

WHERE WE BELONG: Where the Wild Things Are

Isaiah 40:1-11

December 17, 2023

Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/where-we-belong-where-the-wild-things-are/>

I.

Our culture seems to have a fascination with the wilderness. Perhaps we're all looking at the state of the world and trying to get a head start on surviving an apocalypse. I began thinking this week of all the shows that take place in the wilderness.

Season 10 of the TV survivor show *Alone* debuted this summer. *Alone* is the History Channel's popular show where contestants are dropped off in various wilderness areas with ten survival items and zero help. Contestants must find food and water, build shelter, and defend themselves from wildlife and the elements while filming themselves. The object is simple: don't die! The winner is whoever can last the longest without requesting rescue.

The granddaddy of survival shows is *Survivorman* with survival expert Les Stroud, which ran on various networks from 2004 to 2015. The show kicked off the wave of people being dropped into certain death situations for our entertainment. It was one of the first shows where the subject was also responsible for filming themselves, emphasizing true lone survival.

If you can stand that sometimes Bear Grylls isn't exactly as remote or in danger as he says he is, any of Grylls' many shows, like *Man vs. Wild* and *Running Wild*, will satisfy your appetite for the wilderness.

And, of course, there is the reality-competition television franchise, *Survivor*, which is in its 45th season and has produced multiple spin-offs. In the game, the contestants, known as castaways, are split into tribes and set up camps at the filming's location, typically tropical. As a tribe, the castaways must survive the elements, construct shelter, build fire, look for water, and scrounge for food and other necessities for the entire game, generally around 39 days. There are tribal councils, competitions, alliances, backstabbing, lying, and deception. All things we apparently love. Finally, at the end of the Final Tribal Council, a sole survivor is voted on by the jury and announced to the world.

The wilderness and survival TV genre has become a massive money-maker for the entertainment industry. With snacks in hand, we watch, cheer, and judge from the comfort of our recliner. We imagine that it is us out there. We would make wiser alliances, build better shelters, and always outsmart the hungry bear that wanders into camp. We watch it because we love drama, especially when it happens to someone else. Survival and wilderness TV is like a car accident we can't turn away from.

The wilderness is prime entertainment from the comfort of our homes. But when we find ourselves in the wilderness, especially the theoretical or abstract wilderness, we often find it anything but entertaining. It can be downright terrifying.

II.

There is, of course, the physical wilderness, the middle-of-nowhere places that seem empty, lonely, and lacking in life. Few of us have much experience with what it means to truly be lost in the woods rather than simply confused by which trail leads back to the parking lot. But there are other kinds of wildernesses we are painfully familiar with.

There is the abstract wilderness in our spiritual, emotional, and psychological existence – times when we're alone, empty, afraid, lost, feeling as if nothing will work, that nothing can be done. There is the internal wilderness of discouragement, doubt, fear, anxiety, grief, loneliness, anger, and wondering, "Where is God in the midst of this wilderness?"

You don't make the team. Graduation nears, and everyone wants to know your plans, including you, but you don't have a clue. A marriage or relationship ends. Someone we love dies. The nest is empty for the first time and feels too quiet. The bills piled up, the eviction notice came, and the nest isn't empty. It's gone. The career ends through restructuring or retirement, as does a feeling of purpose and identity. The doctor delivers news no one wants to hear. You're lost in the sea of expectations, obligations, and notifications, your Google calendar a rainbow of colors that promises only exhaustion and failure. Your faith has more questions than answers, and you aren't sure what to believe. You're at the age where you've lost your license, home, independence, and health, and you wonder where God is in this final season.

These are some of the wildernesses many of us have wandered in or are lost in now. Sometimes, it feels like life, or God has dropped us off in a vast wilderness with a few survival items and zero help. We feel very much alone, unsure of where we are and how to get to where we belong.

III.

The people of Israel felt the same. Our text today finds them in the wilderness of exile for over two generations, taken captive to a foreign land far from home. For centuries before that, the prophets of ancient Israel had reminded God's chosen people that they were called to be a holy people. Yet, God's people often chose selfishness, injustice, and unfaithfulness. They ignored the needs of the poor while patting themselves on the back for their goodness and virtue. They failed to welcome strangers and care for orphans and widows. They cheated in business and marriage. They worshipped false gods. Some pursued power and privilege; few pursued holiness.

The prophets warned that the unfaithfulness of God's people would lead to disaster. And about six centuries before the birth of Jesus, disaster happened. The Babylonians conquered ancient Israel. Jerusalem was captured, the temple destroyed, and the people were carried off to exile in a foreign land.ⁱ

When our text today, Isaiah 40, was written down, the Israelites were in Babylonian captivity, taken from their homes and families with nothing. The temple in Jerusalem, the place where God could be found, had been burnt to the ground. Psalm 137 tells us they had lost so much they didn't even have a song to sing. "By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there, we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1-4)

While in the wilderness of exile, they prayed and pleaded for God to rescue them. They had broken the covenant with God, and the prophets of old had warned them of the consequences. Would God come to them in this wilderness of their own actions? Would God continue to be faithful to them when they had failed to be faithful to God?

