When God ran away!

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Text: Mark 1:1-8 (B - Advent 2)

Who would have guessed that when God wanted to announce
the dawn of a new age – a New Covenant – God would start
with a prophet screaming in the wilderness, of all places?
Why not have the prophet announce it from the steps of Government House?
Or from the temple precincts?
You would think that God would choose some place of authority, at
least...some platform that normally issued important commands – so as
to get the people's hearing!

But no! It's as though God were running far away from the religious
establishment, indeed, as far away from any human establishment as
God could get, so that God could start the New Covenant free of the
trappings of human culture! God sends John the Baptist to the edge of
the Wilderness, by the Jordan River, to proclaim the coming Reign of
God. And John is dressed as barren of vestments and temple finery as
possible!

On the face of it, it seems a silly risk to take. Imagine the crowds John
could have gotten if he had rented a BIG ARENA in Jerusalem! Aston-
ishingly, John did attract crowds!

We wonder, how did he get the people out of Jerusalem and the
towns? How did he get them to walk all the way out to the edge of
the wilderness – a day’s journey by coach?
I’ll bet we couldn’t get our young adults to do that – not even to hear Shania Twain or the Rolling Stones!

What was it about John that attracted folks to come so far into the wilderness to hear him?

They came precisely because John was different. He represented something apart from the status quo.

Maybe we, as Church, could learn something from God’s strategy: If God has John set up shop in the wilderness, so that no distractions from the cultural “background noise” can taint John’s inaugural address, why then do we set up shop in such status quo settings? Perhaps our message of “Good News for the Poor in Spirit” is getting lost in the “background noise” of our “Me! Me!” middle-class consumer culture?!

So in a real sense God was running away from the temple and all its pomp and priggishness. God wanted to disassociate the New Covenant from the comfortable religious establishment of that time, so that the message could stand by itself for those who came to hear. And also for those future audiences – like you and me today!

Just as God did with the First Covenant that came through Moses, so God likes to bring people into the wilderness so they can listen undistracted for the new thing which God has loosed upon the world!

In other words, this strategy clarifies that the New Covenant is being built out of “new materials” and not just recycled “wineskins” from some past era.

It seems that the flame of God’s Spirit had been all but snuffed out by all the cloud and smog of priestly hocus-pocus, and by the stodgy way rituals were often done.

Yes, it can get to be hard to breath in the “mustiness” of such unclean temple air! Do you suppose this is true of many churches in our day, too?

So God ran away into the wilderness, where the air was sharp and clean, out under the stars where, through a misfit in a piece of camel hide, God proclaimed that Someone and Something really different were coming soon!

It was Someone so special, so awesome, that one needed to get ready! One needed to prepare for his coming, so that one could receive him appropriately (the way people used to be prompted on
how to “receive a monarch” scheduled to pass right beside them). And John said that the appropriate readiness was simply a contrite and repentant heart. He offered a “ritual washing” to help people mark their “turn around” and their fresh start anticipating the New Life when God’s Holy One came among them. All the centuries of accumulated Sin, brokenness, pretension, and cover-up are washed away and a new community is born!

However, only those willing to visit their “wilderness” get to taste this new freedom.

While God calls from the deepest recesses of “our” wilderness, it is up to us to respond, to come toward God as God calls us back to remembrance and renewal in our worship.

Those who insist on staying in their “comfortable city”, in their noisy and trivial religious trappings, may not truly get to hear the new message. Certainly they may not get to experience the ritual renewal available to them in the coming Messiah.

I think everyone of us here has an idea where our “wilderness” lies and what kinds of painful terrain we must travel in order to submit the soiled and carefully covered over areas of our life to washing and renewal.

Of course, it’s not easy to let go of the “comfort zone” we often settle into – in spite of our pained and anguished spirit which nags us continually for relief.

Good friends: the Good News is always being proclaimed somewhere on the edges of our “noisy” and “established” world, somewhere beyond the distractions of our busy and trivial culture.

Good News is waiting for those “who have ears to hear” and “hearts to obey”.

I pray that you will hear the ONE crying out in your wilderness, and that you will have the courage to respond – so that you may discover God’s grace and peace that passes all understanding!