

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 35:6a, 10
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

It is from the difficult place, the desert place, that we get our glimpse of God.

Glorious readings in Advent – and this Sunday from Isaiah chapter 35 and from Saint Matthew chapter 11. From Isaiah we hear that the lamenting people of Israel will soon be transformed into newness and joy.

The desert will bloom for them. The dry terrain of their lives will blossom into lush gardens and be refreshed with cool clean water. The holy highway will be laid out through the land as well, along which God's ransomed people will be protected from danger and lead to Zion. The prophet announces healing for those with physical impairments. And Jesus uses those words as his own in describing his work – at his touch people with blindness receive sight, those with deafness can hear, those who are lame walk, those with disease are cured, those who have died come to life and people who are poor hear good news – what a vision!

But we cannot overlook the most important facts; these glimpses of God's rule are glimpses *from the desert*. Even as Isaiah's good news is pronounced, the Israelite exiles are still in bondage, struggling in their wilderness with weak knees and faint hearts, still overwhelmed by sorrow and sighing for their homeland. John the Baptist receives exciting news by

way of his disciples of the works taking place at Jesus' hands, but keep in mind that he receives this word while sitting in a lonely prison cell – barren, his own desert, sort of.

The fact that these glimpses of God's rule are *from the desert* is important because it validates *our* experience. These scripture lessons bring us hope, but if we take them to imply that life is already full of rejoicing, their promises are not credible because our experience tells us otherwise – life is hard – life is fearful – life even involves war and terrorism this Christmas season.

Is your life like mine – a desert: facing illness, disability or the death of a loved one? Is it some other form of personal loss? Are loneliness, isolation or spiritual dryness familiar to you? Perhaps you have struggled as I have with uncertainty about the future or experiencing the pain of questioning yourself. You may be experiencing economic hardship, imprisonment, addiction, difficult relationships or the effects of sin in your life either as a victim or as a perpetrator of sin – or both.

Today's readings do not seek to minimize or put aside our desert experiences – rather they presuppose and build upon them. The desert wilderness has been such a common experience among God's people that both our

scriptures and our faith take it seriously – we dwell there more often than anywhere else as human beings.

Desert times might also be called in-between times: slumps or “valleys” along the journey between “mountaintops.” During the emotional highs, God is perceived easily and the effects of God’s actions are readily apparent. In the desert, however, gaining a sure sense of God’s presence is very difficult and seldom seen except perhaps in retrospect.

Witness just a few examples among our ancestors in the faith: Abraham and Sarah’s in-between time following God’s call and promises to them before Isaac’s birth. Israel’s wilderness wanderings between the exhilarating escape from Egypt with God clearly at their side and their “holy war” in the Promised Land. The exiles’ in-between time in Babylon, the glorious height of David’s kingdom behind them and the return to Jerusalem still but a dream. John the Baptist’s in-between time in prison after the excitement of preparing the way of the Lord before seeing glorious evidence of Jesus’ messiahship. Our own in-between time when, in the face of terror and fear, we cry out for assurance that God is with us.

In Advent we recall the life of the whole Church is an in-between time of wilderness wandering and waiting for the Messiah to come in fullness. A priest friend of mine once said, “In-between times are the hardest times for God’s people.” In the desert it is especially difficult to recognize God’s nearness. We could perceive God if we could listen and look with hearts open to radical possibilities, but often that is hard to do in the wilderness – especially when

resources are scarce. In Advent and all desert times, therefore, we look to the experience of the faithful before us, and embrace their desert glimpses of God and the kingdom as their own. In the questioning and doubts of John the Baptist confined in prison, the signs the prophet Isaiah had foretold assure everyone that God is close at hand in the person of Jesus. And Jesus says in Matthew 11, “Go, tell what you hear and see.” In effect, Jesus says, “Listen and look with your sense attuned, and share with others what you hear and see.” We may be surprised to find that God’s Messiah looks like a baby cushioned in straw, an executed criminal, a gentle lamb: nothing at all like the political Messiah that we had expected. God may touch the diseased people from whom we would shy away. God may even attend to the poor about whom we would rather forget. God may be present in a tender hug, a listening ear, the offer of a cup of cool water, a child’s secure and carefree laugh – God may even be present in the efforts at peace in our country and in the world today. We are not yet witnessing God’s kingdom and fullness, but we’ll see just enough at Christmas to help us trust in what is still to come. It is from our deserts, from within our wastelands that the vision is there before us, and from which we can take heart. This holy food we share, this gathering in which we become the Body of Christ, are strength for the journey and for our survival.

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