

***“And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit; and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel” (Luke 1.80)***

School is officially done for the year. It's finally time to pack up the car, hit the road and go on vacation. But before you leave, you've got to get ready. In a tale as old as time, you are faced with having to decide what to pack and what to leave. How many pairs of socks you'll need, and how many extra t-shirts just in case. When it's almost time to leave, and you announce it's time to pack up the car, you hear a voice from one of the bedrooms shouting "I haven't even started packing yet!!" Preparation, no matter how trivial, can be a complicated thing. And sometimes the added complication makes it even more memorable.

Preparation is, of course, a key theme we encounter whenever we think of Saint John the Baptist. He is, of course, the forerunner of Christ, sent to prepare the people for his arrival. He performs baptisms of ritual cleansing in the River Jordan, but warns that the real Messiah will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. He teaches his followers, but only so that they can be made ready for the greater teacher who is to come. He embraces humility and surrenders to the knowledge that he is merely the servant of God, who is to be used for His purposes.

He is one of the great saints in people's minds because he is so memorable. Described by Saint Mark's Gospel as being "clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey" (Mk. 1.6), we picture this wild man with an unkept scraggly beard. When he baptizes Jesus, we can remember the vivid imagery of the clouds opening, the dove descending, and the voice from heaven. And we can remember his death, when Herod had his head brought in on a platter.

But though John often spoke about preparing the way for the Lord, his story, and the stories we recall around this day when we commemorate his birth all speak about Godly preparation itself. And, how sometimes the best way to prepare for the coming of the Lord is to experience a wilderness.

The Gospel of Luke tells us about Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Towards the beginning of chapter 1, we learn that he is a priest, and that it was his division's turn for Temple duties. Zechariah was chosen by a lottery to enter the second-holiest part of the Temple and burn incense to God upon the Altar of Incense. And there, he encountered the Archangel Gabriel who told him that he and his barren wife, Elizabeth, were going to have a son whose name was to be John. Zechariah did not believe him, so he was silenced until the day the baby was to be born. We read today about when his lips were loosed so that he could praise God for the mighty act He had done. Zechariah, in his unbelief, was banished to a wilderness of silence where his own words would get out of the way.

We recall John's own preparation for his ministry, in which we understand that he spent a length of time in the wilderness living a wild life. Here, John presumably became close to nature, became loosened from the norms of society, and was able to listen and learn about the God who sent him on his mission from before his birth.

We also recall Jesus' time of preparation before his ministry. First, as a child living what we understand to be a relatively "normal" life, though growing in connection to his heavenly Father. And then, upon his baptism, how he is driven by the Spirit of God into the wilderness to fast and be tempted by the devil. Where, like John, his task may have become clearer to him, had it not been already.

The prophet Isaiah says in his now-famous words, which has been attributed to John the Baptist in the Gospels: "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of

the Lord, make straight in the desert a high-way for our God.” (Is. 1.3). Prepare, prepare ye the way of the Lord. That the voice cries from the wilderness is not something to overlook. If we are to make straight in the desert a high-way for our God, it sounds as though we are to be expecting to find God in a desert – in the wilderness. And what happens in this wilderness? God affects all things – he makes all the things happen: he flattens the heights, and raises the depths, he straightens the crooked paths, and makes the rough places plain (Is. 1.4). And the Glory of the Lord shall be revealed... in the wilderness.

It is not lost on me that oftentimes our daily lives feel like an overwhelming wilderness. We cannot control what people do around us, people we love get sick and die, people we trust break our hearts, the weather is outside of our control, and sometimes everything just begins to feel like it is piling up against us – that insurmountable odds are facing down at us. This is surely a wilderness, and it is also likely a desert of the soul. A place where it does not feel like God is in control, and we certainly don't feel in control either. We grapple to hold on for any grip we can find, and we reach for the tools in our toolbox that we have experience with from what we've learned. Sometimes that is good coping strategies, sometimes that is a destructive path of violence or addictions. But whatsoever desert we find ourselves in, this is where we can find God. This is a place where God will come and straighten the crooked paths and even the playing field. It is a place where we must seek him out to see how we fit into his almighty works. For this is our wilderness, just as Zechariah, John, and Jesus faced. And as the prophet tells us, when the world around us looks to decay, the Spirit of the Lord blows upon it, and the word of our God shall stand forever (Is. 1.7-8).

When tragedy strikes, and indeed it does, and we feel as though we are staring into a pit of despair, it is here that we must seek out our God and prepare for his arrival. In his wilderness of silence, Zechariah foretold the coming of Christ by naming his son John. Saint Ambrose, writing in the 4<sup>th</sup> century said, “from that moment was his tongue loosed for that which unbelief had bound, faith set free. Let us then also believe, in order that our tongue, which has been bound by the chains of unbelief, may be loosed by the voice of reason.” And when his tongue was set free, he immediately burst into a song of praise to God which we know as the *Benedictus* said at Morning Prayer. Zechariah's song shows that he believes God was at work through his silence. The Greek writer Theophylact wrote that to the world, “God seemed to be asleep, disregarding the sins of the multitude, but in these last times coming in the flesh, He has risen up and trodden down the evil spirits who hated us.” And thus, even when all seems lost, God is at work.

John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way of the Messiah: to be a signpost in the middle of nowhere showing what direction to go. And that he did do, so that remembering his name points directly towards Christ. God is always at work, and his Spirit is always at work in us. As John encourages us to prepare a highway in the desert for our God, I encourage us all to seek God in all the wilderness of our lives. Seek him in everything that we do and everything that we experience – for he is there. And truly, while we seek, we must take a step back to ask ourselves, how is God preparing us and what is he preparing us for? Pray to Him. Talk to him. Ask him to be your guide. He will make all things clear in time. *“He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; he shall gather the lambs with his arm”* (Is. 40.11).

And now unto God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, power, honour, and glory as is most justly due. Henceforth and forevermore. Amen.