

Hope in the Wilderness sermon series
John the Baptist
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In my former life as a journalist, one of my writing gigs was reviewing movies. It was a tough job, but somebody had to watch two movies a weekend while eating a large vat of popcorn, and I was willing to make that sacrifice for my loyal readers. One of the things I liked about watching movies was the previews. I was always interested to see what was coming out next and whether I'd like it or not. The previews were always fast-paced, which appealed to my MTV Generation mind. "In a world where evil reigns..." Punch, kiss, explosion. "Coming soon!" The previews were also a great way to warm me up for the feature presentation, except they were usually so long that I had finished my popcorn before the actual movie even started.

What we have in today's passage is the biblical form of a preview. John the Baptist is not the main event, and he's quick to tell us so. He is only the trailer, giving us glimpses of what the real thing will be like. In a world where evil reigns, John the Baptist says that "one more powerful than I" is coming soon.

This fall, we've been spending some time in the wilderness with characters from the Bible, learning how they handled their time in an isolated, desolate place. You could argue that these past six months or so have been a wilderness for all of us, and some of us are dealing with personal challenges in our lives that also feel like we've been exiled. This series is showing us that God is still with us, even when we go through unfamiliar and scary terrain.

John the Baptist is a little different from our other characters in that he chose to spend time in the wilderness. Mark's first words about John say, "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness." That is a statement fraught with meaning, because the wilderness had played a significant role in Israel's history. The wilderness often signified God's presence, much like the mountaintop will do in the New Testament. We often think of the wilderness as symbolizing a time of trial or hardship, and that can certainly be the case. But the wilderness could also very well be where we find God. Often times, the wilderness holds for us what we bring with us into it.

There's a crucial scene in the Star Wars movie "The Empire Strikes Back" when Yoda is training Luke Skywalker to be a Jedi warrior, teaching him to use the force for good and not evil. While training, Luke discovers a cave and says, "Something's not right there. I feel cold. Death." Yoda explains the cave is dangerous and full of the dark side of the force. He then says, "In you must go." Luke asks what's in the cave and Yoda says, "Only what you take with you." Luke goes in and confronts an image of his enemy, Darth Vader. Like that cave, the wilderness holds for us what we bring with us into it.

Why is it important that John appears in the wilderness? Well, he doesn't come from the Temple, the seat of Jewish religious authority. He doesn't come from Rome, the home of the emperor. He comes from the wilderness, bringing with him an anti-establishment message of judgment and hope. And it's a message that people who had been waiting 400 years were desperate to hear.

John also talks a lot about preparation. "Prepare the way of the Lord." He's encouraging his followers to make way for the one who is to follow him, the one who

will bring a baptism of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is bringing a life-changing gift to the people, but John says in order for them to receive it, they have a long way to go to get ready. They need to prepare the way. The crowds were coming to be baptized because John was gaining in popularity and being baptized by him was becoming the “in” thing to do. But he recognized the people were not prepared; he saw in their way of living that they weren’t showing signs that they were getting the message. There was still work to do to get ready for Jesus.

Preparation can be rewarding work. In preparing to sell our house and move earlier this year, I went through all the stuff I had collected over the years in order to be able to fit into my new apartment. And as I went through boxes and bins, I realized I had allowed my life to be filled with clutter that didn’t add anything of value. It just took up space. So, I did a lot of cleaning out in order to get ready for my new start.

I know many people who are using this wilderness time to do the same. Goodwill is overrun with donations as people stay productive during the quarantine by sorting, arranging, and purging. It’s amazing to me how something as traumatic and unexpected as the wilderness can cause us to reexamine our priorities and take the necessary steps to prepare the way for whatever is coming next.

But it’s not just our houses that need to be cleaned out; it’s also our souls. One thing John does in the wilderness is encourage his followers to take a closer look at their faith, because he knew they were no longer living the life God had called them to life. Faith had become a token, something that was given lip service one day a week but forgotten the other days. Faith was about status and checking boxes, not about giving your life to God and living out your faith. Faith had become about what the church could do for me rather than what I could do for God.

To paraphrase one of John’s messages, just because you were born in a Christian country, grew up in a Christian home and go to a Christian church doesn’t make you a Christian. What makes us Christian, John says, is acceptance of Jesus Christ as our Savior, genuine repentance of our sins, and living a life that produces fruit. But for many of John’s followers, and maybe for some of us, our faith has taken a backseat to the fear and anxiety of the wilderness.

So, maybe it’s time to switch up our thinking. Instead of seeing our wilderness as an interruption, instead of seeing it as an inconvenience, instead of seeing it as an unwanted obstacle, maybe our wilderness is a gift, an opportunity to take a look at our lives from a different perspective, a chance to do some cleaning out and decluttering of our souls in order to uncover what really matters and what doesn’t. In fact, instead of trudging our way through our wilderness, maybe we can move forward with anticipation. John promises someone is coming who will change everything, but first we have to go through our wilderness in order to prepare the way. The wilderness holds for us what we bring into it, but the wilderness also gives us the things we choose to bring out of it. Do we choose to bring out our fears? Or do we choose to bring out our faith?

We know life is going to be different when COVID is over. We have no idea how, but we know it will. The normal we used to know no longer exists. Instead, we’ll be living into a new normal. That’s true of any wilderness time, like the death of a loved one or a divorce or a job change. The normal we knew before the wilderness is gone. But God is at work to bring about a new normal, one that contains unexpected blessings for us. Our job, as we go through our wilderness, is to have faith and anticipate what God is

doing. As the writer of Hebrews says, “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” To make it through the wilderness requires faith in what we do not see, the fact that God is at work despite our doubts and fears.

In most cases, we don’t choose our wilderness. I doubt anyone would have chosen this quarantine and all the pain and heartache it has caused. None of us would voluntarily choose to spend time in the wilderness. But the reality of life is that we will spend time in the wilderness, whether we want to or not. The challenge we face is what we do with that time. Will it be a time of anxiety, worry, fear? Or will it be a time of growth, of learning, of preparation for what’s next? What will you choose to bring out of the wilderness with you?

The time for that decision is now because it influences what you choose to focus on this very day. If you want to come out of this wilderness with greater faith, then what are you doing right now to help make that happen? We can’t fret our way through this tough time and then wonder why our new normal feels so anxious. If we want to feel God’s presence with us as we move into the future, it’s important that we acknowledge God is with us in the present. Sure, things are not easy, but there are always blessings to be found, always joys to name, always someone to serve, always signs of hope on which we can focus.

What do you want to happen in our post-COVID world? How do you want this wilderness time to change you? How do you want to be a different person, a better person, when we emerge from all this? The time to start that work is now, anticipating that God is working through you to make that happen. Yes, our wilderness time can be a time of tough trials, but it can also be the place we meet God again. The wilderness gives us the things we choose to bring out of it. Faith or fear. What are you choosing?