

“THE LUMBERJACK GOD”

Message for the Second Sunday in Advent

From Pastor Norman Staker

December 7, 2025

ISAIAH 11: 1-10 ** ROMANS 15: 4-13 ** MATTHEW 3: 1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. He is risen; he is risen indeed!!

“Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waste, and his food was locusts and wild honey.”

Imagine you hear a knock on the door. You check the peephole and don’t like what or who’s on the other side. Normally you wouldn’t even think about opening the door but your husband is there and says, ‘Well see what he has to say but don’t let him in. You slowly open your door. ‘Hi ma’am, my name is John. I haven’t eaten in days; could I trouble for some locusts and wild honey; my favorites? Locusts and wild honey; I’m sorry but I don’t’ have anything like that. Try the local Lutheran church down the road.’ And off he goes. ‘Whew, that was a close one; probably a murderer dressed in strange clothes. And who eats locusts and wild honey?’

Your son or daughter comes home from college with an uninvited guest. Mom/Dad, I want you to meet my new friend John. He’s hungry! You look at John, then your son or daughter and tell them ‘Now is not a good time.’ What else do you say; I don’t like his looks. He needs a bath and some clean clothes. But you ease up; what would he want to eat? He eats locusts and wild honey. I don’t have any locusts; would he eat cicadas? I canned some last spring when they were really popular! You canned some cicadas; you took the time to cook them and put them in jars and seal them! Why? Who cans locusts let alone cicadas? You never know when you’ll need some freshly canned cicadas. Besides, they don’t sell them at FoodFair or Kroger.

Ok, rather far fetched aren’t they or are they?

He was a rare man. He was an unusual man. It is not every one who is reared in an orphanage out in the desert with very little contact with human civilization or the city. Not every one is reared without a mother or father, without brothers or sisters. Not every one is reared by a group of old men in a monastery out in the desert far away from the city. Of course, he would turn out a little strange. Wouldn't you? He was a very unusual man.

It's not every one whose childhood toys were lizards and scorpions, snakes and giant sand spiders, who talked with cacti in the morning and counted the stars at night and whose world was a gigantic sandbox all day long. Of course, he would turn out a little strange, wouldn't you? He was a very unusual man.

It is not every one who grows up alone, so very alone in the quietness of the desert. Alone with the gods of the desert. Alone with the sounds of winds and shifting sands. Alone with the endless time of the desert, the endless nights and the endless days. Of course, he would turn out a little strange. Wouldn't you? He was a very unusual man.

His total life was entirely dedicated to God out there in the desert sands and all alone. What else was there to do in the desert? There are no games to play, no people to talk with, no scrolls to read. What else is there to do out in the desert, night after night, day after day, except talk with God? To be immersed in God.

Then, strangely, they started to come, first by the hundreds and then by the thousands. All these people came to hear him preach. Walking ten, twenty, thirty miles out from their cities, out into the wilderness, to listen to this desert prophet. I mean, that is a long way to walk for a sermon.

These people came out into the desert to hear him preach. Not because his sermons were racy, spicy or sophisticated. Not because of voluminous choirs or old favorite hymns. Not because they had some desire to see old friends that they hadn't seen all week. Not because of some childhood habit of being in the synagogue on Friday nights, a habit that they couldn't kick. No.

They left their cities and they walked twenty, thirty, or forty miles out into the desert because they wanted to see a rare phenomenon. They wanted to see a man who had been totally immersed in God, whose soul had not be corrupted by the pollution of the cities, whose personality had not been fouled by the carnivorousness of the city. They wanted to hear; they wanted to hear an authentic Word from the Lord.

They didn't want to be tantalized; they didn't come to be entertained; they didn't come to hear some fashionable religious wisdom. They came because they wanted to hear an authentic Word from the Lord for their lives.

And more than that, they sensed in this man was the powerful presence of God. The people from the city wanted to find what he found in the desert and what they were unable to find in the city or the cities of life. So these people came looking; they came looking for an authentic Godly life. They came searching to find what he had found in the desert.

The message of this desert prophet was essentially one word. Prepare. In the wilderness, prepare for the coming of the Christ. In the desert, prepared for the coming of the King. In the wilderness, be washed, be clean, be pure. Your imagination. Your heart. Your mind. May these be washed clean, so Christ can come into you and live.

Today is the day of John the Baptist. Today an invitation is given to you and me to prepare for the coming. To prepare for the coming of Christ. To prepare by going into the desert to be cleaned. One's heart. One's imagination. One's thoughts. It is only when one is cleaned in the desert that the Christ comes to live within.

