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“A Way through the Mountains” The Rev. Andrew Armond (12/10/2023, The Second Sunday of Advent)

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Let us pray.

Almighty God made the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer, in the name of

God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The highest point in my home state of Louisiana is called Mount Driscoll.

It is 535 feet above sea level, and I think that we are probably about maybe

even higher than that right now here in Waco. So having grown up there, I had never seen

a real mountain before I was in high school. And we took a road trip to Fort

Collins, Colorado. My brother was working there for the summer, and I remember

feeling something really rather remarkable and magnificent. The first time I saw a

real mountain for the first time, I was blown away by their size and proportion,

and I remember to the strange feeling of sort of seeing the mountains off in the

distance and thinking, oh, we're almost there. And then you keep going, and you keep

going, and you keep going, right? So the my sense of time and space were distorted

as well. And then finally I remember the experience of finally being in the mountains once we got there. Water clearer than anything I had

seen in Louisiana. Air, crisp, and cool, beautiful Alpine forest, even snow in June. And then just this September, my dad and I went to Yellowstone and Grand Teton, National Parks for the first time, and all of those wonderful memories and experiences came flooding back, because we experienced together even more of this scenic beauty in the lakes and geysers and night skies of Wyoming and Montana and Idaho. We tend to think that mountains are beautiful, and we're sort of encouraged to sort of take in these mountain vistas, but there was a time when mountains were considered ugly. They were warts on the face of the earth, pimples, scars, the abode of the demonic in fact. They were huge abhorrent abominations. In 1671 Thomas Burnett called the Alps, quote, vast undigested heaps of stone. He had written that the earth was once smooth as an egg, but because of the Genesis flood, the mountains had arisen, a reminder of humankind's sin. In 1841 Edgar Allan Poe, in a short story, described the Alps as lines of horribly black and beetling cliff, hideously craggy and barren, gloomy, and ghastly. And Stephen Bailey in a recent book called Ugly, the Aesthetics of Everything, says mountains were once thought disgusting. They were dangerous, frightening, and home to nasty demons and bandits. Part of the reason for this distaste and even discussed for mountains is that they were nearly impossible to travel around or through. To this day, even with all of our modern road technologies driving through the mountains is not easy. And on those trips that I just described to you, most of our time was spent in the car, driving up and down and around mountain passes often with white knuckles. Mountains inhibited the free flowing of trade and travel. They were barriers, plain and simple. They were things in the way, speed bumps on the face of the earth. And so as Isaiah envisions the coming of the Lord, the speed bumps are leveled. The barriers are removed. The undulating land with its peaks and valleys is made into a plane. And because it

is a
plane, several things can happen now that couldn't happen before.
Everyone can
see the glory of the Lord coming miles away at the same time,
something that is
impossible with peaks and valleys. There's a clear line of sight and
simultaneously large groups of people can now travel easily. No
detours, no
slowing down, no stumbling, no stopping. The ground, level, and clear
and free
of obstacles has become as smooth and flat as Interstate 27 between
Lubbock and Amarillo. In Isaiah's immediate context, this highway is
prepared so that the exiles can come back from Babylon to Jerusalem.
This
return trip is imagined to be the opposite of the one in which they
were
exiled. That was a journey of sadness, grief and longing, a voyage
away from
joy and toward an unknown future of captivity and anguish among a
foreign
people. That voyage, we imagine, was accompanied by dirges and
laments as the travelers were driven through the valleys and peaks of
the
landscape. By way of contrast, the return voyage is envisioned as a
voyage
of ease and comfort, a triumphant return of good news, of the
certainty that
God has not abandoned God's people, but in fact leads them home, home
to their
own familiar places, to the land where they feel most connected to God
and
God's promises. Some of you may have a spiritual geography, a place
where
as the writer of Kathleen Norris puts it, you have wrestled your story
out
of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance. It is true I think
that the
places we inhabit have a profound effect on our spiritual development
for
Norris moving from New York City back to the house her mother had
grown up in on the
border between North and South Dakota. A place that most of us would
consider the
middle of nowhere, helped her to see the things she had not seen
before.
In the little things, in the emptiness of the landscape she was able
to tune out
the distractions of life and pay attention. Often in the emptiness of
life we find
a richness in our spiritual lives that we couldn't have found

elsewhere.

