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Texts: Matthew 3: 1-6
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The Call of the Wild

Advent begins in the dust of the wild. At the beginning of the church's liturgical year, we're led into the wilderness, where we encounter John the Baptist, the presiding spirit of the wild. If we're driven there by the church calendar, well, we're not alone, for the text tells us that throngs of people from Jerusalem and other population centers also flocked to the wilderness in order to encounter John. It turns out Jesus was among them. Jesus, John, that vast public - they all sensed the call of the wild, and they followed that call wherever it led them. Why did they all enter the wild? What were they hoping to discover? And why might Advent itself begin with a trip to the wilderness?

I'd like to offer an answer to those questions by noting two divergent features of John's character. John, as you probably know, came preaching a message of repentance, a message which, if we boiled it down, could be reduced to this: "Something isn't working here. Something isn't quite right. You're estranged from yourself. You're estranged from your neighbor. And you're estranged from the source of life that we call God. You need to change your life." His tongue, and the truths he puts forth, are sharp, so sharp that they sting. That is the first feature of John's character, and the wild itself, to which we must attend - the capacity, at times, to sting.

But the second feature of John's character stands in marked contrast to the first, for while he may have a sharp tongue, he has a sweet tooth. The text tells us that he subsists in part on wild honey, which gives us to understand that when he's not busy denouncing kings and advising on the need to change, he's chasing a sweet and elusive reward. It's an intriguing detail. It leads us to imagine that John is so attuned to nature, to the wild, that he's capable of following bees to their hives, risking their stings in order to steal their honey.

Perhaps that dynamic, that juxtaposition between the sting and the sweet is what drew Jesus into the wild. Perhaps it's what drew John into the wild too, together with all of those from the urbane population centers who came after him. And perhaps it's what calls to all of us as well during the season of Advent. Perhaps we too, on some level of our being, seek the sting of difficult truths - the way all those ancient folks did when they left Jerusalem in order to enter the wilderness with John. Maybe at some level of their being, and ours, we're all seeking the means by which to change our lives. But perhaps this is true as well - that in so doing, by risking such stings, we're also searching for the golden honey, a sweet reward that can only be found in the wilderness. John knew how to find it. Is that also why we answer the call of the wild - in hopes that John will yield up his secrets? Might it be that the sting and the sweet of the wild comprise the very core of what it means to enter the Advent season?

The wild will mean something different to each of us. We'll all have our own versions of what it means to answer that call, and to follow John into the wilderness. For some, like Abraham, say, it meant leaving a life of privilege and venturing into an unknown place, trusting only in an intuition and a promise delivered by a god. For the ancient Hebrews, it meant deliverance from the hand of Pharaoh, and wandering blind through a desert for 40 years. In our time, the wilderness is evoked by the likes of John Muir and Thoreau, or more recently, by Cheryl Strayed on her long thru-hike on the Pacific Crest Trail. Sometimes the wilderness is an

actual place – Walden Pond or the PCT or the forest near our houses. But for most of us the wild is probably closer at hand. It's the uncharted portions of our hearts and our psyches, where not everything has been decided already, where we can still be surprised, where new possibilities and openings still await us. Most of us, I suspect, in our over-scheduled, over-manicured, over-deodorized, and over-programmed lives are dying to be re-wilded in some form or another. I happen to believe that on both a literal and a figurative level, there is a part of many of us that wishes to be re-wilded. I believe there's something within us that's dying to experience the world not at second or third hand, but at first hand, out there where we may get stung, and out there where the honey might actually flow.

I had my own Advent version of the wild last week, an experience I'd like to tell you about. It was an experience in which I felt a powerful sting, but in which there existed a sweet reward of honey as well. I share it in hopes that somehow, it might speak to each of our Advent journeys, the call of the wild that arrives for all of us in the season of Advent, whatever form it finally takes.

Here's what happened. Last Saturday at 6:30 AM, I lined up with about a thousand other folks in Boonsboro, Maryland in order to run the JFK 50, the oldest ultramarathon in the United States. It dates back to 1963, when four young people heeded a call by President Kennedy to challenge their physical and mental fitness by covering 50 miles in a day. Folks have lined up to run the JFK 50 ever since then. I was thrilled to be there. In the week preceding the race, I had awoken every day feeling an extra burst of energy – in 5 days, then 4, then 3,2,1, I would get to do something that felt like a kind of Advent renewal. I had prepared a long time, getting up early in the morning, long before dawn, to get runs in. And now I was gathered with my tribe, a host of other crazy people from around the country looking for their own experience of rewilding. Rachael was with me at the start, and I kissed her goodbye. She wished me luck, and then the starting gun went off, sending us all into the wild.

