

**“Where the Wild Things Are”  
Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6**

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Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

This past week I was sitting with my daughter at the dinner table and I asked her, “Sylvia, what was your favorite thing about Kindergarten today?”

She thought for a second and said, “We chased the boys.”

“You mean during playtime?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “We chased the boys outside.”

So I asked, “What do you do when you catch a boy?”

She said, “We let it go.”

“You let it go?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “We let it go so we can chase it again.”

So aside from being slightly worried that my daughter might be objectifying members of the opposite sex at her young age, I was also pleased to remember that in so many cases in life, the *thrill* is in the anticipation—not “the catch,” but the lead-up, the waiting, the watching—the anticipation.

And then yesterday at the wonderful Cops and Kids book give-away over at Merchants, I watched a line of children waiting to see Santa Claus, and once again, I was reminded that one of life's great gifts is simple and joyful anticipation.

We continue to find ourselves in this season of anticipation—this Advent season of watching and waiting for Christ to come into the world and into our lives.

A quick check-in with you—are you watching and waiting this Advent season? I've been reminding people lately that it's during December that we tend to eat more, spend more, schedule more, and go into debt more than any other time of the year. So a quick check-in: are you doing ok? You see, I often think there's something going on in this culture of ours—we often respond to anticipation by ramping up life's activities, packing our days with more things to do and places to go. And some of that's ok, but sometimes it all gets in the way—so much so that by the time Christ comes, we've squandered the anticipation.

For me, part of the joy of being a church family is simply being intentional together about who we are and what we're doing. And so today, we invite ourselves once again to be Advent people—people of Christ's coming—and with that in mind, we revisit those anticipatory words of John the Baptist.

Luke introduces John in an interesting way in his gospel—with a sort of “political who's who” at the time. He says,

In the fifteenth year of the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius,  
Pontius Pilate governed Judea  
and Herod ruled Galilee  
and Herod's brother Philip was in power too  
When Lysanias ruled Abilene  
And when Annas and Caiaphas were the high  
priests in the Temple in Jerusalem...

When all of these other people were in prime positions of power and authority—politically and religiously speaking—the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

That's kind of like saying, “Near the end of the first year of the presidency of Barack Obama, when Jim Doyle was governor of Wisconsin, and John Dickert was mayor of Racine. When Benedict the 16<sup>th</sup> was Pope and Bruce Reyes-Chow was moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA, the word of God came to Greg, a homeless man living in a tunnel under the city of Chicago.

That's how Luke's gospel read to its first audience, I think. The word of God did not come to any of the usual suspects—it didn't come to anyone with any obvious power or influence—it didn't come to someone with a Senate seat, a daytime talk show, or even a congregation. Instead, it came to the most unlikely of characters—John—in the wilderness.

Now it's important to keep in mind that when we say "wilderness" in Scripture, we're not talking about the Yogi Bear campground or even a state park nature trail. "Wilderness" referred to something wild and untamed.

The Hebrew word "midbar" was the word for "wilderness" and it meant "a desolate and deserted place" but it also meant "that which is beyond." On into the New Testament, the concept of "wilderness" evoked a place *beyond* civilization, *beyond* control—a place of hunger, thirst, temptation, and deprivation.

That's where God's word comes in the gospel—the wilderness.

I grew up with Maurice Sendak's book, *Where the Wild Things Are*. In it, a young boy named Max misbehaves one night and is sent to his room without supper. From there he enters a wild, imaginative place where the "Wild Things" are—a far-away land of monsters where there are no rules, no limits. Max becomes king of the wild things and he rules there until he realizes that the wilderness isn't all it's cracked up to be. He returns to the safe confines of his bedroom, where he finds his warm supper waiting for him.

The new movie that's out by the same name takes some liberties with the children's book, sending Max to a wilderness where the monsters he meets personify frail, human tendencies toward greed, self-loathing, isolation, and mistrust. The wilderness landscape in the movie is an emotionally confusing and at times desolate place for Max, and yet it is in that wilderness that he recognizes certain truths about himself and about his family.

Reflecting on Luke's gospel this week, I thought to myself, "Interesting. That's where the word of God comes. God's word comes to the place where the wild things are."

This morning I don't want to elaborate to the point where I make this too complicated. So let me simply say that the same thing continues to be true—God's word makes its way into some wild places in this world!

Just as it was true in Jesus' day it is true today: God's word is not reserved for those with obvious access to power. God's word is not the copyright of the politically influential or the religiously educated. Rather, God's word is a rambunctious word that doesn't care who's who—it will show up in the wildest places in this world—wildernesses of doubt, fear, and despair.

The oncology ward where a mother of three prepares again to do battle with breast cancer, and she says through her teeth as she receives another round of chemo—"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

The homeless shelter where a man who, from all outward appearances would seem to be losing his mind, says to the teenage volunteer who hands him a ham sandwich, "Give us this day our daily bread."

The trembling moment of doubt in your own life, when the choice isn't clear. Maybe others' needs have consumed your own, or maybe you've simply run out of options. Maybe there's no

way back, but the way forward seems unbearable. And so you say to yourself, to God, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”

Our lives wander into these places where the wild things are from time to time and we wonder just what in God’s name we’re even doing there. But then it is there—in the hospital bed, in the shelter, in the moment of truth—it’s there in the broken marriage, the year-long depression, the struggle to be healthy, the job ending too soon—it’s there in the wild places of this world that God’s word makes its way.

That’s what we’re watching and waiting for this Advent season! So watch. And wait. Anticipate! Faithfully enter the wild places of this world and expect a word from God. Amen.