

Advent 3, 2010
“A Voice from the Desert”
Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

“In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert wilderness of Judea, preaching, ‘Turn around, for the rule of heaven has come near.’”

Here’s the man some of us met just a week ago.

The Baptist:

A man ablaze with fiery expectation.

A man impassioned about the coming rule of God.

A man preaching to us, with all he’s got, that we ought to turn around and start living a new life before it’s too late.

“Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Now there’s a prophet.

“So, whatever in the world did you go out to the desert wilderness to look at? Whatever did you come to church for last Sunday?”

That’s what Jesus wants to know this Sunday.

“Did you come looking for a reed shaken by the wind? Whatever then did you come to look at? Someone dressed in silky soft robes?”

“Hey, look, those who wear silky soft robes hang around Oakbrook mansions mixing their martinis. They don’t camp out in the rocky caves of a Palestinian desert, crunching on locusts dabbed with wild honey, and wearing nothing but the carcass of a camel.”

“Now there’s a real prophet,” says Jesus, “and so much more than any of the rest of you. Yet, even the least of those who live according to the rule of God will be greater than John.”

Well, that was last Sunday.

This Sunday our song begins in a minor key, not from a desert

wilderness, but from a prison cell.

Listen to him now.

This is not the bright tenor voice of Handel's *Messiah* or *Godspell*.

Here is the somber, subdued voice of a deserted soul in darkness: "Now, when John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one? Are you the one who is to come, or. . . or shall we look for another?'"

The searing voice of that fiery preacher has fallen silent in a dank, dark prison of the soul.

It happens.

John had staked his whole life on "the one who is coming after me."

Now, his life in wreckage, awaiting his death, wondering what it's all been about, the Baptist ponders, like the Prophet of long ago

when he lamented, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity. . . .”

John is not only in prison, he is back in the desert.

His heart is cracked, his soul is parched, his dreams are dry as dust: “Are you the one, or shall we look for another?”

Whether that desert be the sands of the Sahara or the sands of the soul, the desert is a barren, lifeless, unknown, deadly place. But sometimes it is only in the sands of the desert that we can begin to see and hear and sense the moving presence of God.

Listen.

Look.

A few years ago, *The Washington Post* videotaped the reactions of commuters at a D.C. Metro stop to the music of a nearby street violinist.

Of course, the overwhelming majority of more than a thousand commuters was too busy to stop and listen. A few did, briefly, and

some even tossed a couple bills into the violinist's instrument case.

No big deal, just an ordinary day on the Metro.

Except that it wasn't an ordinary day on the Metro.

You see, the violinist was not just another street performer; he was Joshua Bell, regarded by some as one of the world's finest concert violinists, playing his multi-million dollar Gibson Stradivarius.

Three days earlier Bell had filled Boston's Symphony Hall with people paying well over \$100 bucks a seat to hear him play similar pieces to what he was playing on the street that day.

But people didn't have eyes to see him.

People didn't have ears to hear him.

They did not EXPECT, they did not HOPE, to see Joshua Bell at a train stop.

Neither do we HOPE or EXPECT to see God in the darkest night of our soul, in a cave on the coldest night of December, in a distant outback called Bethlehem, "little to be among the clans of

Judah,” says the prophet Micah.

Avoid such deserted places, the voices of the world deceive us, avoid such dark places as Bethlehem. No matter how much it costs you, don't go into the desert of your heart.

Dare to go into that desert, and you just might hear another voice piercing through the cacophony of voices that saturate your soul.

“Here is your God,” the prophet tells us, “Here in the desert is where God will find you.

“Watch what's happening in the desert.

“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, don't fear! Here is your God. . . He will come and save you.’”

There's music coming out of that dead Metro stop, and not just any crummy, old Muzak that numbs and gnarls the heart this time of year, but melodies divine, such as we will hear this afternoon at the

recital.

Some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible flows from that same prophet Isaiah who, discouraged as he might have been, sings in the desert for the Baptist and for us: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. . . .”

The blind, deaf and dumb commuters will finally have eyes to see and ears to hear and tongues to speak, maybe for the first time in your lives.

“Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way. . . . And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and

sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

“Here is your God.”

Here is your God, John the Baptist, here in the desert of the human psyche where despair, like the scorching sun, threatens to wither the soul.

Isaiah’s words of hope originated in the desert of Israel’s darkest hours, as all good poetry does.

It’s just that way: the most profound literature, music, art, theater arises from those who have journeyed farthest into the desert sands of the soul.

One of my favorite Russian authors writes in a short story that “on our earth we can truly love only with suffering and through suffering! We know not how to love otherwise. We know no other love.”

You might think that in such times of affliction, the word would be defeated resignation. Let’s just quit.

But no! Hope arises from the conviction that something, someone can make a difference.

St. Augustine says that hope has two beautiful daughters: ANGER at the way things are and COURAGE to make sure things do not remain the way they are.

“ANGER at the way things are and COURAGE to make sure things do not remain the way they are.”

We’ve heard before that a person can live for days, maybe even weeks, without food, but she cannot live an hour without hope.

“And hope always looks to the future expectantly, not dreading to face it, as [one] lying in bed in the morning.”

I know.

I know that a blossoming desert on a stormy winter day like this one sounds like a mirage that deceives a man crawling along the desert floor just inches from death’s door. Remember those scenes from the old westerns?

I know.

You may call it a mirage.

You may call it fantasy. Go ahead.

I call it poetry. I call it music.

I call it hope. I call it faith.

And not just faith in any of the failed gods of the wimpy human ability to contrive and construct tomorrow.

As a credit card advertisement once tried to deceive us, “You've Got The Whole World in Your Hands—MasterCard.”

And I say, “What blasphemy!”

That is fantasy!

But, if that's the case, if I have the whole world in MY hands, then sad to say, I am definitely without hope.

If it's all in your hands and mine, if it's all left up to us and what we can do, “If for this life only we have hoped,” as Paul reminds us, “then, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Or, as someone once said to me at this time of year, after being bombarded for at least six weeks with commercials to buy, buy, buy; he said, "You'd have to feel sorry for someone whose life would really be made worth living by getting a 'Salad Shooter' for Christmas."

Here is a God who makes a way when we see no way.

Here is a God who makes a highway through the desert of our hearts to find us, to rescue us, to hold us in the loving embrace of our Lord Jesus and his bride the Church.

And our only hope for Christmas is a 'Salad Shooter?'

Here is a God who raises us to life from the barren desert of death.

I don't know for sure where you're living today.

Some of you don't know yourselves, or you're afraid to admit where you're really living. Seems like a nice, sheltered, secure life in your cosey suburban home, mixing your martinis, chatting merrily

with your friends, but maybe not.

I know that some of you, at times, feel as though you are barely living anywhere at all.

Your bodies are giving out.

You're on the verge of homelessness.

Your relationships are disintegrating.

Your worries make you feel like your cracking up.

Every day seems like the darkest hour of night.

Your address may be on Akenside Road, but your home is the desert.

Well, here is your God, say the prophets.

Forty years in the wilderness wandering of Israel.

Forty days in the desert temptation of the Beloved Son.

And there, deserted and forsaken on the cross.

Here is your God.

The God who brings Israel home from exile.

The God who raises Jesus from the dead.

The God who loves us most profoundly through human suffering.

Now, deep in this Advent, I want you to plant this thought from St. Paul deep within your spirit where it can become a seed that germinates and grows throughout the winter into a desert flower:

“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Not that all things are good, but that God can work for good in anything, even in the desert, even on the cross.

“Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord . . .
. . . Be patient.”