

Second Sunday of Advent, Year B

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Ps. 85; 2 Pet 3:8-15; Mark 1:1-8

Voices in the Desert

Today we hear two voices crying to us in the desert—John the Baptist and Isaiah. They, like the desert itself, have different voices. The desert itself can speak to us in a voice that seduces with its beauty and its majesty. Think of the desert flowers so gently portrayed in the painting of Georgia O’Keefe, or the silence peace of vast desert expanses. The desert can also speak words of terror, of threats to our survival if we are lost in it. These two voices of the desert, like the voices of Isaiah and the Baptist, touch deep themes of the Advent season.

The threatening voice of the desert appears in the gospel passage. The Baptist had a deep awareness of the injustices of the world around him and of the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day. He appeared in the desert, doing penance and calling people to repentance. This is not the way it should be; this is far from what God wants of us. He challenged his fellow Israelites and their leaders to both an inner change of heart and an external change of behavior. John the Baptist wanted all of God’s people to reorient their lives to make the world whole again. John the Baptist’s Advent message surly speaks to people like us who live in a country at war. He speaks to a nation where economic inequality and poverty have grown to levels that might be called obscene. A few among us

have grown richer and richer, while many can't even find work. The Baptist's call for change and repentance is surely appropriate in this setting.

But to appreciate the power of the Baptist's call for change and repentance we need to pay attention to the deeper roots of his message. John the Baptist is not simply a harsh, judgmental figure condemning people for being bad. If he were, it is hard to imagine how he had such an impact. People from the whole Judean countryside were flocking into the desert to hear him. I find it hard to imagine that large throngs of people going into the desert just to hear themselves denounced as bad. No, there is something about John the Baptist's message that was extraordinarily inspiring and attractive. What was it?

John's message of repentance is not finally a threat of brimstone and doom. He speaks words of hope that change is possible and indeed is truly coming. He proclaimed one to come after him, who will baptize not with water of repentance but with the Holy Spirit who gives new life. The Baptist promises a new life that only God's own Spirit can give. His words echo the message of Isaiah: "Cry out to the cities of Judah: Here is your God!" Your God comes to you. And what does the God who is coming bring? Again listen to Isaiah: "Like a shepherd God feeds the flock, in her arms she gathers the lambs, carrying them in her bosom, and leading the ewes with care"—bringing them the peace and justice they had lost.

Like Isaiah, the Baptist is promising that there is one coming who will bring renewal, re-creation. This coming one is Jesus, who will give them—and us—a whole new start. Even more radically, the Baptist is telling his listeners that in the desert that God wants to give them God’s own life—God’s own Spirit of love, justice, and holiness. This is truly “glad tidings” and “good news.” It fulfills God’s charge to Isaiah: “Comfort, give comfort to my people.” A message like this will draw people into the desert as negative criticism never could. It assures them that the desert’s terrors and threats will be overcome—dangerous valleys and rifts filled in, unpassable mountains leveled off, opening a highway for the justice and peace that God wants for us. No wonder the first words from Mark’s gospel this morning proclaim “The beginning of the gospel—the good news and glad tidings—of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

This is a message that can keep our hope alive in the deserts of war, inequality, and poverty of our world today. This hope can enable us to work for the changes so clearly needed today. It gives us a hope rooted in God’s extraordinary goodness and love. When we appreciate this goodness and love, our response can be: yes we want to change both ourselves and our society. We want to work with Jesus to help us all live in the peace and justice God wants for our world. Let’s pray together that we hear the glad tidings that can give us this hope.

David Hollenbach, S.J.

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