The race unfolds in 3 distinct phases. The first 16 miles of the course take place on hills and some gnarly trails. The trails then give way to 26 miles on a towpath, snaking alongside the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers. The final 8 excruciating miles take place on rolling country roads, before finishing in the town of Williamsport, Maryland. Each phase had its own character, its own challenges, and its own lessons for becoming re-wilded during this season of Advent.

First came the hills and the trails. It was the moment of inwardness, and of contemplation, akin, perhaps, to what it meant to set out from Jerusalem for the wilderness encounter with John. Had I remembered everything I needed? Did I have what it would take to make it all the way? What would I find out there – what gifts, what challenges, what demons and ministering angels would show up on the journey? Even as those thoughts were unfolding, I made a decision: I would be aggressive on those first 16 miles of hills and trails, cutting through the discomfort as quickly as possible in order to reach the cruising ground of the towpath. Time elapsed, but I was scarcely aware of it, for avoiding the rocks and roots of the trail required intense concentration. It's akin, I think, to what mystics, contemplatives, and artists all call "the flow state," where you're fully immersed in the now, submerged in a task that requires all of your attention. It's not that I was unaware of anything else – the colors of the forest were golden yellow, and gorgeous. The air was crisp. Some people stumbled and fell as the rocks reached up to grab their ankles. Still, this was the part of the journey in which inwardness dominated, along with a kind of emptying. I take it that's a part of what it means to enter the season of Advent, and to re-wild ourselves – to cease to hear the chattering of the world around us, to experience a quieting of the spirit, and to reside fully in the present, in some version of that flow-state. It is to

become undistracted by the many pressures that exert themselves upon us. I imagine that our Meetinghouse functions in way akin to that on Sundays during Advent. We're quieted, and the relentless noise around us ceases for a time. In such a state, we have but one task, which is to enter the wilderness with openness, ready for whatever meets us there.

It doesn't last forever. It didn't for me, at any rate. That flow-state was broken apart upon reaching the river, and the towpath. Because I had pushed hard, my quads were hammered from the ascents and descents of the trail, and I tried to settle into a pace I could maintain for the next 26 miles. For three or four of those miles, I did maintain it. But then the struggle began. It was nearly four hours into the race, and I couldn't help it - I began to think about how much was still ahead. My pace slowed, and my spirit flagged. But then I locked in with another runner going about the same pace, and we began to talk. A few miles clicked by, almost unnoticed. Soon, two other runners locked in with our pace, and the conversation opened even more - we talked about our vocations, our families, and what had led us to enter such a long race. One of my companions was an aid worker who had just returned from Afghanistan. Another was from Belgium. He did tax law for large corporations. Another companion, younger than the rest of us, had just finished a stint with Americorps, serving underprivileged communities. He told us he was now living in his car in order to pay off his college debts.

And then there was me. When they asked what I did, I braced myself just a little, and then said, "Well, this is where conversations either open up or grind to a halt." "Oh man, you're a cop, aren't you?" one of them said. "No, no," I responded. "It's worse than that. I'm a minister." There was silence for a few footfalls, and then someone said, "That's cool. What kind of religion are you?" - by which he meant denomination - "like, are you Catholic or Lutheran or what?" I explained, proudly I must say, that I was a part of the most progressive of all the Christian denominations, the United Church of Christ. And then I told them a little about all of you, about our sanctuary work and our refugee work and our anti-racism work and about some of our partnerships. "It sounds like you all are doing all the right things in the world," the Belgian responded, an affirmation that was good to hear. Then we moved on.

In time, the conversation ceased, for it required too much energy. Even so, for the next twenty miles or so, we maintained a little community of mutual aid and support. We encouraged and checked in with one another. We waited for one another at aid stations while we refueled. We slowed down and sped up as each of us felt able. It came to feel like a metaphor for life as I most wish to experience it, maybe as all of us wish to experience it - a spontaneous and temporary emergence of care and support along the way, easing the journey through some of the most arduous miles of our lives. There was something kind of miraculous about it - it came into formation for a short length of time, and only for the time that we needed it to. But it was long enough to make a difference. I'll never see those individuals again, for we exchanged first names only. But in the time we shared in one another's company, we helped each other through the wilderness journey that we had each embarked upon.

That too is a lesson of the wild. Frequently, when freed of our usual routines and schedules, unexpected connections take place. Conversations happen between people who wouldn't otherwise have found one another. And sometimes, maybe more often than we imagine out there in the wild, those temporary expressions of mutual aid and support simply form, as if through a kind of magic. That's the grace of the wild, a part of its sweetness, even amidst the sting of exertion.

