

**REMAINING FAITHFUL IN THE WILDERNESS:
Prophetic Calling, Prophetic Presence, and the Highway of the
LORD
UNITING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 20TH CELEBRATION OF UNITY
Port Elizabeth
September 27, 2019
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I

Speaking of the traditional socio-cultural oppression of women in Africa and the destructive reinforcement of these harmful traditions by oppressive strands of the Bible, respected African feminist theologian Mercy Oduyoye observes, "At this point, prophecy resumes its original character as a voice crying in the wilderness, ignored by the powerful and the respectable." On the oppressive strands of the Bible regarding the position and status of women and destructive patriarchal readings of those texts by men, Oduyoye is right of course, and it emphasizes the need for faithful prophetic witness, for liberational and inclusive biblical interpretation.

We have become used to reading the reference to "a voice crying in the wilderness" in Isaiah 40 as the prophetic voice of desperation, crying out in isolation and rejection, not heard nor heeded. Archbishop's Desmond Tutu's 1984 book of sermons carried this title conveying the same message.

But the point I want to make is a different one. Rightly speaking, it is not simply the prophet who is in the wilderness, isolated and rejected. It is the people who are in the wilderness, mired in hopelessness, confusion and self-destruction, cast there by the powers who dominate their lives, who fear the dreams and hopes of the people for freedom, dignity and joy and therefore do whatever is necessary to crush those hopes. Unlike the court prophets, the prophet of God makes the choice not to remain in the

places of comfort, among the rich, the privileged and the connected. The prophet chooses not to align herself with the powerful in the palace, the Temple, and the spaces of power where the powerful dispense their wisdom, their judgements, and their largesse to benefit the rich and rob the poor.

The prophet takes the side of the poor and the oppressed, *joins* the people in the wilderness, standing with them in their loneliness and desolation, in solidarity and hope, seeking with them renewal of their hope in God and faith in the promises of God, knowing that the God of the wilderness is the God of freedom and justice. Just because the people have been banished to the wilderness, their faith and aspirations outlawed because these are subversive of the status quo, it does not mean that those promises and dreams have been abandoned, either by themselves or God. It is in the wilderness where Yahweh meets them, as Yahweh met Hagar, restored her hopes and her life as well as that of her child, letting her know that Yahweh is "the One who sees."

Isaiah 40 marks a new beginning: the prophet announces the ways in which Yahweh will return justice to Yahweh's people. They have been roaming in the wilderness too long - enough! Yahweh says. It is now time to "speak comfort to the heart of Jerusalem." But please note that in this context, "Jerusalem" is not the city of wealth and power and corruption, where the poor are trampled to dust, where justice is turned into wormwood, and where the vulnerable are exploited, discarded and left to bleed to death on the streets. No, "Jerusalem" here means the poor, the dejected, the oppressed, the despised, those classified as "sinners" by the religious elites, not worthy of inclusion or compassion or honour. This is the Jerusalem that needs to be comforted by the mercy, grace, and justice of the God who has chosen to take sides, to join their struggle for justice.

Then the voice of the prophet cries out: "In the wilderness!"- in this place of desolation and hopelessness, of despair and loneliness where you have come to believe that Yahweh has forgotten and forsaken you -

“prepare the way of the Lord!” Then follow the ever captivating, life-giving words in vv. 4-5:

Every valley shall be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be
made low;
the uneven ground shall become
level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the LORD shall
be revealed,
And all flesh shall see it
together.

For the first time we hear of the “Servant of the LORD,” the One who will not grow faint or weary (40:28) and in 42:4 we hear that that is so because the chosen Servant will not rest until justice is established *in all the earth*. “He will not quench the smoldering wick,” the prophet says. That means that this Servant of Yahweh will not deride or despise those who are not as strong, wearied and made vulnerable by the pressures of life. He will not smother someone’s hopes, no matter how fragile, or reduce them to helpless hopelessness. He will not rob them of their dignity, steal their dreams, or mock their ideals for the sake of political expediency, ideological gain, or self-aggrandized arrogance, for he brings victory and is the hope of the nations. Those who are battered and shattered, excluded and discarded, broken down and looked down upon, despised and stigmatized – he will not send them away bleeding, untended, burdened, and empty-handed. This God is the God of compassionate justice and hope.