The city. The city. How we love the city and how we are afraid of the desert. The city is a sumptuous buffet of turkey, fish and beef, with sugar coated corn flakes and sugar coated apples and sugar coated coffees with plastic covered dinners and plastic covered boxes and plastic covered bags. In the city they can go to the local Starbucks for an Iced Brown Sugar Oatmilk Shaken Espresso or French Roast even a Pumpkin Spice latte, so many choices. In the wilderness, if it's not cloudy, they can see the stars. At least these stars don't cost big bucks! Not even close to the same thing but much cheaper! The city dwellers eat sumptuously every morning, noon and night. How the city dwellers love the food of their fair cities. It's taste; it's variety; it's convenience; it's volume.

A voice cried out, "In the desert, prepare. In the desert, be cleaned." And then I heard a whisper, a voice speaking ever so softly: "He ate only locusts and wild honey. He ate so simply." Then another voice suddenly shouted out; "Is God really a loaf of bread or the Bread of Life?"

The city is magnificent cathedrals and skyscrapers, buildings of stone and steel, growing taller and taller and taller like the towers of Babel, pointing their fingers high into the sky. Buildings of tinted gray glass and shining bright aluminum,

rectangular, cylindrical, triangular, epitomized by the classic modern building, the Stadium. People love to walk beneath the grandeur of their great concrete cathedrals and see the skyline of the city of man.

A voice cried out, “In the wilderness, prepare for Christ to come in. In the wilderness, be washed, be cleansed. And another voice whispered ever so softly, “God’s tabernacle was only a tent. God lived in a tent.” And still another voice shouted a question so all the world could hear: “Is the dwelling place of God in a magnificent cathedral or in a tent made out of canvas?”

The city is technology; the mind is a machine; the cranium is a complex computer like you have never seen before. How they loved their computerized calculators, their computerized telephones, their computerized checking accounts, their computerized grocery stores. Nothing in the whole world knows so much as a computer. Nobody can answer so quickly as a godlike computer. The people themselves became computerized; marriages were computerized; babies were computerized. How the people loved their computers because their computers were omniscient and people always bow to omniscience.

A voice cried out, “In the wilderness, get ready for the coming King. In the wilderness, be washed, be cleansed.” Another voice whispered above the silence, “He watched only the stars at night. He watched them coming out one at a time. How he loved the silence of the stars.” But another voices shouted a question so all the world could hear, “Is God a giant computer in the sky or is God in the invisible space between the stars?”

The city is sophistication. It is class. It is real class. The city is knowing how to eat, using the right fork and avoiding the wrong fork, the short ones for salads and the long one for dinner. The city is knowing how to talk with a suave, lilting language, using the right word at the right time for the right situation. The city is knowing how to dress right, knowing what to wear and what not to wear; knowing what books to read and what books not to read; knowing the right symphonies to listen to and which music to avoid. The city is class; it is sophistication and so comfortable.

A voice cried out in the wilderness, “Get ready for the coming of the King. Be washed. Be cleansed.” Another voice whispered, “He dressed so simply. He wore only a shirt made out of camel hair. His shirt was so plain, so simple.” Another voice shouted the question for the world, “Is God sophisticated, pure class, like royalty is? Or did he come dressed in the clothing of a carpenter?”

The people had come to love their city. They had come to love the city for the nature of human beings is to love the city of man more than the God of the desert. To worship the city. To be tantalized by the city. To be addicted to the city. To love and worship the city, the technology of the city, the way of the city. The city? The city always results in the death of the soul. The more a person loves the city of man, the more that person loses their love of the God of the desert. The soul needs the desert in order to live. The soul needs the desert in order to survive.

Israel loved the city. Israel was in captivity and had come to love the city. The Israelites didn't want to go out into the wilderness. The Jews had come to love the foods of Egypt, the cathedrals of Egypt, the technology of Egypt, the sophistication of Egypt. Their souls had become absorbed in Egypt and they didn't want to go into the desert because they loved the technology of Egypt. But God led the Jews into the desert as God always leads people into the desert in order to grow. In order to renew their souls, in order to be purified; in order to become clean. God always leads people into the desert in order to prepare them for a new land, for a new mission, for a new life, in order to live in the city.

Today, the Word of the Lord is clear. The Lord says to you and me, "Go into the wilderness and become clean. Go into the wilderness and be cleansed. Your mind, your imagination, your heart, your actions, your words, your habits. Jesus himself went into the desert. Jesus was baptized in the desert and immediately he went further into the desert for forty days and forty nights, preparing for a new mission, for a new life, for a new ministry in the city of man.

