

Wilderness Journeys

In the winter of 1996, I flew for work to the Northern Territory of Australia. I left Maryland, blanketed in 30-plus inches of snow from the blizzard of that January, to travel to a tiny town called Alice Springs, where it was summer, and a sweltering 105 degrees when I arrived.

Alice Springs is, quite literally, in the middle of nowhere. It's home to a small railway station, several Aboriginal communities, and a vast expanse of red-brown, sun-scorched dirt, rocks, and jagged peaks—stretching as far as the eye can see.

About a 30-minute drive from Alice Springs lies the Tropic of Capricorn. This is the circle of latitude containing the southern solstice, at the earth's southernmost latitude, where you can see the Sun directly overhead at noon each day.

One day several co-workers and I decided to drive there. On the way, we passed not a single car, nor were any

visible behind or ahead. No towns were in sight. Nothing but the highway and the surrounding, desolate terrain.

Besides Kangaroos, which people tend to “ooh” and “ah” over, Australia also boasts some of the world’s deadliest snakes and spiders. It occurred to me, as we drove further and further from town, that should we run out of gas or break down, we might not make it back.

But we made it safely to the Tropic of Capricorn, which is marked with just a small monument. My colleagues and I took pictures at the sign, as souvenirs that we had indeed stood at this infamous location. I then made my way to a mound of dirt nearby, and perched atop it to better survey the desert around me.

After a few minutes standing there in silence, I noticed the chatter of my nearby co-workers fade out. I breathed in the assaulting waves of heat and squinted my eyes against the brilliant sun overhead. And there, in the middle of nowhere, I saw the full beauty of God’s creation. There, in

the middle of nowhere, I've never felt the presence of God looming so large, never felt so close to my Savior.

There's something about wilderness places, I think, that nurture such deep connection.

Consider the portrayal of John the Baptist in Mark's Gospel this morning. Mark gives us rich, descriptive details about John. We know, for instance, that he lived in the wilderness near the river Jordan. I myself have never been to this area, but one description I read noted, "it is a...desolate, forsaken, lonely spot—even today. The Jordan flows through here, but it is the only water for miles around. It is a parched and dreary place, rimmed by desert mountains, barren...and dry."¹ This description doesn't seem favorable, but in looking at online photos of the area, I'm struck by how much it reminds me of my trip to the outback wilderness.

Looking across the Gospels at what we know of John the Baptist, it seems wilderness permeated his existence: he

¹ Stedman, R. *The Place to Begin*. <https://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/mark/the-place-to-begin>

grew up in the wilderness, received God's call in the wilderness, preached in the wilderness, and even met his demise most likely in the wilderness—imprisoned and ultimately beheaded by Herod.

What else do we know about John the Baptist? We know from today's Gospel that his clothing was odd: made of camel's hair, a leather belt around his waist. He ate a diet of locusts and wild honey. And he spoke boldly to the crowds coming to be baptized by him. In other Gospel accounts, John actually addresses the crowds as a "brood of vipers"—yes, that is, a family of snakes. Not exactly a heartwarming greeting from a guy who probably appeared as desperately in need of a good grooming.

Many of us today may see John the Baptist as a somewhat intimidating figure—preaching fire and damnation to the people. But in fact, we know he had his own disciples, drawn by a message that was, at its heart, "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ."

This good news appealed to many, who left their homes and their worldly comforts, to follow John into the wilderness. Odd as he seemed, people flocked to hear the truth from this holy and righteous man—one who lived an austere life, not bound up by money or worldly pleasures. From out of the wild, emerges God's chosen messenger of the good news of the coming Messiah.

How exactly do we reconcile the intimidating, reclusive figure of John the Baptist with our calm, peaceful Advent light—the dawning illumination of our hearts and minds, as we approach both the birth of the Christ child and the rebirth of Christ in our own lives?

Maybe a good starting point is to look at John's ministry in contrast to our own worship. Our Episcopal liturgy is structured: full of rite and tradition and convention. We have hymnals and the Book of Common Prayer to guide us—complete with directions for when to kneel, stand, sit, be silent. We engage in certain familiar, rote gestures. Certain liturgical colors to mark our church seasons, and numerous prayer offices allow us to worship throughout

each day. Our worship contains little guesswork or unknown elements. It's comfortable and tidy, something that drew me to the Episcopal tradition when I was seeking a church home years ago. As someone who spent 20 years in the military—tidy and conventional work just fine for me.

But perhaps the greatest proclaimer of the coming Messiah was neither tidy nor conventional. He was wild and somewhat controversial, delivering dire warnings that did not sit well with all. Targets of John's message ranged from dishonest tax collectors and coercive soldiers, to the general crowd, who were reluctant, even out of their abundance, to give to those in need.

John preached a repentance that went beyond traditional Jewish rituals and acts of sacrifice. He urged a true repentance that meant turning away from sin and back toward God—and toward caring for the hungriest of God's people. And despite his challenging message, he drew many people with him into the wilderness.

In fact, we know that wilderness is a critical setting in Israel's story. God's people were tested in the wilderness, driven into exile in the wilderness, rebelled in the wilderness. And God saved the Israelites time and again in the wilderness, where sin and grace co-existed. And let us not forget how Jesus, the Messiah, spent 40 days being tested by Satan in the wilderness.

As a faith community that practices order and structure, what are we to make of all this wilderness? How does John the Baptist's wilderness life speak to us? What can we take from the Israelite's history with wilderness, and what can we learn from our own untamed, wild spaces?

The message of the coming Christ can come to us in surprising, unexpected ways. We think we know the nativity story—its familiar characters and setting. But can we walk through unexplored frontiers, to see it anew? Can we take a moment to step outside our beautiful, familiar liturgies and our holiday routines, to witness Christ's coming in an unconventional way?

When I think back to my wilderness moment in Australia, I realize that just as much as I felt the presence of the Divine, I too felt my own humanity: my limitations and smallness, my faults and sins. I came face to face with my need to “repent,” and with nothing else for miles and miles to draw my gaze, I was keenly able to turn to God.

The good news is, God meets us in our wilderness spaces. And when we repent, we know he forgives our sins. Isaiah tells us,

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

What a breathtakingly beautiful promise, that we'll be cradled in God's bosom.

So, too, John the Baptist assures us God will fill us with the Holy Spirit: our Comforter, our Advocate, our Mediator. When we find ourselves struggling in darkness,

the Holy Spirit—breath of life—is our ever-present guiding light.

This Advent season, may we allow the Holy Spirit to help us consider ways we might see the nativity in a fresh light. To contemplate ways we might inject some of John the Baptist's countercultural influence into our Advent journey. To consider pushing out of our comfort zones a little—perhaps doing something we've never considered doing before. Or doing something we've considered, but were afraid to try.

Advent gives us dedicated time to search the desert spaces of our own souls, to repent and turn back to Christ, and to be filled with the Holy Spirit. May we still our hearts and minds this season, to meet God there—one wilderness moment at a time.