

So, a few weeks ago when I was home with my Mom, I was sitting on the couch while my Mom was fiddling on her phone when out of nowhere I just heard her go, “Who in the world is that?” Initially, I just kind of ignore it because I mean we all have had those moments of talking absent-mindedly at our cell phone, but then it just kind of continued with a litany of, “What in the world? Who *is* that? Who is Dion Bison?” Well, now I was curious and invested in whatever was going on on my mother’s phone, because with a name like that, I too wanted to know who in the world was Dion Bison?

What my mom had been looking at was an email sent out by her company introducing a massive new group of brokers that they had welcomed in to their firm. This email went out to thousands of people on their email server, and all my Mom kept asking was who in the world was Dion Bison? The name just wasn’t kicking in her brain. She showed me the email, with this lovely group picture of all of them, and then all of their names listed below and she just couldn’t put it together. She knew it was a lot of new people they had welcomed in, but with a name like Dion Bison, one would remember that. It took a solid ten minutes. *Ten minutes* in which I had basically gone back to the couch and left my mom to her phone pondering until finally she exclaimed, “Oh my God, it’s Diane Gibson!”

Who was Dion Bison? A product of an autocorrect fail and an editor that

didn't catch the slip up. Dion Bison was no one, other than a complete misprint of this poor Diane Gibson's name. I mean it was ridiculous and from a corporate business level embarrassing, but it was also downright hysterical, and a vital lesson in why editing and paying attention to something as small as a few letters in a name can change the entire meaning of a story or a message.

And I get it, you're like, it's Advent and what in the world does grammar and editing have to do with anything? Well, up until Tuesday morning at about 10:15, I would have told you absolutely nothing, until, and she deserves a shout out here, until Bonnie Carlson pointed out to our Bible study group that sometimes grammar and things as simple as a colon can make a world of difference in the story of Advent. So here we are...a sermon about grammar, which I can honestly say I never anticipated writing.

We know the words of these texts. Every Advent we're prepped and prepared for them. Some of us probably don't even feel like it's Advent until we hear that John the Baptist has emerged from the wilderness looking like some sort of wild man with his locust and honey, proclaiming that we need to prepare the way of the Lord. We're ready, we're in the Advent mindset, prep, prepare, repent, we got it. We're awake. We're preparing the way. Bring on Jesus! And that's all well and good and true, and very Adventy,

but as we discovered on Tuesday, there's something else kind of curious going on here and it's all because Mark decided to get a little fancy with his editing skills.

If you can, it will be helpful to have your bulletin with the lessons pulled up here for a hot second. Because when we just listen to these texts, it makes it sound like they're the same. We hear our first lesson from Isaiah and then Mark goes on and quotes the same text to show that John is the fulfillment of that age old prophecy. The forerunner has emerged and proclaimed the words that needed to be said, which means that the Messiah is on the way, everyone look awake and ready! But...our texts are slightly different, not in wording, but in grammar, and that makes all the difference in some ways.

In Isaiah, it says, "A voice cries out, *colon*, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord." For Isaiah, he is speaking to the Israelites who are in exile, away from home, feeling away from God, feeling like they have been wandering in the wilderness for generations. Isaiah tells them that right where they are they can prepare the way of the Lord. Right there smack dab in the wilderness they can start the highway that will lead them home, that will be their path of deliverance. It's a promise that they will be lead out from the wilderness and home towards salvation. The wilderness, exile, this

time of wandering is something that they need to be delivered from, that's the promise that the prophet gives them. They can prepare the way of the Lord, right where they are, and God will bring them home.

Mark though...Mark changes things. Mark says, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness *colon*, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" *John* is the one in the wilderness calling out to people, but here's the even bigger thing, he's calling people *to him*. He's not calling people to exit the wilderness, he's calling people *into* it. And Mark tells us, they flock to him, "John the baptizer appeared *in the wilderness*...and people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him..." John tells them that in order to prepare the way of the Lord, in order to be ready, they've gotta go to the wilderness. All because of the shift of one colon, the message goes from, God will deliver you out of the wilderness to you gotta get to the wilderness to get ready for God's arrival.

