

Wilderness Waiting
2nd in Preparing the Way Advent Series

from the pulpit of
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December 9, 2018

Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in

righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:2-6, 10-16

²During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” ¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” ¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The people of God have been waiting a very long time for the promises of God to be fulfilled. And we are becoming a people who are increasingly impatient with waiting. Americans spend roughly thirty-seven billion hours each year waiting in line. The dominant cost is an emotional one: stress, boredom, and even a nagging sensation that one's life is slipping away.

Some years ago, one of the Houston airports faced a troubling customer-relations problem. Passengers were lodging an inordinate number of complaints about the long waits at baggage claim. Initially the Houston airport increased the number of baggage handlers and the average wait fell to eight minutes, well within industry benchmarks, but the complaints persisted. So the airport decided a new approach: Instead of trying to reduce wait times further, they moved the arrival gates away from the main terminal and routed bags to the outermost carousel. Passengers had to walk six times longer to get to their bags, but the complaining stopped.

According to MIT professor, Richard Larson, who specializes in operations research: Occupied time, that is - walking to baggage claim, feels shorter than unoccupied time, waiting at the baggage carousel. On average, he says, people over-estimate how long they have waited in a line by about thirty-six percent. He also says: Uncertainty about when a wait will come to an end can cause a tremendous amount of anxiety; and there is a cognitive disconnect when we judge the length of a wait within some matrix of fairness. Studies show that if the line next to us moves faster, our level of negativity spikes, but if we are in the faster moving line it does not bolster our spirits in equal measure. ¹

Waiting creates psychological stress according to the experts; and I would suggest that waiting during the season of Advent for the coming of God again and again and again also requires some theological reckoning.

Without the advantage of a tenured professorship at MIT, John the Baptist intuitively knew how to help people wait. Give people something to

¹ "Why Waiting in Line is Torture," *New York Times*, 8/19/2012, reprinted op-ed, 1/22/17.

occupy their time and the wait will feel shorter. God put John in charge of inviting people into a new kind of religious community, of preparing the way of the Lord, so that John is the first person anyone meets if they are headed in Jesus' direction. With urgency in his voice, and the prophecy of Isaiah on his lips, John the Baptist came into the wilderness of a people who were growing impatient with waiting. All the gospels say John appeared in the wilderness and it was a wilderness of waiting.

My friend Tom Are, Pastor in Prairie Village, Kansas, has noted that "The wilderness is not a zip code. Wilderness is a spiritual condition.² Wilderness is anywhere that God's people are tested; Where people wonder if God's word can be trusted, or question why God's ways seem foolish over and against the ways of the world. Wilderness is an arid plateau of doubt about God, or a desert of anxiety-producing uncertainty about the future.

For some of us, wilderness is what we might find when we arrive at work in the morning; for others – the wilderness has taken up a huge amount of room in our homes, or among our family. Many of us find that in keeping up with the news we find ourselves in another form of wilderness – a state of constant perplexity at the things that make our hearts ache for the environment, our community, our country and in the world.

I think we understand why the Bible says that people flocked to John the Baptist by the thousands. They were searching for God, and there was something about his fiercely commanding rhetoric that attracted them. They were trying to find meaning in their everyday lives which were consumed with work, with providing for their families, helping their children grow up in a hostile world, and surviving the hardship of a military occupation in their land.

Amid all the voices clamoring for their attention, they were trying to discern the voice of God, and somehow they perceived God's word had come to John. He promised them, that the One about whom Isaiah had prophesied

² Tom Are, "Celebrating Christmas with Mark," day1.org, 12/2/18.

was on the way, and that they needed to get ready. He preached about repentance, about turning toward God; about practicing forgiveness; and about a coming judgment day when a great leveling would occur.

They asked for more, “What then should we do?” Suddenly, at the far end of their question, the wide-eyed religious fanatic turned practical. The loud, bellowing voice softened. The raging prophet became exceedingly pastoral. John said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

The despised tax collectors came to be baptized and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” John said to them, Do your work honestly. Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” John said to them, Do your work with integrity honoring those whom you serve. With the simplest examples, John spoke of the inequities of his society and the greed that feeds those inequities, and told them how to address them in everyday, practical ways, in a language they understood.

He helped them learn how to wait for the coming of God – by giving them something to occupy their time in meaningful, waiting-for-God kind of ways. Nothing fancy. Nothing too difficult to do really. If you have more food and clothing than you need, share them. Do your work with integrity and without exploiting other people. John’s practical wisdom about supporting those in need and treating people with fairness, reminds us that giving of ourselves is the essence of a faith that waits with eager longing.

Elaine Pagels is a scholar who studies the history of religion. Her book, *Beyond Belief*, traces her own Christian beginnings. She started out a skeptic and approached her work from the perspective of a historian’s objectivity, until a horrible tragedy affected her life. Her son was diagnosed with an incurable illness, and while on a very cold Sunday morning jog in Manhattan, needing to warm herself she slipped inside the narthex of an Episcopal church. She listened to the hymns and prayers and found herself thinking, “Here is a community that knows how to deal with this (with this tragedy in my life).” Then, the historian began looking at how the practice of Christianity has

changed through the years: “How is it that Christianity lost that ‘spacious moral vision’ in a few centuries? How is it that being a Christian became virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs?”

From historical reading I knew that Christianity had survived brutal persecution and flourished for generations – even centuries – before Christians formulated what they believed into creeds. Early Christianity survived,” Pagels writes, “because Christians were doing something new in the world, something no one had ever seen. They were loving their neighbors, not just their family, clan, or tribe.

Not even just their fellow Christians, but others, strangers, outsiders, Gentiles, pagans, even Romans.” She connects that history to her own experience: “From the beginning what attracted outsiders who walked into a gathering of Christians, as I did on that cold winter morning, was the presence of a group joined by spiritual power into an extended family. Many must have come, as I did, in distress.” They did remarkable, unprecedented things, they contributed money to a common fund to pick up orphans abandoned to die on the streets of Rome and in the garbage dumps. They took food to prisons and stayed behind when the plagues came, to minister to the sick and dying because Jesus told them to love God by loving their neighbors... (early Christians believed,” Pagels concludes, “that their God, who created humankind, actually loved the whole human race and evoked love in return.”³

You know, the wisest observers of church culture in this time of rapid change, when people are free to question all manner of institutional life and belief are saying – they think we should pay more attention to that dynamic activity of the early church – before Christianity became propped up by the culture around it. Because in those days, the church found its life heeding the call of John the Baptist – if you have two coats, give one away; if you have enough food, share with the one who has none; and don’t make a profit on the backs of others.

³ Elaine Pagels quoted from *Beyond Belief*, p. 5-9

Whatever the Wilderness is, in our life, our waiting for God will come easier if we give ourselves away in mission and in service to those around us. As the one to whom John pointed would come to say above all else, love God, by loving neighbor.

AMEN.