But I also think it's a lesson worthy of Advent. Who can say what happened among all of those people who left their homes to journey into the wilderness to encounter John? Who can say

that they didn't encourage one another, tell their own stories, and listen to the stories of others? Who can say that they didn't share water and food in order to get them through the journey? I happen to believe that's the kind of thing that happens all the time when we give ourselves to the wild for just a while. People find each other, as if they had been wishing to do so all along, as if something had been holding them back. It's a learning for us all as we enter the Advent season. I believe we crave those temporary but essential communities to get us through our days and nights intact. It may happen here at church – I hope it does! - or on the playground after school. It may happen in the cafeteria at school or in the dining hall at the assisted living facility. Those encounters may not even go all that deep. But I believe they're an essential component of what it means to travel well through the wilderness – finding fellow travelers to encourage and support us along the way, relieving us of the isolation we so often feel through the long and arduous miles of daily life. Advent can provide that for us.

Then it all changed once again. By the time the towpath ended, our paces had diverged enough that we separated. It was a separation born of respect, for we each had our own races to run after all. So began the sting, the real sting, comprising 8 miles of rolling country roads filled with haunting questions. It was here that the figure of the Baptizer himself emerged, throwing me into what I would call a productive confusion and a generative self-doubt. Why, exactly, was I doing this? What had I hoped to learn, or to gain? What was the point? Wasn't this a perverse and affluent parody of what poor and marginalized people routinely undergo in their forced migrations? Wasn't it, really, a kind of bizarre discharge of too much comfort, too much leisure, too much abundance? What a weird phenomenon this was, running 50 miles. Step by step, mile by mile, I experienced my own narratives about why I was doing what I was doing disintegrating, while my body was breaking down from the effort.

But other, bigger questions swirled as well. Because even as my own self-narrative began to feel strained, and even as my own frailty came to be exposed, it all came to seem like an expression, in miniature, of a much larger set of concerns, as other, wider, and more consequential narratives have become threadbare. Those too intruded in my mind. For example, we've believed in the myth of limitless economic growth, but the planet is bearing the consequences, breaking down as steadily as my body and state of mind were then breaking down. We've believed in the story of the United States as being the greatest country in the world, with the best system of representative democracy, only to learn that our democracy is alarmingly fragile. We've believed the story of our own justice and righteousness, only to realize that that justice is maintained with violence, with bombs, with guns, with tanks, with military might. We've believed in the goodness of faith – of Christian faith - only to see it taken up by vigilantes, charlatans, and right wing xenophobes. We've trusted in the power of technology and progress, only to find ourselves slipping into the furthest reaches of delusion, paranoia, and authoritarianism. As I ran, I sensed my body at the brink of exhaustion, even as I sensed an exhaustion in the narratives that have so often defined our lives. The final 8 miles stung both my body and my mind.

But then the end loomed into sight. Then I finally crossed the finish line, and nearly dissolved into tears from the strain of it all. And then, as I knew it would, as I stretched and talked, a transfiguration occurred, where weariness, where the sting was replaced with elation – with sweet honey. I didn't, it turned out, have to run forever, any more than we have to keep chasing all those damaged and damaging narratives about the world forever. Now came the time of replenishment, of care, of joy, of sweet release from the chase. Might that be a kind of parable for the planet itself, and for all the ways we've exhausted ourselves by listening to damaging

narratives about the world? Might we all cross a kind of line, such that an ethic not only of self-care, but world and planetary care comes into focus for us? That seemed like part of the lesson of that day. The sting and the sweetness, the inwardness, the unexpected community, and the searing questions, were all a part of what it meant to run 50 miles.

But it also came to seem like an elaborate symbol of Advent itself. We've all felt the sting of the Baptizer's words, "You must change your life." We've felt it as a result of the pandemic. We've felt it as a result of climate disasters, and the global slide toward right wing authoritarianism. The stories we've been telling ourselves are threadbare, and they've made us exhausted. Are there other stories we can tell instead of those? Is there a way to find the honey we need from the wilderness, in order to return more nourished and fed for having been there?

"Prepare the way of the Lord," John says. Is that not a call toward a wholly different kind of story – a story where we quiet the noise happening all around us; a story where we renounce our propensity for violence and for militarism; a story where we work to restore and rebuild supportive communal connections; a story where we're attuned to the beasts and the animals and the natural processes of the planet; a story where we protect one another's differences; a story where we care for the least among us, and walk with gentleness, humility, and mercy upon the face of the earth? Maybe that's the unexpected goodness that awaits us after a wilderness journey.

I don't know what all those ancient folks felt upon their return from the wilderness, after encountering John out there. I like to think, that at some level of their being, it was a kind of elation that they felt, knowing that the future was still open, knowing that possibilities for their lives and for the world were still waiting to be born. Those possibilities are still out there, waiting. We'll have to answer the call of the wild if we are to realize them.