

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

Second Sunday of Advent (B)



10 December 2017

Isaiah 40:1-11
2 Peter 3: 8-15a
Mark 1:1-8
Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13

From time to time I have watched some of the various survivalist programs that you can find on TV. Young Tim and I used watch "Bear Grylls," who is an ex Special Forces soldier and the current Chief Scout of the Scouting Association in the UK. He has a survivalist series on TV where he does the usual things: climbing, making shelters, finding food, and eating some truly disgusting looking things that God clearly did not intend us to eat!

Well, if you like that sort of thing, you will not be surprised to learn that America has produced the ultimate example in the genre. It's called "Naked and Afraid"! In it two people are abandoned in some wilderness with the added twist that they are naked. It sounds a bit tasteless, and it probably is, but the filming is careful to preserve the participants' modesty. It is certainly gives pause to imagine what it would be like to be in such a predicament. Needless to say, a lot of people don't make it through the 21 days that the challenge sets. The best bit is the introduction to each segment of the program where a booming voice says, "They are, Naked and Afraid!"

Experience has its own power and authenticity, doesn't it? We listen to people's stories, and those that come from places beyond our own make us listen more attentively: The doctor that has served in war torn Syria, the soldier back from a hard tour in Afghanistan or Iraq, the mountaineer that has come as close to death as one small piece of metal and a length of rope can bring you. We listen to them partly because they have been where we have not and partly because we respect the hardships and risks they have faced. It is, perhaps, as if we expect profound truth is likely to be discovered where human beings are being stretched and challenged by proximity with all the things we instinctively seek to avoid.

I hope those of you that were able to come enjoyed the Advent Lessons and Carols last Sunday evening. I thought it was both beautiful and powerful. In the music of Advent we hear those deep minor tones that simultaneously reflect yearning, sorrow, and glory.

The color of the season, purple, is chosen to reflect the same contrast. Purple is the color of imperial majesty, and has been associated with royal power since Roman times. But it is also the color of mourning and grief. Perhaps the mocking of Christ by the soldiers, when they put a purple robe on him and beat and spat on him prior to crucifying him, is the beginning of this association. Just as the cross is turned from an icon of death and defeat into the sign of victory, so the imperial purple is reversed to become a symbol of mourning and fasting.

These starkly contrasting themes are summed up in today's Gospel in the analogy of the wilderness. John the Baptist emerges from it. Jesus has to go there to confront the emptiness at its heart. The wilderness is the place where challenges and struggles of life are expressed in stark and simple terms. Just surviving there is everything. Food and shelter are hard to come by, and wild beasts roam. Wilderness is, of course, wild: A place where we are not in control. It is where even our best efforts and most rational decisions might not save us. The soldier knows that he might not be able to see or detect the IED in the ground he will step on in a moment's time. The survivalist does not know if the energy expended searching for food will yield enough calories to make up for the ones used in the search.

People come to hear John partly because his cry comes out of that wilderness. His voice has behind it the weight of experience, the authenticity of coming from a place we have not been and do not wish to go.

In the wilderness we human beings see all that we are called into question. We are remarkable creatures: capable of being intoxicated by Mozart or Billy Holiday; capable of loving another human being more than life itself; capable of laying down our lives for an idea or a cause. We are beings with inarticulate longings which are never satisfied: A thirst for a spiritual reality that can never be fully realized here in this life. We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

And yet, amazing creatures that we are, some ludicrous accident, a microbe which you cannot even see, a brake pedal stamped on in a reflex action, a bizarre perversion of cellular life that turns our bodies against themselves, or just happening to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and all this miracle of human life and hope is brushed off the earth as carelessly as you brush a fly off your windscreen, making a mockery of human hopes and dreams and loves. All are sent to extinction beyond recall.

These are some of the wild beasts that roam in human beings' honest awareness of the wilderness. Before them we are naked and afraid. But there are others too. The blind forces of technological change that promise such wonders but that sweep away livelihoods in a moment. Think how many people were employed as secretaries and typists 30 years ago. Think of how many people were employed on the land and in domestic service 50 years before that. Almost all these livelihoods are gone. New ones have emerged, but it seems more are likely to disappear.

And worst of all are the beasts that have human form. We have seen how male sexual predation is being revealed and condemned at the moment. There are some men who use power and position to intimidate and coerce women with less power and in a lower position, and that is a despicable thing. It is part of a wider problem. All human beings are tempted to use whatever power they have to manipulate and exploit others. Money, influence, status, beauty, and charisma of all kinds can be used and abused in this way. There is a beast in all of us that is quite at home in the wasteland that T. S. Eliot described so well where, standing by the river of life, he hears the malignant darkness behind him and says:

“Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud nor long
But at my back in a cold blast I hear
The rattle of the bones and chuckle spread ear to ear.”

One of my teachers used to throw chalk or blackboard dusters at us if we used the word “nice.” He hated it because it said and meant so little! Nonetheless, there are those, I suspect, who think we Christians live in a kind of Disney Land where everything is happy and superficial and “nice.” But nothing could be further from the truth.

The Christian is born of the wilderness. His or her faith is forged in it and found in it because it is only those who have faced the truth of their existence – with all its temporary nature and its subjugation to accident and chance – who have known and recognized the dreadful proximity of evil, who can really see that Christ is the only alternative to all that. The fast of the soul that makes it ready for the feast. For when we come to ourselves – it is the emptiness of the wilderness that makes us able to hear and see and feel the redemption that Christ brings. It’s the emptiness of the soul, or at least the recognition of that emptiness, that prepares it to be filled with God.

In the yearning cry in the wilderness we hear the glorious sound of hope. “I look from afar: And lo I see the power of God coming, and a cloud covering the whole earth.”

Both John and Jesus come out of the wilderness proclaiming that its power is limited; That something greater is coming and is already here; Something that even the wild beasts of sickness, accident, economics, technology, and human malice cannot assail or destroy; Something that is born wherever there is repentance and a willingness to change. Can we hear the Baptist’s cry? Are we really willing to change our ways?

Very soon we will hear the Christmas music again. I will go to midnight mass and that, for me, will be Christmas. And all the fun that follows – the wine and laughter – the gifts from those who love me more than ever I deserve – will remind me of that inestimable gift of the love of God who sent his son into the world that human beings might come out of the wilderness and live. The beasts will not have gone away, but I no longer will be naked and afraid.



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