

Ps 85; Is 40:1-11; 2 Pe 3:8-15a; Mk 1:1-8

2nd Sun in Advent

This Second Sunday of Advent we hear the voice crying out, “Look and see what God is doing!” We are told first by the Prophet Isaiah – and then by the Prophet John Baptist – to make a way – to prepare a way in the wilderness for the Righteous One.

We don’t live in the wilderness. We in Washington County Oregon, live in a well-watered land of lush fields and forests. Where is this wilderness? For Isaiah, it was the hills around Jerusalem. Early on, Isaiah preached to a prosperous people. They had plenty, and had grown indifferent to the things of God. But, God gave him sight to see what was coming for Judah. It was to be defeat and exile. Later in his career, Isaiah became the herald of the future good news, once the punishment of God’s people was behind them.

John Baptist’s preaching echoed Isaiah, right before Jesus began His public ministry: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.” John Baptist appeared in the wilderness around

Jerusalem as well, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Wilderness is about the spiritual condition of humanity, rather than the geography where we live. John Baptist stayed out in the Judean hills, away from the city. People flocked to hear him preach and to be baptized in the river. He kept his life simple – even primitive. He lived out the spiritual discipline of poverty. This remains as a religious tradition for God’s servants.

I heard the story of Hae-won this week. She was born in North Korea, under the dictator Kim Il Sung, grandfather of Kim Jong Un. The harsh communist government of Kim was just over ten years old, and Hae-won was ten years old. She had known only this difficult life under the ruler called the “Great Leader.” He banished all religion, all free enterprise, and all travel to and from North Korea. She knew nothing of the Righteous One. She remembers waking at night in the family’s small, one room apartment. She saw her grandfather sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the window. She did not know why, but decided must be something old people

did. She didn't understand the conversations between her two grandfathers, in which they used terms like *Resurrection*, *Second Coming* and *Red Sea*. Hae-won remembers the ongoing argument between her father and grandfather. "There is something in the galaxies," her grandfather would insist. But her father's reply was always and emphatic, "There is nothing!"

These mysteries were seeds planted in her young heart. When Hae-won was sixteen, the secret police barged into her family's small home one night and ransacked the place. They looked carefully through every book in the apartment, even her brother's school books. She couldn't imagine what they were looking for. "You can't hide bombs, explosives or weapons in a book," she thought. "This is nonsense!"

The police arrested her 82-year-old grandfather, but took her father instead. The authorities knew he could endure prison, whereas her grandfather could not. Later, she learned that 140 people had been arrested the same night. Her grandfather knew each of them. She was afraid she would never see her father again.

When he returned six months later, he was terribly thin. He was very different after prison. He no longer praised the “Great Leader,” Kim Il Sung. He had been profoundly shaken by the experience. Hae-won learned that half her grandfather’s friends were killed after their arrest that night.

Her family was exiled to a remote mountain region as enemies of the state. Their hard life became harder during the devastating famine of the early 1990s. Hae-won was grown and married with children by then. Her eldest son escaped to China to find work. Her grandfather and her father died. One winter night, she and her family packed as much as they could carry and started across the frozen Tumen River for China. They were caught and sent to a prison camp. The family were put in separate barracks. She saw her husband only when they were allowed to go outside briefly each day. When he did not appear for several days, she realized he had died. Almost half the prisoners died of hopelessness and despair. She was released with the remaining members of her family after six months of daily torture.

They were relocated farther from the Chinese border. But several months after their release, they again attempted to flee across the frozen Tumen River. This time they made it to China. Hae-won was reunited with her son who relayed a coded message of his whereabouts through a friend.

Hae-won found a job at a restaurant. A Christian co-worker invited her to church, where she was overwhelmed by the beauty of the hymns. She put her faith in Jesus, and some years later she and her family made their way to South Korea.

As she read her Bible and learned more about God, she came to understand what she saw that night when she was 10 years old. Her grandfather had been praying silently while the family slept. The mysterious adult conversations she had overheard were about the Bible and about the existence of God. The police who broke into her home were looking for Bibles. Her father, despite being an atheist, went to prison for her grandfather's faith. He was forever changed by seeing Christians executed when they refused to deny Christ. She remembers her nation, and

today shares her faith with North Korean defectors in South Korea and across Asia.

Although her grandfather kept his faith from the children in order to protect himself and the house church, his words and his way of life planted seeds in her heart that bore fruit decades later. She was ready for the Righteous One. “I realized,” says Hae-won, that I came to Christ ***because*** of my grandfather’s prayers.” (*VOM Mag*, 5/2017)

Remember Hae-won’s grandfather’s words: “There ***is*** something in the galaxies!” Nothing swayed him from his faith. Peter tells us that the Creator of time is patiently holding back the day when “galaxies will burn up and the elements will melt down” God is graciously waiting for those who do not yet understand there will be “a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (vv 11-13 MSG) He does not want any to be lost. Are you ready for the Righteous One? As we celebrate His birth, keep watching for His return. Amen.