Sermon by Pastor Tim O’Shields, Zion Lutheran Church, Fairview, Montana

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Sermon based on the **Gospel Reading**: **John 1:6-8, 19-28**

6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 19This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” 21And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” 22Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. 24Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” 26John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” 28This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

[Before Sermon] Let’s pray together:

Astonishing God—Loving Father, Send your Holy Spirit upon us as we dwell in your Word. Hold us close as we wait patiently for the coming of your Son. Fill us with your goodness. Open our hearts to glorify you. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in your sight, O God. You are our rock and our Redeemer. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Today, we have a lot of ‘John’ going on. We are reading from the Fourth Gospel [the Gospel of John], and we are talking about another John, who is the one called by God to go before the Messiah and announce the coming of the Messiah. These two ‘Johns’ should not be confused as one. Indeed, our John [today] calls for people to repent, and also baptizes them. In the other gospels, he is called John the Baptizer But, in our text today, we discover in Verse 7, that John is actually John the Witness.

Let’s ask ourselves three questions in our time together today:

1. (To John the Witness)—WHO ARE YOU?
2. What does the WILDERNESS look like?
3. (To all of us, people of God who are about two weeks from a New Year)—WHO ARE WE?

Let’s start with Question 1 (To John the Witness)—WHO ARE YOU?

John is not so much humble as he is self-aware when he confesses in Verse 20 that he is not the Messiah. He further shows a keen awareness of who he is and his Divine calling when he says that he is not Elijah, nor “the prophet” in Verse 21. He is being tested by the Jewish priests and Levites from Jerusalem. He has gotten on their ‘radar’ because John has attracted much attention and acceptance from the people in the cities and outer-lying areas with his witness, his call for repentance, and his offering to baptize the people. In general, the people who come to him love John. He even has his own disciples and close followers. This is threatening to the Jewish leaders. We all know that the story does not ultimately end well for John, as he literally loses his head for his faith. We are seeing the beginning of the building of that case against John the Witness in our passage today. However, his faith remains true and unashamed. He does not try to divert the Jewish leaders, nor does he try to escape their opinions of who he may be or who he is. He is not worried about their perceived ‘threat’ from him. He holds the course of his Divine calling as he proclaims that “I baptize with water, but the one, greater than I, who comes after me, will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” We must read beyond the prescribed lectionary verses to Verse 33 to hear that the Messiah is greater than the earthly man, John, and to hear the proclamation that the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit. John the Witness proclaims clearly to the people with him [then]—and to us [today]—that he is only a human being called by God to be the **voice crying in the wilderness to make straight the way of the Lord**. John also makes it clear that his calling and purpose is to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah. John is living into his Divine calling by opening the door for people to open their hearts and minds to the coming Messiah, and to repent and be baptized, as part of that preparation. He knows that the Messiah is coming to save all the people from their sins and from themselves, as only the Messiah can do. John’s powerful witness paves the way for the Messiah to come to people to share the Good News.

In the Fourth Gospel, there is also a clear “theme” between light and darkness. In the Fourth Gospel, light is the equivalent to the presence of God; darkness is the equivalent of the absence of God. In the beginning of our passage today, in Verse 6, we discover that John has been sent as “a witness to the light, so that all might believe through him.” This is further confirmed in Verse 7 when we hear that John is “not the light, but has come to testify to the light.”

John understands that the LIGHT OF THE WORLD comes only as the Messiah, not in or through him. He is “just the messenger.” John’s commitment and resolve to his calling as the messenger should be an example to us—to this day—as we seek God’s direction and calling for each of our lives. As we see John as the voice crying in the **wilderness**, let’s contemplate Question 2…..

Question 2—What does the **WILDERNESS** look like?

For John, the wilderness was his home—the place where he did his work and ministry. In fact, in most cases, the people came **out to** that wilderness to seek John. He truly is ‘the voice crying in the [literal and genuine] wilderness and from the [literal and genuine] wilderness.” As the living, breathing Word of God speaks to us, we should ask ourselves…what does that wilderness look like for us today? What kind of wilderness is calling to us?

