

First Sunday of Lent, Year A
Matthew 4: 1–11
Deacon Patty Minx

Jesus in the Desert.

This past week I revisited Arizona with its cactus and pines ... its empty sky and mountain ranges, shooting up from the desert sand. Off the well-traveled roads one can get a glimpse of how wild this land was. You can almost hear the thundering hoofs of wild horses kicking up the dust. The parched desert land has become a gold mine for developers. Housing tracts are taking over the sage brush and road runners.

The desert landscape always takes my breath away. At times it looks like a quilt rippling over the earth with its simple visual pattern of reddish rock and gray-green vegetation. There is enough in the pattern to keep me interested. Outside of Phoenix, traveling towards Flagstaff the landscape moves from sandy tan flatness to gradual rocky hedges ... some rounded like the granite rocks outside of Prescott or the red domes of Sedona. Spiny cacti are replaced with cedary junipers. In the higher elevations the juniper is replaced with towering pines. There is a simplicity that pervades the landscape leaving me centered. It has a way of simplifying my perspective on life.

Usually water is seldom found in the desert. Yet on this trip water was a big part of the desert landscape. Stream beds and washes that are normally dry were rippling with water. And when the rain comes to the desert it comes fast. It sends water across every flat place and there is nowhere it can penetrate. As a result, it sweeps everything in its path away. On this trip I was thoroughly surprised by a soft lasting rainfall and how it made the desert floor a lush green. After the rain, the smells of sage, mesquite and saguaro catch your breath. There is nothing like the smell of rain in the desert.

The desert is a part of the Christian landscape. It is regarded as a powerful place to encounter the Divine Mystery. The Israelites spent 40 years roaming the miles of sand and rock in the deserts of the Sinai, Edom and Moab. It was here that their faith in Yahweh was developed and tested. John the Baptist received his mission to preach repentance in the desert. Jesus developed his confidence in being the Messiah after a 40 day sojourn in the desert.

Jesus discovered that being Messiah for His Father's Kingdom was not about security, power and possessions, which Satan was alluring Him to. Jesus learns from the desert spirit that he would be a new kind of Messiah. He learns from this souljourn the importance of dependency on God. The starkness of the desert aided Jesus in raising his heart and mind immediately to God. The desert is a place of immediacy that comes out of one's need to survive. Here in the desert security is exchanged for faith. Whether it be salvation from heat, from cold, from thirst, from falling, one's human assurances are often out of reach and one must rely on nature, on God alone. The awfulness that lurks in the desert becomes awe-full. God becomes enough. And when this awe of God overcomes you, the desert is breathtaking with its varied colors, its fantastic shapes, its breathtaking vastness and staggering heights and solemn silence after a dust storm.

The desert experience is all about endurance...the other side of faithfulness. One must remain steadfast in faith. It is not always about a peaceful self-composure. It is about complaint and praise. God wants all of us. When it is hot in the midday sun, one longs for the cool of the evening. To survive one learns to go with the temperature, knowing it will change with the rising and setting of the sun. The walk with the Lord is uphill and downhill. The desert becomes symbolic as it calls us to participate in what happens to be there ... beauty or starkness.

The desert is a place of temptation with its alluring beauty for some of us. I imagine it was for Jesus. He went there often, but always knowing that he had to come back to his mission...being the Messiah. Jesus gleaned from the desert on what was essential in his role as the Savior and that can be summed up as ... how to say just one thing with my life. The desert teaches one about conservation ... particularly when it comes to water. Jesus leaves the desert with one single desire...the desire to do the Will of the Father. In arid regions it is easy to become obsessed with getting enough water. He leaves with only one simple desire... to do the will of the Father.

The desire to do the Will of the God calls for tenacity. Jesus and the Christian Desert Fathers must have been impressed by the tenacity of the desert plants' ability to adapt to their environment with little water. It hurts to touch a prickly pear cactus without care. The pads of this cactus grow vertically rather than horizontally, thus exposing a minimum area of leaf surface to the sun's radiation. Botanists have discovered an even more amazing adaptation which enables prickly-pear to conserve water. Like all plants it must open its pores to absorb the atmospheric carbon dioxide necessary for photosynthesis to happen. These pores also cause massive water loss during the daylight hours. In order to prevent this water loss, the cactus produces an enzyme that holds carbon dioxide. It is able to store more carbon dioxide at night and thus, assist in retaining it more in the daylight hours. The prickly spines on the cactus protect it from predators who are looking for the water it contains.

Most of the desert rodents are active only at night spending the daylight hours in underground burrows. This cuts down water stress. Biologists have discovered that Kangaroo rats store foraged seeds in their burrows, which have an elevated humidity level of the rat's own respiration. After a few weeks the water content of the seeds increases from 5% to about 40% by absorbing the humidity. The rats are able to survive without outside water resources because of the seeds that have produced more water. The desert experience is all about endurance ... the other side of faithfulness. Jesus leaves the desert with a tenacious heart.

As the Messiah, Jesus has only one thing to say about His life and that is "I have come that they might have life and it all the more abundantly". He realizes from his desert experience that He is the living water and anyone who drinks from Him will have everlasting life. And because of Jesus, others have gone before us with the same desert teaching: how to say just one thing with their lives. They are persons like Etty Hillsum, who died in the Jewish Holocaust stating "We must be balm for all wounds," Jean Donovan, who confessed "My heart is not so hard as to be able to forget the children. I'm going to El Salvador because of the children," or Martin Luther King, "I have a dream...".

So as we begin another Lent...another 40 days in our own personal deserts may I suggest that we ask ourselves “Does my life say clearly one thing?” or is it loaded down with the worry for more security, power and things. In other words, is my life clear on what I say: Are we a word of hope, a song of joy for those who need courage to continue the desert trek of life.

In closing, another piece of desert wisdom I received this past week came when I was lying down on some desert rock one night. As I looked up into the heavens I saw thousands and thousands of stars falling through space. Then I was reminded that there is a tradition among desert dwellers and story tellers that stars don't fall. They simply throw themselves down in honor of those who give themselves up for justice and love.