

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Senior Minister
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What do you do when you find yourself at a bleak wilderness place? You don't like how you're living life. You feel estranged from your best self. You doubt yourself. You churn and twist in place. And you replay it in the middle of the night when you should be asleep.

Do you recall Jimmy Stewart in "It's a Wonderful Life?" His failing savings and loan is collapsing. Evil Mr. Potter is ready to devour him. Instead of seeing a growing young family in their fixer-upper of a home, all he can see is dilapidated hulk of that structure coming down on them. "Where did all of these children come from, anyway?" he wonders darkly.

I'll tell you what I do when I struggle as a pastor to find my mojo. I get out of my study, and outside myself. I call on those who hurt. I see your courage, your strength, and how you let God embrace you in your need. That changes everything. The power of God and ministry and church become real. I say to myself, "Self, if you want to feel like a pastor, act like one." We don't feel our way into better ways of acting. We act ourselves into better ways of feeling. But most striking is, as I head out to serve others, I find *I'm* the one God helps. As I build a roads for others back to God, I find God building a highway to me.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of God returning his people from the forlorn gloom of the exile in Babylon to their homeland. After 39 unrelenting chapters of judgment, hope is sparked. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God...!In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low." The people of Israel are finally going home! How do we know this? Why, the Lord God himself is building the road to get them there. This road is straight and sure, taking the direct route, through the middle of the desert. The Lord himself will travel this road with his people. Isaiah is announcing a homecoming.

How many of us have spent time in a wilderness before finding our home in God? Dan Wakefield, author of the 1985 book *Returning*, describes how he wandered away from God; how his life as an adult became chaotic and confused. Then, he writes, "I cannot pinpoint any particular time when I suddenly believed in God again. I only know that such belief came to seem as natural as for all but a few stray moments of 25 years or more before it had been inconceivable. I realized this," Wakefield writes, "while looking at fish."

"I had gone with my girlfriend to the New England Aquarium, and as we gazed at the astonishingly brilliant colors of some of the small tropical fish--reds and yellows and oranges--and watched the amazing lights of the flashlight fish that blinked on like the beacons of some creature of a sci-fi epic, I wondered how anyone could think that all this was the result of a chain of accidental explosions! Yet...to try to convince me otherwise five years before? It would have been hopeless. Was this what they called 'conversion'?"

"The term bothered me because it suggested being 'born again' and, I had been put off by the melodramatic nature of that label, as well as the current political beliefs that seem

to go along with it. Besides, I didn't *feel* 'reborn'. No voice came out of the sky nor did a thunderclap strike me. . . I was relieved when our minister explained that the literal translation of 'conversion'...is not 'rebirth' but 'turning'. That's what my experience felt like-- as if I'd been walking in one direction and then, in response to some inner pull, I turned."

Maybe that is the home Isaiah was describing, complete with an unconventional road, conversion by fish! "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength. . . Do not fear, but say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'"

Note something important about finding our way home. The highway which gets us there is of God's making. We do not find our way home so much as God *brings* us home. Why is this important? We like to think of ourselves as people engaged in a search for God, as people who explore high and low examining answers to life's ultimate questions. But in Isaiah it is not the people who seek and find their God. It is God who seeks and finds them in a bleak time, who comforts and transports them to where they really belong. Our text is not about what Israel is doing. It celebrates what *God* is doing, where God is going. God lugging Israel along a path made straight, through dangerous and terrifying regions.

So often we imagine the question that will get us home is: what am I looking for? What would *I* have to do to feel at home with myself? Where do *I* think *I* would best belong? No, Isaiah says, the real question is: what road is the Lord God building back toward me? What avenues have I overlooked? And what pulls and tugs upon my soul am I resisting? The biggest rookie mistake in the spiritual life is imagining it is all about me finding God. That is not the story, friends. God seeks and finds us, if only we will heed his beckoning.

We all agree Christmas is time for homecoming. We can already see this. Scanning our congregation, as we go deeper into Advent, I start seeing college kids who've not been here recently. They are coming home. I see relatives visiting you from across the country. Over the years I've grown accustomed to them visiting all of you. Another homecoming of sorts. I see new member classes represented here, with more to come, who say: "I want to join FCC,D because I feel more like myself here. My children also feel at home here." They are coming home. Also, I meet spiritual *exiles*—some call them C and E Christians-- in spiritual exile, but who want to feel at home somewhere, so they wander into FCC, D.

Ponder this: where have you felt at exile with God? What did that wilderness look like? Self-second guessing? Job loss? Feeling stuck in an airless existence? What road is God building back toward you that you've avoided? What voices--friends, family, or within-- have spoken to you, smoothing the way for you to get back to where you belong? What words did you hear spoken from another place than where this world speaks, words that seemed spoken only for you? What face from the past made you yearn for reconciliation? What coincidence did you remark at that perhaps was something more than coincidence? What echo from deep within the memory of your soul was triggered by hearing a carol?

"In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord; make straight a highway for our God." Various are our ways back home in God. Some so obvious that we easily overlook them.

We tend to romanticize wilderness as the natural place to get away from urban pressures. In the Bible, however, wilderness is not some picturesque cabin in Vermont to escape the snarling demons of modernity. As an image for the people of Israel, wilderness was a place of wandering, a place of beasts, a place of confusion, of temptation, and of sin. Wilderness is that place where we lose our way. It seems like a place, but it is no place. Our exile in this wilderness is when we become enslaved to false gods, where we serve powers alien to the one true God, where we sell out, betray ourselves, forget who we are. Our job as the church is to let God make us into such a road, a bridge, an entrance ramp.

The splendid preacher Fred Craddock tells of a little girl from one of his early pastorates in Tennessee. Her parents sent her to church, but they were the type who never came with her. They'd pull in the church's driveway. She would hop brightly out of their car. And mother and father sped away for Sunday brunch. Her father was an executive with a chemical company. He was ambitious, making his mark, an aspiring shaker and mover.

The wild parties this couple gave on Saturday evenings were infamous. The whole town knew about them. They were parties given not so much to celebrate or entertain as part of their systematic upwardly mobile scheming. The invitation list was whoever could help them get ahead. Everyone knew of the uncouth and vulgar things unfolding at the parties.

Still, every Sunday morning, there was their little girl, appearing on the church's driveway. One Sunday Craddock scanned his congregation and thought, "Wow. There's the little girl but with a couple adult friends." Later, he figured out she was there with mom and dad. At the point of worship when the invitation was given for new members to come forward, much as we did last September, the girl's mom and dad came forward to join the church. "What prompted this?" the young preacher couldn't help but ask the couple after church. "Do you know about our parties?" they asked him. "Yeah, I've heard," Craddock nodded.

"Well, we had one last night again. It became very loud, a little rough, and there was far too much drinking. It got so out of control that it woke up our daughter, and she came downstairs. She sat down on the third step. When she saw the eating and drinking and carrying on, she said, "Oh, can I have the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Goodnight, everybody." Then she turned and went back upstairs.

After that, people began to say, "Uh, it's getting late, we really must be going." "Thanks for a fun time, just look at the hour." Within two minutes, our house was empty. As they were picking up crumpled napkins and nuts and half-empty party glasses, mom and dad came face to face. And he said what they were both thinking, "Where do we think we are going?" God had built a highway right into their hearts. Welcome home, everyone here, new and familiar. You are right where you most truly belong. It's wonderful to see you. Amen.