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Called to the desert

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Dec. 7, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

If ever there was a more eloquent description of the Messiah and the reign of peace and justice he would establish for all the peoples of the earth, I have not known it. With rich images and even richer prose, Isaiah of Jerusalem (first reading) shares with us the same vision that has filled hearts with hope and joy for almost three millennia (circa 2,800 years). All that anyone might wish for is there -- a leader who is endowed with God's own Spirit and with God-given gifts that will assure good and wise and just leadership, a leader who champions the afflicted and the poor, a leader whom all the nations of the earth will acknowledge and accept, a leader during whose reign there shall be no animosity, harm or ruin. Knowledge of the Lord, will prevail; everyone will know God and be known by God in a relationship that knows no end.

Second Sunday of Advent (A)

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72

Romans 15:4-9

Matthew 3:1-12

But before this leader and this reign would be established, preparations had to be made. To that end, God sent prophets. Nearer to the time of Jesus, John the Baptizer was sent as herald, crying, "Repent!" (Gospel). There in the desert of Judea, John called for a change of heart and mind and lifestyle that people would need to undergo in order to welcome the One who baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire.

It is significant that John retreated to the desert. So much of Israel's relationship with God was set against a desert matrix. Called out of Egypt, Israel was led by God through a desert where their relationship was formed, broken and renewed. There in the desert, Israel knew an intimacy with God they would remember and long for during later periods of her history. Although the desert could be fraught with untold dangers, for the Israelites it conjured up the joys of a honeymoon. Each Advent, we follow Israel's lead and John's example and withdraw to the desert, where we will find God and ourselves anew.

In her book *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*, Laura Swan describes the desert as a place to explore God, and ourselves standing in truth before God (Paulist Press, 2001). In the desert, we can work through the lifelong process of integrating the faith we profess with our lips with the faith we proclaim with our lives. In the desert, we find that the images of God we had as a child no longer work, and we learn to relate to and reflect ever-new images. The annual desert experience we call Advent invites us to empty ourselves of every obstacle to God, and, in that emptiness, examine and refine our values, beliefs and passions.

The desert is the place where we are forced to live with our questions as well as the ambiguities and paradoxes of our life. In the emptiness of the desert, the enormity of God becomes almost overwhelmingly clear, and yet we need not be afraid. With each trip to the desert, it becomes less a strange and alien place and more of a home where the hard work of repentance and conversion can take place. Is it any wonder that John the Baptizer chose the desert to begin his ministry of preparing the way of the Lord?

As we look beyond the desert to the coming of the Promised One, the late Henri Nouwen invites us to consider where we might find him. "Where is God?" Nouwen wrote. "God is where we are weak, vulnerable, small and dependent. God is where the poor are, the hungry, the handicapped, the mentally ill, the elderly, the powerless. How can we come to know God when our focus is elsewhere, on success, influence, and power? I increasingly believe that our faithfulness will depend on our willingness to go where there is brokenness, loneliness, and human need. If the church has a future it is a future with the poor in whatever form" (*Sabbatical Journey*, Crossroad Pub. Co., 1998).

If we look at Jesus' beginnings in this world, we will not find him in a royal palace or even in the home of a revered rabbi or Levite or priest. From the moment of his incarnation, Jesus was surrounded by poor, humble, simple people. During his ministry, he similarly welcomed the poor. He recommended poverty of spirit and simplicity of life to those who answered his call to follow him. The Gospels continue to challenge those who await Jesus' second appearance to seek him out in those poor with whom he chose to identify and whose needs he made his own agenda.

If our Advent desert experience results in nothing else, let it be a renewal of our own and of the church's preferential option for the poor. Blessed are the poor; theirs is the kingdom.

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