

Where the Wild Things Are
The Third Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 15, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain

'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?' In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

'Where the Wild Things Are' was not the original title of the award-winning children's storybook that was written and illustrated by Maurice Sendak in 1963. His original title was: 'Where the Wild Horses Are.' There was only one problem. He couldn't draw a horse. So, he decided to substitute monsters for horses. But what sort of monsters? Maurice first thought of griffins and gargoyles, but they would be borrowed monsters because they didn't come out of him.

He recalled: "Then, very gradually, these other creatures began to appear on my drawing paper, and I knew right away they were my relatives. They were my uncles and aunts. It wasn't that they were monstrous people: it was simply that I didn't care for them when I was a child because they were rude, and because they ruined every Sunday. They pinched us and poked us and said those tedious boring things that grown-ups say like, "You're so cute, I could eat you up." My sister and my brother and I sat there in total dismay and rage. The only fun we had was later, giggling over their grotesque faces.' Maurice's memory shows that the things many of us adults do and say that we think of as quaint and cute, could be seen by a child as scary and even grotesque.

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks the crowd, 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind.' Some believe that this meant that people were going out to the wild desert country to see John the Baptist because of his strange diet of locusts and wild honey. They wonder if he may have been a curiosity for some – an emaciated, thin as a rail, holy man. The people said they were going out to the wilderness to look at God. But, in reality, they were going out there to look at the grotesque.

The story Maurice later wrote 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."

John the Baptist did not start out in the wilderness. He was born in Ein Kerem, a lush, beautiful mountaintop villa a few miles outside of Jerusalem. 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 estate 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 is to see it as a pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is not just traveling to a place or traveling aimlessly through life. In pilgrimage, the journey is as important, perhaps more important, than where we are going. Pilgrimage is a pathway that opens our heart to change as our heart finds its true home. We are now in the most important time in our pilgrimage – the time of preparation – the time in the wilderness.

Sarah York in her book ‘Pilgrim Heart’ 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 darkness. We’re afraid of the monsters. But even if we try to skip this part of our pilgrimage, we wind up backing into it. So why not embrace it?

Some nights it is difficult to see the stars because of too many lights in the city, what we call light pollution. Sarah York also wrote that she is intrigued by another kind of light pollution – a dimming of our inner vision resulting from too much information, too much progress, too much enlightenment, even. Instead of enlightenment, she calls us to enter ‘endarkenment.’ - a time to reflect on the mystery and a time to live the questions. For a pilgrim’s vision requires darkness.

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 even that essence being changed.

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 and playful qualities, after all, they were patterned on his relatives. If you look closely, you will see that one of them has human feet.

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’ as he stared 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.

Notice how he tamed the monsters. He stared at them and said, ‘Be still.’ Maurice later wrote, ‘Sometimes, goodness is scary.’ The monsters may have seen in his eyes and heard in his voice the goodness of Max, the goodness he was beginning to find in himself. And they celebrated that goodness with a party that Maurice called ‘a rumpus.’

Like the people going to see John the Baptist, Max went to the wilderness to look at the wild things. But he discovered that what he was going to look *at* was less important than what he was going to look *for*. In the irony of ironies, he learned that he had to go away to the wilderness to find his deepest longing, his true home. We, too, long for home. But we discover that our true home is not a place.

In the wilderness, John the Baptist stares at us, tells us to be still, and points us to Christ. Only he can fill the aching and longing in our hearts with joy, peace, and hope. He *is* our true home.

Max '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.' Sarah York writes: 'In the land of the wild things, Max not only tames the terrible beasts, but he enters the place in his own lonely heart that wants to return home. So, he sails back across time into his own room, where nothing has changed except him.'

These final days of Advent are times for us to make a pilgrimage in the wilderness. Take some time to embrace the wilderness, to confront whatever monsters there are in your life, and to discover your deepest longings. Go there and find your true home in a pilgrimage toward, and in, the coming Christ. Out where the wild things are. Amen.