

10 December 2017
Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Comfort in the Wilderness”

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

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

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Comfort isn't something that is normally associated with this time of the year, I don't think. These weeks before Christmas are better known for joy and excitement for some, and anxiety and weariness for others. Some can't wait for Christmas to come, and others can't wait for it to be over. It brings out the best in people - charitable giving usually goes up this time of year. But it also brings out the worst - pickpockets and package thieves on the prowl, looking to take advantage of you.

So *comfort* . . . seems strange. Different. Very Adventy.

And John proclaimed that message of comfort in a most uncomfortable place: *the wilderness*. A place of wildness and danger. A place isolation and loneliness. A place of desolation and emptiness. A place of thirst, hunger, and where little pebbles get in the bottom of your shoes. Which actually sounds like where many people are today. Even - or *especially* - these weeks before Christmas. Maybe not where they walk, but in their hearts. But you don't know it because it's so easy to overlook or not know. It's so easy to hide your wilderness when it's in your heart. Smile and say a few Merry Christmases and nobody knows the wilderness pebbles in the bottom of your heart. Or spend enough money and down a good amount of cheer and maybe even hide it from yourself.

But God knows. As we say in the liturgy of Private Absolution: He is the One *to whom all hearts are open and from whom no secrets are hid*. He knows we need comfort.

I was reminded of that again this week when Laurie and I received a Christmas card from one of our friends in Pennsylvania. I remember thinking how strange it was that we hadn't received their card yet because it is always - *always* - the first one we receive - usually right after Thanksgiving. But not this year. And I remember briefly thinking that something must be wrong.

So we got their card and when I looked at their letter I remarked to Laurie that it was shorter than usual. Our friend couldn't write much this year she said. She simply wrote

that her dear husband had a stroke about one month ago and died two days later. This sudden and unexpectedly loss caused her *sadness more than she could write*. Yet, she also said, echoing the words of St. Paul: *we are sure that to live is Christ and to die is gain* (Philippians 1:21). That was her comfort. It didn't make the sadness go away. But it was a voice in her wilderness. A voice of hope. A voice proclaiming that the wilderness *is not all there is*.

You know, in the beginning, there was no wilderness. God created Paradise, not wilderness. God created peace and harmony, not discord and strife. Fellowship, not loneliness and isolation. Life, not death. That other stuff all came with sin. Sin which takes God's good creation and twists it into something almost unrecognizable. That takes what God made straight and jumbles it into what seems like a maze with so many twists and turns that it seems like we'll never get through it. We'll never find that original joy and life and fellowship God created for us. And just when we think that maybe we have, we turn a corner only to find we've hit a dead end, or to find sadness or trial jumping out at us.

The wilderness. That's where John came preaching. Not because it was the best place to go, but because it was the *only* place to go, in a world of sin and death.

And it's where Jesus came too. To **do** and **be** what John proclaimed.

So while some think the appearance of John the Baptist and His message of repentance an unwelcomed intrusion into the joy of Christmas, a downer in these weeks leading up to Christmas - it is actually quite the opposite. John didn't come into a world all joyous and fine and bring it down - but Christmas is all about Jesus coming into the wilderness we created to raise it up and give us Paradise again. You see, Jesus is the real intruder! Coming to give life to those who die, to give hope to those who mourn, to give healing to those whose hearts have been broken, beaten up, and stomped on by sin. To be ***the mightier one*** spoken of by John. The one who would do what John proclaimed.

And in His death and resurrection He did. For you see the cross? That's what sin wants to do to you, too. Not just Jesus. It wants to take away all that you have and leave you with nothing. Yet how often do we not even notice? Because we're so rich, right? We have so much. Wealth and health and more. But it's all passing away. As Peter told us today - the heavens, the earth, and everything in them will be ***burned up and dissolved***. And then when you die, what will you have?

Well, in Jesus, you have life. For everyone else who was ever crucified - or who died otherwise, for that matter - death was the end. But not for Jesus. For He is mightier than John and mightier than us, and so in His resurrection left sin and death with nothing. They thought they had Him in their clutches, defeated, conquered, just like everyone else who ever lived - *and then He was gone*. And sin and death were the ones with nothing,

defeated and conquered.

And with that a widow has comfort when her husband is suddenly taken from her. The comfort of life and resurrection. You have comfort when sin intrudes into your life. The comfort of mercy and forgiveness. You have comfort when all the world seems to be celebrating but your heart feels like a wilderness. The comfort of Jesus. Who comes to just such wildernesses and transforms them. Into places of grace.

Maybe you don't think you need comforting right now, that you're in a pretty good place, everything's going well. If so, thanks be to God. But maybe you're fooling yourself and have just buried your wilderness deep down in your heart so you don't have to deal with it. Or maybe you've made peace with the wilderness, that it's just not going to get any better than this so make the best of it. Or even if everything is good now, as our friend found out, who knows what tomorrow will bring?

So God sends John to keep things straight. To, as we prayed, *stir up our hearts* a bit, that we not be so comfortable in the wilderness, but find true comfort; a comfort that will last. Comfort in the one who is mightier than sin, mightier than death, mightier than your troubles, mightier than the wilderness. Mighty enough, in fact, to make Himself weak. As weak as a baby. To give you hope.

It is, in fact, when we lose hope that we lose babies too. People saying: *I can't bring a baby into a world like this*. But in His usual backward way - or maybe we're the backwards ones - God said just the opposite: *I must bring a baby into a world like this*. My Son. Because when you have that baby, and that baby grown up into a man, and that man crucified and dead, and that corpse then risen from the dead - there is always hope. For a world like this. For sinners like us. For whatever troubles or sadness or anxieties or anything else that are stirring in your heart right now.

So John comes to us again this Advent to point us to that hope; that hope that gives us comfort. For it is not the kind of hope that may or may not come. When John came it was because that hope was being fulfilled. Right there and then. In Jesus. And so for us, now, it is hope that is sure and certain. Hope that is here for you. The Body and Blood of the baby here in this bread and wine. The resurrection of that man here in water and the Word. Words of comfort, that your sins are forgiven, and that the wilderness is not all there is. That, as Peter told us today, ***according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells***. Where righteousness - not wilderness - dwells. Where everything is right.

Can you imagine such a place? Certainly we're not there yet. We're still in a world of widows and sorrows and rights that are very wrong. But it will not always be so. And so we are waiting, Peter said. Not for Christmas and whatever brief respite it may bring from the wilderness. But for Jesus to return and make everything right again.

And He is. Already He is. Not finally and fully, yet. But already, here, in the strength of His weakness, in the greatness of His littleness, coming and making you right, forgiving your sins, making you His child. That you be a little right in a world of wrong. A little light in a world of darkness. A little comfort and hope for others in the wilderness. Even when you yourself are sad or troubled. Like our friend, who wrote, as she said, with *sadness more than she could write*. Yet writing words of comfort, of confidence. Pointing to Jesus as our hope.

And you too. In your words and in your life. Not because you're out of the wilderness of sin, sadness, and death, but because you're Advent Christians; because you know the one you're waiting for; because you know His comfort and hope; because you know His promises. So *come, Lord Jesus*, in our Advent prayer. Come according to Your promise. Come and comfort us. Come and make everything right again. Come, Lord, Jesus. Come for all. Come for me.

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.