**St Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

[**Baruch 5:1-9**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Advent/CAdv2_RCL.html#Ot1)

[**Philippians 1:3-11**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Advent/CAdv2_RCL.html#Nt1)

[**Canticle 4 or 16**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Advent/CAdv2_RCL.html#Ps1)

[**Luke 3:1-6**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Advent/CAdv2_RCL.html#Gsp1)

**TENDER MERCY**

It is through the tender mercy of our God, the God who formed us in our mothers’ wombs that we were all created with the capacity to walk in the way of peace. What each of us does with that capacity depends largely on the circumstances into which we were born into this earthly life, or on who we were born to, where, and in what period of time, and our accumulated perspectives on the world and God’s people in it.

Thus my way toward peace might look pretty different to yours, but nevertheless, we each have the capacity to engage in ways that elicit peaceful relationships, or we might choose to ignore this God-given gift, and simply do life as we find it, suffering little tolerance for anyone who gets in our way of our own self-satisfaction or comfort.

I like to think that most people embrace the former invitation to offer compassion, understanding, friendship, kindness whenever the need for any of these is felt, and wherever the real need for any of these is called for by someone else. God does not call us to withhold, nor does God call us to refuse, we are called by God to simply love, whether we understand why or not.

This week’s scripture readings are interesting in that, at first glance, they seem out of sync with each other: each beautiful and very different, yet each lifting up different ways to walk in the way of peace.

First the beautiful writing of Baruch urging Jerusalem to put on forever the beauty of the glory from God and the robe of righteousness, and with these will be shown to you by God for everywhere under heaven. And you will be called Righteous. Peace. Godly Glory. And every fragrant tree in the woods shall shade you so that you may walk safely on level ground, walking always in the Way of the Light of grace and glory. Baruch was a scribe and devotee of the great prophet, Jeremiah, and was there at the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. He knew all about tragedy, war and violence, and yet lifted up Jerusalem amid her ruins and gave her moral and spiritual support.

Sign me up Baruch, I’m there. I want to walk in the light with someone like you.

Next, we hear Zechariah’s famous words spoken to his new son, John.

When going about his priestly duty in the temple, Zechariah had been visited by the Angel Gabriel come to tell him the good news that he will be a father to a son. Since Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are getting along in years, Zechariah was skeptical. His reaction to the angel was one of awestruck fear, but his worldly skepticism overcame his faith in the word of God, causing him to doubt that he or his wife could produce a son, especially one destined to be great in the sight of the Lord, and he was struck mute until after all these events had come to pass. And so it was, that Zechariah spoke not a word until John was delivered to Elizabeth and the community heard the rest of the story.

John was destined to bring skeptical converts out of the worldly prisons of their own making, adding them to the ranks of the faithful.

For those of us who turn to the daily office for prayer and study each day, the Song of Zechariah, Canticle 16, is one we know by heart, in much the same way that we know the Lord’s Prayer. We recite the Canticle, sometimes forgetting its context and its meaning for us.

It is at this time of Advent, that the words of Zechariah become even more significant. Speaking tenderly over his newborn son, Zechariah prophesied the coming of one descended from the house of David, the One who will come to save us all from the hands of our enemies. “And you, child,” said Zechariah to his little son, “will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways……By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness….to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

One can almost feel the tender mercy of a father’s love for son. One can sense the anticipation and prayerful gratitude for such a gift.

Little did he know that John’s call was not going to be an exact replica of his father’s ministry. .

For writers like Baruch and priests like Zechariah, the way into peace was to carry out their duties, each in their own way, being true to their covenant to the God they served. Zechariah’s overarching call was to convey to God’s people, God’s deep and abiding desire to be in relationship with God’s people and that they understand that God is a God of grace, love and forgiveness.

Even Paul, writing to the Church in Philippi, was overcome with desire for their overflowing love for God’s tender mercy, rendering them blameless before God.

All of these were about walking in the way of peace…walking for and toward that tender mercy..

And then came John.

He came to walk on the wild side. Came to break the rules of the way things were expected to be done in Rome, in the temple and from the very priesthood to which he was called. And here we are, after being lulled into a sort of sweet merciful torpor’ our cups running over with grace and compassion, introduced to Zechariah’s sweet baby son, who is now all grown up and holding fort out in the wilderness around the river Jordan, keeping himself alive by eating locusts and wild honey, which by the way, if trending very high right now. Not the locusts, but the wild honey.

So what do we do with John? His call to bring people into the realm of God was no different than that of the faithful before or after him. So what is his ministry conveying to the people gathering round him and to us? Are we being invited to something other than the status quo? Are we being compelled to shake off everything we’re willing just to settle for because it is easier or more convenient? Is saying the Daily Office with the Song of Zechariah and the Lord’s Prayer flitting off our tongues like old songs sung from memories of yesterday? Are we in danger of stopping our quest for the way of peace, for grace and divine love and compassion just because we feel that ordinary day-to-day is enough? Do we think about God on Sunday morning and allow God to be crowded out by the world for the rest of the week? Maybe we find it is easier to accept traditional norms of the world, than to throw off all our bonds of compliance and adherence to the status quo, easier to simply accept that the words are enough, rather than to get a little wild with it all, to shake it up and wallow in a little divine love?

John the Baptist was a wild man to be sure, but absolutely living his call, prophesied by Zechariah, to the letter, and walking in the footsteps of Baruch and Paul, yet with his own, far wilder, version of passionate faith. He was open to whatever might be made possible by his presence among the crowds who flocked to hear his words, hoping that they would be so enlightened that they, too, could get a little wild with love for God. To be wild you have to be self-determined, be able to make choices for yourself to be one way or another, to do one thing or another in the world as a result of your freedom from mainstream expectation.

