

**IN AND BEYOND THE WILDERNESS; LUKE 3:1-6; ADVENT II; DECEMBER 6,
2015; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Context is important. When T.S. Eliot published “The Wasteland” in 1922, WWI had concluded only five years before and the great poet was five years away from his conversion to Christianity. It was a moment of soul searching for Eliot who before his commitment to the faith accepted the doctrine of original sin, that humanity was profoundly fallible; and he consequently felt that the liberal values of his time – faith in the progress and perfectibility of humans – was vacuous and naive.

The famous poem that launched modern poetry was a ‘voice crying in the wilderness’; it embodies the brokenness of life during the Roaring Twenties – a time, according to one critic, bereft of tradition, community, faith and purpose while people were full of suffering, alienation, guilt, futility and fear. Eliot’s influence on English and American poetry was instantly dominant and prevailed for the next two decades through the Depression and WWII.

Naming the dark side of human nature became the mark of modern poetry.

The success of “The Wasteland” is not surprising. WWI initiated the barbaric start to a century everyone thought was going to be an era of progress and peace. Instead, the twentieth century was born into a wilderness of political chaos and economic failure.

When we hear John the Baptist today – a voice crying in the wilderness – people in John’s first century Palestine were just as spiritually hungry and lost as they were in Eliot’s twentieth century; but they were also just as lost as they were in the days of Israel’s exile in Babylon in sixth century BCE which John points to by quoting Isaiah.

Isaiah’s community was carried off from their homeland and made to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land. They had no one to blame but themselves after allowing the erosion of their spiritual life and moral values; which led to their downfall as Isaiah predicted.

And so, in first century Palestine, John the Baptist appears like an Old Testament prophet to condemn the moral bankruptcy of the people and to urge them to turn from their self-destructive living.

Here in the second week of Advent, I want to consider the theme of the wilderness and what lies beyond the wasteland. Clearly, the human family gets in trouble when our moral values atrophy; when the culture embraces the values and goals of greed and hubris and our sense of community and connection to one another is lost.

Yet, the biblical narrative interrupts this repeating story-line to announce the coming of God into our midst – at a future date and appointed time. This is the hallmark of prophetic preaching; it is the hallmark of the Baptist’s appearance; because we can’t find out our way to God, God finds his way in to us. God comes to save us from ourselves.

We live in a social/political/moral wilderness today – the shootings over the last two weeks of a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado and then a social services center in California seem on the one hand outrageously shocking and yet on the other hand strangely routine.

Reports from the climate change conference in Paris add to the anxiety; the torrential floods in Chennai, India on the southeast coast and punishing drought in the north of the country are illustrative of global climate turmoil. Perhaps extreme weather events are no longer 'acts of God' but more accurately 'acts of man.'

Here in Advent, John the Baptist quotes the prophet Isaiah and identifies human weakness and folly as the source of our problems. He preaches what Luke calls a "baptism for the repentance of sins." This was not a baptism for proselytizing new converts to the faith; but a coming to terms with the failure to live according the principles of Torah and owning up to the resulting spiritual hunger, personal despair, and the loss of community.

We could make some rough parallels between the Roman occupiers and the one percenters of our time, an elite, powerful, autonomous, class who disregard the plight of the poor; the religious leaders then as some are now, were irrelevant, unhelpful and disconnected to the suffering; and the people were angry, lost and not far from rebellion.

Every age has prophets who name the wilderness of human greed and pursuit of power. It is always the same: social injustice, draconian political figures and, in America, a tendency to naïve innocence and isolationism from the world's problems.

The wonderful *Library of America* series has just introduced a new volume, 962 pages long, entitled *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*. Niebuhr was one of the giants of 20th century thought; he was a Lutheran pastor serving a blue-collar parish in Detroit, MI in the 1920s (at the same time T.S. Eliot was coming into prominence). Without formal academic study and a PhD Niebuhr authored some of the most profound and influential writings on theology, ethics and geo-politics of the modern era.

Like the prophets of old his theme was social justice but his signature contribution was to notice and name the irony of American politics; rather than seeing Jesus as having paid the debt humankind incurred through original sin; he imagined Jesus as a perpetual *reminder* that the debt was still owed.

Niebuhr wrote and preached with disarming candor: "The gospel commits us," he said, "to positions which require heroic devotion before they will ever be realized in life. But we are astute rather than heroic and cautious rather than courageous."

He invariably included himself in his criticism and before he left his church in Detroit for Union Theological Seminary where he would spend the rest of his career he said, "Woe unto you if all men speak well of you; and yet I leave without a serious controversy in the whole thirteen years [of my pastorate]."

