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Wilderness (noun): an uncultivated, uninhabited and inhospitable region; a neglected or abandoned area.

Throughout the Old Testament, the way to freedom and salvation was historically often found in the wilderness for the people of Israel. In the wilderness, God met the Israelites in the midst of their anxiety, their struggle and hardship. It was in those wild, untamed spaces that they encountered God and found both comfort and guidance.

A wild and untamed man himself, John was found in the wilderness by a crowd longing to hear good news, to be baptized, and to seek out an answer to the question "how do we live as faithful believers in a time with so much suffering and uncertainty?" The people were at such loose ends that they left the comfort of their community to hear this wild-eyed prophet who preached water and fire and Spirit, repentance and justice and right relationship. They went, seeking comfort and guidance, and what they found was John pointing his finger at them, rebuking those who 'look out for number one', and who exploit others in the process. John pointed his finger at everyone who turned a blind eye to imbalances of power, those who hoarded their financial and material resources, and those who acted in their own self-interest.

John had a gift at sensing the crowd's deepest hungers, their profound and perhaps unspoken hope. In a world that he perceived to be upside-down, John came preaching a message challenging his hearers to turn the world right-side-up. In his day, the powers-that-be had organized a society based on empire, with those at the top grabbing – through force and greed – the lion's share of power and material wealth for themselves. Things were nearing a breaking point, so the people were ready, even if they didn't know exactly what they were ready for.

And so John helped his hearers "unforget" who they were. He preached a message of forbearance, integrity, and restraint to those who identified themselves as children of Abraham, who understood themselves to be the chosen sons and daughters of God.

For those who were poor, hungry, or naked, John's words are unequivocally words of comfort, hope, and joy. But his words are also words of comfort, hope, and joy

for those in power, who hold positions of prestige, who possess the means of shaping the socio-political landscape. They are shown a way through their current circumstances to something better. He gives them concrete, down-to-earth, do-able tasks to help them discover how to bear fruits worthy of repentance. He warns them that the path of self-interest they have chosen does not have to be the path they continue to journey. He assures them that there is another way. A way forward. A way to salvation.

He draws them to the truth that they will each need to make a personal decision for how to go about living as a faithful, holy people.

The people of Israel, by fact of their birthright, knew themselves to be the chosen people of God. But John says ‘hold up – not so fast!’ In a few brief moments, he simultaneously turns the security of their ancestral heritage on its head while reminding them of the promises that had sustained their forefathers for so long, in wilderness and in exile.

John basically says that right relationship with God comes by personal choice, not by association or birthright. If they truly want to be children of Abraham, they will need to emulate Abraham’s faith. If they truly want to be a holy people, they must choose to live a holy life.

This is the 3rd Sunday of Advent, and it’s sometimes called Gaudete Sunday. It is Pink Candle Sunday, the day that we celebrate Joy.

Admittedly, it might seem incongruous to connect John’s finger-pointing message of rebuke to the theme of “Joy”. But John connects those dots for us by showing in normal every-day examples how the brood of vipers can relinquish benefits of privilege and live a holy life, characterized by integrity and justice.

Not unlike those who ventured into the untamed spaces of the wilderness to seek baptism and moral guidance from John, we have come here this morning, filled with our own untamed interior spaces, with open hearts, perhaps yearning for hope, relief from our burdens, or seeking direction and guidance for how we can do our part to turn the world right-side-up.

We, too, live in an upside-down world, where force and greed and fear-mongering and self-interest dominate nearly every aspect of our culture. We, too, need to hear John’s words of exhortation, forcing us to ‘unforget’ our agency in putting the world to rights.

John invites them, and us, to choose a communal life defined by integrity and justice.

For John, the act of turning the world and our hearts back toward God is far more important than religiosity or public piety. He doesn't tell the people to get back to church, to overthrow the Romans, to transform the world in some sudden, drastic revolution. No, he tells them the same things that my parents told me and I tell my children: "Be kind to one another. Play fairly. Don't lord anything over one another. Share with one another. Don't leave anyone out."

He points out that it's really that simple, that do-able. Basic justice and goodness will knock the supports out from under every out-of-whack, misaligned, upside-down, oppressive system that we've built. Basic justice and goodness would take the driving force out of every process and habit that we humans have practiced and perfected ~ and with which we have hurt one another and the generations that will come after us.

A month or so ago, I was fortunate to have a few hours one-on-one with a good-natured guy I've known for a long time. Our interactions usually involve little more than one of us picking on and teasing the other. But the mood that day was a bit different, and knowing that he has braved a rough few years with various hardships beyond his control, I asked him if he was happy. He sat and stared at me, and considered my question for what felt like a long time. In that silence, it was clear that we had entered territory beyond the bounds of the superficial banter we normally exchange. It was clear to me that I had entered his wilderness.

After staring at me for what seemed like several minutes, my friend finally responded to my question. Nodding slowly, he said, 'I'm as happy as I choose to be.' The resulting conversation was about the kind of joy that doesn't depend on the inevitable ups and downs of the human condition, but that is cultivated by the growth and indwelling of God's Spirit within us.

Joy, we concluded, is the miraculous gift of journeys through the wilderness. Joy is that interior response, a reception of the gift of grace no matter what the external circumstances may be, and the ability to persevere in our attempt to embody the One who reaches through the barriers of space and time to become one of us and dwell among us.

In times of loss, anguish, and guilt, that mystery of the Incarnation looms large, and all we can do, really, is receive it, live into it, in the quiet of our hearts, despite those times of tremendous hardship. My friend and I agree that joy is a choice: "in a broken world, torn by fire, storm and strife,"¹ joy is a conscious choice to

¹ Molly Brewer : "A Prayer for #MeToo"

welcome, abide within, and embody God's gift of wholeness and reconciliation – outwardly in the world as well as within ourselves.²

It makes sense that it was in the wilderness that John's message was preached and heard and heeded by the crowd who had been searching for hope. It was to the wilderness that they took their anguish, and they found joy. Thanks to John's words and his vision of what could be, the crowds were filled with expectant hope in those untamed, wild spaces. For that is where creation communes with the Holy. We, too, are invited to discover expectant hope and abiding joy in our internally untamed, wild spaces where God seeks to commune with us.

² As Wendell Berry says, "Be joyful, even though you have considered all the facts."