And still, you might be out there going, Pastor Tina, that really doesn't seem like that big of a deal, you're really just a big nerd making mountains out of grammatical molehills. But here's the thing...the wilderness in scripture? It's not small thing. It's a huge thing. The wilderness isn't just some random forest setting to give a scene ambiance, like ooo, there are lots of trees and birds and it's quiet and peaceful. No, the

wilderness in scripture is where people go to wrestle with the weight of their hearts, it's a place of discernment and discovery and figuring out who you are and just what exactly you need to be delivered from. No one wants to go to the wilderness in scripture, and frankly, when we look at it from that perspective, I would dare say none of us want to go to the wilderness either.

When I told someone this week that I was preaching about the wilderness, they immediately said, "You don't like the wilderness." And, I mean, nope, in the literal sense, not really. Sleeping on the ground in the cold isn't really my jam, but in the sense we're talking about, no, I really, really don't like the wilderness...none of us do, because who wants to wrestle and struggle with the questions of our hearts? Who wants to go through a time of wandering and wondering and dealing with realities we've long since avoided? Who wants to drag all their dirty spiritual laundry out into the open and go, "Alright, God let's dig into this!!" No one. Absolutely no one.

I think sometimes that's why we prefer the watered down version of Advent, that tells us it's just about preparing for Jesus and Christmas and centers around all the warm fuzzies of the season, when the reality is, Advent was kind of meant to be hard. Advent is meant to be a wilderness time where we sit and we go...alright, John the Baptist has called me out to

this place to repent, so what do I need to wrestle with and weigh in order for my heart to be ready to prepare the way of the Lord? And that's hard work, and frankly few of us want to do it. None of us want to spend the most wonderful time of the year pondering our brokenness, our weakness, our sinfulness, the things that eat us up and weigh us down and make us feel confused, conflicted, and like we're wandering in the wilderness with nowhere to turn. That's just not Christmasy!! But it's not Christmas yet. It's Advent, and Advent is what makes Christmas, well, Christmas.

Because think about it. What is the message of Christmas? That hope as come, that the light which no darkness can overcome has broken into the world to bring salvation and redemption to all. Christ comes as a tiny baby to bring comfort and peace and grace and love beyond all measure. For hearts that are comfortable and complacent and haven't put in the wilderness time? That message feels a little bit hollow. Comfort and hope cannot truly seep into our bones and our beings when we haven't examined our hearts to find and own what truly needs comforting, what truly needs redeeming.

Light cannot scatter the darkness until we have dwelt in that darkness and felt where we need light to shine in and declare that the darkness doesn't get to win. The comfortable don't really need comfort. Hearts that have been protected and shielded don't really feel the full impact of grace. Only when

we've confronted the dark wildernesses of our lives can those things which Christ comes to bring truly and completely be felt.

The wilderness isn't fun. The wilderness is hard. It's messy and sometimes it feels cold and harsh and tangles us up inside to the point that we don't know which way to turn, lost in a forest made of trees of our own planting. Yet, even though Mark and his grammar has called us into the wilderness, Isaiah and his reminds us that God finds us in the wilderness, God calls us out of it, God brings us redemption and salvation from our wilderness journeys. Advent is like a new exodus, God's people wandering in the desert figuring out who they are, only to be delivered to the promised land of a manger and a tiny baby boy born to save the world, born to save us, born to save you, and put all those broken pieces back together.

People of God, as the angels will soon declare, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to go to the wilderness. Do not be afraid to heed John's words and dwell in the hard, dwell in your hearts, dwell in your souls, and find what is within you that needs repented of and redeemed. The wilderness may be dark, it may be scary, but God will find us there, walking on the pathway we have prepared through our wandering. The wilderness will not be permanent, God's abiding redemption will be, period. And that's the one point of grammar that truly matters. **AMEN!!!**