

December 17, Advent 3 (John 1:6-8, 19-28)

In the wilderness, trying to find joy can be like trying to make a fire with wet matches.

by [Katie Kirk](#) in the [December 2023](#) issue

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In the original greek of John 1, John the Baptist is described as a witness to the light: *martyria*. This word for “witness” gives rise to the English word *martyr*. When the religious leaders come to interrogate John in Bethany, John doesn’t yet have his head on a plate. But he bears witness to Jesus from his first appearance in John’s Gospel.

In this Bethany scene, John’s story comes ahead of his cousin Jesus’ ministry. Jesus has not yet gained notoriety. Jesus is born, but he is still waiting in the wings.

When the religious leaders ask John who he is, he tells the truth. He’s not Elijah. He’s not the messiah. John is not a reprise of that which has already happened: Elijah’s time prophesying on earth. John is also not that which is yet to come: Jesus’ ministry and redemption of humankind. John is in the space between the already and the not yet. The prologue of the Gospel of John even seems to pause each time it refers to John the Baptist. Even textually, his ministry is liminal.

In 2023, all of us pastors are doing ministry in a liminal wilderness. Those still living have collectively survived a global pandemic that has permanently altered our churches and communities. Natural and geopolitical disasters strike the places we love with increasing frequency, causing us to wonder if we’re next. In 2023, we have set up camp between already and not yet: between pandemic and endemic, between weather crises and hope for our climate’s future.

In Jerusalem, where I currently live and work, locals and pilgrims alike frequently express to me their feelings that the world is getting overwhelmingly worse. Global catastrophes of disease and disaster aside, our ordinary lives can be wildernesses, too. Some years, our precarious lives are lived between weddings and funerals,

scary doctor's appointments and trips to visit loved ones. Most of us, it seems, are in some kind of wilderness.

In the wilderness places, we know God is present, but it seems to us that God has not yet shown up.

Advent 3 is often referred to as Gaudete, the Sunday of joy. Many light a rose candle to honor joy in the midst of Advent, a season in which our lectionary readings often trend apocalyptic. While many are familiar with the four weeks of Advent as hope, peace, joy, and love, the tradition of the four last things might feel more apropos in a wilderness context: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Our liminal lives weave between these two ways of conceiving of Advent. We walk a path between hope, peace, joy, and love lighting our way toward Christmas on the one hand and harder holiday seasons awakening considerations of death, judgment, heaven, and hell on the other.

This week in the four last things is for heaven, and heaven hasn't happened yet for John the Baptist, either. John's story is one in which joy has not yet entered the story and heaven is not yet on earth. In the wilderness, trying to find joy can be like trying to make a fire with wet matches. The responsibility to light the world is too great for us to bear. We cannot illuminate the horizons of our wilderness alone; we cannot drag heaven down to meet us here.

Though John's story feels thematically jarring for the third week of Advent, his answer to religious leaders' interrogation does give us a clue for how to find joy in the wilderness.

John reminds us who we are not. We are not the light. We are not Elijah. We are not the messiah. We are not always particularly joyful. We are not in heaven.

When we free ourselves from the responsibility to manufacture joy, bring heaven here, and light the world alone, we are free to act. We testify to the light before it comes, and we stick around to witness Jesus. I talked with a pilgrim this week about doing ministry in the wilderness, before joy has shown itself. She talked about allowing the space of the unknown, not knowing everything that's about to happen: not knowing, but acting anyway.

John prepares the way for Jesus in the wilderness. He prepares the way by action. He baptizes in joyful expectation that Jesus is on the way. We too can testify that we are not the light and prepare the way for the light of Christ.