

An Inner Desert
Advent 2B
PPC
6 December 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8

“To live in this world/you must be able/to do three things”, writes Mary Oliver in her well-known poem, “In Blackwater Woods”.

Especially in this season of Advent I find myself pondering what it is that’s important in my life. This year seems particularly challenging. Like so many, I suppose, I am seeking to hang onto what I treasure. But what if some of those treasured times defy the law of life? What if that kind of thinking is a needy, clingy, way of being in the world? After all, I’m never going to be a young girl again heading out on a cold, snowy, Saturday to help my dad choose the exactly right Christmas tree. In my memory, I’m never mad at my dad, either!

The closest I have ever come to spending time in the desert was when we traveled by car from Denver to Albuquerque. Southern Colorado and northern New Mexico may not be officially designated as “desert” but the landscape there looked like what I imagined a desert to look like. No green anywhere, flat brown earth with strange dirt and rock sculptures sticking straight up into the air. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky and the bright, blue sky with the sun beating down on us just made me want to escape.

Sometimes, we do find ourselves traveling in the desert. That desert wilderness may not always be our physical surroundings but it may appear in our interior lives. It can feel like the desert when your husband is fired - again - and you are a stay-at-home mom with young children. Or perhaps the heat of the desert is felt as you

valiantly fight your way toward sobriety. It may even feel desert-like when you find yourself in a relationship that drains the very life from you. There are many ways to be in the desert wilderness without taking fossil fueled transportation to get there.

Mark writes “John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”Mark’s Gospel cuts right to the chase. There is no angelic visitation, pregnant mother, perplexed father, Gloria from on high, or Magi from the East.”¹ No, all we get is the telling of the good news by a wild and crazy prophet. More puzzling, perhaps, is that the good news invites us to repent.

It sure feels like the wilderness today. Those voices crying out, “I can’t breathe”. The mad king sitting in his office insisting that he is telling the truth. Our elected officials refusing to see the reality of the pandemic and its effect on employment. As the surge of COVID 19 becomes more and more real, one quarter of the people in Rhode Island are experiencing food scarcity. It is expected that the day after Christmas when many will lose their unemployment assistance, there will be a great number of evictions.

At the Miriam Family Center we vetted folk who wanted to receive a Thanksgiving basket, consisting of a turkey and the other foods that make up a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. One year, on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Carol showed up on our doorstep, She had one small child and had not been able to sign up in time to receive this needed food. However, I knew that the nuns who had a home down the street from our church were offering turkeys and help for people at Thanksgiving. It was raining heavily the day that Carol showed up at the Center. So,

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2014/11/the-advent>.

she and I got into my car and we drove the few blocks to the nun's residence. Upon our arrival we learned that the nun in charge of the turkey dinner distribution was out but would be back in about a half hour, if we could come back. Carol and I, running out to the car to dodge the heavy rain drops, plopped ourselves down in the front seat of the car and decided to wait there until we could meet with the right nun.

As we were sitting in the car, rain pounding down on the roof, Carol began to cry. Through her sobs she looked at me and asked, "Have you ever felt like you're swimming in the ocean, away from shore, and as you try to get closer to the shore, you are struggling to keep your head above water? Just when you have gotten a deep breath of air, suddenly, a big wave rolls over you and you can't get a breath? As you continue to struggle just to breathe, over and over, that's how I feel right now."

Whether the desert or the ocean, too many of us today are struggling just to survive. How will we escape the desert and its heat or the ocean and its waves?

Mark roots John the Baptist's calling in the message of Isaiah 40. After 39 chapters of threats and pleading for the ancient Judeans to change their ways to the ways of God, Isaiah in chapter 40, brings us the voice of a God who brings comfort to those suffering exiles. Their desert was an enforced exile in a place that wasn't home. Perhaps like many of us today, though, their memories of home were of a place that used to be. A place where the Jews had power. We all know how our memories can turn actuality into a perfect place. Nevertheless, Isaiah tells these exiles that their time of captivity is about to end and thus the prophet speaks of a voice crying out from the wilderness. This voice calls for a clearing of the desert. The valleys will be raised and

the mountains flattened so that the way home will be safe and easy. This journey through the wilderness will be a hopeful one for it will bring the exiles home.

John the Baptist tells us to get on that road. Make a choice. What will be most important in your life and the life of this nation? God is preparing the road for us; will we take it?

Mark's audience was a group of Jews of the first century living under the oppressive rule of Herod, a non-Jewish puppet of the even more oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. They were desperate for the return of self-rule, a more equal distribution of wealth, less violence, and the right to live as free people.

The great irony of the *Pax Romano* was that peace was achieved through violence. Conquer and disperse your enemy, steal land and grind your heel upon the necks of ordinary citizens by taxing them unfairly. There will be peace because the truth tellers are silenced. Gas lighting by these rulers made all doubt their understanding of what was real and what was a lie. But if you tell lies often enough, soon the truth disappears and there is a kind of uneasy peace. Everyone is too afraid to stand up to such evil. The Empire will strike back.

Where do we see the Empire today? Are we seeking peace through violent means? Parker Palmer writes "No one can hang on to America as they imagine it used to be - much of which is a sick delusion to begin with." When peaceful protestors, protesting for Black Lives Matter are blamed for the destruction and violence that we saw in our cities this summer, where is the truth? Are we so scared of one another?

A voice calls out in the wilderness. What kind of hope is this prophet talking about?

The really hard part about this call is that if we want to find that easy road home, we are going to have to walk through the wilderness first. We need to come to terms with why we need to repent. Quoting Parker Palmer again, he writes, “We can choose to help clean up the wreckage of the past four years - and join the effort to rebuild this country using the plumb lines of love, truth, and justice. Delusions take us on a death trip (another lesson of the pandemic). Heeding the call of our better angels takes us toward new life.”

Repenting means changing. Turning our faces toward God. The problem is, if it was so easy to change, everyone would have low blood pressure and low cholesterol because we would stop eating the things that cause that bodily harm. If it was so easy to change, no one would ever have to struggle with addiction of any kind because as soon as they realized what they were doing to ourselves, they would change and do something else. If it was so easy to change we wouldn't need Dr. Phil or Dr. Oz. Usually, although we may recognize the need to repent, or change our lives, we give lip service to the need to change and then move on with our lives, staying the way we are.

Mary Oliver, in her poem, finishes with these lines. “Every year/everything/I have ever learned/in my lifetime/leads back to the fires/and the black river of loss/whose other side is salvation/whose meaning/none of us will ever know./To live in the world/you must be able/to do three things:/to love what is mortal;/to hold it/against your bones knowing/your own life depends on it;/and, when the time comes to let it go,/to let it go.”

There is so much we need to let go of if we truly want peace and a nation that values equality and justice. Are we capable of letting go?

That voice crying in the wilderness is a voice of hope. In our waiting, we come to recognize that this hope only comes from the lessons of the desert. We can re-align our lives, turn our faces to God and feel the warmth and the love.

None of us seeks out the desert. But when we find ourselves there, as perhaps these times show us, may we remember that amid the crucible of transformation we can discover a new vision and a new healing. We can let go of the delusions of the past.

John's call to repentance leads to personal and community transformation. We discover that each of us is called to "prepare the way for God" in our families, our neighborhoods, and our nation. Our preparation opens up pathways of healing, reconciliation and blessing.

May it be so.