comfort my people,” says your God.’ Let’s pray:

Have you ever felt like an outsider, displaced, or chucked on the scrap heap? Have you ever felt as though you’ve been pushed out to the fringes of society, or simply just don’t belong? Ever experienced that?

I ask for two reasons. The first is out of pastoral concern, so please come and talk to me if you’re struggling. The second is that we often consider displaced people to be someone else - those who’ve been affected by war, persecution, or natural disasters. They’re the people forced to leave their homes. Whether they’re refugees escaping war or despotic governments, or the victims of natural disaster, their lives have been uprooted. But dislocation also happens within us. Dislocation is more than a physical move, a change in place, or the loss of our physical home. I’m talking about the geography of our spiritual lives and the dislocation that happens inside us.

So, I ask again. Have you ever either felt out of place, in a bad place, or like your life has been uprooted? If so, you probably understand what I’m trying to get at. If you’ve ever felt disconnected in your marriage, family, or other relationships; that’s about dislocation. If you’ve ever felt that your beliefs, values, or world view have been superseded; if you’ve felt homeless even though you had a home; if you’ve ever felt as though you don’t belong or fit in – they’re all forms of dislocation. If your life has ever been uprooted and left

you feeling like you exist but aren't really grounded, then you know what it means to be a displaced person.

Displaced people are always looking for the next thing that will "fix" their life. They live with the "as soon as" illusion. As soon as this or that happens, life will be better. This is not an accusation, rather, an acknowledgement of humanity's longing for identity and belonging.

Everyone wants to belong. At the end of their life, no-one wants to feel as though they just simply visited this world. People want to be a part of something. People want to be "located" persons.

"Comfort, O comfort my people," are God's words to displaced people. Isaiah first spoke these words to people exiled in Babylon, people whose lives had been uprooted. Those same words speak to God's displaced people today. The prophetic word is always directed to dislocated people. And we long to hear those words of comfort. We want to find our place. More than anything dislocated people want to be located people.

If you listen to what John the Baptist says in today's gospel (Mark 1:1-8), you'll realise that the way of becoming a located people, is to go through the wilderness. You can't avoid it. There's no way around the wilderness. You can only go through it. We're reminded of this on two successive Sundays every Advent. And if it seems strange that we're given two Sundays of John the Baptist and the wilderness, then maybe we misunderstand them both.

When we think about the wilderness, I'm sure most of us immediately conjure up images of emptiness, barrenness, and desolation; a place of demons and temptations; a place where the best we can hope for is to survive. But what if our images are wrong? What if the wilderness is really a place of life, a place of hope, a place of connectedness, a place of finding ourselves and our place?

In St Mark's account of the gospel the wilderness is so much more than a testing ground or place of exile for God's people. The spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness after his baptism and, yes, he faces temptation. But the wilderness is also the place where the angels minister to him. It seems that where there are temptations there are also ministering angels. Mark reminds us that Jesus often went to the wilderness by himself to pray, to encounter the Father (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). The wilderness then is a place where we can connect with the sacred. It's also a place of rest. Remember, Jesus took his disciples to a deserted place to rest (Mark 6:30-31). And it's in the wilderness that Jesus feeds the multitudes not just once but twice; the first time 5000 people (Matthew 14; Mark 6; Luke 9; John 6); the second time 4000 (Matthew 15; Mark 8).

So, if you think the wilderness is a place bereft of life, growth, and hope, a place of hunger and abandonment, stop and think again. The wilderness is a place of prayer, a place of rest, a place where angels minister to us.

All the people of Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside leave their homes and go to the wilderness because they too are a displaced people. They're living displaced lives in the city and the countryside and their movement to the wilderness is driven by their yearning to belong; their yearning for the identity they possess but don't know how to materialise in their lives; their longing for forgiveness.

Something about John's voice, something about his message, something about the wilderness, says to them, "There is more for you than you have now. There is a place for you. But you will only find it in the wilderness."

The wilderness is the place where our lives are reinvigorated and we become placed people, residents, connected. I think that's what the people of Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside understood. Saints, I want you to have this same understanding – a sense of belonging, with deep roots, a

sense of connection to yourselves and each other, a place where you're made to lie down in green pastures and are led beside still waters, a place where your soul is restored.

Every relocation to the wilderness, that place where God's angels minister to us, that place of prayer, that place of rest, is an act of repentance. And if we've misunderstood the wilderness then we've probably also misunderstood John the Baptist and the repentance to which he calls us. Many people hear John's call for repentance as a legalistic, moralistic, turn-or-burn kind of repentance. But I don't think that's what John is asking of us.

I believe John's call for repentance is a call to move from being dislocated to being placed, a move from occupying a space to taking up residence, a move from being a visitor to becoming a local, a move from being ungrounded to being firmly anchored. And who among us today doesn't need or want that? Who among Christians isn't looking for our place of belonging, our welcome mat, our sense of connectedness and wholeness, our way of life that is authentic and holy? That's the work of the One who is more powerful. That's the work of the One who is holy. That's the work of the One who is the root and anchor of our lives.

The wilderness always holds the promise of the One who is more powerful and if there's anything displaced people need, it is that One, Jesus Christ, the Lion of Judah (Revelation 5:5), the Root of Jesse (Isaiah 11:10), our Rock and our Redeemer (Psalm 19:14). We need Jesus because we live with the illusion and fear that whoever or whatever has displaced and uprooted us is the most powerful thing in our life, but John says, "No! That's not true. Come to the wilderness and you will find the One who is more powerful than anything in all creation."

So, Dear Saints, heed the call of John the Baptist, embrace the wilderness as the place that makes you a placed person, and know that the Jerusalem or Judean countryside that makes you feel dislocated has no claim over you.

Brothers and Sisters, my prayer is that you'll leave here today, thinking about what it means for you to be baptised with water and the Holy Spirit. I hope you'll think about what it means to be deeply rooted in the soil of God's love and forgiveness. I urge you to think about what it means to be adopted by and identified as a child of God Almighty who is a jealous God, protecting his beloved children with angels, archangels and all the company of heaven. Jesus is coming for you. You have a place at his table. You belong to him. All praise and glory be to his holy name, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour!

“Comfort, O comfort my people,’ says your God.” Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.