

The Spiritual Geography of Advent

Scriptures

Isaiah 11.1-10

Psalm 72

Romans 15.1-13

Matthew 3.1-12

Opening

When you attend Advent services, even for a few years, you begin to notice the central characters of the Advent pilgrimage. Isaiah's there, John the Baptist comes on the scene, sometimes for two Sundays, Mary always, Joseph comes into view this year, and of course, our Lord Jesus. You become familiar with the spiritual themes of the season, too: repentance, waiting, hope, joy. Yet among familiar Advent characters and themes, we could easily miss the **locations** of Advent. Advent draws us into a spiritual geography. Bethlehem, the City of David, Nazareth, the wilderness of Judea—these places are meant to shape our Advent experience. Yes, the Lord comes to your heart, but your heart lives in a body, and your body inhabits a real place on earth.

Last Sunday, Thomas Ryden introduced a very good question for us at the conclusion of last week's sermon. "What does it mean for us in this time and this place to live in a manner different from the world, yet reflects the present and coming kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ?" It's a very good Advent question, a question, as Thomas said, that we ought to spend our lives pursuing. So I'd like to offer a response this morning to a portion of this good question: what does it mean for us *in this place* to renounce the world, yet live faithfully in the present and coming kingdom of Jesus Christ? I have no comprehensive answer, but I offer a first step. Go to the wilderness.

John in the Wilderness

You cannot take the Advent pilgrimage and avoid the wilderness. When God prepares his people for his coming; when the old world is dying, a new creation being born, the Lord takes his people to the wilderness. Return with me to Matthew 3 on page ### of your pew Bible.

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.' "

John is the prophet who will get the Lord's people ready for the Lord's coming. By custom, you would have expected that any son born of Zechariah and Elizabeth would live close to Jerusalem. Zechariah was a priest, so if a son was born, you'd expect another priest wearing the vestments of a priest, serving near the Temple in Jerusalem. Well, Gabriel changed all that and said this boy would be like Elijah. He would prepare the Lord's people for his coming. So instead of a conventional priest ministering in the capital, Holy City, we get John in camel's hair, roaming the Judean desert, consuming a minimalist diet of grasshoppers and honey.

John's presence in the desert may sound familiar, like this isn't the first time we've seen a prophet and people on desert borderlands. When God saved his people from Egypt, where did he take them? The wilderness. He prepared for them a good and promised land, flowing with milk and honey, but first he led them through the desert. The desert was the place where Israel would learn that this delivering God could be trusted. The desert was that place where God would strip away all the ideas, the idols, the identity they had from Egypt. You need the desert to learn how to leave the old world behind. That's what the desert is *for*. It is not home, but it prepares you for home.

But the desert is difficult. A minimalist diet of manna. A holy way of life, unlike any other nation or culture, revealed in the Torah, the Ten Commandments, given from the Lord through Moses at Mt Sinai. When their desert days ended, Moses gave a long sermon we call Deuteronomy, repeating the Lord's holy law. The location? The desert lands, the

borderlands of Israel. The prophet in the desert preparing his people to live holy before the Lord.

It's ever so strange that God draws us to deserted places to prepare us for his coming. We cannot blunt the edge of this strangeness. There's much discussion about the Church being relevant in our time. But look back to Scripture and you'll see that just before God does a new work, it looks really, really strange. God prepares his renewing work *from the periphery, from the margins*.

When palace and temple have become so diseased, so dysfunctional, so oppressive, God begins a renewing movement away from the centers of political power and cultural influence. Remember John the Baptist had the pedigree of a Jerusalem priest. But God sent him to be a prophet in the wilderness. That's how God would renew his people. To participate in God's coming, new world means renouncing the old world.

A Spiritual History of the Wilderness

It's fascinating that this kind of renewal from the margins is more than a biblical pattern. It's a pattern through church history. When the age of persecution ended and Christianity become the official religion of the Roman Empire, it became not only fashionable, but politically and financially beneficial to be a Christian. The pure devotion and sacrifice of the martyrs gave way to lax, comfortable, and affluent Christians. What happened next was remarkable.

Ordinary, poor, uneducated lay persons (not priests!)—men and women—went to the desert. They saw the disease of wealth in the cities and sought to purify their hearts and lives in the desert. They wanted to do battle with the spiritual diseases in their own hearts—anger, lust, envy. God was renewing his Church from the margins again. These ordinary men and women encountered the Holy Spirit of God in the desert by devoting their lives to repentance. They become sources of tremendous wisdom on the spiritual life, they established communities of prayer and devotion. St Antony, Abba Moses, Amma Syncletica—these were but a few names of those saints whom we have named as the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the early Church.

Time forbids me to share how St Benedict restored order and holiness to the fallen Roman Empire through his monasteries and his famous Rule. Or how St Francis of Assisi embraced simplicity and renewed devotion in the medieval church. Or how Celtic Christians entered a different kind of wilderness—the sea—traveling throughout the British and Irish Isles to share the Gospel of Christ, establishing churches and communities of worship wherever they went. The biblical pattern persists throughout our history. God renews his Church and his world when his people embrace the strange way of repentance in the wilderness.

