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Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

December 4, 2016; The Second Sunday of Advent

Readings: Isaiah 11:1-11; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12.

The Advent Wilderness

The voice of John the Baptist cries out in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way of the Lord....”

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Wilderness?

Repenting?

It is beginning to look a lot like Lent.

But as we know, Advent is not Lent; it does not have the same focus or character. The Episcopal Church moved away from speaking of Advent as “little Lent” some time ago. We now use blue as our color for Advent rather than purple, as we seek to express liturgically that these four weeks are special, not like any other season of the Church year.

And, yet, here is a wilderness in which John the Baptist is getting excited, and calling people to repentance as he invites them to a new life of grace.

What is the character of this Advent wilderness?

Wilderness by definition is a place away from all the usual structures and conveniences of life. People had to leave the towns to go the John in this wilderness, this place of space where he calls on them to deal with what is happening in their lives.

He invites them to open themselves up to God, without the structures to protect their “lives as usual.” Out in that wilderness even the privileged, the leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, are fair game to be called out---you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Wilderness is a big deal in the Judeo-Christian spiritual tradition. God's people were saved from slavery under Pharaoh, but before they could enter the Promised Land, they had to spend a significant time in the wilderness.

They went through a lot in the wilderness---feeling abandoned by God, then receiving manna from heaven, then feeling alone and forgotten by God, and turning to the golden calf.

Taking a break from the usual, and going into the wilderness, even when the wilderness is better than the oppression under which one lived, forces us to face what is real, who we are, what we desire, and who God can be for us.

Sometimes we need to go into the wilderness to learn what is most real in our lives...the same old structures and ways of getting by, even getting by well, can keep us from seeking true freedom, freedom that we have when all our hope on God is founded.

Some us may feel that we are in a wilderness time in our country---realizing just how divided we are, finding once again, in our time, what history has shown again and again, that the great structures that we build will not be our salvation.

So many have felt betrayed by the structures of our nation...others who felt like things were going well, now see trouble.

Forced into a wilderness, we find John the Baptist, focusing our attention on the One who is to come.

In the Advent wilderness, we wait and prepare for the God of our salvation, the God of hope.

We clear some space in our hearts for Jesus to be born again.

Each week of Advent, we prepare with the prophets for the One who is to come.

The First Advent of Christ---the birth of Jesus---God was
 the one with great hope; God chose to enter the
 wildness of life on earth to bring us hope...to show us the way.

Going with John into the wilderness, we watch for hope, so
 powerfully described by Emily Dickinson

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
 That perches in the soul -
 And sings the tune without the words -
 And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
 And sore must be the storm -
 That could abash the little Bird
 That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chillest land -
 And on the strangest Sea -
 Yet - never - in Extremity,
 It asked a crumb - of me.

And so we wait this Advent for such a thing with feathers to
 perch...having welcomed our Advent wilderness, we
 clear some room in our souls for this bird to land.

When all of our planning and and preparing is done, hope may be something
 of a court of last resort, Cynthia Campbell considers, and then reminds us,
 “For Paul, ‘hope’ is more like ‘trust’.

The ground for hope is neither the last resort nor random
 chance.

The ground is God: the God of ‘steadfastness and

encouragement', the 'God of hope'."¹

Paul preaches about our God of hope, who welcomes us
and therefore we are to welcome others.

What does it mean for us to follow our God of hope?

What are we finding in our Advent wilderness...do we see
that thing with feathers flying about?

Do you see it in your life?

Do you see it around you?

I would say that everytime we walk in the way of Jesus, we
are acting out of our connection with our God of hope.

We have hope that one day, all people will have enough
food...so at this point we provide food to those who need it...as
a sign of that hope...through our Food pantry and
our community meal.

We have had our pink flamingos in front of the church with
their red ribbons as a sign of our hope for those with
HIV, that we support all who have HIV, we
remember those who we have lost, and we hope
for a cure.

When some of us gathered for the World AIDS Day service
this past Thursday night, we did so, yes to remember,
and also because we have hope that one day we
will live in a world without this disease...we
have hope that through education and
support now, infections will go
down.

And you know when that thing with feathers is flying about

¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol., 1*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, Epub., Cynthia M. Campbell, "Pastoral Perspective," Loc 1543 of 16796.

...in Christian language, we feel the Spirit.

Ultimately, St. Paul and John the Baptist knew we could not be about the work of God in the world on our own, that we cannot create hope; but it is God who fills us with joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Spirit.

This sort of hope is not always understood by those who look to the bottom line, of anything.

But we see it now and then, and we hear it...as the wind moves through its feathers.

On the PBS Newshour this week, I heard David Archambault, chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Council, speak about the protest in the plains against a pipeline that could have devastating effect on the environment and especially the water supply for the area.

Many in the Episcopal Church have been following and advocating, even going to North Dakota from Richmond to support the tribe.

Tomorrow is a deadline for the protesters to leave.

They do not plan to leave.

We pray for their safety, and join in the hope of the Sioux people and others protesting that they will not be hurt, attached, or forcefully removed.

When asked why the group is still protesting when it seems certain the pipeline is going through, David Archambault replied "Well, the way I look at it is, as long as the pipeline isn't under the river, there's still a chance, there's still hope."²

² <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/despite-impending-deadline-standing-rock-protesters-vow-stay/>

There are reports that over 3,000 veterans are going to Standing Rock to support the protesters even as the Army Corp of Engineers says the group must leave.

Even if it does go through, Archambault, states: “we still want to build awareness on the treatment of our nations, the first people of this nation, and how everybody benefits from the costs that we paid over history.”

Such hope has a long history; such hope has power in itself.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

John was a wild man in the wilderness who was not hopeful about the structures and the powerful who ruled his world.

But John was hopeful that out in the wilderness, the Advent wilderness, people could turn toward God, even as God was turning toward them. Amen.