The wilderness shall be tamed and overcome. Where there is no way there will be a way - a highway - for the *LORD*; not for an emperor, with his armies, chariots, horses and weapons of destruction on the way to conquer yet another defenceless nation. This highway will be a highway to make way for truth and justice, for peace and freedom, for dignity and enhanced humanity.

The prophet does not bemoan her loneliness and isolation. The prophet sees what is at present unimaginable: In the wilderness, a place of utter desolation and oppression, to where the people, their hopes and dreams and faith have been banished, meant to wither and die; there the glory of Yahweh's compassionate justice shall be revealed, and *all flesh*, even those who now sit on thrones of power, oppression and domination, shall see it. And it shall come to pass, "for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." The One "who comes with might" will not oppress, humiliate or destroy, but "will feed [God's] flock like a shepherd; [God will] gather the lambs in [God's] arms and carry them in [God's] bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." (40:11)

And not only shall the chosen One not grow weary or faint until justice is established, but all those "who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (40:31) No, the voice in the wilderness is not one that depicts despair, isolation and rejection. It is the voice of hope undaunted, dreams rejuvenated, faith renewed, courage restored, and love vindicated. It is the prophetic voice who calls on the people, "waiting upon the LORD," - which here means believing and trusting in God - to make the rough places plain, the crooked straight, and to build highways of justice for the LORD to walk on amongst God's people.

We should keep in mind that the voice is not speaking of God's work in some eschatological vision. The voice is calling upon God's people, in the wilderness, to level those uneven places, to lift up those valleys, to lay low every mountain and hill, to make those rough places plain - *right now*. In other words, *to get to work*. This redemptive roadworks programme is *for us to do*, and in doing so, we are preparing the way of the LORD.

The wilderness is not for lamentation, and moaning and groaning about our loneliness. The wilderness is a call for engagement in the world against the ways of the world. When the powerful banish us, we work!

When they exile us, we build! When they silence us, we cry out! When they dehumanize us, we flourish! When they make our lives deserts of injustice, we hold on to the vision and we build highways of justice – for the LORD. The comfort the prophet is instructed to speak to God’s people, the heart of Jerusalem, is not just that their sins are forgiven. It is that the wilderness to which they have been banished can be turned into a place of joy, into what John Calvin calls “the theatre of God’s glory.” Then, and only then, Isaiah says, shall the glory of the LORD be revealed. Then, and only then, shall all flesh see it together.

II

From top to bottom, the children of Africa seem to be in the wilderness. Tormented by wars mostly not of our own making, as in Somalia, South Sudan, the DRC, and the Central African Republic. Still shackled by the irreparable vestiges of the enslavement of our people; still held hostage by horrific inhumanities of colonialism, what African American academic Joy DeGruy Leary, has called “Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome.” These are, even as we speak, like in Zimbabwe, exacerbated by the post-colonial betrayals by our own leaderships; their reckless gambles with the resources of our lands, the lives of our people, and the dreams and hopes of our children. We are wandering in the wilderness and the church, certainly in South Africa, has lost its prophetic voice, its prophetic presence, its prophetic courage. No, we have not lost it. *We have given it up.*

In this sense, the prophetic voices in the church are indeed fighting a lonely battle. We are not immune to loneliness, disillusionments, disorientation, and fear.

In Matthew’s gospel (11:7-11) Jesus turns to the crowds following him and asks three questions to which he apparently does not expect any response from his listeners. In fact, the passage makes clear that he does not give them a chance to respond. He answers his questions himself. “What did you out into the wilderness to see?” he asks, and then answers

with another question, "A reed shaken by the wind?" Before anyone in the crowd has a chance to respond, Jesus asks again, "What did you go out to see?" followed by, "Someone dressed in soft robes?" Immediately Jesus asks a third time, "What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet."

