

Born in Wilderness

a sermon preached on the

2nd Sunday in Advent

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

We moderns are very fond of imagining that we construct our realities, both our present and future. We are, of course, completely deluded in this fantasy as even a cursory examination of our pasts amply demonstrates. By any honest assessment, my personal history requires a humble, even a humiliating, assessment of my capacity to construct my reality. Nevertheless, in spite of the facts we persist with our fantasy about constructing the present and the future. Entire industries have mushroomed during recent decades, based on this illusion. Popular bookstands are full of glossy manuals by smiling 'how to' gurus, on every conceivable subject from sex to how to get on with your mother, to how to make a million in real estate starting with \$1. Of course, it's easy to caricature the 'how to' industry, and of course this hardly does justice. It is true that we cannot live without the drive to create and shape and strive, to plan and strategise and programme. Even the most basic of essential human activities, such as preparing the daily meals, would be impossible without an imagination and a desire and willingness to work for the future – let alone the budget for an entire nation!

But it is the temptation to reduce life to a strategic plan which is our abiding delusion. For to do that is to presume more than is realisable or possible for us. Under the influence of this presumption we imagine that Advent's call to 'Wake up!' is yet another strategic plan over which we exercise control, another accomplishment. Advent's 'Wake up!' may sound like a moral accomplishment, something we achieve by our hard work, determination or cleverness. That is the danger, of course, lurking in wait to entrap us in parables such as the one about the 10 young women with their oil lamps, for instance – 5 of them wise strategic planners, 5 of them foolish no-hopers.

So on Advent's second Sunday in this Year of Mark we hear - in Mark's pithy, racy and succinct telling of the good news - that John the baptiser "appeared in the wilderness". John appeared! Just like that. Here is the very opposite of 'strategic planning'. In fact, the Greek word which is translated into English as 'appeared' is the word for birth. It is the same word used by Matthew in that interminably-long genealogy full of 'begettings', and is connected to the Hebrew word used in Genesis to describe the generations of Adam and Eve's descendants. So it would be faithful to translate this verse by saying that John the Baptist was *born* in the wilderness.

This is a birth, a coming into being, which though it has antecedent causes, like all human birth, nevertheless remains at some level un-caused. Like your birth and my birth, for which there are traceable ancestors, our existence cannot be summed up by the rationality and superficiality of mere genealogical trees and DNA strands. We are much more than that. Birth, coming to be, generativity, remains a fundamental mystery. In some sense life itself springs from nowhere and with no reason. This is the nature of John's birth – beyond human control or reason. This is put more starkly in Mark, since the Baptist seems to have no parents. Furthermore, John is not born in a hospital or even a home. John is born, Mark tells us, in the wilderness!

Wilderness, we recall, is the potent Scriptural symbol for that state of existence in which God's Spirit guides people in order to be liberated from bondage into the freedom of the new and unexpected. Wilderness symbolises the absence of strategic planning, exposes our fantasy that we construct our present and future. Indeed, strategy is useless in wilderness. So John is given, generated by and birthed in that milieu in which we have no capacity to control and shape our present or future. John is born in wilderness. A new future, heralded

by one called John, was gratuitously given to humankind in that state characterised by disorientation, terror, surprise, in the unexpected and disarming. As the great religious traditions have always understood, wilderness is forbidding, frightening, disorienting, humbling, searching, transforming – a far cry from ‘baby Jesus meek and mild’ and sentimental animal-trough ‘Christmas’! Furthermore, we do not choose wilderness – it chooses us. And there can be no genuinely-new coming into being apart from wilderness.

So Advent begins with the call to ‘Wake up!’ Then on the second Sunday it reminds us that the future we long and hope for is beyond our control. Rather, it is grace. This gift, this good news, sweeps all our strategic plans and attempts to control our lives aside in the terror and shock and disorientation of the uncontrollable and untameable wilderness, of absence and emptiness. We wake up not because we thought it was a good idea, or because we are terribly clever, and certainly not because we are righteous, but because we are jolted from slumber by the unexpected, unsought and disorienting coming to birth which we cannot control or plan, for which there is no strategy. We all wake up in wilderness, of one kind or another. The exact contours and shape of wilderness are as varied as we are varied, though there are certainly common features – disorientation, surprise, powerlessness, discomfort, suffering, isolation, aloneness, meaninglessness, impotence, darkness, terror, humility.

This, Advent reminds us, is how we wake up! We wake up because, as our Lord Jesus warns us, and as Peter the Apostle reminded the early church, the Divine One comes like a thief in the night, whose nocturnal visit refuses to obey any strategic plan. The night-time thief’s surprise visit births us in wilderness, stealing all our previous assumptions and dethroning our plans – it is like a dissolution of all our elements. We experience such a state as a fire, which none of us would willingly choose, but which chooses us. This necessary dissolution of all our elements in fire is our birth, our second birth, our being born again by water and Spirit – and fire, as St Luke added to Mark’s version. This wilderness dissolution in fire, this second birth, out of wilderness, is our coming into being, is our appearing as true daughters and sons of God – which is the good news!

Thus, as St Peter counselled, while we are waiting for these things of Spirit and fire, for our coming to birth which the Scriptures call the ‘day of our Lord’, let us strive to be found at peace, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

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