
Advent #2: Go Wild!
Chapel in the Park United Church
December 8, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 3:1-18

This week is the second Sunday in Advent. Traditionally that means talking about 2 things. Two things that - on the surface at least - are contradictory. What am I talking about? Well the contradictions have already been played out during this worship service, although perhaps we missed the significance at the time. We have the fact that the Advent candle we just lit is called “peace”. And in contradiction to that, we have stories about John the baptizer. John was a wild man who lived in the wilderness, and who did some pretty wild things. So today - on the second Sunday in Advent - we are invited to reflect on the tension between peace and wilderness. But wait a minute. Is that even possible?

[image: wild]

“Wild” is often thought of as uncontrolled, unrestrained, out of control, undisciplined, unruly, rowdy, disorderly, riotous, unrestrained abandon”.

[image: wild vs peace]

Peace is often thought of as calm, controlled, disciplined, ordered. On the surface, “peace” and “wilderness” seem like opposites. How do we understand peace and wilderness at the same time? Perhaps we need to scratch below the surface and get down to deeper meanings. Or maybe not. If we scratch deeper we just might find that peace and wilderness are not only incompatible on the surface. They may in fact be completely and irrevocably incompatible even to the core. Perhaps this reflection will not end with closure - imagine that! And if at the end of this reflection you are disappointed, just remember that Advent is a journey, and the journey will continue.

[image: lake louise]

Now I hear some of you objecting. Sometimes - you say - when we want to feel a sense of peace, we head into nature, into the wilderness, away from the distractions of modern living. Surely peace and wilderness are sometimes compatible. I’m sorry, but I really do not think so. Yes, it’s true that many people find peace in nature. And we often

think of nature as the wilderness. But that is not the wilderness I'm talking about.

[image: wifi in wilderness]

Consider the person in this photo. He is in nature. He likely thinks he is in the wilderness. And yet, he is playing with his phone. Look at his footwear. He is wearing sandals. He is probably only 50 m from his car. I mean, yes, you and I can find peace in nature when we have car keys tucked safely in our pockets and we have a full tank of gas. We can find peace in nature when we have good camping gear that keeps rain out, and adequate food. We can find peace in nature when we already have the closest Tim Hortons programmed into our GPS. Yes, we can find peace in the wilderness when we stay in control. Sure, we can do that. And that can be a lot of fun. But I'm not talking about that.

[image: labrador wilderness]

I'm talking about wilderness when it is pronounced properly. Because wilderness should really be pronounced:

[image: labrador wilder-ness]

wilder-ness. And "wilder" means "more wild". More wild than what? More wild than what we are comfortable with. More wild than what we can control. More wild than what we can handle. That's wilder-ness. And that is what the second Sunday in Advent is inviting us into.

We are being invited into NOT being in control.

[image: not being in control]

As Mario Andretti famously said, "If everything seems under control, you're just not going fast enough". We cannot embrace wilder-ness and be in control at the same time. Something has got to give. And we can either give up control, or else we have to acknowledge that we are not willing to go into the wilder-ness. Most of us decide to not give up control. And so we miss out on the blessings that can only be found in the wilder-ness.

[image: via churchill]

There is a VIA train that runs from Winnipeg to Churchill, Manitoba. For many people, getting on a VIA train at all is approaching the wilder-ness. Because only 59% of

them arrive on time. But the route to Churchill is undoubtedly quite wild.

[image: churchill track]

This picture is - I think - a section of track somewhere between Winnipeg and Churchill. I like this image because for me it shows in glaring contrast the idea of wilderness and the idea of control.

The track is completely straight and is very much controlled. The wilderness is everything else (there is a power line too). Are you drawn to the straight track? (“Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight”). Or are you wondering what you might find if you got off the straight and narrow and explored the wilderness that makes up the reality beyond the confines of this image? What are you drawn to in this image?

And perhaps more importantly, what did you hope I would talk about today? Peace and quiet and control? Or wilderness? This tension between control and wilderness exists in our own lives, and even here in the church. But this is a worship service. During Advent to boot. What if - heaven forbid - God shows up today? Would we not expect a certain amount of wild?

[image: fireworks]

Just for contrast, what would you have expected in worship today, if last week I had told you that George Clooney might show up today. This place would be packed. There would be complete pandemonium here. But last week I did tell you that Jesus might show up today. Which I believe actually. And here we are looking like we do when we watch commercials on TV. Where is the pandemonium? Did anyone even bring an airhorn today? Is the possibility of meeting George Clooney really more exciting than the reality of Jesus being present with us, in us, and through us?

[image: toronto wins]

Or consider this image of the Toronto Maple Leafs winning the Stanley Cup. Obviously I had to use artificial intelligence to create this image. Because - you know - they are the leafs. But look at how excited they are. Are you telling me that winning some tin cup is more exciting than the reality of God being with us?