There is a detectably impatient rush in Jesus' speech here, a palpable, and rising, tension in the passages that make up Matthew 11 which begins with the question, via his disciples, from the imprisoned John the Baptist –"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another?" – to the intriguing remarks about the kingdom of God and violence to the three-fold woes to the cities Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. It ends with the invitation to take on Jesus' "easy" yoke and "light" burden through which action those who follow him will find "rest for their souls."

There is undoubtedly much to say about Matthew 11 as a whole, fascinating as it is, but it is those first rapid-fire questions and answers, Jesus verbally crowding out the crowd to make space for his own answers to his own questions, that arrest our attention, the three times-repeated "What did you go out to see?" The anxiousness in John's question - "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another?" - seems contagious. John is in prison because of his prophetic witness and he will not come out of there alive. Jesus knows this. This is, after all, what every prophet, however fearfully, must acknowledge: the life-threatening risks of speaking truth to power.

When John is indeed beheaded by Herod because Herod recognizes a power greater than his own at work in John - powers that he will also recognize in Jesus (Matt. 14:1) - Jesus, upon hearing this, got into a boat by himself, withdrew from the crowd and his disciples to a "deserted place to be with himself." (Matt. 14:13) Jesus knew that he himself would not escape that fate. So the Jesus speaking here is not the rabbi asking a question and then patiently, perhaps indulgently, waiting for his pupils to absorb it, think about it, and then giving their response. Jesus has an urgent point to make here.

Some scholars see in Jesus' questions an attempt to draw a distinction between John the Baptist and Herod. Whereas Herod lives in palaces - Herod did have a palace in - Herod did have a palace at Machaerus on the edge of the wilderness, east of the Dead Sea - at the edge of the wilderness on the banks of the river Jordan - and wore the fine robes of royalty, John wore a coat of camel's hair, ate not the rich foods and delectable delicacies of the spoiled and privileged but locusts and wild honey. Herod, a conscienceless despot and murderous tyrant to those below him, nonetheless scraped and bowed and fawned before those above him: the Roman elite and the emperor in Rome. A true coward, he would do nothing to displease his colonial masters, and anything to gain their favor. He was, in Jesus' words, "like a reed in the wind," easily swayed by his passions, fears and instincts for survival. In stark contrast, John was the true prophet, solid as a rock, truthful in his witness, faithful to his God and his calling, fearless in bringing his message, not disturbed if he caused offense to the powerful. There is merit in this argument.

But perhaps there is more to this. Jesus was indeed holding John up as an example of prophetic faithfulness. Hence Jesus was careful to tell John's disciples - "Go and tell John what you hear and see" - that in his own work for the kingdom of God Jesus would continue to do the work John began, and more; and, he added, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (v. 6) Those last words are not a display of throw-away bravado I think, nor an attempt to play the pre-emptive dispenser of blessings in order to bar anyone from taking offense. They are uttered to show Jesus' deep respect for this greatest of prophets "born of women," whose faithfulness has indeed caused offense to the powerful, and for which he would now pay the ultimate price. The prophet in the wilderness would be an example to the prophet from Galilee.

But I think there are at least two more things we could learn from this important passage. First, Jesus spoke in response to what he knew was John's deepest struggle at that point: the crisis prophetic witness inevitably creates for the faithful prophet. I will die before my work is finished, John

seems to say, and I am not sure just how much I have achieved. So much remains undone: was it all in vain, or are you the one who will somehow take this up and finish it, despite the terrible wrath of the powers against whom we are set to speak the truth of God's kingdom? Every prophet has faced such a moment: from Moses and Elijah to Isaiah and Jeremiah. So would Jesus, and that intensely. So on my reading, secondly, Jesus was not so much contrasting John with Herod, as holding up the real crisis every prophet of God will in some way or another come to face. And it is therefore good to remember that the true prophet never ends up *in* the palace, dressed up in the finery of royalty's favorite spokesperson and comforter, sitting at the table with kings and emperors, partaking of the food of the privileged and the pampered, as reward for their loyalty. No, the true prophet will always be *against* the palace, outside the camp of comfort and complacency, outside the circles where power resides. And in those crises caused by confrontation and offense, the prophet is indeed "like a reed in the wind." Not swayed by rewards from the palace but assailed by doubt

As one who has experienced the desolateness of isolation in prison, assailed by doubts and battered by uncertainties too many to count and too voracious to fend off, feeling the pain because of the conviction that one is called by God to speak truth to power; or who felt almost like a fraud, showing the face of courage on the outside while being mauled by the fangs of fear on the inside, I can only say, "how true!"

