

Crying Out!

When I was a girl, my family took many road trips. We went out into the desert and we played on sand dunes. We went to the high desert to places with names like Big Rock Candy Mountain and Deadman's Point. We went to the mountains, to Mt. Palomar and to Yosemite and to many other places. We loved getting out of the city and going to places where we could run and climb and jump and make all the noise we wanted to!

When we got to our destination, my dad would park the car and we would pile out as fast as we could and take off! My sister and my little brothers would find the highest rock to climb and my older brother and I would look for caves or little holes to hide in. My parents would find a shady spot and my mom would set up lunch while my dad wandered around taking pictures of us.

Around noon my parents would start calling for us----“Lunch time! Time to eat! Come and get it!” My mom would go up one path and my dad another, looking for us and calling to us until we were all rounded up and heading for lunch.

Even though we were always having fun and keeping ourselves busy, we were always happy to hear their voices calling to us

Calling to us in the wilderness ---- Come and eat!

There were times when we would not have found our way back to the car for lunch if it were not for those voices! We wandered far and wide and we didn't always pay attention to which way we came and which way we should go to get back. If it weren't for a familiar voice we would have been lost in the wilderness!

Our scripture readings this morning are prophecies about a voice calling in the wilderness, calling to people to prepare the way of the Lord. In the Gospel according to Luke we read the words of Zechariah about his son John the Baptist who came to prepare the people's hearts and minds for the coming of the Messiah. We also read the ancient prophecy of Isaiah that Zechariah was quoting.

One thing about prophecy is that it is not just for one time and place. It is for many times and places. It is not only for then, in Biblical times. It is for us, now, here in this place.

So what can it mean for us to make the rough places smooth, to bring the mountains low and to raise up the valleys?

Back in the ancient world, when a king or a high official was traveling, a work team would go ahead of him to smooth out the roads, to make sure the trip would go smoothly, to make sure the chariot wouldn't get stuck in the sand and the horses wouldn't stumble in a rut or a hole. The workers would make the rough places smooth for their leader.

John the Baptist did not come carrying a shovel and a rake to literally make the path smooth for Christ. What he came calling in the wilderness to do was to remind people that God was near and to encourage them to repent of their sins.

Repent----to change what you are doing, to stop living whatever way you want to and to start living the way that God wants you to live.

----To stop living in darkness and to let the light shine in your heart.

----To stop feeling alone and to start believing that God is always with you.

----To stop living as though God doesn't care about you or what you do and to start knowing that God loves you and that you love God!

People came by the hundreds to hear John speak! Many, many of them repented and were baptized by John.

Repentance made the rough places of people's hearts smooth. It made in the desert of their hearts a highway for Christ. The highway is not a one-way street. It brings Christ into our hearts and it leads us to Christ as well.

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Level the mountains and the valleys and make them into a flat plain, where everyone, where "all flesh" shall see God together!

And it all begins with hearing the voice calling in the wilderness.

Now, there's a lot of noise today. It's actually very hard to find silence, especially when you live in the city or a suburb. There is always the noise from cars and trucks, sirens from firetrucks and police cars, horns honking. There are boombox cars thumping and buzzing down the street.

There are dogs barking and people shouting. Talking heads and pundits fill the airwaves along with mindless tv shows. And even the good tv and radio is noisy.

In stores and restaurants there is always music playing, and there is research that shows what kinds of music result in more sales in which types of stores, and what music makes people eat faster and leave the restaurant sooner so that more customers can be fed, resulting in more profit.

So,

what are you listening to these days? Can you manage to hear a voice calling in the wilderness among the cacophony of our lives?

If someone wants to tell you something important, how do they do it? If John the Baptist were here today, would we hear him calling to us in the wilderness?

The wilderness of our lives? The wilderness of this day and age that tries to hide God from us?

I find it interesting that John the Baptist spent nearly his entire life in the wilderness. Scripture tells us that as soon as he was old enough, he went out into the wilderness until the time came for him to begin proclaiming his message of repentance.

This means that he spent over ten years in the wilderness, all of his adult life! Maybe he was part of a religious community called the Essenes, but maybe he was out there on his own, with God alone for company!

Whether he was with other people or not, it seems pretty clear that before he was a voice crying in the wilderness, he found a voice in the wilderness to listen to, one that helped him know just what it was that he was called to do, one that called him to be a prophet to prepare the people for the coming of Christ.

As we get ready for Christmas, are we preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ? Most of us have already asked Christ to come into our hearts, but sometimes we put up barriers or get distracted by many things and we lose touch with the nearness of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives.

We forget to ask forgiveness for our sins. We fail to ask for God's direction for our lives. We slip out of the practices of prayer and reading scripture and private devotions and sometimes even of regular worship and we fall into the bad habits of just getting by, of just going along with the crowd.

And our ears no longer listen for the voice of one crying in the wilderness, the one who is telling us that Christ is coming, that he is near!

What voice are you listening to? The one that tells you that more "stuff" will make you happy? That spending a whole bunch of money is the only way to have a merry Christmas? The one that speaks of fear and gloom, that you had better hide all your money under your mattress, along with the gun you'll need to defend it? Or maybe the one that tells you're not good enough, not smart enough, not good-looking or thin enough, that no one will ever really love you.

Or maybe you're listening to all the latest tabloid news about what celebrity has done what horrible thing now! Or the speculation about whatever or whoever!

If you're listening to all that, how are you going to hear the voice crying out in the wilderness, saying "Prepare the way of the Lord!" How are you going to know how to prepare the way if you are listening to the wrong voice?

Stop and listen. Stop and wait. Understand that even here in a city, we are lost in the wilderness of life, of temptation, of confusion. Those of us who are seeking God, longing to know Christ more, are still sometimes lost and confused, sad and alone, depressed and hurting.

And we cry out from our wilderness----sometimes it's as simple as "Help me!" or it might be even from a place too deep for words.

If we open our hearts, we can hear another voice answering us in the wilderness---a voice that says "Follow me" A voice that says "you are loved," that says this is the way, the smooth way, the way that all flesh shall see the glory of the Lord!

"Come this way, to the Kingdom of God!" "Repent and be baptized!" Believe in God and believe in Christ the Savior of the world!

We have been wandering in the wilderness for a long time. We are hungry to know the love of God shown in Jesus Christ. We have been busy and sometimes we have been having fun, but sometimes not. One thing is for sure---we don't always know our way back to a place where we are loved and fed and known.

And a voice is crying in the wilderness even now-----It's time to come back! It's time to find your way again! It's time to eat--- come and be fed!

Just like the voices of my parents called us all back where we found love and safety and sustenance so many years ago, so God calls us now! Come and be fed! Come and be loved!

Prepare the way of the Lord in your hearts and come and feast on love and hope and faith, ready to live life in the way of Christ, the way that is peace.

Amen.