

12 December, 2010; 3 Advent A  
Is 35:1-10; Magnificat  
James 7:7-10; Matt 11:2-11

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“What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?”

Jesus asked. What he was asking was, What makes you go out into the wide and lonely places, past the safe boundaries, beyond the chain-link fence, stepping through the ragged grass over ground littered with tin cans, until the tin bits fade away and the silence grows and grows and hovers over the breathing earth? When you go to *those* places, what are you seeking? What do you hope to find there that you could not better encounter in the crowded streets and malls of humankind? Those people who haunt the corridors of power, the objects we are told to covet, they are not found in emptiness. The things are heaped in gaudy piles on every corner of our towns, particularly at this time of year; the people live in large mansions and attend charity balls. So what do we still seek in wilderness, and why do we go there?

The poet Richard Wilbur writes,

The tall camels of the spirit  
Steer for their deserts, passing the last groves loud  
With the sawmill shrill of the locust, to the whole honey of the  
arid  
Sun. They are slow, proud,

And move with a stilted stride  
To the land of sheer horizon, hunting Traherne's  
Sensible emptiness, there where the brain's lantern-slide  
Revels in vast returns.<sup>1</sup>

“The tall camels of the spirit” -- those awkward, knock-kneed creatures which dwell within us, half stumbling body, half reservoir of heaven -- those creatures within us which yearn for greatness - those feel the need to pit themselves against eternity, to go to a place which demands “not less than everything”<sup>2</sup> and see if they can thrive.

There is a simpler reason, too, of course. In the wilderness, there are not meetings. There are not bosses or deadlines. There are not children or parents tugging at the sleeve. There is not the endless round of errands, driving the car from grocery store to post office to Home Depot to flute lesson and then

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<sup>1</sup> “A World Without Objects is a Sensible Emptiness”

<sup>2</sup> Eliot, “Little Gidding.”

back to the Stop and Shop for the one missing item we inevitably forget. The desert, we hope, is the original dry cleaner: it will remove the stains from our soul. Freed (at least for while) from all our cares, we hope to float heavenward, to become serene, to be the sort of person who could play a yoga teacher in a movie.

The thing which drives us out there is a holy hunger, a hunger to be holy, to become the people we'd like to think we are: compassionate, wise, gentle, and loving. And this drive is necessary. Yesterday morning, I attended a seminar on food security in New Brunswick. The keynote speaker told of a time when a farmer pulled his leg, commenting "The corn don't grow so great around the edges of the field, so I stopped planting the edges."<sup>3</sup> (*Think about it.*) It's laughable, of course, because there are always edges; the question is where they are. If we do not plant the edges, our fields shrink; if we do not push outwards, our souls shrink, too.

All the same, I think Jesus may have been asking the wrong question. Sure, some of those people probably wanted to see something, to gaze upon a real, live holy man, or else, more cynically, simply to take in the spectacle. (It must have been something!) But in my heart, I think they went out to the wilderness, not to see, but to hear and to be touched. When a man is yelling "repent" and you go towards him, it is usually because you think you need to. You have tasted the stale sameness of your life; you have grown tired of mediocrity; you yearn for something different than what you have; to be someone different than who you are. You want to be washed clean and set free to begin again. You want to feel hands touch your forehead in blessing. You are hungry for a word of truth -- any word which is tangibly true, as simple and solid as bread or wine. And so you go to seek it.

John, of course, was looking for it, too. That's why he sent his disciples to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or is there another?" (Matt 11:3) Like so many of our critics today, John knew what was wrong with his society; he could condemn, tear down, and dissect with the best of them. He could not, however, build it back up again. That's why Jesus' response is so striking: he replies, not with words, but with actions -- life-restoring, healing actions; he responds by knitting up the rents in the world. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Matt 11: 4-5) In a world of *Thou shalt not*, Christ alone replies, "*yes.*" Christ alone is still repeating the judgment which he gave at creation: "It is good. It is very good."

This week, I went with a friend to the Morgan Library in New York, where we saw an exhibit on Mark Twain. There were the expected photos of him in his white suit and bushy hair, handwritten manuscripts of some of his most famous work, and pieces from work which is much less known. There was a large

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Winne, told at "Learn, Grow, Share," Dec 11, 2010.

section of his scathing analysis of the brutality and hypocrisy of European colonialism; underneath the rage, I could sense the recoil of his deep humanity, a man who was accustomed to tolerate foibles with humor running up against something which could not be tolerated. I found myself wondering where we find those honest voices today, voices which know not only what is inhuman, but what human beings should be. Voices which can make us whole. I suspect that, if we could find one, we would seek it, like those first-century Judeans, wherever it happened to be.

But Jesus, of course, was not out there in some hard-to-reach place, in the wilderness. He spent most of his time in cities because that's where the people were. Unlike John, he did not wear strange clothing, eat locusts, and live in the desert. He feasted with sinners, touched the unclean, laughed with children, wept at the grave of his friend. He did not preach a world-denying faith, but a world-embracing one.

I love my times of retreat, but retreats are not the whole of faith. Holiness does not consist in the way we are without other people around; it is with them, among them, that Jesus is to be found. Time away from other people and their incessant demands can allow us to center in, to remember who we are, to work through old pain or make a new commitment, but all of it is given to us so that we can live among other people and show them the love God gives us. We are not camels, after all, but human beings, and when we return from the distant wells, we are called to share the water we have carried. People sought John in the wilderness because they were hungry for truth, but Jesus taught in the marketplace and pushed through the crowds and lived among us for the same reason. It is a turning-point in the life of God: not that we should seek him, but that he should seek us. That's what "Advent" means: Christ coming to us, here, among the scattered bits of our lives, amid the washing that needs to be done, in the classrooms and meeting rooms, in the endless round of faithful drudgery which is the cost of our ability to love. It is here, not some other place, that we prepare to welcome him.

Richard Wilbur concludes his poem,

Beasts of my soul who long to learn to drink  
Of pure mirage, those prosperous islands are accurst  
That shimmer on the brink

Of absence; auras, lustres,  
And all shinings need to be shaped and borne.  
Think of those painted saints, capped by the early masters  
With bright, jauntily-worn

Aureate plates, or even  
Merry-go-round rings. Turn, O turn

From the fine sleights of the sand, from the long empty oven  
Where flames in flamings burn

Back to the trees arrayed  
In bursts of glare, to the halo-dialing run  
Of the country creeks, and the hills' bracken tiaras made  
Gold in the sunken sun,

Wisely watch for the sight  
Of the supernova burgeoning over the barn,  
Lampshine blurred in the steam of beasts, the spirit's right  
Oasis, light incarnate.

Amen.