I once had a student who confessed to me that she removed her cross necklace when she went out with her secular friends. She eventually became a priest, and now wears a collar proudly. That’s wild.

Like John, her decision for the priestly call, is an example of how God makes the most of those who dare to take a walk on the wild side.

If you’re thinking that the time has come for you to walk on the wild side, then Advent is the perfect time to do it. Advent is all about going wild for love, for justice, for integrity, for grace and compassion. It is all about having the patience to wait, not in a passive way, but in expectation of something new, something which seems possible for the first time in a long time.

Advent is a time to throw of the mantles of too much routine, too much, shall we say, domestication, so much day-to-day sameness that we forget to open ourselves to the divine. What if we were to suddenly, wildly, open ourselves to God’s presence? What would our spirituality look and feel like then?

We tend to think it was easier for people in the time of Baruch, Zechariah and Paul, to throw off the manacles of public expectation. We rationalize that they were not as shackled by rules and regulations inside and outside the Church so that they were more available to creative and spiritual encounters with the divine. Perhaps the sparks of creativity were allowed to burst into flames of fire in heart, soul and mind, leading one to deeper and more passionate relationship with God and we think we are far too caught in the web of societal norms to experience that kind of passion.

Yet, whether yesterday or today, John’s message is the same for whomever wishes to receive it. God wants less hard-core doctrine, less routine prayer, less debates over what has always been and always should be. As Will Francois III, Sr. Pastor at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Pleasantville, New Jersey, puts it, God wants “creative encounters, divine embodiment and spiritual effervescence.”

We enter each new day with old ways, pushed and pulled into shape by old habits, our complacency with attempting the new and our hard core attitudes shaped in part, not by us, but by the society in which we find ourselves.

It was no different in John’s time, yet he broke out of the bonds of the society that would keep him within boundaries of accepted and unchanging behavior.

Out in the wilderness with the wild beasts and bugs, the unknown dangers and things that scream in the night. For John, it was the place of freedom, unbound and unbought by the structures of public opinion and power.

So John leaves us with a question. Why can’t a little wildness in our own time be an articulation of faith? Why are we so afraid to let our passion for life in God’s creation show? To quote James Baldwin[[1]](#footnote-1) “Say yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found. “It is found in terrible places.”

John was out there in the middle of nowhere, and nowhere became somewhere; a somewhere that lives in history. People flocked to listen to the wild man and his teachings about changing ways and perspectives. Forget all your plodding piety was the message underlying John’s ministry to the masses. And they began to leave the way of the ordinary, for the way of a slightly more wild and passionate faith, and found their true sense of self and a true sense of connection to God.

John’s voice for this kind of self-liberation rang out across the wilderness. The people were free to move out of the social circumstances which dampened rather than enervated their spirits. And as their sense of renewal grew among them, the wilderness became a true Church.

When we allow ourselves to become a little wild for God, what we think of now as banal, what we think of as a dead end, or nowhere going anywhere fast, becomes somewhere special, our own place of freedom to indulge in the mystery of Godself. It doesn’t mean we stop paying our taxes, or paying our bills, or educating ourselves, or learning vocations, or any of those activities we must pay attention to in order to live successfully in the world.

Yet giving way to a little wildness, (not including the wild locusts and loincloth) can do nothing but good for our spirits. Giving way to find humor hidden in everyday burdens can only lighten our loads. Giving way to laughing at ourselves rather than giving in to our self-consciousness can only make us stronger for the journey ahead, equipping us with an extra dose of endurance to go the distance.

When it comes to our relationship with God, repentance is not about wearing sackcloth or a hair shirt, to atone for our sins, it is to turn around after taking stock of how deep we are mired in the status quo. It is to throw off some of the rules, self-imposed or imposed by the world, and taste a little freedom of the spirit. It is to get a little giddy, simply for love of God and neighbor.

So at this Advent, this possibility for all things new and possible, in the aftermath of a year of darkness and human challenge, allow yourself to get a little wild. Allow yourself to love yourself and your neighbor with increasing passion and abandon. Throw off all that holds that love chained down and give thanks to to Zechariah and Elizabeth for John, the wild man come to prepare the way for the One we know lived in his own most radical, most passionate way. Give thanks to Baruch and his imagery of a more beautiful life born out of the ashes of destruction. Viewing beauty in all creation, is ours for the taking if only we would only take the risk of fully embracing it. Give thanks to Paul for his confidence in our God-given capability for over-flowing love, and to John, for his wildly free passion, trust and belief in the One to come. Learning ;from them all,.

perhaps this Advent, we will be just wild enough to join the…..

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

So that we, too, can

'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

We, too, can help to fill every valley  
and assist in making every mountain low.

Straighten the crooked,   
and make the rough ways smooth,

in ways that we never dreamed we would have done before. And, as we do, let us be passionately and wildly open to God’s tender mercy in our lives, so that we have the strength to endure whatever the world has in store for us next.

Amen

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

December 5, 2021

1. —  James Baldwin (1924-1987) writer from the United States 1924 - 1987 From Nothing Personal, a collaboration with the photographer Richard Avedon (1964). Baldwin's text for the volume can be found " here https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1042&context=cibs".  
     
   Source: https://quotepark.com/quotes/1916378-james-baldwin-one-must-say-yes-to-life-and-embrace-it-wherever/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)