

As we prepared for worship this morning, Chrissy radiated a smile and said "I'm so glad we're singing 'Go Tell It on the Mountain!' It's my favorite! Well, I have lots of favorites!" she admitted. It Came Upon the Midnight Clear is surely one of my favorites. And I love what Julie Kechele is doing with the words as artistic expression.

And you, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,  
who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow,  
look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing:

O, rest beside the weary road, and hear the angel sing.<sup>i</sup>

Friends, how do we hear the angel sing?

Dusk turned into night. And my feet were screaming, writes Maynard Moore. I'd walked to the courthouse in that small Alabama town, where I'd stood during all the speeches. The black community demonstrated in defiance of a Klan threat to punish anyone who dared to vote in the upcoming election. I was visiting a colleague in a nearby town that weekend and decided to attend the demonstration. Now I was hitchhiking my way back up U.S. Route 11 toward Birmingham, Chattanooga, and Virginia, Moore continues. I hoped to be back for college classes on Monday morning. But my previous ride didn't turn out well. The white farmer who picked me up seethed with disgust about all the "agitators" in the state. I told him that I'd been visiting my girlfriend, but he became belligerent. When we came to a four-way stop in the middle of nowhere, I grabbed my duffel and bolted from the car.<sup>ii</sup>

Into what was essentially, for Moore, a wilderness. The wilderness can be a physical place, of course. Unfamiliar landscape. Barren desert, wild forest, scary city streets. Sights disorienting and sounds disquieting. And wilderness can be a mental, emotional, relational experience, even among people intimate and places beloved. An experience of loss—where a once-familiar voice is now silence. Or maybe it's conflict—harsh words spoken, that still sting in the cuts of our heart.

Maybe we enter the wilderness by choices we've made. Maybe we're in a wilderness created by forces beyond our control. Moore's story appears in a recent *Christian Century* magazine, joined by other people's stories about the exile of being single, heart screaming for company. About leaving an alcoholic, abusive home, defiant yet anxiously unsure where she'd sleep after work that night. A story about a church with much to like, yet where people seethed over social issues in ways which demean her perspective. Stories about AIDS and cancer and caring for a beloved child who developed complicated mental illness.<sup>iii</sup> Maybe these stories sound familiar. Or maybe we could tell another. Could you? Would you? Would we tell our story, if the occasion arose; if we met someone in the wilderness for whom we might just be able to offer a good, uplifting word?

It's in the wilderness, where God often speaks to us. Or maybe, where we're more open to hear a word the Spirit is always speaking. In the beginning was the Word. The beginning, that is, all creation an utterly and completely disordered wilderness. If we're hanging out with Neil deGrasse Tyson maybe here's where we talk about basic atomic elements flying around, crashing and associating, or 95% of the Universe we call dark matter, so wildly unknown. If we incline toward philosophy, maybe we have fun with existence and non-existence. Or social science schema—Jungian and Freudian relations. Or fundamental theories of business economics. Or maybe we go about daily routines, often marveling at the miracle and miseries of human life on earth, wondering why. In the beginning, was the Word. In the wildest

beginning, there was the creative force of Sacred Grace / Holy Love to order all things, and bring it into being. Light in darkness. Life where it didn't exist. In the cosmic scope of John's gospel that's what the Word means—the presence and power of God. Like the poetic metaphor in Genesis--God said: let there be light, water, all creatures.

Now, we may be wondering is this sermon lost in the wilderness yet? Here's where we're going, friends. John writes to people in the wilderness—failed military revolts, bitter religious conflict, personal anxieties and social uncertainties. And in these first verses John states themes he comes back to in the rest of his gospel. You see, however these verses may connect with physics or philosophy, John tries to get us to believe that *if all things came into being from God, then there is no place, no experience, no circumstance that is beyond the pale of God's presence. Not in Alabama or Kalamazoo. Not in your wilderness. Not any friend's or enemy's.*

And here's some real good news: a Holy Word in the wilderness so often comes to us through human voices. That's God's love revealed in Jesus. Healing people long-suffering. Talking with foreign strangers and all varieties of “not-good-enoughs.” Sharing dinner conversation with any who hunger for love and deeper meaning and servant purpose in life. That's Jesus and that's what God wants to hear in your voice and mine.

In this Advent season, we rest beside our weary roads and prepare to hear God's voice in Christ. That's why John the Testifier says he's the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. He quotes Isaiah, of course. And when his people heard it, many other words and visions of Isaiah would flood back into mind and heart. For so many millions in our country and around the world; many in movie theatres not sanctuaries right now entering George Lucas' galactic wilderness, it's kind of like saying “the Force be with you!” Do we see Luke, Han, Leia, a wookiee, storm

troopers and ewoks? Do we hear [sound of Vader breathing]? or what's your favorite Yoda quote? Something funny like "When 900 years old you reach, look as good you will not!" Or the most famous according to some websites: "Do or do not, there is no try!"

"A voice cries out in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" And John's people would see and hear again what that looks like in Isaiah's words. Good news for the oppressed, binding up the broken-hearted, liberty for captives, gladness not mourning, praise not a faint spirit. For the Lord loves justice and hates robbery or wrongdoing. Life in God will blossom like a devoted married couple; like a spring garden with abundant new shoots to grow and bloom and bear fruit.

Isaiah was an agitator, rooted in life among friends, colleagues, in the face of belligerent foes. And Isaiah was a comforter, a visionary in the business of words and so much more they could inspire. Yes, both agitator and comforter, because sometimes a Divine Voice helps us become aware a wilderness we didn't even realize we were in. By this point in the book of Isaiah, the people had been conquered captured and carted to forced servitude in Babylon. Now they're coming home. They're longing for new life. They're trying to envision how to rebuild society after the ruinous wilderness of exile.