Sometimes, our wildernesses are the result of those who have gone before us. Sometimes, our wildernesses are not the results of our choices, and sometimes, they are. Sometimes, we have no song to sing and only tears to cry because we've wandered far from the Lord, far from what gives life, seduced by the things that take life instead. Will God come to us in the wilderness resulting from our actions? Will God be faithful to us when we have failed to be faithful to God?

Amid those questions, in their wilderness, after years of suffering, Isaiah 40 brings a new word from the God of Israel through the prophet. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD'S hand double for all her sins." (vv.1-2)

Can you imagine what these words would have sounded like to God's people living in exile? Like a cup of cold water to a man lost in the desert, God offers these words of relief – you've served your time and then some. The time of suffering is over. Yes, you made a mess of things, but I, your God, have not abandoned you. Yes, you were unfaithful, but I, your God, am not. Nothing will keep me from You. Prepare the way for me to come to You.

In vv.3-5, we read these words, "A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (vv.3-5)

Notice how verse 3 says to make straight in the desert a highway FOR our God. Not a way *to* our God, but a way *for* our God. God is coming to us in our wilderness. God makes a way in the wilderness, whether our fault or not. In the very place of your fear, pain, brokenness, grief, anger, loneliness, confusion. Whatever your wilderness, God comes to you. We prepare the way. The modern equivalent could be to roll out the red carpet, signaling the coming of someone special and important. God is coming to us.

Comfort was not all God had to say to God's people. When the voice asks God, what should I preach, we hear the response in v. 9. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

Perhaps there is something to sing about once again. God's word for God's people in the wilderness when we aren't sure where we belong is this— COMFORT! HERE IS YOUR GOD! God is here. God comes with might because some things need to change. Mountains need to come down, and valleys need to come up. Crooked ways need to be made right. God also comes in comfort, like a shepherd who gathers the lost lambs close to God's chest and carries them in and through the wilderness.

IV.

The pandemic of 2020 felt like a wilderness. Life was upended and unpredictable, and in that season, when everything seemed up for grabs, we hungered for comfort and the familiar, the predictable. One thing people did in that season was rewatch comfort shows. In 2020, *The Office* was the most streamed TV show, with over 57 billion minutes watched.ⁱⁱ Most of those were repeat viewers who knew the characters and what would happen. While life around us was changing rapidly, there were no surprises as they watched life in Scranton, Pennsylvania, unfold yet again. People didn't turn to a wilderness or survival show. They were living it every day, and that was enough. Instead, they turned to what was familiar and comforting. When there is a lot of change around us, people find comfort in what they know, even if it isn't great or life-giving.

Eventually, the Israelites returned to their homeland, but it wasn't the same. The temple was destroyed. People and familiar places were gone. New generations born in exile were returning to a place they had only heard of, and to be honest, this remnant of a town didn't look like anything their parents told them about. Its glory days were over. Going back to the old ways was not an option.

In the wilderness of exile where they didn't belong and in the devastated city where they returned, the Israelites were reminded from the high mountain and the prophets' voice of where they had always belonged, and that was with God. Even if their temple and old ways were gone, God remained. In whatever wilderness we feel lost in and in every situation and place that no longer feels like home, we're reminded where we've always belonged, and that is with God.

V.

This is the anticipation of Advent. In those pandemic Advents, when our celebrations looked different and we couldn't gather with families or in this sanctuary, our comfort has always been and must always be found in Christ the Messiah. When we gather next Sunday night for our Christmas Eve service, may the joy we experience not be in the comfort of this space or old traditions of that service but rather in the long-awaited and fulfilled promise that GOD IS HERE!

God has moved into the neighborhood. Jesus shall be called Emmanuel, which means “God with us!”

It would be thirty years after that night in Bethlehem before people would begin to understand Who was right there among them. Even as John the Baptist told them to prepare for the Messiah’s coming, they didn’t know the Messiah was already here, living up in Nazareth. The savior was already in the neighborhood, but they were slow to recognize him, and many never did. He wasn’t what they were expecting, but during their Roman wilderness, Jesus was already there. God was at work.

Is that not what we long to hear? Is this not good news for those who feel like you are in a wilderness of sorts? Maybe all we can see is the wilderness around us. Perhaps we have an expectation of how God will show up and rescue us, and because of our expectations, we’re missing how God is already at work, already present with us in our wilderness.

Isaiah’s word from the Lord to the Israelites in their exile is a word to us today in whatever wilderness we find ourselves in. “Comfort! Here is your God.” May this be the Good News we proclaim as we lift our voices and candles next Sunday night and every night to come as we proclaim to the world, “COMFORT! HERE IS YOUR GOD!”

Melissa Hatfield © 2023

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/b02-the-second-sunday-of-advent-year-b-2020/>

ⁱⁱ The Abingdon Preaching Annual 2023, 142.