

## INTO THE WILDERNESS

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie, Advent II 2020*

*Wilderness.* We've been *living* in the wilderness... for about nine months now. Our wilderness seems barren; as barren as the dusty, rocky wilderness not far from Jerusalem. I was there on a pilgrimage in 2008. That wilderness looks as if nothing living could possibly survive for more than a few days.

We wonder about *our* survival, emotionally and physically. We're separated from family and friends, the people we love most deeply. Sometimes it means not visiting with a newborn baby, maybe our first grandchild. Sometimes it means not being able to hold the hand of a dying grandparent. Sometimes it means not being able to just go out to a restaurant with a friend and have a lovely evening together.

The experts tell us that the worst is yet to come. It's so hard to change the way we celebrate the holidays that our instinct is not to change at all. We hear of holiday parties being planned with large guest lists. This, despite the reality that some in parts of the country, hospitals are running out of ICU beds. What will happen in a few weeks, when, as Dr. Fauci puts it, there will be "a surge superimposed upon this surge"?

So. Life is pretty grim right now. We *are* in the wilderness, with so much beyond our control.

There are times of an *interior* wilderness, the wilderness *within*. St. John of the Cross called these times "dark nights of the soul." Times of confusion, moments of self-doubt. Deep, profound grief at all kinds of loss...loss of a spouse, or God-forbid, a child, of *whatever* age. Loss of a friendship you had always relied upon.

Just the *aging* process can bring on moments of despair as physical ability wanes and memory declines. We've all heard the famous observation, "growing old is not for sissies." These kinds of changes force us to *reevaluate* the source of our *identity*, our sense of self. That's when the *best* thing we can do is to consciously, purposefully, *embrace* the wilderness.

The biblical witness teaches us how necessary this is, for our soul's sake. The biblical story tells us that the wilderness can be a place of cleansing and renewal.

I've heard it supposed that the *Israelites needed* to wander in the wilderness forty years so that no one would remember what it was to be enslaved. So that they might experience freedom as their *right*, their *inheritance*.

Jesus *himself* went into the wilderness just after his baptism, when he heard a voice claiming him as God's beloved son. He needed time and space to interpret what this might mean. In fact, Mark's version has the Spirit *driving* Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus needed to face demons within and without to define himself *against* them.

Today we meet up with John the Baptist ... or Baptizer, as some call him. Some scholars think he came from the Qumran community, already in the desert, a monastic kind of community devoted to spiritual purity.

John called people *beyond* the superficial keeping of the law to something much deeper. He challenged people to a personal relationship with God which begins when we admit where we leave off and *God* begins.

John quotes an earlier tradition in the words of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" God's messenger calls us to repentance so that we may *recognize* Christ when we *see* him.

A woman named Maura Lammers writes about volunteering in a Spokane homeless women's shelter. She took on the "graveyard shift," working from 7 pm to 7 am several nights a week. She writes: "One morning I was so exhausted while disinfecting a doorknob, my eyes blurred with tears, because I'd be back in another 12 hours to do this again, and again the next night, and even though I knew that keeping doorknobs clean is important, the action felt endless and futile. In my sleep-deprived haze, cleaning the doorknob made me think: *I am totally alone. We are all totally alone*". This woman had entered her own dark night of the soul.

But she found comfort from an unlikely source: the homeless women *themselves*: "These women have, despite everything, a sense of community. If someone is new to Spokane or new to experiencing homelessness, here they will be swept under a wing and protected. The women share information about other shelters in town, bus schedules, medical clinics, laundry services and food pantries. They share extra food and clothing and blankets. They share advice about who to avoid and how to talk to each other, and try to manage any conflict in the group. I

heard one woman sharing her troubles, and another promise that she will pray for her.

“We have each other, I keep telling myself to ward off the 3 am thoughts.  
*We always have each other.*”

We don't enter the wilderness to *stay* there. We move into the wilderness to face some difficult issues, to face inconvenient truths about ourselves and our world.

Then we emerge, *cleansed, renewed, and ready to recognize Christ in one another.*