The Spirit of God is upon me, within me, to bring this good news! Those are Isaiah's words. Those are Jesus' first words according to Luke. And friends, as we journey through the wilderness that's what God in Christ wants us to feel, to find—the angelic Divine Voice inside all of us. You see, from listening to my own life and yours, it seems we're always both hearing good news from someone else and speaking it ourselves.

However we get into wilderness times and places, trust that God will come to us. We hear a voice dispel the lonely, grief, regret, or fear-filled silence. We sense a loving presence offer comfort, courage, hope for new life. Then precisely out of that experience of grace, the Spirit gives us a word of good news to share. And we go tell it on the mountain. Tell it in an anxious hospital room. Tell it in a cold alley or a crowded shelter. Tell it on bustling yet solitary streets and stores. Tell it in a regretful prison cell. Tell it in an unsatisfying or hostile workplace. Tell it in ethically conflicted boardrooms, and lively classrooms, and lonely living rooms.

Each week we prepare to share good news by lighting our Advent candles—light shining in the dark wilderness. And with the words of Isaiah we center on thematic words: first hope, then peace, today joy. How can we know and spread joy in the wilderness?

More than momentary pleasure or fleeting happiness, friends, we're talking deep joy to all the world. Joy grounded in abiding gratitude for Sacred Grace. Joy sprouting from giving hearts to Holy Love and Compassion above all. Joy growing through hope in God's unfailing vision of fullness in life for all. Joy bearing fruit in the Divine Purposes of peace, that are the reign of Christ. Gospel truth is: Jesus was born in the wilderness. In a rough dilapidated barn, in a disregarded village, in an insignificant corner of the Empire. Born with wild men like shepherds and friendly inquisitive foreign magi as witnesses.

And Frederick Buechner assures us: we, too, on weary feet on faith and fragile wings of hope will come to love and bear witness to that Word of God made Flesh. We will love as he first loved us all the way to the deep, dark wilderness of the cross. And we will rise out of the wilderness, every last one of us, as he rose before us.<sup>iv</sup> Here's how I heard that witness this week.

At Rotary last Monday, she brought a compassionate, inspiring word about hard, disturbing truths of human trafficking. And the Spirit fell upon another woman who stood up and said, we've talked statistics and experiences of people who are trafficked for sex or slave labor. And the reality is this problem wouldn't exist without demand created by people like us. So when we hear it discussed in undertones at work or in passing at family gatherings, don't just let it go. That's a word in the wilderness.

Another good word came from our national church news feed. Lea Attanasio serves as a deacon at Valley Presbyterian Church, just a few miles down the road from Sandy Hook Elementary School. When the shooting happened five years ago, she taught fourth-grade at a school nearby, where her friend, a college professor, had two young sons. They launched the Newtown Poetry Project to create safe space for people to rest amid shock and express grief, anger, regret, fear, love, thanks. Dozens of children and adults filled a room at her school. They covered long white butcher paper with words, pictures, marker scribbles and squiggles, feelings. By the end of the six-week workshop, the paper became a rainbow of gratitude and hope.<sup>v</sup>

Valley Presbyterian hosted the Project the next year. And as annual workshops rotate to other locations the invitation continues for young and old to explore their lives and places they love, through the healing art of writing poetry. "We look for the good and beauty in life, ... hope in a better tomorrow," Attanasio explains. "Gathered in a room together, many cast aside fear and put their faith in the future and in one another." Participants who begin quiet, reserved, reluctant to share become "an intimate group of people that truly care about one another." They share words in the wilderness.

I grabbed my duffel and bolted from the car, Maynard Moore remembers. It was so dark. I could barely see across the road. No cars in sight. I began to think I might

rest beside that weary road the whole night long. Then a dilapidated truck pulled up. The driver, a middle-aged black man, friendly and inquisitive, said, “Come on, boy. Ain’t nobody going to come by here this time of night. I can get you as far as Eutaw—you might be able to catch a ride from there.” We settled into easy conversation.

As we approached Eutaw he said, “Look, you ain’t going to get any ride here tonight. If you want, you can come home with me and sleep on a mattress with my kids. We’ll fix you breakfast in the morning, and I’ll take you up to the highway where you’ll catch a ride up to Tuscaloosa in no time.” Moore agreed right away. Fifteen minutes later, they turned off the road on to a rutted one-lane dirt track. Headlights barely penetrated the dark pine forest. Finally, we came to a clearing, Moore explains, and I saw a cabin. Inside, two small kids slept on mattresses by a woodstove in the main room. They barely stirred when my host moved the little one to make space for me. I settled under a blanket as he went into the next room to join his wife.

At daybreak, the kids woke me. Surprised by a white boy in their bed, they scurried into the bedroom. Samuel came out, (huh...Samuel, whose name means “the who listens to God”) ... Samuel poured some water in a basin for me, and pointed me toward the outhouse. His wife made grits and some fatback for our breakfast. Then Samuel took me outside, showed me his walkway out into a swamp filled with alligators. He told me he earned a living delivering alligator meat to a market. Then he said, “Come on, I’ll get you up to the crossing on the highway so you can get a ride.”<sup>vi</sup>

A word made flesh in the wilderness. O hear the angel sing!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” text by Edmund Hamilton Sears

<sup>ii</sup> From “Wilderness” in *Christian Century*, November 8, 2017, p. 25

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.* 22-27.

<sup>iv</sup> See Frederick Buechner in *Listening to Your Life*, as quoted in “Wilderness” in *Christian Century*, November 8, 2017, p. 23.

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/1217-sandyhook/>

<sup>vi</sup> From “Wilderness” in *Christian Century*, November 8, 2017, p. 25