

**Reflection on Isaiah 40:1–11 and Mark 1:1–8**  
**Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrew's by the Sea Uniting Church**

Yesterday morning, Sean and I sat on the veranda “watching the weather” as Sean puts it. As I drank my tea, my eyes would settle on a spot in the garden or a bird in the tree. No sooner would I take in the green or the red when my mind would recede into the dark recesses of the past or future. In other words, I was having trouble staying present, which is where I wanted to be.

So I went inside and retrieved my Wendell Berry book of Sabbath poems knowing poetry in general and Berry in particular have a way of grounding me. I opened to his Sabbath poems from 2008 where I had left off and read the first poem aloud.

After the bitter nights  
and the gray, cold days  
comes a bright afternoon.  
I go into the creek valley  
and there are the horses, the black  
and the white, lying in the warm  
shine on a bed of dry hay.  
They lie side by side,  
identically posed as a painter  
might imagine them:  
Heads up, ears and eyes  
alert. They are beautiful in the light  
and in the warmth happy. Such  
harmonies are rare. This is  
not the way the world  
is. It is a possibility  
nonetheless deeply seeded  
within the world. It is  
the way the world is sometimes.

Hope, like that which arises for us in the image of the one drawn for us by Berry, throbs beneath the Christian life. It is the yearning that leads us to prayer and worship, the fuel that propels us to love and serve. The world is not always beautiful, harmonious or good, *but sometimes it is*. This is our hope. And we want to be there in that light—to notice it, bask in it, be a part of it.

Nevertheless, as this season seeks to remind us, we live too much in the world of desecration and desolation. We are shaped too easily by the grind and drive of a culture whose salvation is bound up in markets that must climb higher and reach further, in lifestyles built upon forms of living that are unattainable for most and unsustainable for all, including the earth.

This year in particular, the apocalyptic themes in the Advent season seem imminent and real. The end-of-the-world seems to be quite literally on our doorstep with the climate crises, the bushfires, the COVID pandemic, the Brereton report and the flexing of muscle on the world's political stage, to say nothing of our personal sufferings and challenges. Many of us are yearning for something substantive from our faith; a spirituality that can hold the tensions and complexities of life and bring genuine hope and wisdom for the horrors we are experiencing. The Advent prayer, "Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus," is an earnest and sincere one for us.

Today's scripture readings reinforce for us the need for healing and usher a call for us to prepare for a revolution of the heart. Both readings are set in the context of the wilderness. For a society like ours that has "grown too big for its britches," as my grandmother used to say, the wilderness teaches us how to live closer to the ground, to be "our right size in the universe" as I heard humility defined recently. In this place the glory of small things can be seen. Materialism and grandiosity lose their appeal and we are content—thrilled even—by the transcendent in common wonders.

For the prophet Isaiah's audience, wilderness represented their displacement. The story goes that the people neglected to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. Self-concerned, greedy and corrupted, they were lost in a wilderness of their own making, exiled from their true home in the heart of God.

But now a hopeful word is cried out: *Comfort, comfort my people. Here is your God, who comes to gather you like a shepherd, enfolding, tending, gently leading you to life.* In anticipation of the consoling love that is to come, the people are encouraged to make the path straight and clear. They / we are invited to declutter and simplify, to let go and reprioritise so we can make room for the gratuitous love being poured out by God through Christ Jesus.

Related to this, wilderness in the gospels is most often a place of growth and renewal. It is a place of divine encounter and, in Mark's Gospel, it is where the Christian life begins. In Mark, we find no angel annunciations, barnyard nativity scenes or visits from shepherds and magi, but the good news starts in the wilderness.

In this unadorned, rugged, stripped back landscape comes the call to repent—to turn again, more completely to God—for forgiveness and reconciliation. Here we are invited to pause before the waters of Jordan for a long, loving look at the real, seeing both our loveliness and that which is in need of transformation. In Mark's wilderness comes the promise of One who will baptise us with a Holy Spirit, bringing lasting change, inspiration for the good, and opening our eyes to the light of life in us and in our world.

Harmony is rare indeed. Beauty and goodness are not always the way the world is. And yet, sometimes it is.

May we live in hope, and use these weeks to prepare our hearts to receive the grace and truth who was, and is, and is to come. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.