

Lent I Year B 2018

If you've never been to a desert... you should go. While in my last year in Seminary in Austin, Katharine and I were invited by some friends in San Antonio to go to the Big Bend National Park. The Big bend is situated in west Texas along the Rio Grande on the Mexican American border. It is in the northernmost part of the Chihuahuan desert which extends deep into Mexico, and a ways north into Texas along the Chisos mountain range. It was like going to another planet.

At first glance it seemed a barren and lifeless waste... an intimidating landscape wholly alien to my sense of place... Being a son of the agrarian South, used to our lush and almost tropical climate, it was unnerving and altogether disorienting... Upon entering the park I could feel my anxiety spike. We had received a brochure at the welcome station all about the do's and don'ts of desert culture... Take a generous supply of water with you at all times; Don't run from mountain lions; avoid confrontations with bears; stay in groups; Keep a compass; pay close attention to your surroundings. I began to wonder why I'd come... But soon enough I realized that despite the danger, the desert was beautiful, and full of life... 1200 species of plants in fact; 450 species of birds; 56 species of reptiles. There were ancient agave plants some seventy five feet tall; prehistoric looking ocotillo; breaks of dusty Silverado sage with its lavender blooms; one could smell

creosote in the air; species of flora and fauna made by a God adept at improvisation; the craggy and majestic Chisos range home to millions of fossil remains from the layers of history far more ancient than human memory... At night, out of the incandescent and garish lights of cities, one could see the river of gas and ore, and metal we call the Milky Way... so very close it seemed, mysterious... humming with some urgent intensity. The Indians say that one is closer to God in the desert. I believe there is something to that... In the desert there are few distractions... less baggage, as it were... in the desert one only needs the essentials... In the desert our senses are heightened out of necessity, because life is more tenuous there. Illusions serve no purpose in the desert. Perhaps it is more real. Life distilled to its essence.

Today we read for the third time in three months from Mark's account of Jesus' baptism... Baptism and the life and vocation of the baptized, the principal theme in Mark's gospel. Today, again, Jesus is front and center being baptized by John; and we are told that the heavens are torn apart, and a voice, like thunder tells the gathered congregation that this Jesus is God's son, the chosen one, in whom God takes great delight... But remember, this is just the beginning of the Good News... so the rhetorical question is: what is next for Jesus... what is next for us, the baptized? You may remember in the passage just before our reading

for today John says that he baptizes with water, but that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit... and so we are told that the same Spirit drives Jesus out into the desert... the word in the Greek is flung, not driven, with apologies to the translators... The Spirit flings him out into the desert to be tested by Satan for forty days. The literary allusion is obvious here: the people of Israel upon their crossing the Red Sea into freedom from slavery sojourn in the desert of Sinai for forty years.... To be tested, to be stripped of their illusions, to be reoriented to the reality of things; to be shown what is essential... to experience God without distraction. God is closer in the desert. God is closer where life is at risk, challenged, tenuous, and provisional.

So the life of the baptized is a desert life... a life characterized by courage, not comfort; a life in which one must be intensely and urgently aware... Remember that our faith comes from a middle Eastern desert culture; It is a culture in which the welcoming of the stranger is a matter of life and death; a culture in which mutual care is at the heart of the sustainability of the community; a culture in which hospitality matters for the good of the whole. It takes looking out for each other in the desert. On one level this business of the desert has literal weight for the hearer of the first century Middle East, but certainly it is metaphorical as well. The figure of Satan, for example, for the first

century scribe, is the power of oppression and violence... the empire in short.

When Jesus says he saw Satan fall like lightning, he is speaking of the emperor. So the life of the Baptized is tried, tested by the powers that be. The desert for Mark is the occupied world of empire... a world ravaged by the arid winds of shame and indignity... a world that thirsts for justice and well-being... a world confronted by the rough beasts of violence and abuse.

Brothers and sisters we, the baptized, are flung by the Spirit into the desert of our world... into the fragile and tenuous landscape of power held at the top of the socio-economic pyramid... And we are duty bound to pay attention to the evil of it.... Repentance means to wake up to the truth, the essentials, undistracted. Our democracy in our own place and time is, before our very eyes, is becoming more and more the vehicle by which the interests of the powerful few are served.... And the fruit of such a disparity is violence. We see it all around us in our modern desert. How insane is it that one can purchase with ease a weapon of mass murder? For us to think otherwise is illusion. Our healthcare system is unabashedly for profit, and becoming unaffordable. Our prison system, dubbed by Brian Stevenson as the new Jim Crow, is no longer the means for rehabilitation and empowerment, but for punishment and banishment, and profit. In our desert the poor are getting poorer, and the rich richer. In our desert the middle class,

once thriving, is now disappearing. Our government is corrupt, bought by corporations, gerrymandered into partisan intractability. These are a mere few of the beasts that inhabit this disorienting landscape... But friends, we dare not run.

Consider this: Perhaps it is at the heart of Mark's vision that it is in the fragile and disorienting landscape of the desert that God hangs out.... That what seems like a barren wasteland, is in truth rife with possibility, full of potential, full of new life, humming with mystery.... We are told in our lore that Jesus didn't come into the world to condemn it, but to save it. You say you want to find God. It is in the desert, not in the comfort of our privilege, where we will find God... It is the desert into which God calls us... to make the rough places smooth; to bind up the brokenhearted, the ones captive to evil, as Isaiah puts it. The proverbial forty days, the forty years are in truth a lifetime, our lifetimes. We are to give the whole of our lives to the desert. God waits for us there; as do the ones who have no hope, the ones who languish amid the world's parched brokenness.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, Lent the season of repentance... a reminder that our journey is a desert journey... The watchword is Repent, metanoia... that is, keep awake... pay attention... get real... drop your illusions... mind the essentials... That's what it takes to live in the desert... It will be an

adventure unlike any other. That I know... such is a life in the Spirit... such is a life in our God who made us for Love, and love only. It is love that flings us into the desert, to encounter our God, and the ones God loves... Think of it... an encounter with God. The God of the desert places, full of possibility, potential, surprising beauty, and mystery, and awe. If you've not been to a desert... you should go.