

Let the Wild God In

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

Slide: Ten Essentials

When I was a kid, my Dad taught us the good habits of being in the backcountry, whether for a long day hike, camping, or an overnight backpacking trip. Given we lived near mountains, understanding that weather conditions could change in an instant was important. So, besides the usual good habits such as staying on the trail, packing out your trash, or leaving no trace that you were in the campsite, My Dad also taught us to travel always with the Ten Essentials, because you may never know when something could happen and you would need these essentials to help you survive.

What are the Ten Essentials? They are the following: Navigation (map), flashlight and batteries, sun protection, First Aid kit, knife, matches or lighter, shelter such as a tarp, extra food, extra water, and clothing that dries easily and keeps you warm

such as wool. That's it. Those are the ten essentials.

Sometimes, I would think when I would drag these out, "Do I really need to haul all this around? It's just a day hike."

And, I have never had need of them to survive but I have a friend who did. My college roommate Jenny was a volunteer at Holden Village for a year. She and I would go backpacking together when we were in college and she had never heard of the Ten Essentials until meeting me. Whenever we went out together, we brought them but never really needed them. We were lucky.

But, she found herself lost when on a day hike one afternoon on her day off from Holden Village. She brought those essentials with her and needed them when the temperature dropped to near freezing, and that night she had to sleep alone in the dark. She had the ability to light a fire, had extra clothing, food, and water. Her preparedness saved her from hypothermia. Friends from the Village found her the next day. She called me soon

after to tell me about it and believed that having those essentials saved her life.

Slide: Mountain with Moon

Today, we meet a wild man of God named John who is also telling us that we need to be prepared. And, we should not ever go into the wilderness without that preparedness. Often when we open the Bible, the very last thing we think about is location. We are easy to jump to the people or person in the story. And, along with that, we first tend to look at the actions and words of scripture before actually thinking, "I wonder if the location of the story is significant." But, I can't help but think that location is everything when we consider John the Baptist and what he asks of us.

The entire Gospel of Matthew has a location in itself. At our Bible study last Sunday, we conversed about that as we dived into the overall focus of this valuable word about Jesus. This whole next Church year we will walk along with Matthew to experience the person called in chapter one:

"Immanuel, God with us". As we enter Matthew's Gospel masterpiece, it's worth remembering what sort of thing a "gospel" is. Originally meant to be read out loud, Matthew is a kind of story-sermon meant to declare Good News in ways provoking us hearers to reflect, to repent or change our ways, to believe, and then to serve the wider world.

Matthew is a practical, poetic and literary work with layers of meaning, written for the location of the present moment of an occupied people, a people struggling to figure out how be faithful as Jews who are also new believers in Jesus as the Christ. And, Matthew is steeped in the knowledge of the prophets before Jesus, the ones who also screamed in the wilderness that the people ought to mend their ways before they can mend the universe.

Through this historical location then, we enter another location, a wilderness, one that is not only metaphorical, but physical. And, people are streaming to this wilderness to encounter a wild man of God,

proclaiming a wild God, one who promises life through a simple act of repentance.

Slide: Desert

John is not proclaiming this new realm of God or preparing a way for it in the places of power, in the temple, nor in palaces; nor where the religious authorities discuss, argue and deliberate what faith looks like and is practiced.

John is a man on the edge of things. He is purposely dressed like the Prophet Elijah, the prophet that the people of that day believed would come to usher in the coming of the Messiah. No wonder all of Judea is rushing into the wilderness – John is the Elijah character, bigger than life, proclaiming change, ushering in a new path on a repentance road.

And, he does this in a wilderness. Wilderness is unpredictable. It's beautiful. It includes water, earth, and weather and has no walls. In the wilderness are other creatures other than humans. It demands respect and preparedness and at the drop

of a hat, it can change, expecting you to adapt to the change quickly. Wilderness cannot tame God as much as people try to. Wilderness hearkens back to creation, to Noah and the ark, to the saving of the people across the Red Sea, and this wilderness stretches as far as the manger, where even our God had to lie under stars and then flee in the desert of Egypt.

Among all of the words of change John speaks of here in this reading from Matthew, we face a God who is wild. And John begs those who long to live this new way of making the road straight to let the Wild God in.

Do we? Do we allow God to be wild in us? Do we allow our faith to stretch into the wild places of our lives? Or do we tame God as much as we can?

Slide: Rainbow

Think on this. Most of scripture occurs outdoors in these wild places. Jesus is born with angels proclaiming to shepherds outside in the wild.

Jesus is baptized in the wild where John the Baptist is. He roamed about the countryside, sitting on mountains and preaching sermons. When Jesus fed the multitude, he was outside. And, at his final breath, he was not lifted up on a cross in the city or jail, but away from the city on a hill.

And yet, for centuries, we the people of God have forgotten this. We have brought the wild indoors into churches. Our water is in a bowl. Our bread and wine is inside. We bring in greenery and create a Jesse Tree because it's beautiful and brings meaning to our worship. And yet, in all our lives, have we been hard at work at taming the very God who longs for us to enter the wilderness? The Wild God wants in. Will we let it happen?

This is why we need John. We need John every year to remind us that we have a God who indeed is Immanuel, God with us. We have a God who is not nor cannot be confined, controlled, or manipulated to be what we want. This God has been

loosed on the world and John was called to usher that in. John is not in the Gospel to tame God. He's a reminder that we have a tendency to and that we are to repent from the desire to make God in our own image. We are to seek the wilderness places, the hard edges where God needs us to go in the world.

Some of those places may be uncomfortable ones. Some of those places may require for us to hold a mirror up to ourselves to reexamine our place in this calling of the Gospel. Are we truly a hospitable people? Are we willing to change as we are instead of looking to how we were and wanting to stay there? Because in the Wild, John is proclaiming a life of radical change, a life against the status quo and what always was. How are we as a community of faith to heed this? What are our ten essentials to help us when we are lost?

Slide: Big Falls County Park

Today, we baptize
Rihanna Elizabeth Hanvelt in

the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Rihanna is in 8th grade. Rihanna came to baptism on her own. Her desire to be baptized happened because she heard God's love for her here at St. John's, and a tug from the Holy Spirit brings her to this water. Rihanna has no sponsor because she is not a baby. Of course, she has her family to support her in her faith, but she also now has you. She has this faith family to encourage her in the faith she felt called to when coming to our Wednesday worship.

This water is not tame. The people of God attempt to tame this water, but this faith cannot be controlled. This water is full of the wildness of God, the one who calls us to listen to voices of this newly baptized child and all young people who long for a church that will listen to the change it needs for their future. We need to listen to them. For, in her world, faith is truly on the edges of a society in need of engagement. In her world, our climate is in need of repair. In her world, children are being killed in schools by active shooters. Will we listen to this

for our future here at St. John's? What can John teach us today as the people of God here in this place?

For we worship a God at loose in the world. Let us prepare a road, fling wide the door, and let the Wild God in.

Amen.