

Sermon – Mark 1:1-8
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
2 Advent – Year B
10 December 2017

“Where the Wild Things Are”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The man wandered aimlessly through the snowy woods, bundled against the weather but vulnerable to the *anfechtung*, the anxious despairing in his soul, and the seemingly random vicissitudes of life that had brought him to his existential crisis. In this wilderness, with nowhere else to turn, the man did what he hadn't since his almost-forgotten youth. He cried out to God. And to his surprise, the heavens opened and a voice boomed out, “Yes, my child?” “God? Is that you, God?” “Yes, my child. I am here.” Stunned by an actual response, the man blurted out the first question he could think to ask the eternal God: “God, what are a million years like to you?” “Well,” came the response, “to me a million years are like second, a brief moment fleeting by.” The man caught upon an idea: “Well, what are a million dollars like to you, O Lord?” God answered: “In like manner, a million dollars are worth but a penny.” The man, seeing an answer to some of his problems and the beginning of new hope, said, “O dear Lord, would you please give me a penny.” To which God answered, “Absolutely, my dear son. Just hang on a second.”
2. Bad jokes aside, our lives are marked by wilderness and waiting. We have found ourselves lost – in the chaos and stress of this season, in alienation and anxiety, in personal grief and shared fears. In our lost-ness, we wait. That's what Advent is for, of course. But beyond the Advent calendar countdown is a deeper waiting. Why, Lord, do you tarry? Into this waiting strides once

more the throwback, prophetic figure of John the Baptist. The people had waited 400 years since the last prophetic utterances of Malachi, and now John comes to prepare the way of the Lord. It's worth noting that Mark does not begin his account of the good news of Jesus Christ in a manger, or with wise men and shepherds, or with the Word that was in the beginning. No, Mark begins his story in the wilderness, in our lost-ness, with the declaration to prepare the way of the Lord, to prepare a royal highway. And what are we to do to prepare? Hang tinsel while we listen to Mannheim Steamroller? Well, maybe, but that's not the main point. John's call has a crystalline clarity to it: repent. Be baptized for repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

3. For at the end of the day, this wilderness – and the isolation, the separation from God and one another that it represents – is of our own making. We are the wild things in the wilderness. In whatever other ways we are lost, we are lost through our own sin, by our own turning away from God, by our own failure to love God and neighbor. We are lost because we've gone the wrong way. Recently, Greta was invited to a birthday party, the theme of which was daddy-daughter rock climbing. We arrived at the party, got decked out in harnesses and climbing shoes, and went over to the rock wall. Greta took to it naturally, making repeated ascents up the four-story wall. Not to be outdone, I quickly scampered up the wall, skills long unused clicking back into place. But as I climbed, I forgot that I was afraid of heights, because I'm never afraid of heights while I'm climbing up. It always hits me at the peak, when I think about the various ways my return to earth might happen. So I hung there, clenching the rocks, palms becoming clammy, heart racing. And what I kept thinking was, "Lyle, you idiot. You did this to yourself. You didn't have to come up here!" But there I was. So it is with us. We go about our business, not even realizing that we're going the wrong way, getting into trouble, until it hits us. And by then, it's too late.

4. So it had been for the people centuries before, when they found themselves in exile in Babylon. Today's words from the prophet Isaiah drip with hope and promise, but only because now the penalty has been paid and the term served. The penalty for what? For failing to heed the word of the Lord. Turning back to the end of chapter 39, we jump back to a time before the exile, when Isaiah stood before King Hezekiah and proclaimed that for their sins the people and all that they had accumulated would one day be carted off into a strange land. And instead of repenting, instead of asking the Lord how this could be prevented, Hezekiah declares this to be good news. Why? Because it won't happen until after he's gone. He can kick the can down the road and let future generations worry about it. All of which makes him an ideal candidate for office in Springfield or Washington. But I digress. They were warned but didn't respond, and their sin would have to be dealt with sooner or later. They did it to themselves.
5. So what are we to do? We listen to John. In fact, while many focus on keeping Christ in Christmas, I'm going to advocate for keeping John the Baptist in Advent, even if I can't figure out a catchy way to put it on a bumper sticker. John's voice, that husky, prophetic, surprising voice is the one we need to hear. How do we best get ready for Christmas? By confessing and admitting that we need it. By acknowledging just how lost we are, just how deep the night has become, and then repenting – turning around and walking the other way, back to the God who in Christ will knock down any mountain, raise any valley, to get back to the people who have wandered off – you and me and this whole world. For Christ has come. Christ is here. Christ will come again, and no mountain or valley can slow him down. We don't prepare because our preparations make him come to us. We prepare because he's coming anyway, and that's how you greet your king.
6. Mark is clear that the story he is beginning is one of good news, of gospel. The coming of Christ is nothing to fear. He will baptize not simply for

repentance and short-term forgiveness, but with the very power of the Holy Spirit, leveling out our hearts and making a way into our lives for God to dwell. Today we are blessed to see that promise made real for Athena as she is named and claimed as a child of God forever. But as Mark might say, this is just the *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, at work in her life. She now – forgiven and free – is called to let her light so shine before others that they may see her good works and give glory to her Father in heaven. What does that look like for us? Repenting. Acknowledging that Jesus is coming. Turning back to God and to one another. If you want to prepare for Christmas, repent. Seek peace with one another. Work for reconciliation. Forgive sins in the name of Jesus, even as yours have been forgiven, and in so doing smooth the way for this greatest of news to be born into this world.

7. And if it all seems to be taking too long, if the waiting drags on, be patient. God shows up in God's time. As Peter writes, "while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation." For however patient we feel we have been or are called to be, it pales in comparison to the Lord's patience with us, we who have wandered. In divine patience, Christ has come to meet us in our wilderness and deal with our sin, once and for all; he does so by bringing grace and mercy undeserved that we might be forgiven, that we might live, and live to God's glory as we anticipate the coming of Christ through works of service and lives of praise. So hang on, friends. It shouldn't take more than a second. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.