Niebuhr took to heart the difficulty of being a Christian, he said, "it is almost impossible to be sane and Christian at the same time," and regretted that "on the whole I have been more sane than Christian." Finally, he advocated a Christian realism that there can be no permanent solution to human difficulties; "It is an illusion," he said, "of the idealistic children of light that they typically imagine that we can destroy evil merely by avowing ideals."ⁱ

Such voices – as Isaiah and John the Baptist and Reinhold Niebuhr – stir us from our spiritual slumber; alert us to impending danger and call us to honest evaluation not just of our values but of our conduct. We need to be jolted from our comfortable lives – even if our comfort is an uneasy but familiar truce with life as it is.

In Babylon, God’s people had resigned themselves to adapt to a foreign land with foreign gods. The Jews in Babylon believed Nebuchadnezzar was stronger than Israel’s God. Sometimes we live in the remote, wild, valley of wilderness so long we think our state of affairs is normal. Even in an affluent nation with a vital democracy we accept life as less than it can be. We have anesthetized ourselves and our children with virtual lives numbed with busyness, pharmaceutical aids and the blue light of computer screens.

So it took an Isaiah, then later a John the Baptist, and in 20th century America, a Reinhold Niebuhr to announce an alternative reality to the wilderness, to subvert the tight-fisted grip of the empire.

One of the great voices of our time as prophetic as John the Baptist or his predecessor Isaiah, but also as unapologetically Christian as Reinhold Niebuhr is Marilynne Robinson. In her recent collection of essays entitled, *The Givenness of Things* she refers to our innate moral conscience and spiritual selfhood, which is increasingly discounted by neuroscience.

Citing such seminal thinkers as William James and Jonathan Edwards Robinson says, “[they assumed] that we are not passive in relation to our emotions. There is a second self, a self who can wish we would not be afraid of what frightens us, that we would not be angered by what angers us, a self-awareness that regrets an incapacity for the kind of joy the best moments of life would afford us or the kind of compassion circumstance demands of us.

Referring to the great tradition of mainline Protestant preaching beginning with Jonathan Edwards, Robinson says “they could preach to the difference their congregations would have felt between appropriate experience – an overwhelming love of God, an overwhelming gratitude for existence, a ravishing sense of the divine beauty manifest in Creation on one hand, and the comparatively dull and meager experience of unconverted life on the other.”ⁱⁱ

One of Robinson’s greatest contributions is to call us back to a sense of awe and wonder; to lift up the marvel of human creation and raise our vision to the Source of all Creation and to the Maker of human creation.

She has an uncanny way of making you believe or at least inviting you to consider that we were intended for something much greater than we so often settle for in our Babylonian wildernesses, which is precisely what the prophets did – often with fire and brimstone – but also with poetry and song.

The shift from prophet of condemnation to prophet of new life is audible in today’s lesson, “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 places made smooth; ‘and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

There is the wilderness and there is the life that awaits us beyond the wilderness, the life the prophets promise God will usher in. Critics have said as brilliant as T.S. Eliot was, he only got it half right; his poem “The Wasteland” captured the sense of human defeat and despair so completely that there was nothing more to be said; no poem of despair could add to or surpass it.

Indeed, the dark forces, would have us stop there, would close our hearts to any new song, close our minds to think that any change in our circumstances, any return home from exile is possible.

And so it is the prophets, the poets, the singers who lead us out of our spiritual lethargy and mental malaise. I am reminded in today’s lesson – when John quotes Isaiah to announce the beginning of the end of the people’s suffering – of George Fredric Handel. I think of Handel reading those lines of scripture and imagining the healing, restoration and hope to come in God’s time. And then the great composer’s mind stirring to the poetry of the prophet, hearing a new song and the birth of what would become the great oratorio “The Messiah.”

We will sing a new song on Christmas Eve at Lessons and Carols as our music ministry leads us into the wonder and glory of the lives we were intended to live.

For now terrorism seems to reign; fear lurks; distrust of our human capability to be better than we are seems to prevail. But then we hear a voice crying in the wilderness....

Not everyone who heard John came forward to be baptized, and not all of those baptized embarked on a new path. There is a decision each of us must make to prepare the way for Him to enter not just our thoughts but our actions. It starts today with the lighting of a candle and the eating of bread and wine. In the meantime we wait, we watch, and we listen. Amen.

ⁱ Adam Kirsch, “The Ironic Wisdom of Reinhold Niebuhr,” *The New York Review of Books*, August 13, 2015, 74ff.

ⁱⁱ Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York: 2015) 82.