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Finding New Life in the Wilderness

Christmas was right around the corner, and Eli had just passed his driver's test. Knowing exactly what he wanted for Christmas he approached his Father, asking if he might consider getting Eli a car. Of course, a car is an extravagant gift, but Eli's father was a reasonable man, so he told Eli if he raised his grades, studied his Bible and got his haircut, then he and his mother would consider getting him a car for Christmas. One day at breakfast Eli asked his father if they were still considering a car for Christmas? His father replied, "Well, son, you've brought up your grades, and I've seen that you have been studying your Bible, but I'm disappointed that you haven't gotten your haircut yet." Eli replied, "That's true. I have really been studying my Bible, and I've noticed in all my studies that Samson had long hair, Moses had long hair, and even John the Baptist had long hair." Eli's father replied, "Well, son, Did you also notice that they all walked everywhere they went?"

All joking aside. I have often wondered about John, and his long hair. I have wondered about his seemingly disheveled, possibly even offensive appearance. About his life in the wilderness, wearing clothes made of camel's hair, eating a meager diet of locusts and honey. And, in all my wonderment the question always arises, would I have followed John? Would I have gone to the wilderness to hear his testimony, to take part in his witness to the light? Because, my guess is he was probably not the most approachable individual, although he most certainly would have been one of the most distinguishable. I mean, if someone today was out in (let's say) the park, bedraggled and going on about "preparing the way" and "making our paths straight", chances are I would not stick around to listen, much less be led towards and dunked under the water by this individual. Chances are much more likely that I would quietly walk away, maybe call the authorities to see that the man get the assistance it would appear he most obviously needs. So, then, how is it that John's wilderness rants became enticing sermons that lured the masses to, not only believe his outrageous prophecies, about salvation and repentance, but also to take them on personally, through baptism, as they formed a community to prepare the way for their coming Messiah?

Over the past decade the Pew Research Center has been reporting a significant decline in religious affiliation in our United States. From those with no religious affiliation to those leaving their own spiritual communities (we call them NONES and DONES) it has been apparent that our institutions are no longer serving individuals in the ways they believe are needed. But, while many young people may be giving up on organized religion, they are not giving up their spiritual ties. These young people are "decidedly looking for community and spirituality in combination, and know they can't lead a meaningful life without [them]. The lack of deep community is indeed keenly felt. Suicide is the third-leading cause of death among youth. Rates of isolation,

loneliness and depression continue to rise. [And], with a hunger for spiritually fulfilling communities and connection, [young people] are looking elsewhere..." They are looking to other outlets and communities, in the form protests and social justice movements, yoga studios and spin classes, farming communities and ecojustice movements, even zoom spiritual forums and soulful artistry movements. Young people may not be going to traditional churches, but they are looking for community, connection, and I would argue spiritual fulfillment.

I wonder, did the people who came to John, and heard his good news, despite, possibly, it's seemingly unappealing appearance, go and see because they were already wandering in the wilderness. Were they looking for something different than what they had already seen, heard, and witnessed. Maybe, because what they knew and where they came from wasn't working any longer. The salvation the world had promised them proved flimsy and fake, like a cheap ornament, shimmering and beautiful to gaze upon but too brittle to withstand the chubby hand of a toddler or the unsteady tumble of too much eggnog.

In our passage from Isaiah, the salvation that awaited Messiah will usher in is clearly laid out, as we are told: The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;... to comfort all who mourn." Isaiah reminds us that the salvation God offers, through Christ, is one that comes in the form of healing, liberation, release, and comfort. And, can be found through human connection and community.

I wonder what it would look like if we were as brave or brazen as John, wandering into the wilderness, joyfully witnessing to the light of Christ, creating a community dedicated to bringing about divine salvation in the midst of a world caught up in suffering. Would it look like going to the spaces where our young people are? Listening to their own proclamations and desires? Or like offering up our own space for them to gather? Maybe even making space to share stories of our life experiences and journeys? Or even, would it look like creating something new, that speaks to the salvation we all so desperately desire. Salvation that comes in the form of real human connection and community, across borders, across races, maybe even across generations? I wonder, would this bring us joy? Would it allow us to feel the sweet comfort of a healing, liberating, and releasing salvation as we used our lives, our time, and our energy to point to the love that loved us first? To know and truly experience, as our Presiding Bishop Curry tells us, the loving, liberating, lifegiving salvation of Jesus Christ! I wonder?!
And, I hope, you will wonder with me too!!