

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Hope Blooms with Truth-Telling

Dr. Jo Forrest

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Sometimes even a cabin in the mountains or a place at the beach might be too civilized when you need to get away from it all. Instead, you may park the car, lace up your boots, and leave behind your mobile phone and Netflix.

We head into the wilderness, for starters, because it becomes a place to live with only the necessities of life, relying upon the earth and our own capacity to exist. We balance our desire of what to eat and drink against the weight of how much we can carry.

In the wilderness, life is raw and unsettled, and our illusions of self-sufficiency shatter fast. To locate ourselves at the outskirts of security and power to see ourselves, in the bare bones, without the trappings of protection, makes us aware of our neediness, and that's where we find hope bloom.

In the wilderness, far removed from safety — the word of God comes.

Starting with Abraham and Jacob, later the Israelites wandering in the desert, the wilderness becomes the place we hear God clearly, painfully, and confidently.

The second Sunday of Advent sends us to the wilderness to prepare, to confide some truths about ourselves, before calling us to the manger.

Dear God, we know you provide the firm foundation of our feet, the sky above, and surround us with the air we breathe. As we look

for you in all the usual and unusual places, meet us in these ancient words. Speak to us of the essentials of life that we set aside whatever comes between us, and we bear fruits pleasing to you. Amen.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

Then the people of Jerusalem and *all* Judea were going out to him, and *all* the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, *confessing their sins*.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Let me introduce you to a modern day, John the Baptist, Nadia Bolz-Weber.

When she was 17, she inked her skin with her first tattoo, a long-stem rose, to bolster her confidence. The image stopped her from slouching and anxiety about towering over others at 6'1". She rebelled against her fundamentalist household with drugs and alcohol and tells the story of getting a "gross" tattoo on her back while passed out on some dealer's floor.

She slipped further into addiction and promiscuity, then pooled her money with other junkies in a group home by working in stand-up comedy. When one of her fellow comedians died by suicide, friends turned to her to lead their makeshift memorial service. It became a turning point.

Nadia tells the raw truth of getting clean. To avoid the typical bar scene, she socialized where other tall people hang-out, volleyball teams. There she met a towering, young, Lutheran pastor, who became her husband. Nadia's smoldering faith ignited among traditional liturgies and rituals.

Once ordained a Lutheran pastor as well, she founded House for All Sinners and Saints, to serve society's outsiders, its "underside dwellers ... cynics, alcoholics and queers" in Denver, Colorado.

In recent years, as that church continues to flourish, she's not into big church, she pivoted her ministry, preaches at a woman's correctional facility, and hosts a podcast called *The Confessional*. I highly recommend her books, blogs, and podcast with the caveat to expect raw language and topics.

When you see her, she usually bares her big guns, shaped from her body building days, by wearing a sleeveless, yet clergy-collared shirt. That gross tattoo from addiction she considers scar tissue and rather than hide it, an artist reimagined it into Mary's annunciation, the moment when Mary learned she would bear Jesus. Nadia's covered in ink, mostly biblical characters. That gives you a sense of Nadia and what her ministry is all about.

Back when the church she founded was still young and struggling, Nadia was invited to preach at the ecumenical Easter sunrise service at Red Rocks, a massive, natural outdoor amphitheater nestled in the Rocky Mountain foothills. Most often used as a concert venue, on Easter morning it welcomes over 10,000 for worship.

The week after Nadia's Easter sermon, her church's typical 45 worship attendance doubled. Some found this exciting, except

the new people who showed up, she felt were the wrong type of people.

She claims “some churches might freak out if the drag queens showed up. But these were bankers wearing Dockers. I freaked out. They could show up to any mainline Protestant church in the city and see a room full of people that looked just like them. And I thought, ‘You’re ruining our thing. You’re messing it up.’”

She called one of her clergy colleagues in Minneapolis, also serving on the margins at a church-plant called House of Mercy. “Dude, have you ever had normal people take over your church?” She thought the curiosity seekers would leave after the novelty wore off. They kept returning. Rather than commiserate with her, he scolded her, told her to remember the church’s value to welcome the stranger – the recovering addict, the LGBTQ+ kid and that means sometimes they see the stranger in middle-class, white, americana.

Humbled, Nadia describes sitting in a circle at church as they wrestled with the changes. The newcomers shared who they were and why they were there. They thirsted for the authenticity of ritual and ancient liturgies as this group of sinners and saints stumbled through each week.

Then those members who helped found the church shared their stories. A kid named Asher said, “Look, as the young transgender kid who was welcomed into this community, I just want to go on the record as saying I’m glad there’s people who

look like my mom and dad here, because they love me in a way my mom and dad can't."¹

Those white bread suburbanites ventured into a wilderness by going to a grungy, basement church in the seedy part of town just as surely as if they hiked in the remote mountains.

They sought to shed the trappings of their scripted but bland existence, tell their truth in a place that knows the pain of judgement. Anyone who attended House for All Sinners and Saints could write chapter and verse about judgement, having been excluded, told they were irredeemable.

When people get involved in religion, how often do we, not God, take it into some practice of judgment not intended by God? When tradition creates the kind of judgement to exclude and condemn and in the process elevates some false standard of acceptability, religion becomes something diametrically opposed to what God has given us from the start.

In the first century, if someone sought to be closer to God's presence, religious customs prescribed that they travel to the center of Jerusalem. And yet, the Gospel of Matthew describes people going in the opposite direction. They

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*, (New York: Jericho Books, 2013). Also listen to the interview with Krista Tippet at *OnBeing* from 2013 <https://onbeing.org/programs/nadia-bolz-weber-seeing-the-underside-and-seeing-god-tattoos-tradition-and-grace/>

ventured into the wilderness to seek out the deviant, John the Baptist.

This guy, who probably had dreadlocks to his waist and was never included on the invite list to a suburban party, attracted the disenfranchised people and Gentiles from the outskirts and wilderness areas. His rawness and his strength became irresistible to the religious elite of Jerusalem, the Pharisees and Sadducees. This gospel notes *crowds* flocked to him.

In a passage that reeks of judgement, note that John the Baptist begins by giving a big space for everyone to just tell the truth. He received all who confess their sins.

Later, what might sound as harsh words, “you brood of vipers...stones might be more fertile...the ax is lying the root” merely confirm what these elites already experienced – their birthright has nothing to do with being blessed. In their bones, they knew it.

Why else come to him to be baptized into a new life? The Gentiles needed baptism to become welcomed into Judaism. But the elites, they were the establishment. They came to rediscover the heart of their faith.

John the Baptist speaks of judgement not to separate people, sinners from saints. He invites everyone to tell the truth, confide they are at the same time a sinner that desires to be the saintly. I don't mean stain-glass saintly, just a beloved child of God trying their level best to please God.

He uses familiar agricultural terms, like pruning to encourage growth, and winnowing to be set free from baggage that you carry around.

Everyone, that mix of sinner and saint, needs to get rid of the chaff, burn away those behavior patterns that get in the way. In a world of ranking and separating, by what we do, we need to remember that what we do matters to God.

“Confess.” “Sin.” “Repent.”

These sharp words hold the keys to intimacy with God when we tell the truth.



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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org