

Sermon at St. Thomas, by Lynn Cunningham. December 24, 2007, Christmas Eve. Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20.

1. I have often listened to one or another person here in Dubois explain they feel closest to God when they are walking or riding way out in the wilderness around here. In fact, we have the a hymn that says: "I found God in the Wyoming wilderness." Most come here to get away from the bustle of the cities, and get closer to the peacefulness of nature.
2. This evening I want to pull together this both the sense that God is present in the stillness of the wilderness and also the wisdom found in what was read from the Bible these past few weeks. Together these two insights can give a clearer understanding of what is meant by celebrating tonight that Christ is born in the world, in each person.
3. On the first Sunday of Advent, four weeks ago, this church and churches all over the world read this saying of Jesus from Matthew's Gospel: "Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." Matthew chapter 24. Hold on to that thought for a moment, the thought of waking up to the day of the Lord's coming.
4. On the second Sunday of Advent, the church read again from Matthew's Gospel, of John the Baptist saying, "repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. ... This [Jesus] is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke, when he said, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." First, the church was asked to awaken to the day of the Lord's coming. Then, the church was shown that the way of the Lord been prepared for all people.
5. Now, we know that Christmas is here. Everyone wants to hear the singing of the carols. Everyone enjoys seeing the creche. Everyone enjoys the candles and the smell of greenery. We want to enjoy the celebrations, and decorations, and family visits.... But think for a moment about what it might mean that the Way of the Lord has been prepared for us.
6. On the third Sunday of Advent, the church heard from the prophet Isaiah, saying, "For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert... A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way...." Isaiah chapter 35. Again, a statement that the Way of the Lord, the Holy Way has been prepared for us.
7. The Fourth Sunday of Advent we heard the lesson from Isaiah foretelling a sign that God would save Israel and Judah, and the sign was that a young women would become with child and bear a son, a son to be named Immanuel.
  - a. And in the Gospel of Matthew, also read on that fourth Sunday, that birth is described, the birth of Jesus to Mary.
8. We have been hearing these Advent lessons for four weeks now. Awakening to the Day of the Lord, the preparation of the Holy Way of the Lord, and the birth of the child Immanuel to save Israel. In these ways the lessons have invited the whole church to awaken to God's saving presence.
9. Let me turn away from the lessons for a moment, and invite your thoughts back to wilderness, the sense of the holy found in the wilderness here.
10. I have watched with wonder the bright moonlight these past few nights, the light of the full moon shining on the snow on the hills and mountains around us. Perhaps you have seen it as well.
11. I have heard the wind, and in the moonlight and in the wind, I sense something more is present. Perhaps you do too. The moonlight on the snow, on the hills: it is as if these reveal a great silence. A stillness, as if the mountains themselves are praying. Perhaps you have felt this stillness as well these last few days.
12. Something in that stillness reveals to me an answer to why we are here tonight, and to me it comes close to what is expressed in the Advent lessons.
13. To me a great joy underlies the stillness, something pregnant with the presence of the Holy. Many have given words to the joy found that sacred stillness, a joy because God's presence is in the world. Jesus in Matthew Gospel, John the Baptist, the prophet Isaiah...were they not all preparing our hearts and minds for knowing God's presence, for

- this Christmas celebration?
- a. And, by the way, all of them had spent years wandering in the wilderness somewhere.
14. A few lines from a poem I love captures what is going on in this celebration tonight, a poem by the Welsh poet, R.S. Thomas.
    - a. "...Life is not hurrying on to a receding future, nor hankering after an imagined past.
    - b. "It is the turning aside like Moses to the miracle of the lit bush, to a brightness that seemed as transitory as you're youth once,
    - c. "but is the eternity that awaits you."
  15. I started this sermon by quoting Jesus saying, "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." Just as Moses long ago kept awake and, so, was awake enough to see the burning bush, the burning bush out of which God spoke to him. Remember? Moses was wandering in the wilderness, when he came upon that burning bush.
  16. Just so, you and I are asked to keep awake this night for the coming of the Holy One.
  17. "Life is not hurrying on to a receding future , nor hankering after an imagined past." The poet is asking us to stop, as Moses stopped, in that wilderness, as Jesus asks us to stop and keep awake in our wilderness.
    - a. We are asked to step out of the transitory, feeling that time seems to be rushing away from us, and instead sense with awakened hearts the presence of eternity around us this night, an "eternity that awaits us," as the poet says.
  18. John the Baptist said about Jesus, "This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke, when he said, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Let me ask again, what is this way of the Lord of which John the Baptist speaks, in the passage we heard on the second Sunday of Advent?
  19. In the stillness, there is not a future or a past, but the Holy around us, within us now: is not this the Way of the Lord?
  20. Anyone who has been talking with people around town for the past few days, cannot but be aware that all over our great nation, people have been hurrying to get somewhere. Flying to join their families. Driving to reach home with friends. Struggling to get out of the great snow and wind storms sweeping across the country.
  21. Hurrying and struggling. Many people hurrying and struggling.
  22. But tonight, in this place, in this little log church way out in the middle of nowhere, you and I do need to not hasten or struggle to get anywhere further. You are here. The Way has already been prepared for you. Here the Christ child is present in this community.
    - a. To repeat what the poet says, "Life is not hurrying on to a receding future , nor hankering after an imagined past. It is the turning aside like Moses to the miracle of the lit bush..." Here we too can turned aside from hurrying and struggling.
  23. In the second chapter of Luke's Gospel, the passage read this evening, it is written that the shepherds go to Bethlehem after being told about the birth of the Christ child, go to find Mary and the Baby lying in the manger. And the shepherds tell Mary news that the angels told them, about the promise the Baby was bringing into the world.
    - a. Luke writes that all who heard the shepherds' words were amazed.
    - b. But, he also writes, Mary treasured the shepherds words, and "pondered them in her heart."
  24. Dwell on that image for a moment, "and Mary pondered these words in her heart."
    - a. "Pondered this news" in the stillness of her own heart.
    - b. She paused. She pondered. She let herself come deeply into the great stillness of that holy night. She was awakened to the moment of the Lord's coming. She drank in the presence of the Holy One in that stillness. Just as you and are invited to pause in the stillness of this night, and be awakened, re-awakened.

25. Here is the place to pause and ponder in the midst of Christmas festivities all around, the time to rediscover the Christ birthed in each of us.
26. “Turning aside like Moses to the miracle of the lit bush.”
27. The way to God has been prepared for all of us before this night. You have heard it in the lessons read. You may have sensed it in the deep stillness of the moonlit mountains praying in the Holy One’s presence. You know it in the secret parts of your own hearts.
28. Tonight, this very night, in the great stillness underneath all that is going on, the Christ child is born in our hearts.
29. The message brought by the Christ child into all our hearts is simple: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. The Lord God will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms. And lead them home.” Isaiah chapter 40.
30. Let the eyes of your awareness be opened, as they were for the shepherds: Christ is born, in us, now.
31. In Jesus name. Amen.