

## **“Wilderness Experience”**

Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-8

December 4, 2011

The Rev. Dr. David A. Van Dyke

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

### The Second Sunday in Advent

*Prayer: In the quietness of these moments, O God, startle us by your presence. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing your word we may discover Jesus the Christ, in our midst. We ask this in his name and for his sake. Amen.*

It is natural at some point to question the things we were taught as children—to challenge our religious beliefs and the convictions of our parents. Whenever we choose to do that probably depends upon many different factors, but it is a natural aspect of human development.

Looking back on it now, I’m not sure what prompted me to go out there. I mean, I’d heard about it. Lots of people had lots of opinions about it and about what was going on out there. So I finally decided to go check it out for myself.

And if I’m honest, it was more than just curiosity that drew me out there. I went out of a sense of personal longing for something. A hungering, perhaps, for something different—something real? I was about twenty years old and in college, so it was a time of exploration and experimentation—a time to figure things out.

So one cold, Sunday night, I got in my car and drove outside of town. I drove well beyond the lights of the city into what looked like a warehouse district or industrial part of town. I turned into the parking lot of the Faith Christian Center. The church was housed in a metal building that from the outside looked very much like a warehouse, there was nothing fancy about it. In fact, once inside, the large worship center was a nondescript room with a low hung ceiling and filled with what looked like stackable hotel ballroom chairs.

This warehouse of the faith beyond the city limits, had none of the trappings of a traditional church. They had no organ, communion table or baptismal font, although I’m sure there was a dunk tank hiding somewhere. There wasn’t a printed bulletin either, which instantly propelled me outside my rather traditional comfort zone. No bulletin? No printed order? How will we know what to do? I’m sure to them such things would confine the movement of the Spirit.

But from the moment I arrived, I could sense that something was happening there. The building was rocking with the loud sounds of a band and drums and everyone was on their feet, singing. I didn’t recognize any of the songs but everyone else seemed to know them. Some in the congregation had their own tambourines with them in order to play along. They sang and they sang, they swayed to the music with their hands in the air, and they clapped while they sang and they clapped when they were done singing. I was raised to believe that worship consisted of three hymns—the way God wanted us to do it. Not there. The singing went on for about forty-five minutes.

When it finally ended and people were getting settled in their chairs, a woman began shouting out rather incoherently, shouting out what sounded like nonsense. It was like she was in trance. We listened to her stammer away and when she was finished, the man next to her stood up and apparently interpreted what she had said, which had been a word to us directly from the Lord. The Lord had apparently just warned us through her, that we needed to behave ourselves and resist any temptations that might seem particularly alluring to us. The Lord didn't exactly express it that eloquently or grammatically correct, but you get the idea.

Then the preacher got up and came down the center aisle with a microphone in hand where he stood among the congregation. He was wearing a kind of shiny, double breasted suit, the kind of suit you might see on Nathan Detroit if you were attending a performance of *Guys and Dolls*. He spoke loudly and confidently in calling for confessions. "We are all sinners here tonight," he said and was greeted by a chorus of Amens. "Who here needs to make a confession?" he asked, looking around. Now I was not used to hearing individuals get up and publicly confess things in church, but apparently everyone was extremely interested in this portion of the service because it got very quiet, like no one wanted to miss a single word that got spoken during this part of the service.

And sure enough, people came forward and confessed the things they had done and the things they had left undone. There were confessions of various degrees of backsliding, of failing to trust God, of personal struggles and shortcomings, that sort of thing. Over the course of about five minutes, one woman tried to confess something but no one could have possibly known what she was talking about. But you got the sense that her life was a mess—hard. And each person who confessed something was sincere and their confessions seemed heartfelt as their easily flowing tears would indicate. The congregation too seemed patient and willing to listen. When they were finished the pastor would pray for them individually and lay his hands on them. Sometimes other members of the church would crowd in around them as well and place their hands on them while the pastor prayed.

They prayed a lot in that two-plus hour long service. Sometimes they'd stand up, turn around and kneel down, turning those hotel ballroom chairs into kneeling benches. I had never seen anything like it.

The sermon was filled with talk about judgment and the end of the world, which was coming soon and how there'd be hell to pay. Sin was going to be punished and the wicked were going to burn—a notion popular with the congregation judging by the amount of applause it received. But there was also a lot of talk in the sermon about the Holy Spirit. These people seemed to place a far greater emphasis on the Spirit than I was used to, and they seemed to experience the Spirit's power and presence in ways I never had and was not sure I wanted to, frankly.

