

Good Shepherd Episcopal Church
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Year B - Advent 2
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The Desert Well

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. – Mark 1:1-4

Human beings are afraid of lonely places: empty parking lots, abandoned houses (which we often call "haunted"), walking alone at night, an old cabin in the woods, your car breaking down on deserted road. Any of these scenes could be the beginning of a good scary story or movie!

It reminds me of our youth group mission trips to Navajoland (AZ) in high school. Being on the reservation was probably my first real experience of being in the desert. It is everything you think of when someone says desert, hot, dusty, dry, it's almost hard to breathe because of the heat and elevation...but I think more than any of those things, it is lonely. The even if you are with other people, kind of lonely. You sense your own smallness. There are miles and miles of roads on the reservation where there are no lights, no gas stations, no humans, just empty roads that stretch on forever. I vividly remember an old Navajo storyteller telling us stories about Navajo skinwalkers and warning us to never drive on the reservation at night and if we did and we saw a man walking along the side of the road, that we should never, never look back at him in the rear view mirror. Although I am not normally one to get scared by ghost stories, to this day I am creeped out by hitchhikers on the road after dark...

The desert is a powerful location and metaphor in our Scriptures as well. It is a place of terror and tenderness, a place where one is at the mercy of life's extremes, and therefore completely dependent on God, who provides what is needed in the desert. It is in the desert that we come to know God and be constituted as God's people. During the Exodus, the people have to trust God to lead them with pillars of cloud and fire, feed them manna, and give them water from a rock. The prophet Isaiah talks a lot about deserts as well... "the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom." Or For the Lord will comfort Zion, he will make her wilderness

like Eden and her desert like the garden of the Lord. It is in the wilderness that the prophet Elijah is fed by ravens and waited upon by angels.

In other words, in the Bible, the desert is not just a lonely, dangerous place, it is precisely the place that God intervenes to save. Our gospel writer Mark picks up on this theme. For Mark, God's saving act comes in the desert. God breaks into the world – as a voice crying out in the wilderness. Mark begins the gospel of Jesus Christ, not with a baby in a manger, or angels appearing, or magi, or shepherds...but with a lone voice crying out in the wilderness. An image not so different than the beginning of Genesis when God speaks into the empty chaos and brings light. Mark too begins his story with a word in the wilderness. God does not remove the desert, God meets us in there!

In the same way, the prophet Isaiah sings a song of comfort to a confused and scattered people. He is talking to people weary after 70 years in exile, a metaphorical desert. He speaks with tenderness to people who have endured too much, grief, loneliness, despair. He reminds them that God's word and love stand forever (unlike flesh or grass). He reminds them that after everything that has happened to them, the bond between God and God's people still stands. The wilderness has been transformed, the wasteland of their grief becomes a garden of hope.

John the Baptist calls people into the desert, challenging them to confront the brokenness of their lives. He calls them not to scare them, but to bring them to a new place, a place to encounter God directly. For John, the Baptist, the desert is a place to be stripped of all preoccupations and accumulations of life. When they enter the desert, seekers will find the God who is searching for them, ready to bind up their wounds and offer them a drink (or a plunge) of living water.

So, in some ways the desert is the place where God does God's best work. In the wilderness, the *eremos* in Greek, a word that describes a place without inhabitants, an empty, abandoned or sparsely populated place. We all experience these places or perhaps more realistically these times in our lives. Sometimes we choose these challenges, time to be apart, discover ourselves anew, but more often than not, the deserts of our lives discover/find us.

Times when we are hurting, or in need, searching for answers, or in need comfort. Times when we are lonely, even if there are people around us. Times when sadness creeps up on us. Places where we are lost and don't know which way to turn. Where we find ourselves alone and must put our trust in God alone.

And yet, again and again, in the Gospels, Jesus withdraws to the desert, to a lonely place, to seek God in prayer. Jesus wanted “desert time.” How often do we avoid this important aspect of our spiritual lives? Even when the desert is thrown in our laps, we run from it. We do not know how to seek or accept the desert of solitude, silence, and prayer. We are frightened of this wild, unknowable place. What would happen if we allow ourselves to experience the desert...to make room for God to break in? A voice crying out in the wilderness?

(Allesandro Pronzato writes,) “The desert is the threshold to the meeting ground of God and humans. It is the scene of the exodus. You do not settle there, you pass through. One ventures on these tracks because one is driven by the Spirit to the Promised Land. But it is only promised to those who are willing to chew sand for forty years without doubting their invitation to the feast in the end.” As we spend time in solitude and a forced stillness brought on by a pandemic, perhaps we can think look to those who spent time in the desert, who have gone before us. Let us allow this time prepare our hearts and minds for God’s arrival.

In the desert of Advent we wait for our return from exile, we listen to the voice of the prophet calling out to us, to prepare for God to break into our wilderness lives. The desert is also the place where we meet God. “The Desert Christians of the fourth century report that people went out into the desert to seek the men and women who made eating sand their regular diet. They asked them for a word, a bit of manna to sustain their own journeys. And so I have one for you as well. It comes from that wise “children’s book” by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince*. You probably remember the story. The airman has an accident and comes down in the Sahara Desert, where he meets what he first describes as “an odd little voice,” whom we come to know as the little prince. (In Ch. 24), eight days after his crash in the desert, the airman has drunk his last drop of water. He and the little prince trudge for several hours in search of water. They find none. Night falls. A conversation about the beauty of the desert ensues. It closes: “What makes the desert beautiful,” said the little prince, “is that somewhere it hides a well...”

This is my word for you: What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well.”¹ May you find the well that will sustain you in these times and drink deeply of its living water. Amen.

¹ Quote and ideas about the desert from Bonnie Thurston her book, “The Spiritual Landscape of Mark.”