

The Church in the Wilderness

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, August 19th, 2018

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.’ ” (Matthew 3:3 & Isaiah 40:3)

The theme of wilderness crops up again and again in the Word. You could even say that the first reference to it is in Genesis, chapter 3, when Adam was cast out of the garden and his world was cursed with thorns and thistles. Drought and famine are regular concerns in the stories of the Patriarchs and of course Moses had the daunting task of leading 600 thousand Israelites and their wives and children through a wilderness for 40 years before they reached the borders of the Promised Land.

Again, the young hero, David more than once fled into a wilderness to escape the mad King Saul, and the Prophets after him regularly addressed the people in the deserts of their own making when they disobeyed the Lord’s instructions. Then, in the New Testament the story of the Lord’s ministry literally begins in the wilderness where we find John the Baptist preaching to prepare the way for Him. And it continues with the Lord Himself fasting and undergoing temptations for 40 days in the wilderness before preaching the Sermon on the Mount. Again, well into His ministry (Matthew 14) He went out to “a deserted place” where He ended up feeding a crowd of 5000 people who followed him (and in case you wonder, the Greek word for this “deserted place” is the same word used for wilderness). Then, finally of course, we have the vision in Revelation, chapter 12, of the woman clothed with the sun who with her newborn Son, being attacked by a dragon “fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God...”

This vision as we know especially represents the New Church, and the wilderness to which she fled represents a state or circumstance in which the truths of faith actually *are* lacking or *appear* to be lacking, as in states of temptation (see AR #546). It may seem curious, then, that this is the place prepared by God where in fact she would be *protected and fed* for “a thousand two hundred and sixty days” (v. 6). So looking deeper we find that the word, wilderness, here is more like the deserted place mentioned in the Gospels since *the spiritual sense of it* is that the New Church would be *among a few* “while provision is made for it to exist among more people, until it grows to its appointed state” (AR #547).

Now the *reason* the church is among so few is that despite the appearance in some cases there is a lack of genuine good in the Christian world, and that lack of good is because of the lack of truths to inform and qualify the good (AE #730). Let’s face it, the New Church *is* in the Christian world among many who have no idea what the teachings of the Word really mean, mainly because they are driven by worldly interpretations and concerns that block out the light of heaven. Yes, of course there are some who “get it,” who live in genuine charity and faith, and we both can and should make common cause with these people. But we should not forget – indeed how *can* we forget? – that the Christian Church today (both Catholic and Protestant) really is in a spiritual wilderness, plagued by new scandals that seem to emerge every week, causing it to be viewed with disdain by many who see little more than hypocrisy in leaders and members alike. It’s a really sad situation, not only for those caught up in the scandals but for *everyone* in that these cases tend to sour people on religion generally, and on churches of every kind in particular.

So it is that even in the New Church we find many people who feel really ambivalent about the organization and its uses. But to the extent they stay away they deprive themselves of opportunities to learn and grow in the deeper truths of faith, and so the famine continues; the time in the wilderness is extended.

Still, the woman in the vision fled into the wilderness so that she could be nourished. The point is that even though there are only a few, relatively speaking, who in this desert have the genuine goods and truths of faith, **it is among those few** that knowledge can be acquired and faith strengthened. This is why in the early days of the New Church special enclaves were set up and distinctive communities planned with the idea that they might be ***oases in this desert*** where people could learn and practice their faith at least somewhat sheltered from the harsh conditions around them. Special schools were set up with curricula and programming uniquely designed to cultivate the innocence, knowledge and affection that would lead their children into the goods and truths of a genuine faith in the Lord. Distinctive social life was another feature of these communities where certain standards of behavior were expected (even if they weren't fully honored). So the members were nourished in their faith – *but still the church did not grow*.

Well, OK, that's not quite true. For some years it did grow, as many of you here know. People uprooted from other areas to move here to be part of this community, and two generations of children were raised on the milk and honey of the New Church. Some of them joined the church. Others when they grew up and married brought their husbands or wives into the church. And every now and then some new folks from other backgrounds signed up. But then again, in time there were those who moved away, passed into the spiritual world or actually became disenchanted with the congregation for some reason and stopped coming. We are seeing those effects today, and so in spite of having consistently gained new members over the last 40 years the net effect – again as you well know – is that it has begun to feel as if the church is *shrinking* instead of growing!

In response there are several critical things to note:

1. Although the enclave itself may be struggling, many of those who have left have taken the church with them [no, certainly not all, but given human freedom what should we expect? And even if they never join the organization, surely they have been nourished according to the vision, “for time, times and half a time,” until the church grows among more people – here or elsewhere.
2. We are not here to serve only ourselves and our families. We are here to serve the Lord and our neighbors, and we do that whether we are a large or small group by learning and doing what the Word teaches, thereby helping to sustain the connection between heaven and earth. The Writings are very clear about this very important use.
3. Wildernesses, deserts or deserted places in the Word are not necessarily bad places. Of course they *are* in many circumstances, but as places “*prepared by God*” they can only be understood as positive, in this case offering *protection from persecution*. After all, who wants to go out into the wilderness and, as David said of Saul, pursue a dead dog or a flea (I Sam 24:14)? The fact that we are viewed that way by many Christian evangelicals to a large extent keeps us from having to be on the defensive while we continue to gain strength in our convictions and how to share them. Remember, the Lord Himself

went into the wilderness for relief from the crowds and to, as we might say, re-center Himself for the challenges to come.

