



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

---

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR ENGAGEMENT & CONNECTION  
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT, YEAR C, DECEMBER 5, 2021  
BARUCH 5:1-9; CANTICLE 16; PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11; LUKE 3:1-6

## WILDERNESS

**Luke 3:1-6** *[In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*

*"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,*

*make his paths straight.*

*Every valley shall be filled,*

*and every mountain and hill shall be made low,*

*and the crooked shall be made straight,*

*and the rough ways made smooth;*

*and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."']*

Well, hello! It's wonderful to be back among you. I am so grateful for the gift of a sabbatical, and I look forward to sharing some of my experiences with you in the coming months and at the Sunday forum next week. One that is top of mind today was a September week I spent with my husband on Inishbofin, a small island off the west coast of Connemara, Ireland. To get there, you

drive 55 miles northwest from Galway to Cleggan and then it's a 30 minute ferry crossing to Inishbofin. It's one of the most westerly islands, about 3.5 miles wide and 2 miles long, with no trees to speak of.

It's a large rock, essentially, that rises out of the wild Atlantic Ocean and claims 160 year-round human residents and thousands of sheep. The climate is lovely and mild in the

summer and stormy and fierce in the winter. Sometimes the ferry can't run for days because the sea is too rough. People plan their week around the weather forecast.

Inishbofin is also where St. Colman of Lindisfarne, a leader in the early Celtic church, retreated in the 7<sup>th</sup> C when he was exiled after the Synod of Whitby by the victorious Roman delegation. That's a long story for another day, but the fact is much of the west coast of Ireland and its outlying islands bear the history, stone ruins, and living ethos of ancient Celtic spirituality. There was something about the remote, untamed environment that attracted monks from Iona and Lindisfarne to found small monasteries that then became centers of worship, learning, and farming.

Will and I spent most of our week on Inishbofin walking the island and I soon understood how the souls of those early Christians were fed. After a 20-minute trek from the narrow main road, you are alone in the wilderness, gazing out at the grass-covered hills, sheer grey crags, and booming waves. The landscape seems to exist for itself, and the words of Saint Patrick's Breastplate stirred in me, "I bind unto myself today . . .

the stable earth, the deep salt sea, around the old eternal rocks." It seems changeless – exactly as it was for St. Colman in the 7<sup>th</sup> C and hundreds of centuries before that.

On the northwest tip of Inishbofin, there is only the sea. And 750 miles away, Iceland. The wind is constant and provides a symphony of sounds -- a high-pitched whoo through gaps in the cliffs, a staticky rush on your ears, and a soft ruffling of grass. Sometimes the wind pauses for a moment and that absolute quiet feels like the inbreath before creation began.

And then a paradoxical reordering happens – there is both a powerful awareness of human smallness and transience AND a deep sense of God's abiding presence. It is a spiritual regrounding. The wilderness will do that.

Scripture tells us that the wilderness is an important part of our story as Christians. After escaping Egypt, the Israelites wander in the wilderness for 40 years before entering the promised land. For Jesus, the wilderness provided a watershed encounter with temptation, but more importantly, it was the place he turned to for prayer during critical times in his ministry. And through the centuries, from Desert Mothers and Fathers

to monastic communities to modern pilgrims – the wilderness has shown to be less a place of chaos and bewilderment than a place to get your spiritual bearings.<sup>1</sup>

So, it's no surprise that in today's gospel, the word of God comes to John in the wilderness. It's a different geography, of course; the Judean desert is demanding in its heat and aridity. But it is clear that John's time there provides a spiritual regrounding.

Maybe the stark, unchanging landscape creates space for him to commune with the holy in a new way. Maybe it is the scarce food and water, the harsh elements that clarify human frailty and an essential dependence on God. Because when John comes out of the wilderness, he channels the prophet Isaiah and his message is clear.

“Israel, you have forgotten who you are – you're God's chosen people, beloved. You have forgotten who God is – the creator of the heavens and of history. The One who never abandons you and showers you with mercy and righteousness. So, turn around, take

stock and change your ways. The one to restore Israel is coming.”

This is the message we hear each year at the beginning of Advent. All four gospels begin their accounts of Jesus' ministry with this story of John the Baptist issuing a call for repentance and reconciliation. Only Luke's gospel, though, locates it in a particular political and religious context.

Luke is very specific – it was the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius' reign, with Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, and Lysanias also exercising rule, and Annas and Caiaphas in religious charge. It's like Luke is trying to communicate – this really happened, this is not a parable or allegory. This is a fact. In a time of tight-fisted sociopolitical control, when the people are vulnerable and weary, the word of God comes to an ordinary man in the wilderness. And that clears the way for Jesus, the one who changes everything.

So, we begin the new church year with this proclamation from John and prepare for the birth of Christ with a season of interior work – both as individuals and as a community.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Douglas, “A Way in the Wilderness: Men and the Environment”

We ask, “What distracts or hinders me in my relationship with God? Where have I neglected the needs of creation and of others, especially my sisters and brothers who are harmed by injustice?”

We want to be honest with ourselves and with each other – not out of fear of punishment or a need to feel bad – but because we long for a deeper bond with the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

We also need to do this interior work because this community is committed to action – to working for racial justice, creation care, and dignity for every human being. That action is only impactful and sustainable if it flows from a deep awareness of God’s compassion and peace, where we act out of concern for one another and for all of creation, not against one another or out of a sense of anxiety, anger, or superiority.

So this Advent, I think we need the wilderness. We need a space that is outside our control, uninhabited by our daily tasks and preoccupations. A place of stillness and starkness that regrounds us in our dependence on God and on each other. Maybe that is the physical wilderness, of which we are blessed to have so much here.

Maybe it is intentional time set aside for quiet reflection and opening oneself to God’s peace.

So I invite you, find some time today to consider the next three weeks. How will you find a wilderness space in Advent? Do you have one morning each week? Or 10 minutes a day to step away from busyness, to feel your breath and heartbeat and experience God’s spirit moving in you? Desire and resolve to seek the wilderness. God will do the rest.

Because, in the first year of the presidency of Joe Biden, when Jay Inslee is governor of Washington and Jenny Durkan in her last month as mayor of Seattle, during the episcopate of The Rt. Rev. Greg Rickel, the word of God is still speaking in the wilderness. Go and listen.