

Putting the Wild back in Wilderness

The Rev. Abby Kocher
Duke University Chapel
John 1:6-8, 19-28
December 14, 2008

Wilderness. A place where the terrain is rugged or water is scarce. A place where the forests are thick or the skies are one endless horizon. A place that is that is frozen over for months on end or scorched by the sun's heat day after day. And yet, a place that could be breathtakingly beautiful. Perhaps you'll see something you've never seen before, a mother bear with cubs or a lion on the prowl. Perhaps you'll come back with a story that no one will believe. Perhaps you will discover a sense of adventure or courage in yourself or your traveling companion that you never knew before. The wilderness is a place of freedom but loss of control. A place we crave but also fear. A place of latent anxiety yet tremendous potential.

John the Baptist beckons men and women and children to the wilderness. When the inquirers are sent from Jerusalem to ask him who he is, he gives several negative answers. "No, I'm not the Messiah, I'm not Elijah, I'm not a prophet like Moses." Frustrated, the inquirers then ask him, "What then *do* you say about yourself?" He responds with words of Isaiah, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord." In answering their question, he lays claim to his life and purpose in the wilderness. He *embraces* wilderness. The other gospels describe him as a man who wears a garment of camel's hair. He eats locusts and wild honey. Scratch, scratch, crunch, crunch. He invites people to leave places of settled life and journey to meet him in the wilderness where he is baptizing people in the River Jordan. He lives in the wilderness. He embodies the wilderness. He is *in* it, and he *is* it. The wilderness is a valid place to be, even daringly, to live. He is there to meet the Promised One of God.

The scratchy, crunchy, rugged, ungroomed wilderness. John's kind of wilderness is the place where cell phones don't pick up a signal, where gps systems are no help, where Google Earth has no images to show, and mapquest can't give you an estimated travel time. There are all kinds of technology we employ to protect ourselves from true wilderness. In a way, real wilderness is terrifying, and we'll take whatever we can get to insulate ourselves from what we might find there. Our modern sensibilities tell us that wilderness is something we've moved beyond or at least learned to navigate more efficiently. John the Baptist seems rather primitive and causes us to think, really, aren't we past this? Really such a heavy dose of wilderness is behind us, in some earlier era of human life and a much earlier part of the story of Israel. We don't really need the wilderness in the same way now, do we? Haven't we moved beyond wilderness as a way to meet God?

Yet throughout the Bible, we are told again and again the wilderness is essential, both for the people of Israel and for Jesus. What is it about ourselves and God that is revealed in wilderness?

Let's look first at what wilderness meant for Israel. The wilderness for Israel was a place of grumbling and complaining and doubt. It was a place of crying out to God and crying out to Moses who was their guide. The people wondered what was to become of them. Israel wondered if it had a future. Wilderness took Israel to its limit, made it do things it regretted, and

revealed who it really was. The wilderness was a place of hunger and thirst, of fear and hope, and promise of a land to be a home forever. But the wilderness was also a place where daily manna came from heaven and water came from rocks. It was a place where God was constant day and night in the pillar of fire and cloud. In the wilderness, God gave the Ten Commandments. There, Israel learned what it meant to be God's people.

Despite all the good that finally came of these wilderness wanderings, it wasn't a place where the people of God had any desire to return. And so when John the Baptist appears in such a place, beckoning the faithful to join him in the wilderness, it looks like going back in time. You can hear the grumbling in the minds of his contemporaries, "What? You want us to go to the wilderness? We thought we were finished with that! No matter how bad things might be for us now, how can the wilderness help anything?" Yet John the Baptist persists in embracing the wilderness and inviting others to do the same.

This very wilderness is the place Jesus' ministry begins. As a matter of fact, in John's gospel, it is the first place Jesus appears. He goes into the wilderness to be baptized by John at the Jordan. He doesn't go to a pretty place or a powerful place – he goes to a wild space. But that's not all. Afterwards he faces forty days more, alone, in the wilderness. This wilderness for Jesus was a place of testing and temptation. It is the place he must say 'no' to some things so that he can say 'yes' to what is more important. It is the place he encounters his own hunger, his own fear, and his own humanity. It is the place he encounters the devil but is filled with the Holy Spirit. It is the place his ministry begins, the place he claims the promises of God for himself, the place he learns to trust God's power in him. It is the place he relies on God's steadfast love to make sense of his life.