4. Finally, of course, we have in the heavenly doctrine a complete explanation of why the **New Church** has to be in this wilderness. Among other things we read,
 - a. “It is of the Lord’s Divine providence that the church be at first among few and that it gradually grow to be among more, *because the falsities of the previous church must first be removed*. For truths cannot be accepted before then, inasmuch as truths accepted and implanted before falsities have been removed do not remain, and they are also expelled by followers of the dragon....
 - b. “One thing is certain, that the New Church, which is the New Jerusalem, *will come into being*, because it is foretold in the book of *Revelation*, chapters 21 and 22. And it is also certain that the falsities of the previous church have to be removed before then, because that is the subject dealt with in [the spiritual sense of] the book of *Revelation* up through chapter 20” (AR #547; see also AE #732).

In light of this teaching, as sad and difficult as it is to observe in this third century of the existence of the New Church, the fact that allegiance to traditional churches and their doctrines is seriously waning, especially in the western world, and especially among the generations born since the 1960’s and ’70’s, **MAY actually be a good sign**. You know, we tend to look at what the Writings say about “the old church” and think, well, those descriptions were written in the 18th century; things are different now, nobody really believes in an angry god or salvation by faith alone anymore. But the truth is that the whole Christian world is *still* awash in the sacrificial blood of Christ and a really pagan sort of vicarious atonement for the sins of the human race. The fact that people are walking away from this falsity really seems to be part of the preparation for acceptance of the New Church.

Why, then, don’t these same people join the New Church? Well, of course, we’d like to know! But as we search for answers we should be mindful of the deep skepticism that shrouds human institutions of all kinds, from government to big corporations. And it’s not just that the institutions are flawed: *people* are flawed, so again, sadly, we can expect this negative attitude, and what’s more, it’s our responsibility to prove that we are, or can be an exception.

That said, there’s not much use in pointing fingers and blaming the world for the fact that this church is not attracting people in droves. There is, after all, a wilderness in each of **us**, in fact a deserted place as far as the deep, thoughtful consideration of the Lord’s Word is concerned. We are easily pre-occupied with self-centered, worldly concerns, and if nothing else, busy taking care of whatever responsibilities the world and our families put upon us. We find it hard to sustain any prolonged reading and reflection on the Word, and when push comes to shove we don’t know the stories or the doctrine as well as we should. So of course we’re nervous about sharing what faith we have. We don’t want to embarrass ourselves OR do a poor job of explaining things, so, often, we just avoid the conversation. [That’s how excited we are about the Lord’s Second Coming: we usually do a better job of talking up a restaurant or a movie we liked.]

As for the idea of “distinctive New Church communities” as oases in the desert, the technology of modern communication has pretty well swept away the boundaries that used to separate us from the influence of the world – with an effect almost like the flood that the dragon spewed out

of its mouth in Revelation (and you know, a flood in the dry, cracked earth of the desert can be devastating, since the ground isn't prepared to absorb the water very well).

On top of everything else we're not always as cheerful and thoughtful towards others as we could be, and so the light that shines from our lamps can at times be weak.

On the bright side, however, consider the tremendous success that entertaining, informative Internet programs such as "Off the Left Eye" and "Swedenborg: Religion and Life" are having with hundreds of thousands of followers who are eagerly accepting the teachings of the New Church every month. These are at least some of those mentioned earlier who *have* rejected the falsities of the old church but because of their disillusionment and fear of being taken advantage of all over again aren't yet ready to join a new church. They enjoy learning from the new revelation and what they learn may actually transform their lives. So the church may grow in them, or as we say, they may become churches in their own individual ways, further contributing to the conjunction of heaven and earth. This is a great thing, and we can be thankful for the champions of our cause, who like David are well prepared to go out on our behalf and confront the Goliaths of old, ungainly theological reasoning.

But the people who benefit from all this are still nervous about "organized religion." What can we do about that? How can we help?

Well, let's be clear: watching on a screen at home requires no commitment, no loyalty, no inconvenience, and no other trust than to believe that the presenter has something positive and interesting to say. So the watcher is still in a wilderness, still in a deserted place, at home, alone – especially if no one else in the neighborhood sees the value in what he sees there. Yes, coming to a church involves commitment, some level of allegiance if not loyalty, trust, *and inconvenience*. It also involves a willingness to confront (that is, mingle with) other people we might not otherwise even like very much. So what is to be gained?

You will see some answers to this question in the newsletter for September. For now let's just focus on one thing: the opportunity to practice and consolidate what we learn through self-discipline *in a sphere of charity and affirmation of the Lord in His Word*. In this sense belonging to a church and attending services can be like working in the favorable conditions of a laboratory where we test and confirm our theoretical convictions in real-life interactions with people of all stripes, sharing what we have in common and learning new things from the new perspectives others bring. This can help us grow to greater spiritual maturity than would ever be possible on our own, provided, of course, that we come with that goal in mind.

So the "time, times and half a time" of Revelation can be fulfilled, both in the church as it exists in individuals and in the church as an organization *which will eventually be seen not as a woman struggling for survival in the wilderness but as the holy city, New Jerusalem, prepared by God and descending from Him out of heaven to bless the whole world*.

Amen.

Lessons: *Exodus* 14:1-18
Children's talk on the Lord's protection of Israel in the wilderness
Matthew 14:13-21, *Revelation* 12:1-6, and *Apocalypse Explained* #732