

**Hearing the Voice of God in the Wilderness**  
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During this season of Advent, we decorate our homes, shop for gifts, purchase a tree, host and attend parties, bake cookies and prepare to gather our family. Into this Advent busy-ness, John the Baptist intrudes like an uninvited guest and demands that preparations of a different kind be made. John is an odd figure dressed in a camel's hair coat and munching on wild locusts. In Luke, the voice of God comes not to the emperor, the governor or even to the high priests, but rather to John, the son of Zechariah, an ordinary guy, who prepared the way for Jesus.

Here in the middle of nowhere, in a place that that Bible simply calls the "wilderness," John hears the voice of God and conveys it to those around him. The dictionary defines a wilderness as a "uncultivated and uninhabited region; a waste; a wild, barren, empty, or open area." A wilderness has no highways or reliable paths to follow. The landscape is challenging. The distances are great. We may meet wild beasts, extreme temperatures and find no shelter.

But the "wilderness" can also signify a really difficult chapter of life. Let me play the Grand Inquisitor for a moment. Don't raise your hands now, but how many of you are in a challenging place right now or have undergone a significant trial this past year? Thirty-five percent of Americans over 45 are chronically lonely. Each year, only 8 percent of Americans report having important conversations with their neighbors. Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*, "During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness."

The wilderness is a place where we are isolated and put to the test. Others cannot appreciate what we are facing. They can sympathize, write letters, call or stop by with a meal, but it's so hard for others to fathom our trials. Whenever we read about the wilderness in the Bible, it's often associated with the number 40. Moses had spent 40 years working as a shepherd in the wilderness, when he saw a burning bush and God spoke to him.

God called Moses to lead the Jews from Egypt to the Promise Land. But first they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. Before beginning his ministry, Jesus spent 40 days fasting and praying in the wilderness. In Hebrew the number "40" means "a time that seems to have no end." Whenever we or someone we love is undergoing a wilderness experience in life, it often seems like it will never end. When will I or she ever regain her health, conquer this addiction or see through to better times?

Yet, the wilderness is a place where many biblical figures encountered God. God summoned Abram and Sarai to leave home and venture through the wilderness. Abram banished Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, where an angel rescued them. St. Paul discovered Jesus while traveling through the wilderness on the road to Damascus. What all these figures had in common was that they heard a voice. They stopped to listen and changed direction.

I suspect there isn't a person here who hasn't endured a difficult season of life. I recently learned that the daughter of a dear friend who lives in Europe has been plagued by a horrific skin disease that has disfigured her entire body. This young woman cannot attend graduate school or hold a steady job. She never knows from one day to the next how she will feel. The breakdown of her immune system and this disease have ruined the last six years of her life.

All of us will one day traverse through a time of loss or suffering, illness, grief, addiction or accompany someone through such an ordeal. Yet, the Bible reminds us that God speaks in the wilderness, if we will stop, wait, watch and listen with an open mind, not limiting how God can come to us. God may communicate through a dream or a friend, a counselor or a Bible verse.

In today's gospel John the Baptist gives us a solution to our dilemma in the wilderness. John tells us to repent. But the Greek *metanoia* which he uses means to "change your mind," "change your thinking," "to turn around," or "return." John says reorient and starting living in the right direction. Use Jesus as your compass for he guides us in the right direction.

When we are traveling in one direction, it's hard to hit the brakes and turn around. We are tempted to keep doing what we have been doing, pop more pills, drink more cocktails, eat more food, buy more things, work obsessively, isolate ourselves, or refuse counseling and help. Psychologist Scott Peck says that most Western people are spiritually lazy. We don't want to change, reorient, turn around and be spiritually transformed. In *The Age of Anxiety*, W.H. Auden wrote,

We would rather be ruined than changed  
We would rather die in our dread  
Than climb the cross of the moment  
And let our illusions die.

Hence, C.S. Lewis famously said, "At some point in time, ultimately, either we will say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and we will accept God's invitation to go his way... Or God will say to us, 'Thy will be done.' He will let us go in the wrong direction back into the outer darkness and into the nothingness out of which he had brought us."

Sometimes, we get in such awful ruts that it's hard to change. I remember a man who came to see me years ago. His mother had recently died, and he had faced many losses that year. As holidays approached, he was dreading Thanksgiving and Christmas. But what troubled him most was the death of his mother with whom he had been estranged for decades.

She had met another man and walked out on her family when he was a boy, leaving his father alone to raise the family. Decades later, as he told me that he felt robbed of his childhood, robbed of happiness, robbed of a mother's love and a happy family. Forty years had passed, and he still struggled to forgive his mother, who was now dead. He was walking through a wilderness and he knew that he had to reorient himself and let go. He knew deep down that

the only way out of the wilderness was to focus on his future and stop dwelling on the past. He had a decision to make just like each of us.

Into our wilderness, John the Baptist invites us to turn from sin, to change direction and to seek God's forgiveness. Prepare the home of your heart and the way of the Lord. Make a smooth, straight place for the God's Spirit to enter our lives. Etymologically the word "forgiveness" means "to let go." The way forward is to let go of the past in order to enter the future.

In his book *Falling Upwards*, Richard Rohr notes, "We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right." I suspect that St. Paul had this in mind when he wrote, "It is when I am weak that I am strong." (2 Cor. 12:10) It is when we are weak and in the wilderness and there seems to be no end in sight that God touches us. We are transformed from living on the surface of life to diving deeper and becoming a person focused on substance and meaning.

C.J. Jung noted, "where you stumble and fall, there you will find pure gold." The very place where we are touched by sorrow and acquainted with grief is where God resurrects us. In his book *The Second Mountain* David Brooks notes that we move "from suffering to wisdom to service. Dying to the old self, cleansing in the emptiness, resurrecting in the new. From the agony of the valley, to the purgation in the desert, to the insight on the mountaintop."

If you or someone you love is in the wilderness, stop, and listen for God's voice calling your name and urging you to reorient and start living in the right direction. God sent Jesus to be our compass, to help us to travel in a life-giving direction. John spoke in the wilderness using the words spoken 700 years earlier by the prophet Isaiah which still ring true today:

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 ways shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Devote this Advent being open to change, and Christ will not come to you, but you will come to Christ. God no longer lies in a manger full of straw. Today, He resides in you.

Let us pray:

Guide us, O God as we trek through barren places and wildernesses along our life's journey that strip us of hope, rob us of joy, and leave us isolated and vulnerable. Help us to hear your voice and to care for those walking through dark, deserted landscapes and bring them hope, trusting that you are at work in even the bleakest situations and harshest seasons of life. Amen.