

4 December 2011
Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Comfort and Joy In The Wilderness”

Text: Mark 1:1-8; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Isaiah 40:1-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

John the Baptist appears in the wilderness - both then and, we could say, today. To us. Then, you could see the wilderness - the barrenness, the isolation, the wildness. Now, maybe not so much. But I propose that the wilderness we live in now is just as barren - if not moreso - than the one John walked in way back then.

For today the world has never been so crowded, but many never so lonely.
Today we have never been more connected, but many never so isolated.
Today we are so wealthy, but many never so poor.
Today we travel so much, but many go through life never so aimlessly.
Today we fill our minds and eyes with so much, but many hearts have never been so empty.
Today we are so free, but many never so enslaved by sin.

For what makes a wilderness? Is it the absence of life *outside* of us or *inside* of us? In Medieval times, some folks fled to the wilderness to *find* life. And ask Adam and Eve about the wilderness after they sinned. They were living in the wilderness even before God put them out of the Garden, so ravaged with the thorns and thistles of sin were their hearts. And soon the world around them began to look like that as well.

And so it is with you and me. You don't have to go to the wilderness - the wilderness comes to you. The sin in our hearts and lives robbing us of the joy and life and comfort that God designed for us and created us for.

Sometimes we look around at our world and wish that God would come and change things; that He would come and make things better. But what if He did? We would quickly ruin it all again. For that is treating the symptom, not the disease. Giving a pain killer, not fixing the cause of the pain. Dressing up the corpse.

So God does not do that. He doesn't come and change the world in a flash. He'll do that, actually, at the end of time, when He comes again in glory, as Peter told us today, ***when the heavens pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies***

are burned up and dissolved. Now, we are waiting. Waiting, ***according to his promise, for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.***

But it is not time for that yet. Now, He comes one person at a time; one heart at a time. He sends John the Baptist into the wilderness of our hearts and lives still today to proclaim life. True life, through repentance and the forgiveness of sins. The life that our Lord Jesus Christ comes to bring.

But do we need a guy like John to receive such life? We do. Mark calls this ***the beginning of the Gospel***, when John comes and proclaims repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We need to know our truth. If all we know is the wilderness and we didn't know there was anything better for us, we'd think that's all there is and try to make the best of it. And many do that very thing . . . just make the best of it. Dress up the corpse of our lives with the wrappings of Christmas. But it doesn't take long for that corpse to stink. To realize nothing has changed.

And so John comes and cries: ***repent!*** Why? Something better is coming. ***“After me, he says, comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*** Yes, something better is coming . . . and that something is the life that our God comes in the flesh to bring you. For God doesn't just dress up the corpse - He brings the corpse back to life again!

So (to use the imagery that Isaiah used today): the trenches that we've dug in our battles, the mountains we've made out of molehills, the roads of our lives that we've cratered with the bombs of our hatred and anger, the places we've dried up with our lack of love - and all this both in our lives with others and in our life with God - this is what Jesus has come to do something about, and sends John to *bulldoze* with His preaching. To breakdown your defenses and expose your sin, for all this you have done, and more, and worse. It's true. And such bulldozing hurts, and it can be frightening, for those things are our defenses, our protection from the sins of others. And if you don't have them . . . then what?

But behind all your defenses you will never find the peace you are looking for. And so John's bulldozing has a purpose, which Isaiah told us today. ***Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.***

Advent calls us to see that our Saviour is coming to end our warfare - both our warfare with God and with each other. He is coming to fight the fight of our sin Himself and to be the casualty for the sin of the world, that our sins and assaults be forgiven; that there be peace. And even more - that we ***receive from the Lord's***

hand even more than we lost: **double for all your sin.**

And you have! For the Saviour John proclaimed has come. Born in a manger in human flesh to fight the battle against our sin on the cross. And when it looked like the battle had been lost, it had actually been won - the victory Jesus triumphantly proclaimed in His resurrection, when His corpse was brought back to life again. And now in His victory, He repays you double for all your sin, not only giving you the forgiveness of your sins and life now, but also the promise of eternal life when He comes again. The promise that you will reign with Him in glory.

And you will! For the work of your Saviour John proclaimed has come to you as well. He has baptized you with the Holy Spirit, through water and His Word. And so your sins are forgiven *now*. You have life *now*. You have peace *now*. You have His protection and guidance *now*. You have all His promises *now*. The sin in this world can hurt you and even kill you, but it cannot take your life. For Jesus is your life. His Spirit gives you life. A life which will never end.

And so into the wilderness of our lives John comes today. That we know there is a better way; so that we know the truth - the truth about ourselves and the truth about our Saviour. So that we celebrate Christmas and the birth of Jesus rightly: not just as the birth of boy; not even as just the birth of God; but as the birth of your Saviour. The one not just born, but born **for you.**

And so into the wilderness of our lives John comes today. Though, the picture of him on the cover of the bulletin today could have been a bit better - they should have put half a locust coming out of his mouth! Or at least a little honey dripping down his beard! For he was a wild man, as Mark told us: ***clothed with camel's hair and wearing a leather belt around his waist and eating locusts and wild honey.*** And we think: thank goodness we don't have to wear that and eat all that!

But maybe how John looked isn't that far from the truth of our own lives. For all that we think so luxurious in our lives today - the good food, soft clothes, and nice houses we have - you will see for what they really are - our modern day "locusts and wild honey!" - when you take your place at the finest; at the marriage feast of the Lamb in His heavenly kingdom! When you see all your Lord has for you, and all that He gives to you. For as John is proclaiming to us today: something better is coming. Someone better is coming.

Until then, Peter says: ***Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.*** Or in other words, listen to John, repent, and live in the forgiveness and life of your Saviour. Keeping your eyes on the good that awaits you, and keeping your eyes on your Saviour coming for you now with all that you need. Coming to you now in His

Body and Blood. For in Him you are forgiven, in Him you are pure, and in Him you have peace. So that when He comes again, you will be ready. And you will rejoice.

For the wilderness is not all there is. But as long as we live in this wilderness, our Lord gives His water, His Word, and His food, to raise us, to sustain us, to comfort us, and to prepare us.

And we prayed: *Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son* (Collect of the Day). Yes, stir up our hearts and come, Lord Jesus!

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.