

What is your wilderness season? Take a moment with me, and think about the season in your life where you felt most like you were wandering through the wilderness. The unknown, the new, the perhaps overwhelming, the time when you felt disoriented or cast away from something, journeying towards something new. What is your wilderness season?

For me, my wilderness seasons are usually when my mental health isn't doing so great. When anxiety threatens my peace, my centeredness, my ability to show up. When bits of depression get in the way of really living. When I'm dealing with new manifestations of stress in my mind, body, and spirit, and naming that helps, but it doesn't take away the wandering and unknowns.

I don't know about you, but it is in those wilderness seasons of life that I feel the deepest need for God in my life. That longing for God to bring deliverance and light and act in the world and in my life is never stronger than when I'm wandering in a new season, in some sort of wilderness towards something unknown. That need for God feels like a blessing when my crying out is a recognition of God's power and might. I recognize God's movement in the world in my daily ability to wake up and rise again for a new day of life, no matter how hard it is in that season. I see in a new way that I don't need to have it all perfect and yet the world still spins. And I am reminded that even just being alive is in itself a gift of our most holy Creator.

I firmly believe this strengthened recognition of God's presence in the wilderness is because the voices to prepare the way of the Lord, prepare for God's coming into the world, come from the wilderness itself.

In both the Isaiah and the Mark readings we heard today, the voice cries out from the wilderness. And just as our faithful forebears did too, we find and encounter God in the wilderness. We need God the most in the wilderness. We need Jesus the most when we are in the midst of our wandering, wondering, wallowing, and waiting. And thanks be to God that we are certainly not alone in the wilderness. God is with us.

And from that wilderness, we don't need to have all the answers, to cry out in a particular way. The Holy Spirit, into which we are baptized, also intercedes when we are groaning, when our sighs are too deep for words, the Spirit comes within and around us to bring comfort and hear our prayers. And this is the gift of being baptized with water and the Holy Spirit, as John proclaims. The Spirit intercedes and gives us the power of prayer even when those prayers are beyond words. Not being able to speak is certainly a humbling experience, and yet the Holy Spirit meets us in that humility and intercedes to bring our prayers to God, and connect us to the holy communion of saints, here now and gone before us too.

I think about the people in this Isaiah text with a sense of awe. This particular part of Israel's history is called the Babylonian captivity - the people who are in the wilderness at this time have been banished from their homes, away from the temple and Jerusalem, and are doing what they can to keep themselves and their community, their people, alive in the midst of this (to say the least) turbulent time. The Israelites, our forebears in faith, had a terrible thing happen to them that cast them into the wilderness and yet it is from that wilderness, in that unbelievably challenging chapter that the voice cries out to prepare for the Lord. Well, as we are all aware, it can be really hard to take one more thing on top of keeping ourselves and our beloved people alive in this midst of a really hard season, a wilderness season. For the Israelites, this was a calling to prepare the way of the Lord. "One more thing?" I imagine them saying. "What shall I cry? What do I even say to this?" they respond. And yet they keep going, they keep their faith that preparing and taking on what seems like one more thing is the right thing to do, the next right step they can take.

And yet, in this turning point of Israel's history, in this season of captivity in the wilderness, what are the first words God speaks to God's beloved people? Comfort, O comfort my people. God sees the suffering of God's people and before anything else, before even the promise of Jesus Christ, God gives the people comfort. And we deeply need that comfort, whether

it's easy for us to name or not. We need the peace and the deep breath of exhalation and release to be comforted by our Creator God.

The wilderness seasons remind us of our humanness and of our humility. Part of being human is that we are not perfect, not everything is controlled all the time and we must have room for the unexpected to enter in, because it will, whether we like it or not. God is with us in these unexpected seasons, alongside us in the crying out and in the lack of words that we may have. God gives us comfort against all odds, against the powers of sin that may threaten to keep us captive, in all times and places. God is a God of comfort even in the wilderness.

And our job through the wilderness is simply to keep going. To keep praying, to keep listening, to keep tending to ourselves, our loved ones, and our holy human humble needs.

Eventually, the preparations of the Israelites, our forebears in faith, do lead the way for the coming of the Lord with us, in a whole new way, in the life-saving way that changed the world at its core.

One of my favorite things about this coming of Christ - is that his actual arrival and coming and baptism is powerfully proclaimed with the might of the Holy Spirit by his weird cousin John. Like, who chose this guy? Who in their right mind would choose this man covered in bear fur who ate bugs and honey to be the holy proclaimer and baptizer of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Oh, right, it was God. God has an interesting sense of humor, perhaps, but even more than the delightful image of a weird cousin proclaiming the life-saving good news of Jesus, God chooses the unlikeliest people and places and situations in which to reveal his glory. His goodness. His grace and mercy and love. God chooses humanity, and yes, that includes our weird river-dwelling cousins that go boldly forth in their Spirit-given truth.

God showing up in unexpected and challenging times, by the proclamation of the weirdos and people on the fringes is exactly the God that we need in

the wilderness. We need a God who is unpredictable in everything except God's constant love, to meet us when our world is completely upside down. We need a God who knows what it is to be a human right alongside us, who had difficulties and wilderness seasons of his own and knows what it is to weep and gnash teeth and laugh and heal and grow and love in the midst of it all. We need a God who showed up out of the tomb looking like the gardener, with dirt under his nails and clothes a little wonky to truly meet us in the beautiful and holy imperfection of being human. We need a God who chooses a young woman to bear the way, truth, and life for all people and for all time - who knows that women have the power to create and nurture life even in the humblest of circumstances, alongside barn animals also of God's beloved creation. You don't get a whole lot more humble than giving birth in a barn next to sheep and goats, and whoever else needed a warm spot to sleep that night. We need a God who is human in that deep understanding of what it is, in its pain, beauty, tears, sickness, health, sorrow, joy, and hope. We need a God who is with us, Emmanuel, the Messiah, Jesus, himself.

That deep need for a God of beloved humanness is what fills our spirits, and helps us through the wilderness seasons.

Whether you hear the proclamation of the coming Lord from a weird, hairy cousin or from the most gorgeous cathedral you've ever seen, from a wilderness new season or a bishop or pope themselves, God is certainly coming. Jesus is coming. In that truth, we can be sure. In that hope, we can live. And in that love, in that journey of God with us through the wilderness, we will find the one who is more powerful than any wilderness season. We will find Christ Jesus in the journey, in the wilderness, in the way prepared for the Lord. In that journeying, we are brought comfort, and we are never truly alone, thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit. May God be with you in this wilderness season and beyond, dear friends in Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.