

## ***“Crying in the Wilderness Is Not a Waste of Time”***

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of  
St. Andrew’s United Church

Sunday, December 10, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Advent 2 – Candle of “Peace”

**Scripture Readings:** Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

*(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)*

We have all been there, I assume. A place where grief is palpable, and uncertainty immediate. It may be the death of a person special to the community or the loss of someone due to a tragic or thoughtless act; it may be the loss of a young child or the death of a defenseless individual. We have been there – if not to see the event unfold, at least to experience the raw emotion and loss for the people who must go through the event, and we know when fear and pain and sadness all come together in one life. It is not an easy experience to witness, much less go through in a personal way.

When we look to “peace” as a focus for the second Sunday of Advent, we are not thinking of a sanitized peace or even a weekly comedy series or soap opera style of peace. It is a real and gripping struggle to find peace in the midst of pains and hardships, disappointments and fears, struggles and disasters that can creep up on us and leave us confused, disoriented, and frustrated.

Now John the Baptist is the lead figure of the pre-Jesus story. Let me restate that – John the Baptist is the lead religious figure in that story. For many, and especially those from a Roman Catholic background, Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is very much a key figure, but we should not overlook John the Baptist. He represented the traditional religious viewpoint in terms of commitment, but also served as an antidote to what people expected of their religious leaders. His style of dress, his unkempt personal presence, his disarming way of preaching was a new vision of what it meant to be a religious leader. He helps prepare the way for Jesus in more than one way, for he reveals a new way of being religious, and yet also an important need to present a message of hope.

People had to go to the wilderness to hear him. He was not in the great temple mount or even in the burgeoning synagogues of the time. John the Baptist took his message to the streets – and beyond.

Where are the street preachers of today? Some large cities still have a preaching stand or box to which people are invited to share their ideas, but more often than not the unconventional pulpit of today is Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, or a dying art, blogging. We can find people looking for a message in unexpected places and in unusual ways.

But the main strength of the wilderness message of John the Baptist is that insights for the next steps in our lives become clearer and more intense when we begin with a sense of the needs that we have. There is a truism that states people who have never known sadness or loss cannot really experience joy and hope; and so people who have not experienced

tension and strain cannot really know what it is like when they come to a place of peace and calmness.

David Wilkerson had his own wilderness experience as a young rural pastor in Pennsylvania. One evening he was reading Life magazine, and he was leafing through the pages when he came upon a pen drawing of a trial taking place in New York City, some 350 miles away. In his words: "I'd never been to New York and I never wanted to go, except perhaps to see the Statue of Liberty. I started to flip the page over. But as I did, my attention was caught by the eyes of one of the figures in the drawing. A boy. (One of seven boys on trial for murder.) The artist had caught such a look of bewilderment and hatred and despair in his features that I opened the magazine again to get a closer look. And as I did I began to cry."

This experience was the start of a transformation. Wilkerson went to New York and attended the trial, and even barged forward to speak to the judge as the day's proceedings were recessed. Coming short of being jailed for such a judicial interruption (made more aggravated by the fact there were threats on the judge's life), Wilkerson returned home but began his transformation from a country pastor to an inner city missionary, working with troubled teens and young adults. The die had been cast. His call to ministry suddenly was transformed, and Teen Challenge began in that experience.

Peter Steinke is a widely experienced author and teacher who has made his living on sharing his theory of a Systems Approach to creating healthy organizations, including healthy congregations. He argues that we are all interconnected. "A systems approach claims that any person or event stands in relation to something. You cannot isolate anything and understand it."

His argument is persuasive and thorough. Remember the common and popular image of 6 degrees of separation? The suggestion was that we are only about six connections away from being connected to almost everyone in the world – certainly to people within our own country or at least province. It is not that everything is connected to something, or even everyone is connected to someone, but our interconnections are so widespread and intricate that we can trace contact with almost anyone through six steps of connection through a person close to us. Yet even Steinke, I think, would argue that sometimes the only way to appreciate that interconnectedness is to take time alone, separate from the issues and realities we face, and reflect on what is best. To use the images of today, the wilderness is not necessarily a place of abandonment and loss, but a place of reflection and potential insight.

In the wilderness we learn it is not all about us as individuals. Steinke argues that concern for the congregation means that we must also be concerned about our community and the world at large – only being concerned about one's self creates an imbalance in how we live.

Before coming here as your ministers in 2014, Catherine and I had some lengthy discussions about how to work together and what would be the best way forward for the congregation. We were convinced then, and now, that being intentional in making

connections with the downtown core of the city was a growing edge that needed to be encouraged and nurtured. That has happened. Our new opportunities to be actively connected to the Off the Street Emergency Shelter in its programs and needs for those using their services is one small but significant part of that connection. We will hear more about that later.

In short, we need to see the wholeness of life to be clear as to how we will live our faith. Sometimes it is in those wilderness moments of life we really get clear about what the priorities should be, and where the values should be underlined. We need opportunities in which we act and do; we need to make opportunities in which we reflect and pray.

Sometimes we have those moments in our own lives. It may not be a wilderness moment as such, but we go off on a trip or cruise or world travels and experience some wonderful opportunities, yet we return more appreciative of where we have come from, and what we experience in our regular life day by day. We enjoy in a new way the life we have. In short, wilderness experiences (however they arise or come about) are not a waste of time.

Steinke invites us in life, and also in the church, to welcome even the negative or upsetting wilderness experiences we face, and not to run from them. Why is that? "A healthy congregation is one that actively and responsibly addresses or heals its disturbances, not one with an absence of troubles."

We need to be open to those voices in the wilderness that cry out to us, nudging us, maybe even pushing us or thrusting us forward, for it is in paying attention to these voices that we can examine again our life and what is important within it.

This Sunday of peace is a day to underline the importance of faith, and the particular goals that we carry in life that involve more than us. This Advent Sunday of peace brings us together to hear with new ears, see with new eyes, and act with new hearts. This Sunday of peace will help us face our wilderness moments, and not be afraid, for though we can be challenged, we also continue to learn, and we always can be confident that God goes with us in the journey that is mine, and yours. Thanks be to God.