Or is it just that we are so used to the message that Jesus is coming into our midst that it does not generate any excitement? One of my friends says that the best proof that

God does not exist is the lack of energy and excitement we find in our churches. And I have yet to think of a snappy comeback to that.

[image: quote about velvet]

In the words of author and poet Annie Dillard. “On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear straw hats and velvet to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offence. Or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return”¹. Does that perhaps start to give a sense of what “wild” might look like?

It’s Advent and we are waiting for Jesus to appear in our midst. Now in Jesus day, if you wanted that sort of experience, you had to venture into the wilderness. And you had to deal with John. Meeting John must have been an event in itself. I wonder why 2000 years later we expect to find Jesus staying all cozy and warm in the comfort of our living rooms, or in this sanctuary. Even the word “sanctuary” suggests a place of calm and peace. In other words a place where nothing exciting ever happens.

[image: rocket launch]

But on this, the second week of Advent, perhaps a better name for this place is “launch pad”. A launch pad being a place of energy, sound, smell, light, transformation, daring, risk and uncertainty. And above all, a place of departure. Did you come here today for the peace and quiet? Or did you come here today as a point of departure into the wilder-ness?

[image: airport departure]

If the idea of a launch pad is a bridge too far for you, perhaps consider the departures area at an airport. The important thing about the second Sunday in Advent is that it is a point of departure to the wild.

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 1982.

[image: john baptizer]

Given our own preference for peace and control, we might wonder why so many people flocked to John? Well, perhaps we don't know for sure. But we do know that John represented the anti-establishment. John likely was a homeless person. "His dietary fare was that generally consumed by the poorer elements of society. He stood in bold relief to the wealthy, indulgent Jews of his day." As one commentator said, "John was a veritable walking sermon!"² If you lived in Jerusalem those days, you could find your salvation through the approved channels provided by the temple and the priests. Why on earth would people have gone to John? Clearly, the temple/sacrificial system wasn't working - at least not for everybody. The temple system was organized, controlled, calm. It was simple to understand because the priests would explain it to you. But perhaps the system was so controlled that there was no space left for God. And even if the priests could not figure that out, normal people - people like us who long for deeper meaning - certainly did figure that out.

[image: soup kitchen]

Even today, many people of faith - even people of deep faith - find they need to look beyond their own institutional church from time to time to help them grow spiritually. How many United Church people flocked to Billy Graham when he was in town. And after that experience - which they enjoyed - were quite content to go back to their own churches? But they appreciated the little boost they got from something beyond the walls of the established church.

How many teenagers grew up in church and found that their faith only started to make sense to them when they went away to a Christian summer camp? How many people grew up in church and their faith did not quite gel until they started volunteering at a soup kitchen? Controlled and calm is great. But sometimes, we just need to inject a bit of wild in order to make sense of our own lives, and our own faith.

[image: quote about if you know what you are looking for]

Now I do understand that many people came to this church today looking for a certain amount of comfort, or certainty, or peace. And I hope that you find that in the

² <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/266-who-was-john-the-baptist>

prayers and music. But we are all old enough to know that this is the second week in Advent. It's time for wild. As Advent thunders forward we continue to wait for Jesus in our midst. If you know what you are looking for, you are not trying hard enough. Advent is not about us being in control. It is about looking for Jesus in our midst - a Jesus who is beyond our control and very likely beyond our comfort zone. Any Jesus that we can control is too small to be part of the vastness that we call "divine".

[image: lake louise]

Well, it does appear that you were all right and I was wrong today. I'm very disappointed to realize that I did not need to wear my motorcycle helmet to worship after all³. The hoped for "wild" did not seem to become manifest in our midst. But as I said earlier, Advent is a journey, and the journey continues. I have not given up my search, and I hope that you have not either. What exactly are we to do while we keep looking for Jesus in our midst? I'm glad you asked.

[image: what then should we do?]

And the crowds asked John, 'What then should we do?'. In reply John said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none. And whoever has food must do likewise.'. Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked John, 'Teacher, what should we do?'. John said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.'. Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?'. John said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

That was John's answer. What is our own answer - in 2024 - right here? Perhaps it means speaking to a stranger at a bus stop this week. Perhaps it means listening deeply to another human being who is frustrated, scared, or lonely. Such people are easy to find. You'll find them everywhere right now waiting in line to check out at stores all over town. And in other places. Let's share our answers with each other over coffee time today. I'll repeat the question, "What then should we do to make the presence of Jesus real today?"

[image: rohr quote]

I want to close with a quote from Richard Rohr. "How odd it is that God's

³ Rev. Paul entered the sanctuary wearing a motorcycle helmet.

salvation is so seldom recognized. How strange that what God is offering is so rarely experienced. We have presented salvation so poorly that much of the world does not even take it seriously. Oh yes, we want help, we want solace, we want magic, but I am not sure that we recognize or even want the scary freedom that God calls salvation.”

We are called to the wilder-ness. Let’s all go wild this week.

Amen.