

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

December 5, 2009
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Baruch 5:1-9
 Canticle 16

Philippians 1:3-11
 Luke 3:1-6

A voice in the wilderness

A voice cries out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low” [Luke 3:4]. One morning this week I woke up wondering -- What is the voice that cries out in the wilderness? What did Isaiah hear, what did John the Baptist hear, as they wandered in wild places, listening to wind and scrambling over rocks? Is the voice that they heard in the wilderness still speaking, and can we hear it, too? I decided that I needed to go find myself a few mountains and valleys, and a good place in which to listen.

Around here we don't have to search hard for such places. I grabbed a cup of coffee and drove straight to Skinner State Park. I left my car in the lot near the base of the mountain and began walking up the road. It was a warm day, and a gusty wind was roaring about, tossing the branches of the oak and hickory trees in the woods around me. A flock of geese passed overhead, beating their wings hard in the roiling air and almost tumbling against each other as they fought to keep their balance. I heard them make their fierce cries, until at last their calls vanished in the wind. I turned to take the short, steep trail that leads straight to the summit, and listened to the sound of my labored breathing and the squelch of my sneakers as they slipped on rocks and patches of mud. As I climbed, the far-off hum of traffic grew more faint, and by the time I reached the top of the mountain, all I could hear was my panting and the steady howl of the wind.

I stood on the balcony of Summit House, that former hotel that is still a magnet for people in search of open spaces and distant views, and I looked out at the landscape far below. It was hardly the desert wilderness that Isaiah and John the Baptist knew. I could see plenty of civilization -- the 18-wheeler crossing Coolidge Bridge, the clusters of rooftops and spires jutting up through the trees, the airport runway. Yet I could also see the river curling peacefully in the distance, the great stretches of fields and forest, the shadows of clouds as they moved silently over the rises and hollows of the land.

I'm told that the Holyoke Range was formed 200 million years ago “as lava welled up into the valleys, and sediments were washed in from nearby

mountains.”¹ For thousands of years before European settlers arrived, Native Americans considered the larger peaks of these mountains to be sacred sites. Thanks to the vision and generosity of local citizens some years ago here in the Pioneer Valley, most areas of these mountains are now protected from development. I am grateful that some of you here in this congregation are active in similar efforts today.

We all know what can happen to our souls when we spend time in a natural setting. Something in us relaxes, enlarges, and lets go. The immediate, urgent concerns that keep such a tight grip on us -- an escalating war, financial uncertainty, health issues, relationship issues, all the worries, regrets, and fears that plague us and pursue us and hem us in -- somehow they drop away for a time out of time when we walk in the wilderness, listening.

This week I was interested to learn that a recent issue of *Scientific American* reports on a new study from the University of Rochester that shows that spending time in nature can change our values, making us less focused on ourselves and more focused on others, less concerned with personal gain and more concerned with generosity to the larger community.² The study distinguished between what it called “extrinsic life aspirations,” such as being financially successful or being admired by a lot of people, and “intrinsic life aspirations,” such as creating meaningful and enduring relationships or working to build a better society. The results showed that people who watched images of nature, or who spent time in nature, “scored significantly lower on extrinsic life aspirations, and significantly higher on intrinsic life aspirations.” Experiencing only built environments led to life aspirations that were more focused on the self. It’s enough to make one wonder whether our country’s growing absorption in the world of screens and virtual reality, of the Internet, social networking, computer games, and everything else that keeps us firmly indoors is somehow related to the apparent increase in our aspirations for celebrity, wealth, power, achievement, and all those other values that enhance the self.³

Yet something in our souls calls us back into nature. Something lures us out to find again a space of open sky or a stretch of wild water, a spot deeply hidden among trees or a bluff from which we can look out to the furthest horizon. Something in us wants to be immersed in wildness, to find ourselves related to something large and living and free. Our soul expands to fit this large and wild space, because our soul -- it turns out -- is just that large, and just that wild. Deep

¹ From a sign posted at the entrance to Summit State Park.

² P. Wesley Schultz, “The Moral Call of the Wild: New study suggests that spending time in nature changes our values,” <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=moral-call-of-the-wild>

³ A similar point is made in the article cited above.

within us a voice cries out, and we can hear it cry. It is a cry of recognition and rejoicing. *I am home now! I have found my place!* And it is a cry of repentance, too. *My life has been too small!*

“The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness” [Luke 3:2], and the word of God comes to us in the wilderness, too. It is a voice that greets us tenderly, as if putting a sheltering hand over our sad, sorry selves, welcoming us in and carrying us home. And it is a voice that challenges and confronts us, that uproots and unsettles and shatters and breaks and burns. Our small, tight, ego-centered self, the self that is so focused on its own appearance and survival, on looking good, and winning, and being liked, and being right -- that self is crucified when the God of love comes near. The mountains of that ego-self are laid low. Its self-serving stubbornness is toppled. Its pride crumbles. Its hard-hearted insistence on triumphing at all costs collapses and falls away. Down it all goes! And our valleys are raised up. We are lifted up out of shame and fear, pulled up from despair. Our hollows -- those aching places of loss and grief and self-doubt -- those hollows are filled.

Advent is full of the imagery of transformation, of preparing a way for God, of leveling mountains and filling up valleys. Of course we don't take this literally -- we know that this is not a call to fire up the bulldozers, blow off mountaintops for coal, or fill up valleys with sludge. But often we think that leveling those mountains and raising those valleys is a job that is up to us to do. After all, Advent is a busy time -- for example, a good many of you just finished organizing a flat-out, hats-off, hands-down, over-the-top fantastic St. Nicholas bazaar. (Thank you, everybody!) Many of us are on the go in these weeks before Christmas. Some push hard to finish exams; others clean house before the return of far-flung family members for the holidays; many buy gifts, send cards, host parties. There is a lot to do, and if we're lucky, we love every minute of it.

But of course, Advent has another dimension, too. You might say that Advent has a contemplative heart. It's not about us, but God -- not about our own activity, but God's. In this darkest month of the year, when the days grow short and the wind now blows cold, our forbears in faith invite us to seek an open space in which to listen carefully for the inner voice of love. We are invited to do what Isaiah and John the Baptist did -- to go out to a place in nature, or to set aside time at home to pray in silence as we await the Sacred Mystery that is larger than our own small selves. Preparing the way of the Lord is not another project of the ego, not another busy, bustling effort to assert our will. It's about allowing our selves to be seized and silenced by the living God, and to let God do the work within us and among us that only God can do.

In a few minutes, as we sing the offertory hymn, we will have a chance to come forward with our pledge cards and to make a financial commitment to the

work of God as it is expressed in this particular community of faith. We offer our pledges because we are confident -- as Paul says in his Letter to the Philippians -- that “the one who began a good work among [us] will bring it to completion” [Philippians 1:6]. We offer our pledges as a sign of God’s self-giving to us, in the gift of Christ’s birth. We pledge money, time, support, creativity -- whatever we have -- to each other as a way to share in God’s self-giving. The more we participate with each other in God’s self-giving love, the more we embody the life of the Trinity in whose image we are created. Our true selves are ignited in these precious moments of opening our hearts -- and, yes, our pocketbooks -- and we give thanks for “the tender compassion of our God... [whose] dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace” [Canticle 16, Luke 1:78-79].