My discernment of this week’s lectionary has led to a renewed search of a wilderness that I call the ***faith wilderness***. The world that we live in seems like it is calling loudly to us, and coming apart at the seams. There are divisions and divisiveness that boggles the mind. There is active hatred at work in far too many peoples and places. There are destructive wars killing innocent people and showing the decline of humanity. And then, there are blatant and rampant assaults on the truth that threaten the order of life as we know it. Not to be pessimistic during this blessed time of Advent, but things look grim. It is easy to see how many people find themselves in the ***faith wilderness***. It even seems that the continued decline of the Church and people who affiliate with God, faith, and/or church directly correlates with the increase in people finding themselves in the ***faith wilderness***.

This ***faith wilderness*** really impacts our faith journeys and lives today. It causes us to pull away from the light that John the Witness proclaims. It makes it hard to hear any voice calling to us from that wilderness to ‘prepare the way of the Lord.’ This can lead to doubt and faith apathy. It causes us to question the relevance of God in our lives and in the world. It causes us to keep pushing God and faith further and further down in the priorities of our lives, as we let the distractions and lures of the world climb higher and higher in the priorities of our lives.

Let’s dig a little deeper here.

In a world where there are more questions than answers, and more confusion than clarity, it is easier than ever to find a path to the ***faith wilderness***. It almost seems like a natural place to go—even as we long for the presence of God and the coming of Christ again to the manger at this time of year. It seems that God is often silent when we need God the most. Doubt manifests in our lives physically, emotionally, mentally, temporally, and spiritually, and in any combination of the above, and possibly all of the above.

Here are several scenarios that lead to doubt and squarely put us in a ***faith wilderness***:

* When we need more “ME” time than we do “GOD AND FAITH” time, and our lives revolve around our needs, our wants, and our priorities with little to no regard for the direction, calling, or will that God has for us, then we are likely not heeding the voice crying in the wilderness.
* When prayer, discernment for direction in life, legitimate Bible study, genuine relationship building with God, and unfiltered dialogue with God, are only occasional or infrequent in our lives, then we are likely not heeding the voice crying in the wilderness.
* When our personal FUEL for life is “ME” fuel, “I GOT THIS” fuel, the fuel of self-reliance, and not the fuel of God (above all), then we are likely not heeding the voice crying in the wilderness.

That brings us to Question 3—(To all of us, people of God who are about two week from a New Year)—WHO ARE WE IN CHRIST—IN FAITH?

When the ***faith wilderness*** is a temporary place that helps to learn and grow in faith and to ultimately cling tighter to God and faith, then it is time well spent. However, if we find ourselves in extended periods in the ***faith wilderness*** with no sign of movement to the strengthening of our faith, we are on a path that is one of darkness—not of light. Remember—presence of God (light)—absence of God (darkness). Even worse, is when we find ourselves in long periods of darkness in the ***faith wilderness*** where God and faith do not matter at all in our lives with no path forward. There is no light in this kind of living—No God through Jesus Christ or by the power of the Holy Spirit in this kind of life. That is NOT who we are called to be.

Please close your eyes and meditate for a few moments. Focus on your need and desire to clearly hear the voice crying in the wilderness, **“Prepare the way of the Lord!”**

Whether it is a week before Christmas and we are preparing for the coming of Christ into our hearts, or whether it is any ordinary day at any ordinary time of the year, God wants us to live in the **LIGHT OF HIS LOVE, HIS COMPASSION, HIS NURTURE, AND HIS SALVATION**.

John prepared the path for Jesus to come, love, and save. His cries from the wilderness to us—whether we are thriving in our faith journey or whether we are lingering or suffering in a ***faith wilderness*** are just as relevant today as they were in John’s day. As we prepare for Christmas, and the coming [yet again] for Christ, let us truly celebrate the Light, Love, and Salvation that Jesus brings to us in our lives and the wilderness situations that we often face. Let us never forget, that the baby in the manger, is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

We are saved by God’s grace, through our faith in Jesus Christ, according to the Holy Scriptures, and to the glory of God. Let’s end with the words of the old Christmas Carol: *Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne*:

**Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown,  
When Thou camest to earth for me;  
But in Bethlehem's home was there found no room  
For Thy holy nativity.  
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, There is room in my heart for Thee.**

**When the heavens shall ring, and the angels sing,  
At Thy coming to victory,  
Let Thy voice call me home, saying "Yet there is room,  
There is room at My side for thee."  
My heart shall rejoice, Lord Jesus,  
When Thou comest and callest for me.** AMEN!