

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Pettit
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Psalm 29 and Mark 1:4-11

I hail from New York state, a fact I share in common with a few of you. I spent the first thirty-eight years of my life around various parts of upstate NY. I grew up in the hills of the finger lakes region, a region known for the long, deep, and narrow glacially carved lakes. We lived for many years across the street from Bristol mountain ski center. My parents still live within 20 miles of the hospital where I was born and within a few miles of where I grew up and went to school. Naples, NY, is nestled in the hills of the western finger lakes. From my parents' deck, you can look down into the valley and see the vineyards.

I think it is not too egregious of comparison to say that Jesus and I grew up in similar surroundings. The region of Galilee, of which Nazareth was on the outskirts of is not dramatically different. No ski mountain of course. In place of the vineyards are the olive groves. In place of the grape pie stands lining the road in the fall are the olive presses, where you go to press your olives to extract your oil. From most places, you have a view of the lake and the hillsides surrounding it. Back at my parents' place, it is Canandaigua Lake. For Jesus and his hometown, it was the Sea of Galilee. There are consistency and rhythm in such places. The rains are consistent. Agriculture reliable. Families live in the same area for generations. Everybody seems to know who everybody else is.

And in such places, God is associated with those constancies. Our Psalm this morning is one tied to geography and a certain climate. They wouldn't be singing this Psalm down in the dry Negev I don't imagine. It is a psalm of ascribing praise and glory to the God associated with bringing the rain and the sustenance, and the seasons. Where God and grain are connected. Where the thunder and the lightning are symbols of God's presence. God's presence is all around. You don't even question it. God is in the rain and reliable agricultural rhythms. God is in the synagogue where families gather to hear the Torah and discuss it. God is in the teaching of parent to child. God is all around, and God's voice merges with other voices. If you grew up in and around the church and family, this experience might sound familiar to you too.

It makes me recall the story about the young Samuel in the temple. God speaks to him at night; he hears his name and goes to the priest Eli saying, you called me. Eli says it wasn't me. This repeatedly happens before he starts to parse apart God's

voice from the voice of this influential person in his life. Because Eli was the voice of God to him during those years of rearing.

Well, in contrast to this landscape and its agricultural and communal rhythms, our passage highlights another landscape not far away. It is the wilderness of the Jordan valley. From its outlet at the Sea of Galilee, as you follow the Jordan south you observe the gradual but clear transition to a more dry and arid valley. By the time you get to the southern portion near Masada and the dead sea, the valley is dry and barren. In the Jordan valley, the salty soil of the Lisan Marl doesn't support agriculture. They get very little rain. Along the banks is described as a dense thicket. Along the banks, trees and shrubs grow and become the home of lions and predators who take shelter and watch for prey to come drink from the river. Jeremiah says, if you have wearied in a safe place, how will you fare in the thicket of the Jordan.

Somewhere down in the Jordan Valley is where we find John the Baptist. He, like many others of his day, leaves his tight knit community. He breaks ties with the temple in Jerusalem and with the Pharisees, who thought they are often cast in negative light in the gospels, the Pharisees are the local clergy, the pastors, the fathers who are training sons, the religious leaders in these small communities. John has chosen a different environment. He moves to the periphery. That is another connotation of the Jordan valley—it is a border, on the edge, outside of Israel proper. For John, it seems to be a place for renewal and repentance, a change in perception and orientation. John and others retreated to the Jordan wilderness because they didn't feel that God's purposes had broken in yet, and they were waiting for it. Prepare a way in the wilderness. Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.

John moves to the periphery to step outside the current patterns and call attention to God's purposes. He also moves to the Jordan, I suspect, because the noise and the routines and the rhythms that lull one into a pleasant stupor up in the Galilean hills are all interrupted. There the comforts of family and seasons are abandoned for a more rigorous routine. In the Jordan valley, God's presence and voice are not associated with the abundance and seasonal rains and rhythms, and families and communities. God's presence is associated with God's help and provision in a barren place. There is quiet and room for God to speak. Maybe this is why you go for a walk sometimes, or a quick hike or drive into the mountains, to get space, "to clear your head" as we like to say.

Sometimes we choose the wilderness; we change environments to hear God more clearly, or maybe to center ourselves. Sometimes we intentionally disrupt our

rhythms and the noise for a brief time. Where is that for you? A walk? A hike? Camping? Travel? Fly fishing for me. However, other times the wilderness and its disruption intrude upon us. In these cases, we are not as much in control. We don't get to decide the degree of disruption nor how prolonged it will be. Rhythms are disrupted. Comforts are less available. This year of the pandemic has been one of those imposed wilderness periods. Hasn't it? Your rhythms and comforts and community and connections have been disrupted. Add to this perhaps the growing disruptions from changing culture and communities and the increasing dissent, divides, and disorientation in our public life. It may leave us yearning for those pleasant rhythms again.