The following week I went to see the college chaplain and I told him about my experience. He seemed cautiously intrigued, perhaps pleased that a college student was attending any kind of worship service. He listened patiently and knowingly as I described the speaking in tongues, the kneeling—basically everything that went on at Faith Christian Center. And he heard me try, at least, to articulate that I sensed it was authentic.

When I was finished, he began explaining how emotionally charged forms of religious expression tend to be problematic in the long run, namely because that level of energy cannot be sustained. He talked about needing to keep our emotions in check. He was being a good Calvinist. And he said that what often appears to be Spirit driven, can just as easily be contrived. That when hands go into the air and start waving during a song, it's not necessarily any different than when we automatically stand up to sing a hymn. People can be conditioned to behave in certain ways, especially when they know what is expected of them in a setting like that, he explained, like I wasn't the first person he'd explained this to.

And I think he's right. I understand everything he said on an intellectual level and I know enough now myself as a pastor to have seen the ways in which various forms of religious and theological expression tend reflect the deep, sometimes unexamined emotional needs inside of each individual. I get all of that. And yet I'm troubled by it and here's the reason.

When John, the cousin of Jesus, got religion and went into the preaching and baptizing business, he didn't go to the Central Synagogue in downtown Jerusalem. He did not approach the leaders of the religion in his day, explain his sense of call, allow them to validate it or not, and then point him in the proper direction in terms of educational training and formation.

Instead, he went into the wilderness and started preaching hell fire and damnation like he was a man possessed of something. He preached about the end of the world and other things that brought to mind what other ancient prophets had proclaimed in earlier days and that now also in his day, frightened the establishment types to death.

And why was it, do you suppose, that all those people, from the whole Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem, according to Mark's Gospel, went out to the wilderness to be a part of what John was doing? That huge numbers of people would walk away from the orthodox center, would flee the religious establishment and walk past their own local synagogues, rooted in orthodoxy and steeped in ancient tradition, in order to make their way to the wilderness where they would publicly confess their sins before this proclaimer of the end of the world?

And why was it that on a Sunday night in Michigan when I was in college, all those people drove beyond the city limits to the edge of an industrial warehouse district, in order to pile into a metal building they called a church and publicly confess their sins, tell their stories and get whipped into a frenzy listening to a preacher shout about the end of the world? Why were they there instead of being at any of the other, more traditional and respected churches in town? Then again, why was I there? Curiosity? Perhaps.

Looking around at those who were there that night, I had the feeling that many of them would not have felt exactly welcome in some of the more established, traditional churches in town. No one at Faith Christian Center wore a suit except the preacher and even his suit would turn most heads in here. And I had the sense that the lives of most of the people there that night had not been particularly easy. You could see it in the way they were dressed. You could hear it in their grammar and broken English. And you could see it in their

faces—joyful faces underneath which lay lines and bags as if some of their one-time-good-looks had been weathered away by life's battering storms.

They seemed like people with stories to tell—stories about life experiences so far removed from my own that I simply couldn't comprehend them. So they drove outside of town to be in the presence of those with similar stories to share and confessions to make, and to experience the power of God's presence, and to hear the hopeful promise of the world's eminent end. "Please God bring an end to this world...come soon and rescue me, ransom me, save me!"

Humanity is diverse and one size religion does not fit all. And sometimes religion fails people altogether. It judges people unfairly. It creates obstacles and artificial barriers to God. It adds to their guilt rather than freeing them from it. And it always, always fails to live up to the fullest and truest expression of God, who is love.

But I am also convinced of this. There is a universal hunger and longing for the presence of God and people will go to extraordinary lengths to discover it and experience it. Sometimes they will go around the world if that's what they think it takes. Sometimes, they will drive along way from their homes and past many other churches in order to find it. And sometimes, they will head to the wilderness, or outside the city limits to meet in places that don't resemble traditional churches and that in no way fit the category of "respectable" as defined by the fashionable mainline, the halls of academia or the institutional church.

And yet here's the astonishing thing about it, in each of those places and forms of religious expressions, the One for whom we are all searching, the One who came into the world in a most unorthodox manner, can still be discovered waiting to receive us when we arrive.

Amen.