At Bemerton and Little Gidding

I will take the time to share with you the story of a friendship of two Anglican saints who pursued repentance on the margins of England—George Herbert and Nicholas Ferrar. Their story contains the most unexpected ending from their beginnings. Both Herbert and Ferrar had the pedigree, education, talent, and the expectation that their life would be spent in London in the halls of political power. They became friends when they were students, studying theology at Cambridge. But it seemed more likely they were both destined for a life in politics. Herbert, especially, curiously delayed his ordination, seeking the best way he would serve the Lord.

Herbert's great passion was to serve the Lord by laboring a peaceable society. He was a rising star in the world of Cambridge and London for his public speaking. Everyone expected him to have a career serving King James, the same king of the King James Bible. He stood for election to Parliament in 1624 and became the MP of Montgomeryshire. Ferrar was also elected to Parliament in 1624, representing Lymington.

But political service would not last long for either Herbert or Ferrar. King James' son, Charles, proved himself a war hawk toward Spain. Herbert and Ferrar left politics and London disillusioned, still pursuing a vision of establishing peace and Christian community. They left the center of political and cultural power in London and headed to a wilderness of sorts. Herbert became the rector of a village church called Bemerton, and Ferrar established a religious community among his family near Herbert called Little Gidding, both on the outskirts of Salisbury.

Herbert and Ferrar moved to these remote places when England was waging war abroad and war was escalating within. Civil war came to England a mere twenty years later, and Oliver Cromwell's men leveled Ferrar's domestic monastery at Little Gidding to the ground. Herbert didn't suffer a violent end, but he died a young man, living a mere three years in Bemerton after leaving Parliament.

With England on the brink of foreign and domestic wars, Herbert and Ferrar chose an unimpressive, seemingly ineffective way of life when the nation was in crisis. Herbert faithfully prayed Morning and Evening Prayer, served his rural parish people with humility and love. He didn't aim for personal peace alone; Herbert labored for Christian community, a parish of peace. Ferrar led his extended family of about 30 people in Morning and Evening Prayer, too. They prayed all 150 psalms every day. They served the practical and medical needs of the poor nearby.

When Herbert was on his deathbed, he sent his dear friend Nicholas Ferrar, a collection of his unpublished poems, saying, "here is a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul, before I could submit my will to Jesus my master, in whose service there is perfect freedom. If he thinks it can help any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not let him burn it; for I and it are the less than the least of God's mercies." ¹Such was the way of repentance George Herbert chose in obscurity. How interesting, though, how persistent is the faithful witness of saints in the wilderness. Their words, their witness persist through the ages. They make straight paths for the coming of the Lord.

The Wilderness Nearby

I have two Advent challenges for you to consider that involve entering the wilderness. First, I encourage you to spend an hour listening to the Lord's voice in a nearby wilderness. There is wonderful Arabic proverb that says "the further you go into the desert, the closer you come to God." We don't have deserts or seas, but woodland areas, mountains, and ridges are local wilderness places for us. If you work in Oak Ridge, stop by the Oak Ridge

¹ Izaak Walton, *Life of Herbert*, 420

Arboretum one day; in south Knoxville, the Urban Wilderness; along Northshore, the shoreline woodland path at Carl Cowan Park; even around the corner here in West Hills, there are benches beside secluded, wooded areas along Third Creek ideal for prayer. You don't have time for an entire weekend retreat in December, but you have time for an hour in a local woodland. Put on a coat and gloves and go out to meet the Lord in our local wilderness places. And simply ask the Lord in the quiet of a nearby wilderness: where would you have me change my life for your sake? When the Lord begins to speak, ask him that your repentance would bear fruit with action.

The second Advent challenge is simply to enter a different kind of wilderness that is nearby. Cultivate your vision for the spiritual wilderness around you. T.S. Eliot, who was responsible for reviving the legacy of the saints at Little Gidding in the 20th century, composed a collection of poems titled *Choruses from 'The Rock'*, verses concerning the witness of the Church in a time of darkness. In this poem the voice of a prophetic figure named 'The Rock' addresses the people of England saying:

You neglect and belittle the desert.
The desert is not remote in southern tropics,
The desert is not only around the corner,
The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you,
The desert is in the heart of your brother. ²

We live in the mass age where identities are reduced to algorithms, names reduced to numbers, neighbors reduced to strangers. Look for that spiritual wilderness all around you.

I grieve the modern wilderness Eliot describes when he writes:

² T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* Choruses from 'The Rock,' Harcourt Brace, & World.

And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour
Unless his neighbor makes too much disturbance,
But all dash to and fro in motor cars,
Familiar with the roads and settled nowhere.

In the mass age, those who *will* care for the neighbor, who will be settled, will be, paradoxically, those who enter the wilderness, seeking the Lord Jesus Christ with a repentant heart. In their hearts will be straight paths to the Lord. In their hands will be the fruit of repentance. For God loves to work in obscurity; he loves to renew his world from the wilderness.

Go Out to Meet Him

“Then Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the region about the Jordan were going out to John...” Let us go out to this nearby wilderness we love called west Knoxville. Let us seek the Lord’s voice in these nearby places. Let us look for that invisible and pervasive spiritual wilderness in the heart of our neighbors. And let us take action in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord and the new world that is coming. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.