St. Hillary once wrote, everything that seems empty is full of the angels of God.

The middle of nowhere can be a spiritually rich place. It certainly was for John

the Baptist, the main character of Advent. The one who emerges from the wilderness,

the waste, the empty place, the place of desolation where no one thinks that

anything good can come from. And the reason this emptiness can be so full and

rich of spiritual lessons is not just that we can tune out the distractions and

voices competing for our attention, though that is part of it.

It is also that in the wildernesses of life we realize that we cannot control the

universe. We can't even control our little corner of the universe.

This is what Norris found in the extremes of the weather of the Dakota plains.

It's what John the Baptist and Jesus both found in their own wilderness

journeys a reliance on God and God alone for everything from our food and drink to

our own breath. Norris says that both the plains and the monastery are places

where distractions are at a minimum and you must rely on your own resources only

to find yourself utterly dependent on forces beyond your control.

Where time seems to stand still as it does in the liturgy where your life is

defined by waiting. And so I want to suggest to you that the stillness and

quiet of advance, and especially its repeated theme of waiting, waiting, waiting,

is not an emptiness, but a fullness. What are you waiting on today?

Are you waiting on a test result? Are you waiting on an estranged loved one to

come back home? Are you waiting on retirement? Are you waiting for someone to

return a call or a message? Are you waiting on the holidays to be over?

Are you waiting to hear back from a job interview? Are you waiting for a child to be

born? Are you waiting on God to show up? Are you waiting for God to smooth out the

rough places in your life, the mountains and valleys that are making your return

voyage more difficult? Waiting is a kind of wilderness, but even in the wilderness,

and maybe especially in the wilderness, God is there.

There were Christians around the fourth century who found a lot of inspiration in the character of John Baptist, and they imitated him and other Biblical prophets' lifestyles. They lived simply in the desert, devoting themselves to prayer and fasting. One of those monks, if Agrius learned, that even in the desert, in the wilderness, in the wild place, it was impossible to leave behind the thoughts of our former lives, the things that don't allow us to move on and live in the present. And so, as Kathleen Norse again puts it, in the desert, we have not only to know where we are, but to learn to love what we find there. In our reading from second Peter today, there's an admonition to those who are waiting. Those who are waiting for the second coming, which many of the early Christians thought would have happened within their own lifetimes. And so, the writer encourages these early Christians who were living in a kind of wilderness, a kind of desert, a spiritual landscape of waiting, strive, he says, to be found by God at peace, regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. Can we love what we find in the wilderness? Can we love the waiting? Can we be found by God at peace? These are the daily disciplines of the Christian life, the disciplines too, of this season of Advent, because we are all in the wilderness. We are all like the monk of Agrius having difficulty leaving behind the past. All the past hurts and guilt and confusion and embarrassment. We all have difficulty leaving behind the peaks in the valleys. We have difficulty moving on from failure, especially. And we have difficulty waiting with hope, on the God who was always ready to help us forget our past and to see ourselves as God sees us. Why did people go out to siege on the Baptist? To the wilderness, to the barren place, to the place where there was nothing, but this anachronism, this man dressed like no one had been dressed for hundreds of years. A man saying things no one had heard for a really long time. Why did people flock to this self-styled prophet who was talking about leveling the rough places in our lives? John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. They went out because in the waters of baptism they were able to see

and experience something new,
hope, and hope especially in the forgiveness of sins.
They were able to see and experience new life.
They were able to see and experience liberation from the past.
And they were able to see and experience a way forward, the way of
God's love and forgiveness.
When Jesus comes, he makes the rough places a plane.
When Jesus comes, he smooths out the peaks in the valleys.
When Jesus comes, he forgets our past failures and hurts and pains.
When Jesus comes, he sees us as God sees us, beloved children of God
in need of compassion and mercy.
When Jesus comes, he enables us to experience the peace of God in
every circumstance of our lives.
In all the places of exile and wandering, yes, even in the wilderness.
When Jesus comes, he brings peace.
When Jesus comes, he feeds his flock like a shepherd.
He gathers them in his arms.
He carries them close to himself and gently leads them.
When Jesus comes, he brings beauty and light.
When Jesus comes, he makes all things new, all things, even you and
me.
Amen.
Thank you.