

## Hope in the Wilderness

In the years when I was teaching biology at St. Ambrose University, one of my favorite courses was a two-week field trip in May to North Carolina studying eastern forests. We drove from Davenport to the Great Smoky Mountains and then spent the next two weeks camping and working our way across the state to Cape Hatteras. The first time we drove back without stopping, some twenty-four hours in all. After that I allowed two days of travel because it took twelve hours just to get across North Carolina from the Atlantic coast.

A day or two after arriving in the Smokies we would hike up to the Appalachian Trail and back to our campground at Cades Cove. It was about seventeen miles round trip, with a 3300-foot change in elevation. At the campsite it was late spring, but by the time we reached the Appalachian Trail it was still late winter. One year it was snowing at the top. Fortunately there was a stone shelter nearby, and some of the more enterprising students sacrificed pages of their field journals to start a fire.

On the way up we slogged along a steep path for long stretches, staring at our feet. Occasionally we stopped to catch our breath and hope for a glimpse of the valley below. It was worth it, but boy was it hard! That image of strenuous hiking is what comes to mind whenever the Bible talks about walking up mountains. Today we heard about mountains and hills being made low, easy to walk on – and from an unusual source, the book of Baruch. The person Baruch was the close friend and personal secretary of the prophet Jeremiah. The book that bears his name was very likely not written by him but rather in his name, an entirely acceptable practice in ancient times. It was also acceptable to borrow from other books, and what we heard this morning is a lot like the passage in Isaiah quoted in today's Gospel.

The book of Baruch was written in a time of exile. The people of Israel had been conquered and taken away hundreds of miles to a foreign land. To them, Baruch gives a wonderful message of hope. Forced into exile on foot, they will return to their homeland, carried as on a royal throne. Instead of slogging up steep mountain paths, they will return on level ground. Not just the woods, but every fragrant tree will shade them. Their journey will even *smell* good!

The exile is one of the great stories of Israel, and the return from exile one of the great promises. The other formative story is the Exodus, the forty years spent wandering in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. John the Baptist connects us with that story, too, for John is living in the wilderness. John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In Luke's telling of John's work, he connects him also with the prophecies of Isaiah about renewal and return from exile.

I've been struck by the number of people recently who have told me about being in the wilderness. It has meant different things to different people, but for each it is the sense of being in a place that is empty and forlorn, a place where they would rather not be. At the same time, most do not feel abandoned. They have felt the presence of God. In the Bible, that presence during the Exodus is described as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. I really like that imagery. If you think about it, you can't see a whole lot when you're in a cloud, and if

you've ever sat around a campfire at night, you know that you can't see very far into the surrounding darkness. A wilderness can be stark and fearful, but it is also a place of hope.

We heard about that hope in the song Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, said about him:

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, \*  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,  
To give his people knowledge of salvation \*  
by the forgiveness of their sins.  
In the tender compassion of our God \*  
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,  
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, \*  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

That's what we're heading toward in these few weeks of Advent. We're heading toward hope in the wilderness. We're heading toward that incredible, unbelievable time when God, in all of God's glory and majesty, chose to become a vulnerable human being. It didn't happen in some fairy tale time, but in very real time, as Luke takes pains to remind us, in the midst of rulers of this world who had no idea that their power was about to be overshadowed by God's love. As the poet Christina Rossetti wrote, Love came down at Christmas, and we wait urgently, impatiently, for that love to come down once more. We wait for the light in the darkness of the world, for the promise of hope given to us through Jesus Christ.

Someday I may get back to the Great Smoky Mountains. I imagine that the trails would seem steeper and longer than they did twenty years ago. I'd probably stop a lot more and be glad that I'm not trying to keep up with college students. Yet even now the Appalachians form part of my enduring image of wilderness – beautiful, unforgiving, a place apart but also a place pregnant with the presence of God. If you are in a wilderness, take heart. God is with you. God will always be with you, whether you are aware of it or not. Soon we will again celebrate how God came among us and brought hope to the world. So hold on to that hope. Be ready. Be ready to welcome the light and love of God into your heart.

[Advent 2: Baruch 5:1-9; Canticle 16; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6.]