

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 14, 2025

Soft Robes and Rough Roads

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? Someone dressed in soft robes?” Jesus asks the crowd this unsettling question in Matthew 11:7–8. He draws a sharp line between two places.

The Palace is where the soft robes live. It is where comfort sits close to power, where Herod’s court smiles under Roman standards, where stability functions like an idol. In palaces, everything is polished, but very little is brave.

The Wilderness is where John the Baptist lives—camel hair and locusts. Risk and repentance. It's a place we're conditioned to fear because everyone knows the wilderness is dangerous.

We recognize our own palaces. Not marble halls, perhaps, but modern versions that sparkle with convenience. The halls of power and the platforms of the “tech broligarchs.” The soft robes of one-click comfort. The palace promises to keep us safe if we will only comply, only keep quiet, only conform. The palace whispers, “Without me, you won’t make it.”

But Jesus turns our fear inside out. The Palace is where the empty suits live. The Wilderness is where true life is.

We have long preached the wilderness as punishment, as a barren place of testing. But listen again through a resistance lens: the wilderness is the last-resort home for those exiled by synthetic famines of solidarity. When community is starved by greed, when belonging is rationed by status, the wilderness becomes a sanctuary. Not a place of lack, but a place of prophetic potential.

History remembers the Maroon communities. In the Great Dismal Swamp, escaped enslaved people and Indigenous neighbors built a life where the “civilized” swore

life was impossible. They chose the wilderness over the “palace” of the plantation because the wilderness offered what the palace refused: freedom. In a place dismissed as uninhabitable, they created actively resistant communities. They cultivated food. They hid one another. They survived not by the empire’s permission, but by God-given ingenuity and shared courage.

Sometimes God calls us into that kind of wilderness. To log off the imperial cloud long enough to remember our neighbors’ names. To loosen the grip of consumerism so we can learn again how to clean the water entrusted to us, mend what we have rather than discard it, and follow our ancestors in the faith who chose courage over comfort. The wilderness trains our eyes to see abundance without hoarding, community without gatekeeping, holiness without pretense.

John is not in a palace. He is in prison because Herod cannot abide the truth. From that cell, John sends a question to Jesus: “Are you the one who is to come?” We often preach this as doubt. Maybe John is faltering, we say. Maybe the wilderness finally broke him.

But hear it through resistance: John is a political prisoner checking on the movement. He is asking, “Is the work getting done? I am in chains for this, are you continuing the revolution?”

Jesus does not answer with a résumé or a degree. He answers with testimony:

- The blind see.
- The lame walk.
- The poor hear good news.

This is not a checklist of “fixing” broken bodies as if they were less-than. This is a tearing down of the social walls that labeled people unclean and kept them exiled from community. The miracle is as social as it is physical: those sidelined are moved to the center. At Jesus’ table, the ones purity culture called untouchable are the honored guests. John’s question receives an answer that any prisoner can trust: the movement is moving. The reign of God is arriving from the margins inward.

Matthew’s Gospel knows Isaiah 35. The wilderness, Isaiah sings, is not a dead end but a construction site. In the desert, God is building a Highway called the Holy

Way. The crocus blooms where the dry dirt cracked yesterday. Joy grows in places where fear used to have the final word.

Isaiah says, “The unclean shall not travel it.” In a resistance key, hear this not as a slam against those society already calls unclean, but rather as a judgment against those who refuse to give up the soft robes of oppression. The highway is for fools like us, the reed-shaken, the refugees of empire, the ones who put our weight on God’s promises. And on this road, the text says, we cannot go astray. Not because we are clever, but because grace is sturdier than our stumbling.

How will we survive this wilderness? Isaiah’s counsel is concrete: Strengthen weak hands and make firm feeble knees. James adds, “Do not grumble against one another,” because grumbling is how solidarity dies and empires win without lifting a sword. Survival is communal, or it is not survival at all. On the Holy Way, we become repairers of one another’s courage. We share water. We trade stories. We braid our hope together.

The palace tells us a story meant to keep us small: without our platforms, our algorithms, our markets, our soft robes, you will die. But the gospel tells a different story: the desert shall rejoice and blossom. The flowers are already pushing through the cracked earth.

So stop looking for salvation in royal palaces or from princes. Their breath is in their nostrils, says the psalmist, and their promises expire as quickly as their attention spans. Go where life is being born without permission. Go to the wilderness. Find the people who are making a way out of no way, who are cleaning the water, mending what they have, and centering those the world has cast aside.

Jesus verifies his ministry not by who invited him to dinner, but by who was healed, who was seen, and who was restored to the circle. “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me,” he says. Blessed are those who are not scandalized by a Messiah who chooses wilderness over palace, prophets over courtiers, freedom over soft robes.

So church, strengthen your knees. Lay aside the soft robes that cost your neighbor their life. Step onto the Holy Way with the fools and the saints, with John and the Maroons and every wanderer who knows that God meets us on the margins. Out

there, in the wind and the scrub and the stubborn blossoms, you will find the divine. And you will find life. Amen.