It is no wonder that the prophet Jeremiah, in his matchless, audacious, ferocious struggles with God and with his calling has become such a refuge, such a sanctuary for those whose lives have been a turned into multiple contradictions, whose souls have never learned to deal with the turmoil of being called by a God who is determined not to let go. Is it indescribable grace or unspeakable terror? It is better not to speak too easily, or too glowingly, of "the prophetic calling." It is even better, though, to ask with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Who am I?" and to discover the

only answer worth knowing: "Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine."

The prophet is not a rock of brave, stoic solidity. We are, as Jesus would come to know and experience in Gethsemane, more often like a reed in the wind. We do not rush to the cross, trembling with scarcely contained excitement of anticipated, triumphant martyrdom. We fight with God, through sweat turned into blood, to take the cup away from us. Nevertheless, the prophet stands against the power of the powerful, not because the prophet is so strong, but because the prophet is overcome by that other power: "But as for me," Micah says,

I am filled with power,
with the spirit of the LORD,
and with justice and might... (3:8)

III

As Christians involved in the struggle we were confronted with apartheid, the heresy of its theological and biblical justification, and the challenge for people of faith to choose for justice in the struggle against evil. We discovered that it was not so much the survival of the church that was at stake. At stake was the integrity of the church and its prophetic witness in a world shaken by deadly convulsions. At stake was the Gospel itself. In moments like this, fundamental decisions must be taken and these are the decisions on which the life of the church depends. These challenges have returned with matching urgency.

The world in which we live and are called to witness as the Church of Jesus Christ is equally a world shaken by deadly convulsions. The combined wealth of the world's richest 1% overtook that of the other 99% in 2016. In that year, more than half of the wealth in the world was in the hands of just 62 individuals, more than was owned by the entire 3.5 billion of the world's population. The so-called economic recovery of the last few years was in essence only a recovery for the rich: the richest

1% have seen their share of the global wealth increase from 44% in 2009 to 48% in 2014, and has climbed to more than 50% in 2016.

But that quickly became old news. By January 2017 Oxfam reported that the situation was much worse: just 8 white men own as much wealth as half the world's population. One in nine people do not have enough to eat and more than 1 billion people live on less than \$1.25 a day.

In 2019, South Africa remains the most unequal society on earth. Over half our population live in utmost poverty. In the meantime, though, we have over 13,000 dollar millionaires. According to a new study released in June 2019 by AfrAsia Bank, Durban, Belito and Umhlanga, with 25%, have seen the biggest growth in wealth among our dollar billionaires over the past decade, a time period which corresponds nicely with the Zuma/Gupta years. Time Magazine, reporting on our rich/poor gap, writes, "Poverty is so extreme in South Africa that even a lower middle class area looks rich." People of faith should be outraged, but we aren't.

The late, and greatly lamented Stellenbosch economist, Sampie Terreblanche, constantly raised these crucial matters, pointing out the undeserved enrichment of whites and the undeserved impoverishment of black South Africans over more than three centuries. Terreblanche never tired of warning us that our present grotesque social and economic inequalities are the greatest danger facing our country. It is, he insisted, not only a socio-economic and political question; it is a *moral* question, prompting him to ask, "Why don't the churches rise up in revolutionary anger at these conditions?" He actually talked about a moral question for *white people*, and that remains true. But we now know that the class struggle we are facing is a struggle against a predatory capitalism that has put on a black face. Why not, indeed.

