

**“FROM WILDERNESS TO CLARITY TO ADVENT
(THE INCARNATE CHRIST)”**

Mark 1:1-8; Isaiah 40:1-11

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I've never been to Alaska, but they say that one of the grandest mountains is Mt. Fairweather. Rising to over 15,000 feet, it is the tallest peak in the Fairweather Range, the tallest coastal range on the planet. On the bleak central coast of southeastern Alaska, it has a rugged, ominous beauty ... when you can see it. It's called Mt. Fairweather because you can only see it in fair weather. And there are, on average, only twenty days of fair weather a year. Seems like it would make more sense to call it Mt. Invisible or Mt. Usually-Covered-With-Clouds.

The song says that “on a clear day you can see forever.” Clear days are gifts. Clarity is a gift ... and clarity is profoundly rare. This morning we want to talk about seeing forever, about seeing eternity, about clarity ... clarity around what really matters.

Last Sunday, we explored what it means to stay awake: To see clearly in a culture that lives in excess at the expense of the majority world. We questioned what it means for us, as followers of Christ, that 16% of the world's population consumes 80% of the earth's resources. We talked about the crisis of water our planet faces today, and asked what our response should be when homicide and assault becomes part and parcel of the high holiday of Black Friday. What do we do with the religion of consumerism? The Scriptures tell us to stay awake to the world around us. To pay attention to how we're choosing to live in harmony or disharmony with the earth and all her creatures. The Scriptures call all of us to clarity.

This week, the Gospel leads us to the story of John the Baptist. It is yet another story about staying awake and seeing clearly. And yet it is another side of the story, one that balances action with quiet and silence.

John the Baptist will lead us to the essential nature of the wilderness, if we let his story speak to us, if we pay attention.

Who is this character, John the baptizer, anyway? Mark's gospel begins with him in a dramatic kind of way. John doesn't enter the stage in an unassuming, subtle way: He enters the story boldly, in camel's hair. (What the heck is camel's hair? I don't know, but it sounds like a strange choice for attire.) The text describes him by his appearance and his choice of cuisine, just as strange: locusts and honey. My mental image of John is something like the stereotype of a deranged lunatic, disheveled with a wild look in his eye and a grasshopper hanging out of the corner of his mouth. He's reciting an ancient text from the prophet, Isaiah, “I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.” And he's promising the advent of the Messiah: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me ... I have baptized you with water; but he

will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” There’s nothing unassuming about John or his message. Like all prophets, the Baptist knows something for certain. In fact, he’s so convinced this Jesus of Nazareth is the one who will be the agent of salvation, that he’s appealing to the promise of the prophets to identify Jesus.

So why does John ‘get it’ so quickly? What makes him recognize Jesus as the son of God, the culmination of prophecy, when so many did not? What makes any prophet so certain of the truth of their convictions?

I think it has something to do with the wilderness. The metaphor of wilderness has a rich tradition in the scriptures; it can refer to exile, to desolation, to despair. But it can also refer to a space in which one gains clarity.

Could it be that John’s disengagement from the Roman Empire, from the cultural addictions surrounding him, that his retreat into the wilderness allowed for the clarity of heart and mind to see and recognize Jesus?

This is just the kind of dis-location practiced by spiritual leaders and contemplatives of all places and times. The Desert Fathers and Mothers took their cue from John the Baptist and sought solitude outside of the chaos and persecution of their cultures. And in this space, they found the Divine...more concretely and assuredly than many of us could say we’ve encountered God. In fact, I wonder how many of us could say that we've ever recognized the incarnate God...

The Baptizer is a figure marked by his location in the wilderness and his certainty of Jesus as the incarnate Christ. That is not a coincidence, not an accidental part of the story. John’s disengagement from culture, his commitment to solitude in the wilderness allows for the clarity of his vision.

I’m not exactly suggesting that we ought to become desert hermits and reject our rootedness in culture. I am suggesting that the text reveals something vital to us, as contemporary followers of Christ. And I think this revelation is more than suggestion. Seeing clearly demands the creation of space and of time.

Advent meditations on John the Baptist usually focus on being prepared for the return of the Lord. The words John uses in Mark are first found in Isaiah, spoken to a community in exile, intended to inspire hope to a people displaced and discouraged. “A voice calls out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” While there is value in considering what it means to be prepared for the Lord, it is perhaps a little like putting the cart before the horse. How can we be prepared for what we do not have eyes to see?

