

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers

Sunday, December 7, 2025

Whitney helped our kids to begin to understand what it means to sense Christ's peace around us with breath. And so we're going to do that this morning as well. Get comfy in your pews as you need to, and

Take a deep breath in with me and breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in.

Breathe it out slowly.

And breathe in God's mercies

and breathe out God's mercies to others.

And breathe in God's mercies

and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. We pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments, that by your peace you would quiet us that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As we continue on our Advent journey together, our series is entitled Insisting on Hope. We are reflecting on how it is we navigate fear faithfully in our world. And we have two scripture lessons this morning, as we did last week and as we will throughout the season of Advent, that help to shape us in that posture of hopefulness, of insistence on the hope that we know in Christ Jesus. Last week we framed fear...we framed it as both the fear that we hold personally in our lives and also fear that surrounds us. It might be fear that we carry for something going on in our lives or fear that we see in the world around us. This week we are going to frame wilderness and wasteland. Wilderness and wasteland. There's going to be two words that you hear in our prophetic word this day, and we want to frame them. There's going to be a personal and communal element to each of them as well.

So, first, from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 43:19- 21. Let us listen together for God's word to each of us and indeed to the church this day.

See, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself, that they may proclaim my praise.

Here ends the reading.

And now from the Gospel according to Matthew, we are in the 11th chapter. We're going to read verses 1-11 together. Let us listen again for God's word to us.

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After Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples, they went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on my account." As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John. "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No. Those who wear fine clothes are in king's palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, and I tell you more than a prophet. This is about the one whom it is written, "I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you." Truly, I tell you, among those born of women, there has not risen another greater than John the Baptist. Yet, whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, let's frame wilderness and wasteland, and let's use the prophetic word and the words of the gospel writer from Matthew. In some ways, we all understand when we use the words in this sort of context, wilderness and wasteland, we have some sort of idea about what they mean. But there are specific implications that come from scripture that paint the picture for us, that frame for us what wilderness and wasteland look like. Let's begin with John the Baptist. His wilderness and wasteland looked like prison because that's where he was. He was imprisoned. That is the documentation of our gospel lesson this day. But there was something else going on that gave dimension to his wilderness and wasteland. When he was in prison, he began to wrestle with really important and specific things. The question that John was asking of himself was, "Has my life and my work been worth it?" Here's the thing. John's in prison, and while the sentence of death has not been carried out, he knows he is at the end of his road. Okay? And so, he's asking the question that many people ask when they've come to the end of the road. Maybe the journey of an entire life or maybe the end of a journey of a...a season of life. He's asking, "Has what I've done mattered at all?" I imagine John in the yard when he and his fellow prisoners were let out for maybe just a little bit, right? I imagined him talking to his fellow inmates about his journey. I imagine him painting a picture that maybe we don't get from the gospel writer this morning. "Y'all should have seen it. I went out to the river, and I was preaching and people started showing up to be baptized. You wouldn't believe it, how many people came, and they would come and I would baptize them for the forgiveness of their sins. And then more people would come and more people would come. You couldn't have imagined what my work was, right?"

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And I imagine those fellow inmates probably not believing him because he is in the same place that they are—imprisoned. And so the question John's asking Jesus is “Are you the one that I was to make a way for, or are we supposed to wait for somebody else? Is what I've done been worth it, or am I going to die without having seen anything grow from my work?” Okay, many of us are probably familiar with that question. Whether it's coming to the end of a season of our vocational lives, maybe it's navigating a relationship and the work we put into it, right? Maybe it's parenting or marriage, or you fill in the blank, right? Looking back and saying “All the things that I have poured into this, have they amounted to anything?” That's what John's asking. It's a very particular personal sort of wilderness and wasteland for him. It also can be a bit crazy, right? Which is why he's reaching out to Jesus, sending his disciples to ask this question. That's the personal piece of wasteland and wilderness. But there's this other dimension of wilderness and wasteland that we need to be aware of. And that's brought to us by the prophet Isaiah, because Isaiah is speaking to an entire people, a community, the people who are known as the people of God and yet who have known what it means to be cast out from their place of home, right? To journey in a literal wilderness but also a spiritual wilderness as well. And the prophet speaks to that group of people communally and says, echoing the words of the divine, “I'm about to do a brand new thing amongst you and in the world. Do you not perceive it? I'm going to make a way in your wilderness collectively. There will be streams in your collective communal wasteland.” Right?

Each of these words from the gospel writer and from the prophet speak in a particular way to us and resonate in us for different reasons, I think. And each of them is critically important for us if we are to be a people who are insistent upon hope in this season of Advent. We have to understand that the God that we know in Jesus Christ speaks words of hopefulness to both our personal and our communal wildernesses and wastelands. Okay. So, a little personal anecdote for y'all, a little story. Generally, I'm a person of, you know, good cheer. Maybe some people here at the church would not say that, but generally, across the board, I have...like I keep a pretty modest kind of energy and tone. But to confess to you, the last couple weeks have been pretty tough for me. I've just been navigating some stuff. Nothing to worry about. Somebody came out of the 8:30 service and said, “I hope you're okay.” I'm totally okay. But...but the last couple weeks were really difficult for me, and...and navigating some different things that are going on in my life has been really heavy, right? I tell you that to frame for you a coffee that I had this week. A couple months ago someone showed up to worship here at Idlewild for the very first time, and after attending our worship service, they sent me an email and said, “I want to grab coffee with you.” Okay. Now, Anne, I see your head kind of nod to the side. Yeah. I kind of said the same thing when I read the email. I generally don't grab coffee immediately with someone who's just visited for the first time. And I certainly have a motto when it comes to coffee

