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Trinity Episcopal Church
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Where the Wild Things Are

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.’

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A movie came out this fall titled

‘Where the Wild Things Are.’

It is based on an award-winning children’s storybook that was written and illustrated by Maurice Sendak in 1963.

The story goes like this:

Young Max wore his wolf suit and got into all sorts of mischief until his mother called him ‘Wild Thing.’ Max threatened to eat her up and was sent off to bed without his supper. That night, a forest grew in his room, then an ocean tumbled by, and Max boarded a boat and ‘sailed off through night and day and in and out of weeks . . . to where the wild things are.’ (pause)

Today’s Gospel transports us to where the wild things are.

We find ourselves in the wilderness with John the Baptist.

John the Baptist did not start out in the wilderness.

He was born in Ein Kerem, a lush, beautiful mountaintop a few miles outside of Jerusalem.

When I visited there last winter, our guide pointed out that John gave up a lot to go to the wild desert country.

His father was a priest in the great temple of Jerusalem, and John’s expected path would have been to follow in his father’s footsteps in the priesthood and inherit his family’s home in Ein Kerem.

Instead, John went to live in the wilderness.

John had been given a special task – to prepare the way of the Lord, to prepare the people for the coming of Christ.

Throughout the Bible and throughout our lives, the place people go for preparation is the wilderness.

After escaping from Egypt, the Hebrew slaves prepared to enter the Promise Land by wandering for 40 years in the wilderness.

Jesus prepared for his public ministry by encountering temptations for 40 days in the wilderness.

A way to look at this Season of Advent, in fact – a way to look at our whole Christian journey in life is to see it as a pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is not just traveling to a place or traveling through life. It is a way home where the journey is as important, if not more important, than where we are going. It is a pathway that opens our heart to change as our heart finds home. We are in the most important time in our pilgrimage – the time of preparation – the time in the wilderness. One writer describes this part of our journey:

‘The pilgrim knows that there is no growth without inner confrontation, no promised land without time in the wilderness, no mountaintop that cannot be reached without going through the valley of the shadow of death.’

I think we too often try to skip this part of the journey.

We’re afraid of pain.

We’re afraid of not being in control.

We’re afraid of unfamiliar territory.

We’re afraid of the wild things.

But even if we try to skip this part of our pilgrimage, we wind up backing into it.

So why not embrace it?

The prophecy quoted in today’s gospel says:

‘Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth.'

This pilgrimage time in the wilderness is a leveling time.

We can't carry our houses or our cars in our backpacks.

We walk together as pilgrims not as poor or rich,
but on equal terms.

Our identity is not defined by what we have but by who we are at our very essence and our openness to having that essence changed on this collective journey in the wilderness.

The pilgrimage time in the wilderness is an opportunity for renewal – a second, third or fourth chance to change.

In the children's storybook, Max arrives in the land of the wild things.

Maurice Sendak illustrated these wild creatures with incredible imagination.

They are scary looking, yet they have human qualities.

If you look closely, you will see that one of them has human feet.

I talked with one of our parishioners yesterday about 'Where the Wild Things Are' and she talked about how this storybook had a way of giving perspective to the cultural changes that were happening when it was published in 1963. That was a turbulent time in America – the assassination of President Kennedy, the civil rights movement, the new music of Elvis and the Beatles.

Our whole country seemed to be in the wilderness.

And Maurice Sendak's inventive story and illustrations of these wild things provided a metaphor for this strange new journey.

When Max arrived,

The wild things 'gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws,' but Max tamed them by telling them to 'Be still' while staring into their eyes without blinking once.

They made Max king of the wild things. Even though they gave him the power to rule them and to send them off to bed without their supper, Max was lonely and he wanted to go home.

Like Max, we find our deepest longing in the wilderness.

We, too, long for home.

But this home is not a place.

The home we long for is Christ.

It is he who fills the aching, longing in our heart with joy, peace, and hope.

The wild things tried to scare Max into staying, but he 'sailed back over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day and into the night of his very own room where he found his supper waiting for him. .

.and it was still hot.'

This time of Advent and this time of life
are times for us to make a pilgrimage in the wilderness.

It might mean taking a retreat in an outdoor location.

It might just mean writing in a journal while looking out a window.

Take some time to embrace the wilderness.

Go and find John the Baptist

Where the wild things are. Amen.