

In the Wilderness

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Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
December 5, 2021 – Advent II

During this Advent, as we are preparing ourselves for the birth of Jesus, our preaching theme is “Hope in the Face of Empire.” As we are preparing ourselves for the hope that Jesus brings, we are reminding ourselves that the hope that Jesus brings us does not come in a vacuum. Biblical hope always lands in the hearts of the people of God in the context of principalities and powers that want to usurp the place of God, that want to control and manipulate the people of God.

When I was growing up in church, I never really noticed the way that imperial power plays an enormous role in the Bible. It is astonishing, because imperial power surrounds the community of faith from early in the Bible to the end. We get the Egyptian empire, the Assyrian empire, the Babylonian empire, the Persian empire, the Roman empire. Empire upon empire upon empire. The people of God always had to make their way in the face of totalizing, dominating powers that demanded their allegiance, extracted their resources, and intimidated anyone who tried to do things outside of the imperial system. Throughout the Bible, we see a variety of different strategies, within Israel and the church, for negotiating and navigating life in relationship to the empire. Some strategies are more confrontational, some are more accommodating.

Characteristically, the empires of the Bible did not want people to hope for anything, other than the continued growth of the empire. Empires never want people to hope, because hope has to do with things changing. And when you’re at the top of the imperial pyramid, the last thing you want is change. This is why, when the magi tell King Herod in Matthew 1 that they have come to pay homage to the child born king of the Jews, Herod goes berserk and goes on a killing spree. Imperial power always needs to keep a very tight leash on people, because it cannot tolerate any dissent or criticism. Despair grows inside the grip of empires, which can turn to violence, such as we saw again this past week with the tragic shooting at the school in Oxford, Michigan.

This is why it is so important for us to think about what Advent Hope means for us. What are we hoping for in our lives this Advent season? What are the various empires that affect and influence our lives, that want to shape the way we think, the way we act, the way we live? How do we distinguish between good and faithful leadership, and acting in imperial ways? My sense is that whenever a person, or an institution, wants to *control other people*, they are on the way to acting like an empire. Autocratic regimes around the world may come to mind. We may think of how the

consumer economy is a global empire that wants us to believe that the path to happiness is through being able to buy and accumulate more products, which can make us think that we never have enough. Universities and the media can become empires that want to tell people how and what to think. Churches and religious institutions can become empires that want to control people's lives – we see this in the pages of the New Testament. Families can embody characteristics of empires, especially when they want to control their family members or declare certain topics of conversation off-limits. What are the main empires that you experience in your life? Are there places in your life where you can feel tempted to try and exercise imperial-kind of control over others?

The spirit of imperial power can be found in many places.

And the spirit of God wants to emancipate people from the grip of empires. The spirit of God wants us to be free, wants to lead people towards neighborly compassion, lead people towards creative generosity. There are no *neighborhoods* for an empire; empires can only see tax districts and commercial zones. There is no free and generous creativity for an empire, because empires try to monetize creative works and turn them into commodities that can be bought and sold.

We can see this emancipatory trajectory in our gospel reading from Luke 3. This week and next, we get to spend time with John the Baptist. John is presented as the messenger of whom Malachi 3 speaks, sent to prepare the way for the Lord. You can tell from Luke 3 that the gospel writers were very aware of imperial politics, because they know all the players, all the names and the bureaucratic titles. Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate the governor, Herod the ruler or the tetrarch of one region, Philip the tetrarch of another, and Lysanias the ruler of yet another. Then there were the religious elites, who oversaw their own religious empire, the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. There is a whole imperial structure, set up to maintain control over life in the region.

It is into that structured context that the word of God comes. Only it doesn't actually come into that structured context. Verse 2 tells us that the word of God came to John *in the wilderness*. The people in the imperial list of verses 1 and 2 assumed that they would receive all of the important communications. But they did not receive the word of God. The word of God came to John, who was in the wilderness.

The wilderness is a precious place in the Bible, and it needs to occupy a precious place in our own lives. The wilderness is a zone out beyond the reach of the empire. It's where you cannot receive a cell-phone signal, but you get a strong word of God signal. You cannot order delivery in the wilderness, but you receive exactly what you need from the Lord. Life is not cushy and comfortable in the wilderness, but you are never more alive than when you are there.

According to this text, if we want to prepare the way of the Lord, if we want to cultivate Advent hope that can imagine a quality of life beyond what the empire wants

us to think is possible, we must find ways to develop a wilderness spirituality. And the good news is that you do not have to be in the Shenandoah Valley or on the Appalachian Trail to do this. It is true that getting yourself out into the woods can be a help. But wilderness spirituality can be cultivated right in the midst of the city. Wilderness spirituality is about unplugging yourself from the Christmas machine, unplugging yourself from the notifications on your smartphone, unplugging yourself from the squawking of the big screen TV. Wilderness spirituality has to do with connecting with God, connecting with your neighbor, and connecting with yourself. That's it. The Afghan Refugee Discernment process here at Lewinsville is one way to connect with God and neighbor. We had 48 people join a Zoom meeting this past Wednesday evening, to hear about the difficulties that are facing recent Afghan refugees, and how we at Lewinsville might be called to respond to this crisis. There are two more discernment sessions, and if you were not able to make it this past week, we'd love to have you join this Wednesday. You can sign up on the website.

Sometime this week, unplug yourself from your phone and other devices, and go and sit outside. See what you notice. Go for a walk, and leave your AirPods at home. Notice what you hear. Close your eyes and sit still for 5 minutes, and see what you notice stirring inside of yourself. Have at least one conversation with someone this week where your primary goal is to listen to them, not to convince them of something, not to persuade them to do something, just to listen to them. Ask God to show you one way to become more generous. These kinds of practices – letting go of your communication devices, letting go of distractions, letting go of trying to manage someone – these things can purify and refine you, as the prophet Malachi said.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Lift up the valleys, and level out the hills. Straighten out the crooked places, and make the rough places smooth. To God and to God alone, be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.