So, you ask the question: "Where is the desert? Where is this wilderness? Where is this desert that you talk of?" Your very questions betray your reluctance to leave the city. To ask such questions at all betrays our reluctance. It is like the Jews of slavery, anxious to remain in Egypt, asking God, "Where is Mount Sinai?" The Jews knew where Mount Sinai was. They really wanted to stay in Egypt and not go into the desert, and so they asked questions, in order to avoid going into the desert. We are the same.

But the miracle can only happen in the desert. So we ask other questions. "Where is the desert? Where is the wilderness? Is the wilderness a camping trip? Is it a hike around Mount Rainier? Is it a trip in my tent trailer or motor home around the Olympic Peninsula? Such foolish questions are asked by people who think merely in the thought patterns of the city.

The wilderness is where God lives. The wilderness is any place where a person becomes absorbed in the powerful presence of God. The wilderness is where anyone is alone, totally alone, really alone, with the ultimate issues of life, death and eternity. The wilderness is in a Book, in a thin wafer and thimble of wine. The wilderness is in a prayer and a still small voice. Sometimes it is in a slum. Sometimes, it is in a closet. Sometimes it is in an apartment. The wilderness is always where the cross of God is invisibly present. The wilderness is where God is, and where God can cleanse our polluted minds and imaginations and hearts and values and habits and anything else inside of us.

The wilderness is silence and quiet. It is the elimination of the sounds of television, the radio, the stereo, the CD, the Walkman. It is the elimination of the voices of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends. It is the elimination of the racing tape of my own mind that absorbs my thoughts. It is quiet. It is utter stillness. It is being alone with God. It is for a moment, for a minute, for a month, being still, absolutely still...and listening. God speaks in the wilderness of silence. The city is so noisy; so busy; so crowded in my mind. The wilderness is silence and God speaks to us through the silence.

In the wilderness, you actually hear the voice of God speaking, "Be washed. Be cleansed of the pollution of resentment, rage, and revenge. Be washed of whatever is hurting your life and the lives of others. Hear the voice, "Your sins are forgiven; go and sin no more." Hear the voice, "Love one another as I have loved you." Hear the voice, "You shall love God with all you have inside, all your heart, mind, soul and strength...and your neighbor as yourself." Be quiet. Be still. In the wilderness, you finally can see the stars and hear the sounds of the wind. In the quietness of the wilderness. Be still and you will hear the voice of God.

They came ten, twenty, thirty, forty miles to hear him preach. They came out from their cities and into the wilderness. What did they come to see? A reed shaken by the wind? No. They came out to see a prophet and more than a prophet. They came out to see a man who had found the powerful presence of God in the wilderness.

Then we read: Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

God has compared Himself to a dove, an eagle, a lion, a tower, a fortress, a counselor and a friend. Today God puts on the flannel shirt and boots, grabs an axe in His hands, and plays the part of the great and mighty lumberjack: the Paul

Bunyan of heaven. He sharpens His axe and heads out into the forest. He's ready to chop some trees down. The bigger they are, the harder they fall. If you've ever chopped down a tree, you know how refreshing and powerful it can make you feel as they fall to the ground.

We need to hear this too, even as Christians. It is the message of Advent. We are more used to the pleasant God, the smiling God, the generous God, the friendly God, who holds us by the hand as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. These are pictures of God that we like - and they're good pictures that are meant to comfort us. We feel safe with baby Jesus in the crib, lying in a manger. We don't feel threatened by a God who is dying on a cross and allowing us to crucify Him. What harm is He? He's all about love and forgiveness. He's willing to die for me. He loves me with an unconditional love. This God doesn't scare me at all.

But here, He's sharpening his axe and He's getting ready to violently cut someone down right at the roots. He's scary. He seems much too aggressive for today's Christian. He looks too mean, too masculine, and too threatening. But when you read God's Word, He threatens all the time.

God doesn't cut down trees just for his own temporary enjoyment. He doesn't do it to keep Himself warm. He does it because He is just. He does it to call people to repentance, so that a new tree can branch forth and grow. The Lumberjack knows how to run a tree farm. He knows when to prune and He knows when to chop down. He knows what to do with the wood, what to build with and what to throw in the fire. Just look at what He did with the wood of the cross!

As God the Lumberjack threatens to swing the axe, we are called on to listen and bow before Him. When we see Him chop people down to size, we humbly ask Him to spare us. Yet even if He chooses to swing, we know that the Lumberjack knows best, to use our failure or our fall as a way of building His church all the bigger and better. He has the power to take a stump and transplant it into His kingdom, water it and make it grow. We pray for His mercy and strength, to keep growing in Christ, and to keep from pride as we grow. We pray that God would open our ears to listen to His warnings, clinging to the cross, waiting for Jesus to come as our Savior.

Amen.