

Call of the Wild

Mark 1:1-15
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Our language stigmatizes the wild. The California poet Gary Snyder points this out in his book *The Practice of the Wild* when he summarizes the Oxford English Dictionary's use of "wild":

Of animals—not tame, undomesticated, unruly.
Of land—uninhabited, uncultivated.
Of individuals—unrestrained, insubordinate, licentious, dissolute, loose.
Of behavior—violent, destructive, cruel, unruly.

The dictionary has defined the word wild by what it is not. But if we start from what wild *is*, according to Snyder, we get a different list.

Of animals—free agents, each with its own endowments, living within natural systems.
Of land—a place where the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact.
Pristine.
Of individuals—Unintimidated, self-reliant, independent.
Of behavior—fiercely resisting any oppression, confinement, or exploitation.

Snyder explains how the way of the wild "elud[es] analysis;" it is "beyond categories, playful, surprising, impermanent, independent."

Doesn't this sound like Jesus and the Gospel story?

John the Baptist, that strange wild man, calling the people to leave the comfort and the order of their homes and enter the wilderness in order to repent and start over again. Jesus' own reordering of power through the introduction of a new humanity.

Over in the Gospel of Luke a teenage girl has revolutionary visions: The powerful cast down. The lowly uplifted. The rich sent away empty. The poor filled with good things. *Just imagine some contemporary American politician campaigning on that platform. Then we'd really have a "War on Christmas."*

The Christian message has been so tamed by political and social power and consumer capitalism and the sentimentalities of the holiday season that we fail to remember its radical, revolutionary, wildness.

As I prepared for this sermon series, I read all these wonderful descriptions of the wilderness and how the call of the wild is the call to freedom. In Gary Snyder's book he writes, "To be truly free one must take on the basic conditions as they are—painful, impermanent,

open, imperfect—and then be grateful for impermanence and the freedom it grants us.”

But reading that just made me uncomfortable. Waiting in recent weeks for a diagnosis of Mom’s health, I am deeply annoyed by the idea that we should “be grateful for impermanence and the freedom it grants us.”

As I was writing this sermon this week, my own words were annoying me. I’m not quite as radical as I once was. I don’t like change as much as I once did. New technologies annoy me because I really liked the ones that were new when I was in my twenties and surely they can’t be old already.

Plus we’ve lived through political and social chaos in the last year, and it doesn’t feel good. Stability and order and tradition and the standards and mores make even more sense when you see them upended.

Two weeks ago I ended my sermon by quoting the biblical scholar Mitzi Minor, “Wilderness experiences are necessary stages on the journey for those who seek to be authentically human.” Then I said,

It is in these moments of potential danger that we are purged of excess and luxury. We are forced to grapple with the deep questions and build the qualities of strong character. In the wilderness we find our way forward and learn to trust in God.

“Easier said than done, pastor,” is what I wanted to say to myself this week.

Yes, our world is a wild place,
And we also serve a wild God,
Who does wild things.
Who calls us into the wilderness to repent
And prepare for God’s coming.

And while sometimes all that good news excites me, it can also make me uncomfortable. But maybe Advent should make us a little uncomfortable?

Then I noticed something else in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus doesn’t stay out there in the wilderness, he goes home, and tells them what he’s learned. And again and again in Mark he teaches his followers in a house.

In the Mary Oliver poem, the wild geese are returning home and we learn our place in the family of all things.

The wilderness may be an essential place in the journey, but it isn’t the final stop. God calls us into the wild, but also brings us home again.

Home will look different. Jesus *is* about creating a new humanity and reordering society. Mary’s revolutionary vision *is* God’s dream for the world.

So we return to a home that is more fair and loving and equitable and peaceful and all those good, nice things we really want to sing about this season.

And guess what, it’s time now. Our Advent wanderings in the wilderness are over. **[Sigh & Pause]** Christmas is about to begin. So, enjoy.