IV

In fundamental ways, the *Belhar Confession* of my denomination has become a defining, prophetic presence for us in our witness to and in the world, though in the process it has become a witness against ourselves. There are good reasons why so many churches in the global Reformed family, (though not the white Dutch Reformed Church) have formally adopted it as a confession and faithfully trying to make it a way of life. In its bold and hopeful articulation of the essence of the prophetic church, it has indeed become the most potent self-critical presence in the life of my church. By far the most well-known words in the confession are the words found in the 4th article: *We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged, and that God calls the church to follow God in this... that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream; that the church as the possession of God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others. Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.*

For Belhar, following the Reformed tradition as a whole, it is clear: God's preferential option is for the poor, the destitute and the wronged. Those of us who call upon the name of Jesus must stand with those, because God stands with them in *any form of suffering and need*, and against *any form of injustice*. Every form of injustice is a form of exclusion. Because of the choices God makes, because of where Christ stands, we are, Belhar says, *obligated* "to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another." No exceptions, no

maybe's, no kidding. What Belhar is pleading for is the courage, compassion, and commitment to disrupt the works of evil in the world by the undoing of injustice, and by doing the deeds of justice, peace and love required by Yahweh.

Increasingly, the church across Africa is characterised by the unholy emulation of that peculiar Christianized militarism of American "patriot pastors," a so-called "spiritual warfare" wholly based on an unabashed, imperialist, violent jihadism across the globe, in tandem with a spiritually militarised bigotry aimed against women, the poor, the LGBTQI community, and everyone not a "born-again, Bible-believing" Christian. And, in the end, as the "prosperity gospel" fires up the imagination of the "set men of God" while capturing the purses of the poor and needy, it is all about power and greed. So we should think twice before expressing unqualified pride in the fact that Christianity is now the fastest growing religion on our continent.

We are bound to recall the invaluable distinctions drawn by Frederick Douglass in 1846,

I love the religion of our blessed Saviour ... which comes from above, in the wisdom of God which is first pure, then peacable, gentle ... without partiality and without hypocrisy ... I love that religion ... It is because I love this religion that I hate the slave-holding, the woman-whipping, the mind-darkening, the soul-destroying religion that exists in America ... Loving the one I must hate the other; holding to one I must reject the other.

So the question is not whether we are religious, or Christians: the question is what kind of Christianity are we embracing? I am speaking of the waves of Christian neo-fundamentalism imported from the U.S. washing over Africa and much of the global South with its toxic neo-colonialist package deal of scriptural selectivity, presented as "biblical inerrancy," violent homophobia, patriarchal power, and anti-justice agenda. Its justification of war and violence in the name of Jesus, its religious exclusivism and Christian chauvinism, coupled with unbridled

political ambition in its so-called dominion theology, and its prosperity gospel grounded in the embrace of and enslavement to capitalist consumerist ideology. In its neo-colonialist alliances with capitalist power and the global media, it certainly is dragging Africa, its churches and its societies, to the edge of a disaster every bit as devastating as colonialism. This is the new heresy which like the heresy of apartheid has to be named and combatted.

What Belhar is calling for is the doing of inclusive, irrevocable, unstoppable justice: if justice does not roll down like waters for persons of colour subjected to racial discrimination, for women, for LGBTQI persons, for everyone at all suffering under any form of oppression and exclusion, justice will not roll down at all.

V

In South Africa we are experiencing, on an almost daily basis, the tragic consequences of what Sampie Terreblanche calls the "secret elite conspiracy" of 1994 between the wealthy, white elite and the black elite within the African National Congress, under the tutelage of the United States and the Bretton Woods Institutions: a fraudulent economic policy that has increased the underserved wealth of the already white rich; increased the undeserved impoverishment of the already desperately black poor while creating a small, new, unbelievably rich black aristocracy, the bedrock of our disastrous inequalities. Our negotiators felt themselves obligated, not to the interests of the people, but to the secret deals made with apartheid South Africa between 1985 and 1994.

Because it studiously, and quite deliberately, avoided social justice, restitution, and the redistribution of power, wealth, land, and social goods, our reconciliation process, in which black South Africans have invested so much, including the social cohesion it was meant to produce and foster, is under savage strain. In other words, democratic South Africa came into being, in disastrous denial of the revolutionary struggles, sacrifices, aspirations and hopes of the people, as a triumphalist product

of imperialism. So the church must not only ask serious questions about our reconciliation process, we must face up to why we have failed to hold up the biblical demands for genuine political reconciliation for our nation, and why we have failed to set the example for true reconciliation for the nation to follow.