This text demands that we do our work.: That as followers of Christ, we figure out what the wilderness has to teach us. The Gospel, John the Baptist, the wilderness ... they all call us to do our internal spiritual work first, to create space for solitude and silence amid the noise and work of our lives, and then to continuously cycle back to contemplation

which informs our actions. Only then can we live more authentically as holistic creatures, attentive to the incarnation. Creating wilderness space in your life might mean waking up 20 minutes earlier than you need to in order to practice a spiritual discipline. (I've been practicing 20 minutes of solitude in my own life for over a year now, and it's a lot harder than it sounds. Sometimes, those are the most anxious, uncomfortable minutes of my day. But I keep trying to root this practice in myself because every once in a while I get a glimpse that developing internal spirituality is essential to following Christ.) Creating space might mean committing yourself to making opportunities to encounter God in the natural world on a daily basis. It might mean practicing keeping the Sabbath. I can't tell you the perfect way to create space. I can tell you that when we go to the wilderness, when we open ourselves up to the creation of space, we encounter Jesus, our deliverance, our salvation, the laborer from Nazareth, the incarnate God.

In my life, I'm convinced of the need to make space to see the incarnate God. I believe that the miraculous moment of the incarnation is found in what it means that God became embodied. How would I change if I made space to see clearly and, if then, in my clarity, I began to recognize the incarnate God in the faces of the people I love, in the faces of the people I have difficulty loving, in those who are lonely, in those who are pushed to the fringes of our communities, in the soil of my garden, the call of the songbird, the spider spinning her web in the corner of my living room. The truth about the miracle of the incarnation is that the sacred, liberating spirit is as incarnate here and now among us as in Jesus of Nazareth. The benefits, the blessings of seeing clearly are many ... in my own life and especially in the realities of the world around me.

So what does the incarnate Christ look like? How do we recognize Jesus from our point of wilderness clarity? Part of what comes from solitude is beginning to recognize God in ourselves, being attentive to the divine which dwells in the center of our being and, through contemplation (or prayer or meditation), awakens us to the incarnate Christ. The mystery of gaining wilderness clarity is not that we see the incarnation in the world around us, but that God in us recognizes the embodied Christ in all that surrounds us. For me, this primarily means seeing the world itself as the body of God: God is Emmanuel not only in Jesus of Nazareth but also in the flesh of our planet. When our theology centers around this kind of embodied Christ, we recognize that God does not dwell elsewhere, in some kind of disembodied, mystical place; but God via the incarnation, dwells among us, and that all bodies belong to the liberating, healing, inclusive love of God. This is not leisurely work – it is difficult, painstaking work to create the clarity needed to see Jesus. It involves a lot of stillness, a lot of listening – and I'm not entirely certain what we're listening for. The author Annie Dillard describes the spiritual journey of silence by writing that when we're finally prepared to listen to the wilderness—to the woods, the sea, the mountains, the whole world—we're met with the hum of silence. She writes, "The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega. It is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blended note of the ten thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence ... distinctions blur, pray without ceasing."

The times I've recognized the incarnate Jesus in my life have been the times I'm centered

and quiet enough to pay attention. But even then, they are only the briefest flashes of light. Hold them too closely, examine them too carefully, scrutinize them too critically, and they seem to disappear. My head explains those moments away, but my soul knows something my head is often too stubborn to acknowledge: that the incarnate Jesus who dwells within my body recognizes the incarnate Jesus who dwells within the whole earth—all creatures, all bodies.

There's a lot of silence involved in the quest for authentic Christian spirituality, on both sides. We listen, and sometimes we hear the divine; sometimes we don't. Sometimes, the silence is all there is, and we should acknowledge that our task begins with the hardest of calls ... to the wilderness, to creating space, to silence.

During Advent, we're often so busy focusing on the activities of the holidays— even the 'holy' activities of religious life—that we don't actually see the Messiah, the Jesus who came to deliver us.

Where do you need to make space to see the incarnate Jesus in your life?

This morning, we have the opportunity to participate in what I think is the most sacred sacrament of the Church. Participation in the Eucharist is our chance to participate in the incarnation of God, to be drawn into the mystery of embodiment through the symbolism of body and blood. So if you don't know where else to start in your recognition of the incarnate Christ, start at the table which draws all things together. When you come forward to receive communion, consider the significance of the bodiliness of our Lord.

So, stay awake—certainly! But first, go to the wilderness. Find your clarity; locate your center. From that point of clear sight, stay awake and pay attention. May you encounter the incarnate God this season of Advent; may you recognize this Christ; may we follow in the footsteps of the wild man, the prophet, the eater of locusts, the wearer of camel's hair. May John the Baptist inspire our movement toward the coming of our Lord. Amen.