

Second Sunday of Advent
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA
9 December 2018

Luke 3:1-6

Advent begins in darkness, but Advent also begins in the desert. Luke today tells us that the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. Not only is John a wilderness or desert prophet, but according to Luke 1:80, John, “Grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.” John lived in and grew up in the wilderness.

This is a pattern that can be seen throughout Holy Scripture. Remember the wondering of the people of God in the desert for 40 years before arriving at the Promised Land. Remember David and his companions escaping into the desert from king Saul and Elijah the prophet escaping into the wilderness to save his life from Queen Jezebel. Remember all the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and others announcing one who prepares the way of Messiah by creating paths in the wilderness for our Lord.

God has a tendency to speak to his prophets in the wilderness. During this desert experience, the prophets are equipped and encouraged for ministry through their communion with God. Although the desert is a place of bareness and scarcity, in Biblical tradition, the wilderness is also a place of divine provision. God provides for his people and this provision nurtures their bodies and prepares their souls for the mission God has designed for them.

Remember the many narratives in the Gospels when Jesus escapes to the desert. After his journeys of preaching and healing the sick in village after village, Jesus escapes to a desolate place or mountain to commune with God alone and in peace. And in the silence of the wilderness when nothing can be seen or heard for miles and miles, God’s voice is heard with perfect clarity. God speaks in silence, which means that we need to learn to listen in silence for that still voice of God.

In the silence and solitude of the desert, God prepared John for almost 30 years. And Luke tells us that this preparation in the wilderness was announced by the angel who appeared to John’s father in the Temple. That angel said, “And he will go before him (Messiah) in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared for him. (1:16-17). Luke makes clear that this prophecy has been fulfilled in John by quoting the prophet Isaiah. John is “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’”.

John is the Elijah returned, or, in other words, one who “walks in the spirit of Elijah.” He marks the end of the old age of the prophets of Israel and builds a bridge to the new age of Messiah. He was prepared and formed in the desert and he began his message of Advent in the desert. Ironically, darkness and isolation become the very stage of John’s preparation and formation for ministry. And, like Jesus himself, John learned early on to find God’s voice and provision in the scarcity of the desert.

I believe this desert message is very important for us today. The days are getting shorter, the nights are growing in hours and darkness, and many of us may find ourselves going through a desert experience. There are many of us who suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder. The major symptom of this condition is crushing and unrelenting depression. In fact, more people choose to commit suicide during the holidays than at any other time during the year. The irony is that the daily pressure to be happy and joyful, the Christmas music, the television specials and Christmas movies, and all the party invitations often do nothing to alleviate the crushing loneliness and sadness of this condition.

Others among us have felt isolated from God and others for years. Many leave in a constant state of spiritual desert and they feel dried to their bones and lifeless. God may have been a close friend in former years, but they now feel God is very distant from them, God doesn’t care, God is busy taking care of the super-good and the super-devout. He simply doesn’t have time for us, not that we feel as though we deserve his time and his love anyway.

Some of us feel trapped in the desert of worry and all we can see is scarcity. We worry about our children and all we can see is the areas where they have failed to live up to our expectations. We are worried about our finances and all we can see is the things we don’t have and the life we could otherwise have if we had an abundance of money and resources. We are worried about our health and all we see is the joint pain, the mobility difficulties, or the back aches. We are worried about our future and spend countless nights imagining all sorts of catastrophic scenarios of what might happen to us or those we love. We are worried about our world and deal with this worry by watching 24-hour news cycles at every waking moment, which of course make us more worried and upset. There are countless examples of this.

If you are in any of these categories or if you are going through the desert of resentment, bitterness, hopeless, or helplessness, I have good news today. Even though Advent begins in darkness and in the desert, Advent points to a reality that is filled with life and possibility. Advent points us to the new life of the Christ child and the new life this child can bring to each of us. The good news is that your desert is the very place where God has chosen to build a home. He has chosen to break into our world and he knows exactly what we are going through. He is speaking to you this very moment and he knows your pain and your anguish. Listen

to his voice because his voice is filled with hope. The deserts will be filled with springs of living water. The dry places will produce abundant harvests. A highway is being built in your desert this very day and this highway leads to God himself. We are not alone. Christ walks with us and he knows how desperate our condition has become. Please listen to his voice this very day. He is our savior and we need saving, especially during this season of advancing darkness.

And if you are suffering from depression this season, please know that we love you, we are praying for you, and we are here for you if you need us. You are not alone. God is in control and he loves you more than you can ever imagine.

My friends, whatever desert you may be going through, ask yourself what God may be preparing you do. Listen to his voice and let him lead you where he wants you to be. Deserts are not empty. They are filled with possibility. May Christ, who speaks in darkness and who knows the desert well, help you find your way to him this very day. Amen!