

The images seem to fit....again...

Exile

In our first reading....we hear words that God had spoken to God's people just as they had begun their exile....just as they had been forced into an unknown place..... a strange land... where they were not at home....a place they did not recognize....

On Tuesday in our staff meeting and later on his blog Pastor Lyle mentioned that it is almost like we are living in an exile of sorts right now.... Exiled to our homes, only able to see those we live with....unable to participate in so many normal, simple, routine, and joyful activities....and this is particularly poignant now.... At this time of year when we usually have our calendar chalked full of parties and get-togethers, meals, gift exchanges, and time with family...some of whom we only see once or twice a year....

Not now though....we are exiled....to our homes....to our pods....to virtual worship, to zoommost of us only leave the house for "essentials"....all of it making the ground that is so familiar feel like we have stepped into a foreign land...of course we are still in our home country, not exiled literally somewhere else....yet...it even sometimes feels like we are strangers here...the familiar stripped away... .and now we are surrounded by things we do not recognize... forced there by the pandemic that continues to rage on....bringing new suffering and exposing the suffering that was always there but has for too long lived below the surface.....exile feels like such an apt description for where we find ourselves right now..... I was mentioning to someone this week...how it feels so different this year....We are in a place we have never been before...

Exile.....Now take, wilderness...Both Isaiah and John find themselves there too...

Some days more than others it seems like we are in our own wilderness...the wilderness of 2020....the wilderness of the pandemic...all being compounded by the literal barren wilderness of winter descending upon us as the days get shorter and the nights get longer....and we are trying to find our bearings....trying to search out a path of some kind...for the road ahead...but things are so unpredictable..in the wilderness.....we feel lost...We are feeling pandemic fatigue....zoom fatigue...exile fatigue....wilderness fatigue...It's hard to be here.

Yet...even though some of our experiences are new....we are not all that new to wilderness life ...and it is not as if 2020 is our only entrance into exile..... We know what is like to wander in the wilderness....the wilderness of our own making....and the wilderness that grows up around us.....The wilderness of our sin....wilderness of this world...

We know what it is like to be far from home...

When even things that are familiar become unrecognizable...

We might describe our wilderness and exile as a place of disease, or despair, fear or loneliness, unemployment, or as unresolved futures....not knowing what happens next....

Wilderness and exile....

It's as if the Scriptures have been made alive again in our midst....and we now find ourselves in these readings...joining God's people in exile....and in the barren and cold wilderness.....and disorienting exile...

It is here....we find Isaiah and Mark...crying out"Prepare the way of the Lord..."

Yes, in our exile....in our wilderness..."prepare"....right here...right now...make his paths straight...in our lives....in this place.....And the cry is one not just of desperation....but it is a cry of hope....a cry of anticipation...

because embedded in this plea...is a promise that the Lord...emmanuel... will come....

Now we join our voices alongside Isaiah and John....

Preparation is not just words though....not just a cry of our voice...but we can prepare with our lives...

Preparation is not a spectator sport....we know this if we have prepared for a guest in our homes...or maybe a big event here at Grace....it's all hands on deck.....

So....it is for us...disciples of Jesus....when we prepare the way of the Lord....

How do we do that though....especially when resources in our wilderness and exile seem so sparse....and hard to find....when things seem so sparse....

John...in his wilderness is baptizing folks in the river Jordan....and...just a few verses past where our reading ends...Jesus himself is baptized in that same river....And....although not recorded in Scripture...those events lead us to another event....one that no doubt happened in some sort of wilderness or amidst some feeling of exile....after all...isn't that where much of life, in between....the first and final coming of Jesus? Maybe this event happened many years ago...maybe you don't remember it exactly....maybe it happened here at Grace....or somewhere else halfway around the world.....It happened in a tributary of the river Jordan.....that just happened to spring up....somewhere unexpectedly in a font like that....and wash over your very flesh and blood...your very body...yes! The one you occupy right now....accompanied with the words....*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*...and at that rushing and overflowing, bath of mercy....our Jordan river...we were baptized....made children of God....raised from death to life....As John says....given the Holy Spirit..... All of this breaking forth in our wilderness world....and we are baptized into this world to live our lives here....

In writing about Jesus's baptism and we can say...ours as well...Theologian Samuel Torvand says this: " This washing in the Jordan river did not initiate him/us into a private relationship with God, a human soul communing with divine being.....Rather, from the waters of the Jordan he entered his public life/we enter our own with this purpose, proclamation and enactment of the nearness of God's reign."

Given this gift of Baptism.....and all of its benefits....we now have what we need....our supplies and tools and...filled with the Holy Spirit...given the gift of faith....and baptized into a community.....a new family...a new people.....The baptized life is then spent in the wilderness...in exile.....So now we walk wet as wilderness wanderers preparing the way of the Lord...and bearing witness to his advent among us.... And you do already!!

in the wilderness plagued by racism and white supremacy....where our siblings of color feel as though they are in exile....without a home....in a strange land....where too often their experiences are not validated....we convene "Black Voices at Grace...." and through difficult conversations and intentional dialogue.... In this holy work....we prepare the way of the Lord...bearing witness to the Advent to come....

In the wilderness plagued by a pandemic that has disrupted so much we connect on YouTube and zoom when we can't gather in person....still loving one another and being the body of Christ for each other....like I saw when I attended the moms of littles group...to meet them and like happens in so many ways both formal and informal... and we prepare the way of the Lordbearing witness to the advent to come....

In the wilderness plagued by death and sin we proclaim and receive the good news of Jesus Christ....who offers forgiveness and life eternal free of charge and we share that good news in word and deed with all the world and prepare the way of the Lordand bear witness to the advent to come....

In the wilderness plagued by hunger.....we partner with harmony and beyond hunger....providing food for souls and bodies and prepare the way of the Lord...and bear witness to the advent to come...

In the wilderness plagued by self-centeredness and narratives of scarcity we are generous with time and resources....not only behalf of Grace....but for the sake of the world beyond these walls....and prepare the way of the Lord....and bear witness to the advent that is to come.....

And...we do this in a myriad of ways in our families, in our homes, in our schools, at our jobs, and in our lives.... When we live for the sake of others....turned outward to care for our neighbors...when we chose to see those who the world doesn't see....when we turn toward the marginalized....and the stranger....when we see the vulnerable and wounded body of Christ, God come among us...disguised as health care workers at the brink...and in the faces of the sick and dying..... We prepare the way of the Lord.... And bear witness to the advent that is to come....

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Wilderness and exile....are images that sometimes feel all too real...but as baptized children of God in this strange land, we find that we have all we need to join Isaiah and John in preparing for that day when “every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain....and when the Lord will feed his flock like a shepherd; and gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom.” And...for that day when Jesus Christ comes...and wilderness and exile become a new heavens and new earth and life that never ends...