

Dear People of St. Peter's,

As I write this letter to you I am sitting in the wilderness of the Wadi Rum—the Valley of the Moon—in southern Jordan. Along with ten other pilgrims from St. Peter's and another twelve souls from Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Nepal, Israel and Jordan we have arrived in this beautiful and remote place for the night. Our guide said the name is inspired by Neil Armstrong who said this place looks more like the moon than any other place on earth. That's real wilderness, I suppose.

We are all entering the wilderness of Advent these next four weeks. Despite all commercial indications to the contrary, 'tis the season to listen to the voice of prophets. The prophets' job is to arouse awareness from those who are living comfortably in denial. The prophets also speak challenge to us when our kingdoms—large or small—are at odds with the virtues of God's Kingdom. Last but not least, the prophets' job is to speak promise to those who are hopeless.

Before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the prophets were speaking in the wilderness. As Jesus matured to the moment of beginning his earthly ministry, he himself set out to the wilderness and was baptized by the prophet, John the Baptist. After hearing these promising, heavenly words, "You are my Son, my beloved," Jesus ventured further and deeper into the wilderness for forty days. It was the advent of his ministry—not just a beginning, but also a wilderness time of listening deeply to God's loving, challenging, promising voice in spite of the louder voice of temptation.

When Jesus heard, "Make bread from stones," he listened more deeply and trusted that God was calling him to live with more than bread alone. When he heard Scripture (mis)used to urge Jesus to disregard common sense, he chose not to throw himself down upon the mercy of angels and put God to the test. And when he heard the most alluring temptation of all—unlimited wealth and power—Jesus listened more deeply and trusted that God was calling him to a more powerfully compassionate life than that.

During the last two weeks our group has spent time alternately between the city and the wilderness, just as Jesus did. Yet, for us even the city of Jerusalem is like wilderness because its sights, sounds, smells and surfaces are foreign to us. We have walked many steps through the wilderness, and it has indeed been a blessed and bewildering time for us.



*Approaching a canyon with a Bedouin tent in the Jordanian wilderness*

Be careful not to interpret bewilderment as a bad thing. I believe it is the experience where Advent begins—whether we travel to any sort of geographical wilderness or not. I believe Advent begins with a spiritual wilderness when we listen more deeply to God's loving, challenging, promising voice in spite of all the other voices tempting us with distraction or denial.

Like Jesus, we can live by more than bread alone. We can trust God without testing God. And we can listen for God's invitation to live more compassionately. I pray you have a bewildering Advent, including some time for quiet listening to God's loving, challenging, and promising voice. Like the disciples of two thousand years ago we still resist bewilderment, and so the voice still begins with these simple words, "Be not afraid..."



*The sunset over the Judean wilderness as seen from the top of Mt. Nebo*

Blessings and Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juruae" with a small cross at the end of the line.