John chooses the wilderness. Many come out to him to be baptized in the Jordan. It is a baptism for the forgiveness of sins but also to align oneself with what God is doing, and to make straight the path for God's messiah.

Jesus chooses it too. He goes out to be baptized in the Jordan. In hindsight, we understand this move to be part of God's plan, of calling Jesus at just the right time. And I think we often think of Jesus as a young man who steps up at the right moment of maturity. He is just a little older than Cassie, after all. He is young, has zeal, still has cartilage in his knees. But Jesus is kind of an old man. You scoff, I suspect. Thirty? Old?! Thirty is young for us because we expect to live into our seventies, eighties, maybe even nineties. But life expectancy in Jesus' day was more like 35. Sure, folks lived longer, sometimes much longer, many less. But like going to your 50th or 60th class reunion and realizing there aren't many of you left, Jesus and his peers may not be far from that reality themselves, many of them not living much beyond 35 or 40.

Jesus is a mature person, formed, rooted, shaped. He is not a young wide-eyed person. Jesus grew up in the synagogue in Nazareth. He has known the rhythms of agriculture and community. He has been reared to think like his community, to hold their values and their inclinations. He has learned to work with his hands.

But at the mature age of thirty years old, he will step away from his community in order to hear clearly the work God has for him. You see, sometimes we need to step away from the comfortable rhythms and routines to hear afresh. And it's not just for the young. It is for the advanced in years too. Sometimes it takes the wilderness to parse apart God's voice from all the other voices that have seemed to merge with God's voice, and we can't tell them apart anymore.

Mary Oliver writes in her poem, "The Journey,"

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice –
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,...

She portrays all the forces that try to keep us from hearing afresh, that keep us in our roles and rhythms.

Jesus steps away from the quaint landscape of Galilee and down in the Jordan with John, as he dips in the waters seeking renewal and a renewed commitment to God's plans and purposes, he hears God's voice clearly, not in the words of the elders or family or the predictable patterns of nature. He hears God's voice speak in the barrenness and in the silence. The text says the heavens are torn open, and the Spirit descends like a dove, and God's voice comes clearly, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

I wonder if sometimes it takes the wilderness to hear these words. Or maybe they just sit differently if we can listen to them when everything is disrupted. Now, these words fall to Jesus, the messiah, who bore a particular role. But as those called to follow in Christ's steps, I suspect this message is for us as well. The Spirit descending on us, both as God's presence with us and God's empowerment to be about God's work in the world. And the words of love, you are my beloved.

Mary Oliver's poem continues,

little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice

There was a new voice, or at least it seemed that way to Samuel in the temple, and to Jesus as he stood in the waters of the Jordan. And even if you have found yourself in God's family for years or decades, maybe that voice might find us anew also. A reminder of God's deep love for each of us. A renewed sense of God's Spirit granted to us, and a new calling as Christ's disciple in this world.

Part of the Jordan's significance in the Bible is that it is this place on the periphery, where you return from changed with a new status, a new role, and a new call on occasion. Naaman dips in the Jordan to be cleansed of his leprosy and returns changed with new allegiances. David flees Absalom to the Jordan and returns with new resolve and new faithfulness from his soldiers. Moses passes the mantle to Joshua in the Jordan valley. John – Jesus.

Jesus returns to Galilee, that place of comfortable rhythms, changed, and he starts being disruptive in the eyes of many. He starts ministering to the sick and the lepers and the outcasts. He befriends tax collectors. He starts preaching differently in the synagogue. You see, he repented out there with John, baptized and committed anew to God's inbreaking kingdom. He gained a clarity about who he was in God's sight and what God had for him to do. And he came back seeing the world differently, responding to the marginalized differently, seeing how God's kingdom was going to come on earth differently. And he started actively participating in that, actively being God's voice and hands in his community.

Whether you think thirty is young or old, the invitation to come to the wilderness to hear God's voice and call anew is for each of us. I hope you hear it. I hope I hear it. I hope we can share that possibility together as a church, to hear that clear voice from heaven, you are my beloved, and you have a role in my kingdom work. And I know we are tired of the wilderness aspects of the pandemic and other disorienting aspects of our world. And we just want to get back to comfortable rhythms. But what if God's voice can be heard in the wilderness too? And what if we are called, just as Naaman, David, and Jesus, to return from the wilderness changed, with a new sense of calling, seeing and relating to the world differently. You are God's beloved. Listen for it.

And all God's people said...

The Journey

by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice –
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Mark 1: 4-11

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’ ”

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The Baptism of Jesus

(Mt 3:13–17; Lk 3:21–22; Jn 1:29–34)

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Psalm 29

The Voice of God in a Great Storm

A Psalm of David.

- 1 Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- 2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.
- 3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.
- 4 The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
- 5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- 6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- 7 The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
- 8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- 9 The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"
- 10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
- 11 May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!