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meetings with people I haven't met yet. Right? No agenda, no agenda." Okay? That's my...that's my meeting motto. All right? You can...you can adopt that, too, by the way. Because when there's no agenda, the anxiety can just go through the roof, right? We never know as pastors kind of what we're walking into. And so that was like weeks and weeks ago, and I had totally forgotten about this coffee that I was going to have with this person because we put it on the calendar. It was great. And then I find myself for the last couple weeks just kind of navigating some tough stuff. And so it's Wednesday afternoon and I'm at Idlewild East, which if y'all don't know is French Truck Coffee on Highland Avenue. That is where I take like multiple meetings a week, right? And I'm there and this person who had visited comes to meet me there for a cup of coffee. Here's the thing. She has no idea what wilderness and wasteland I'm navigating at this point, right? But they sit down there, and they begin to tell me about their spiritual gifts, this sense that they have that God speaks in and through them words of hope to people. Okay. And they tell me about a couple of these different interactions that they have had, these what I would call divine moments that they've had with strangers and with people that they know really well where God has given them a word to speak to that person, right? And you can imagine that something within me is beginning to churn a little bit. And this person seated across from me says, "And I think I have a word for you." And I took a big old sip of coffee, and I said, "Do you?"

And this person said, "Yeah, I think I do." And I kind of just opened myself to it. I was like, "Share it with me." And it was not 30 seconds into this person sharing the word that God had given them for me that I said, "Stop. I need to get my phone cuz I need to take some notes on this." Right? And for the next 20 minutes, it was just bam, bam, bam, bam. Like four or five words of hope for me, right? And those words, there was one of them that was very convicting of me, right? But it was said with such love that I was able to receive it, right? There were other words that were spoken in that very brief time that felt like balm for a weary heart. Okay. And so I'm typing this up, I'm typing this up and we get done with our coffee and you know hug and depart. And the image that came to me was the image of what it looks like to have a stream in the wasteland. Right? These four words that this person spoke to me were indeed that. They were living water in a place that felt really desolate. Right?

Here's what it made me think about. It made me think about our two different lessons for today. But it also made me think about the power of a living God at work in and through each of us. Right? Here's what those words didn't do for me. What they didn't do, they did not remove me from my wilderness and wasteland. Okay? That didn't happen. Those words were not able to pick me up and move me into a better place. Right? But what they were able to communicate and what they were able to transfer in a way to me were a peace that I hadn't gained in any other

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way. Right? Here's what it made me think about. Maybe this morning when I ask you to contemplate your wilderness or your wasteland, something immediately comes to mind, right? Maybe it's a relationship. Maybe like John, it has to do with your vocation, right? Maybe you're coming to the very end of your life journey, or you love someone who is, right? Maybe when I say wilderness and wasteland, and I ask you to think about what yours is, something immediately comes up. If that's the case for you this day, I want you to know that our God meets you in that place. Right? If your fear and your worry, your wilderness and your wasteland looks like something deeply personal to you, I want you to hear the words of Jesus to John who was navigating something very similar to you. Jesus says, "Go back and report to John what you have heard and seen. The blind receive sight. The lame walk. Those who have leprosy are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. The good news is proclaimed to the poor." Now, that was happening in real time in the ministry of Jesus. And that is also happening now both literally and spiritually within us. That's the God that we know in Jesus Christ. And it is that God that attends to your wilderness as well. To your questioning, to your wrestling, to your angst over the work that you've done, whether it's amounted to anything or not. Okay? Maybe you are that person. And if you are that person this day, then I want you to know that Jesus is meeting you in that place. meeting you in that place with a word of hope. Or maybe like me on most days, things are pretty good for you this morning. You came in here, you were filled up already when you got here. You got all your decorations up early. You got all your gifts wrapped, right? All the boxes are checked off. Maybe that's you, and you're feeling great about your situation. And if that's the case, then I think this is an invitation to you because what we know is that there are people in the world, there is even in our wider community that need people who are committed to speaking prophetic words of love and hopefulness in the midst of this time. What I'm imagining is that there will be a moment for you, and it might not be across a small cafe table at French Truck on Highland, although it might be. I don't know. It might be across a center console to your partner on the way back from church today, right? It might be across a desk or even a Zoom link. God works through that too, I guess, right? It might be across a telephone line this evening or sometime this week where, because of the place in which you find yourself, you are the one who can speak a word of hope and purpose into someone else's life. Okay. I think the messages for us this morning are both balm to our weary souls and invitation to be balm to the needs of the world. If we're going to be a people insistent upon hope in this season, then we need to trust and believe that the God that met John the Baptist in his weariness and wilderness and wasteland is the same God that meets us. And the God that met God's people, the community of the world in the midst of their worry with a brand new thing springing forth, that same God is at work within us this day and around us. Okay? So if you're in your wilderness and wasteland, may you hear the good news, that indeed the lame walk, the leper is cleansed, the blind see, and may you have the courage to speak that into someone else's life this week. Let's pray together.

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Gracious and loving one, we trust and we believe that you meet us with words that are balm to our weary hearts in the midst of wilderness and to your world. We pray, Lord, that you would be balm to us as we sit here in this very pew this morning, and that indeed you would enable us with the right words and tone and timing to be balm to our neighbors. May we trust and may we believe that as we insist on hope in this season, you are that true hope. We ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.