This my firm belief: We cannot say Jesus without saying justice; and we cannot say justice without saying Jesus. And the more we say Jesus we have to say justice; and the more we say justice, we have to say Jesus, because without Jesus we will not be able to sustain the struggle for justice.

VI

In January 2017 the United States and the world witnessed a spectacle many were convinced they would never see, and all over the world misogynists, patriarchalists, xenophobes, and homophobes of every stripe, creed and color; white supremacists and unashamed racists from New Nazi's in Europe to revived apartheid defenders in South Africa and new apartheid creators in Israel arise empowered and emboldened. Predatory capitalists, worshippers of money and destroyers of the Earth have rejuvenated joy; war mongers and the makers of drones, cluster bombs, barrel bombs, land mines and all kinds of deadly chemical weapons rejoice in the temples of profiteering as they see their fortunes and stocks rise higher every year. In a perverse reversion of the prophet Isaiah's vision of the voice in the wilderness, they have waited upon their lord, their strength is renewed, and they are ready to mount up with wings like eagles, to run and not grow weary, to walk and not faint. As a continent, Africa has never really recovered from the impact of slavery and the slave trade, the ravages of colonialism, the self-inflicted wounds of our post-colonial recklessness and the onslaughts of neo-imperialism. We have work to do.

We should learn to resist the temptation to see the global realities through the eyes of the powerful and privileged, but rather through the eyes of the suffering, the weak and the vulnerable, the dehumanized and the demonized, the outcasts and the excluded. Our theology, and hence our preaching, should be anchored in a theology attuned to the cries of the poor and oppressed because I believe John Calvin was right: the cries of the oppressed are the cries from the very heart of God. Calvin is quite radical in this: "It is then the same," Calvin says, "as though God heard Godself when God hears the cries and groaning of those who cannot bear injustice." God presents Godself as the poor and the oppressed. We must not be afraid to say it.

The key to overcoming the wilderness is to remain faithful. Hagar remained faithful and because she did, she met the God who sees, who made her see the well that saved her child's life, and made her hear that promise of life. Because she remained faithful, she had the strength to go back to the camp, face Sarah and Abraham, and claim the inheritance meant for her son. Because Miriam remained faithful in the wilderness, she could challenge Moses, his exclusivist, violent, patriarchal leadership and give the people an alternative leadership that could not only be imagined, but enacted.

Because Isaiah remained faithful, he could hear the voice in the wilderness, and could see the future of justice: every valley filled, every mountain and hill made low, every rough place made plain. Because he remained faithful, he knew the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and *all* people – the rich and the poor, the privileged and the destitute, the high and mighty and the lowly and powerless, shall see it together. The poor and powerless shall rejoice, and the rich and powerful shall quake in their shoes. Because Jesus remained faithful in the wilderness, he could withstand every temptation Satan threw at him, because he knew every single one of them was meant to tempt him away from the poor, from the struggle for justice, from his communion with God and from the fulfillment of God's reign. So the question in the wilderness remains: have

we heard the voice of God as it speaks to us in the cries of the oppressed, in the voice of God, and in the resolute "NO!" of Jesus?

VII

The reason why Godself does not come down from heaven to build the highway and is calling on us to do it is because God has bestowed us with something special; God has enough trust in us to make us God's co-workers. Even more: this same Isaiah reminds us that God has written our names in the palm of God's hand, that this God will be with us as we go through the water and the fire. That is to say, God has your back. So there is a power within you. "There is a message to be borne," Albert Luthuli reminded us, "and God will not fail those whose bear it fearlessly." Because there is a power within you. As with Hagar and Hannah, with Jochebed and Miriam, with Isaiah and Amos and Jeremiah; with Mary and her Magnificat; with John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, the wilderness is not a place of mourning, self-doubt, and self-pity. It is a place of hearing the voice and answering the call, of saying "no" to Satan's temptations; a place where there is work to do. We have a highway to build. We have a world to save.