Wilderness in the Bible is a place of truth: the truth about ourselves both good and bad, and the truth about God.

Now I am not someone who has much confidence at all in my outdoor survival skills. This is why I do not, under any circumstances, lead camping trips. I tend to rely on very early forms of technology like leaving a trail of bread crumbs so that I don't lose my way or at least someone else might be able to rescue me. But I know people who are very skilled in these kind of adventures and what they will tell you is that the great outdoors is indeed freeing, but it places certain demands upon you. It may free you of your usual responsibilities and open your mind and spirit to encounter the glory of God's creation but it demands the fullness of your humanity. You must carry enough water, keep your matches dry, care for whatever injuries you accrue along the way, consume enough calories, and be realistic about your limits and the limits of the others who are with you. In other words, the wilderness demands your full humanity. It demands not only the tidied up version of yourself that you present most of the time but the version of you that comes with blistered feet, itchy poison ivy, your unbathed body, and your hungry stomach. If you have honest friends with you, they'll be sure to let you know about how they experience the demands of your humanity. If you have turned an ankle, you won't be able to hide it from those traveling with you if hope to make it to your destination campground by night fall. The wilderness requires that you own the untidy version of you: the embarrassments, the covered-over mistakes, the pains and hurts, the laziness, the impatient judgments you make of others.

There is something else within wilderness that's a good deal more frightening. Look inside the word wilderness and you'll find wildness. Then take a look inside wildness and you'll find wild. W-I-L-D. Think about the wilderness as wildness. Think about the wilderness as wild space and suddenly you have a different set of thoughts and very likely some of those are fears. You see, John the Baptist doesn't only represent wilderness; he represents wildness. If he makes us uneasy it because he reveals what is untidy, and beyond that, what is wild, in us. We order our days to show anyone watching that everything is okay with us. We end up looking like a neatly wrapped Christmas package – festive and cheery and merry. John the Baptist doesn't buy into this myth at all. Because he knows us. He knows we're not all neat and tidy. God knows us, too. We might want to look like a pretty present with a bow on top but that's not the whole story. God knows us because he made us, remember? He knows we are not perfect and loves us anyway. The wildness that is visible in John the Baptist reveals our fear that if we went to God so untidy, so ungroomed, surely God would reject us. We are afraid that God might not take us in if we showed up looking a frightful mess. We assume that people at church would reject us as well. And perhaps underneath it all we have even rejected this part of ourselves. So we persist in wanting to take our cleaned up selves to God and to church. John the Baptist asks a different question: What would Advent be like if we took our wilderness selves to God?

There is one more thing John the Baptist has to show us. He shows us a wildness that is not reduced to sin; that is to say, he separates what is wrong from what is wild. In general, the church has done a good job of making us feel that anything approaching wildness can only be sin. But wildness is more than that. Wildness is the zeal John had and the single focus of his life to one devotion. His love of God is wild, as is his trust that God's promises would come true before his own eyes. His wildness is in the way he embraced what others rejected and his honesty to say 'Everything is not right.' Deep in the wilderness, we can even see the wildness in God. There is wildness in God's steadfast devotion to seeking after us no matter what. In Jesus, God has literally come looking for us in the wilderness. Jesus shows us what is wild in God because we see what God is willing to do to for our salvation. Because we are made in God's image, it's no surprise there is wildness in Jesus and in us. God is ecstatic with the ways we are wild for him. And yet, whatever our wildness for God, God is always wilder for us. Always.

John the Baptist proclaims that the Promised One of God is heading straight for the wilderness. Jesus is making a beeline for John the Baptist. God doesn't reject our wildness. In Jesus, God heads directly for the man of the wild himself, to be blessed by him, to be touched by him, to be washed by him. John's good news is this: if we think we've got to get ourselves out of the wilderness before God wants anything to do with us, we're wrong. If we think that the wilderness is only a metaphor for being lost by God or abandoned by God, we're wrong. If we think the wilderness is a place God has sent us in order to destroy us, we're wrong. The promise of Advent is that God isn't waiting for us to make it out of the wilderness on our own. God is coming into the wilderness while we're still there. So if you feel surrounded by wilderness today or if you feel the wildness more closely than you wish, hear the good news. This is where the gospel first appears. Look with open eyes and see Jesus who is coming to meet you there, in your wildness, in your wilderness.

