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Advent 2

We began our worship this morning with these words from Isaiah: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.

Wilderness is always a theme for Advent-tide, but this year it feels different, doesn't it? We sit in the darkness of this difficult year whispering to ourselves that promise from God expressed so beautifully by Julian of Norwich that all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. And yet that promise feels so distant. Especially as we continue to make our way through this pandemic. There's hope in the promise of a vaccine. But as we await its arrival, we are living through the darkest days yet. Bracing ourselves for how many more people will die. Worried about getting the virus. And anxious about the possibility of spreading it to others.

These emotions feel a little bit like a wilderness. And while our wilderness may only be figurative, not the untamed Judean countryside of John the Baptizer, that makes it no less frightening and isolating, and well...bewildering.

We heard from two prophets in our readings this morning. John and Isaiah. Both were speaking to people who felt abandoned by God. That God's face was turned from them. Isaiah spoke to the people of Judah who had been carted off to Babylon after their Temple was destroyed and Jerusalem

overtaken. And John spoke to the people of Israel once again subjugated by a foreign power—this time the Roman Empire.

Both prophets promised that God had not neglected the people. Isaiah's prophecy began with the words, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." And the Gospel writer Mark introduces John the Baptizer as the one making the way for the good news coming in Jesus.

But the role of prophets is not only to share comfort and good news. Prophets must move beyond the reassurance that God is indeed still present and challenge the people to get on the path that moves toward God and God's promise. It can be uncomfortable, but prophets remind us of where we have fallen short—our sinfulness, and then call us to a different way.

The earliest Christians were, in fact, known as "the people of the way." Their spiritual transformation in knowing Jesus not only changed them inwardly but caused them to be on the move...on the way—working in a very real and physical way for change—not just for their own personal salvation but for the salvation of the world. Their faith wasn't passive. Belief wasn't their destination; it's what gave them strength for their walk.

Prophets help us stay on the path. They serve as guardians of our hopes and dreams for society, and they challenge us to act in ways consistent with those hopes and dreams. And when we fall short, when we behave in harmful ways that thwart those best hopes and dreams, prophets warn us by helping us to see the future to which that harmful behavior will lead. We

have needed modern day prophets during this pandemic like Dr. Anthony Fauci and our own Maine CDC Director, Dr. Nirav Shah. They call us to our better selves when they ask us to stay home and mask. And they warn us of where our harmful behavior will lead if we let a selfish desire for normalcy trump those safety precautions. Over the past months, they have painted us a picture of a future with overwhelmed healthcare workers, hospitals operating beyond their capacity, and thousands upon thousands of deaths—particularly of our elderly. The picture they painted is now becoming the reality.

And that's where we find ourselves today—in the midst of this pandemic wilderness. For some people that wilderness is compounded by things like illness, addiction, or broken relationships.

But there's no resisting the wilderness that we must navigate. All we can do is get on the path and start walking. It's hardly ever a quick journey and so we should pay attention to what we might learn while we dwell in it. What might we discover about ourselves in the hardship of the wilderness? About our capacity to love or sacrifice or even to grieve? Some of the most painful experiences in our lives are what creates in us a capacity for greater love.

And so, during this season of Advent, I invite all of us to see this wilderness as a blessing. Even if that feels counter-intuitive. We bless the wilderness for all that it teaches. For the sorrows and tears it loosens in us. For the courage that it arouses in us. For the kindness to others that the wilderness calls from us. We bless the wilderness for the way it summons

us to the path that brings us nearer our destination of finding God.
Knowing that all the while we seek to move closer to God, God does not
abandon us. Amen.