

3rd Sunday Advent Year “A”

December 14-15, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-6, 10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

I received a harsh lesson in the vicissitudes of the desert when traveling to see Mount Sinai in my last year in the seminary. The day we arrived at the base, prior to ascending, the temperature hit 112°! The plan was to camp outside and then climb beginning at 3:30 a.m. in order to see the sunrise from atop. Our guide reminded us to take a warm blanket for the night, and incredulous, I ignored him, only to wake up at 2:00 a.m. shivering cold. The temperature drop was incredible, something I never thought possible.

In the midst of what surely looks to be a White Christmas ahead, the Church gives us a vision of a very different landscape today. Carmel is the mountain range that juts into the Mediterranean Sea near to the modern port of Haifa. It was on Mt. Carmel that Elijah dwelled. Sharon is a 50 square mile coastal plain and one of the richest agricultural areas of Israel today; in biblical times it was wild and undeveloped, used as a pasture for sheep, yet ruggedly beautiful.

The prophet Isaiah is describing scenery perhaps unknown to us, but surely not to the people of his time. In this harsh climate, often barren for much of the year, the wild beauty of nature will be in full bloom. Nature stood out amidst some of the richer farmland, that produced a beauty all its own.

“The luxuriant growth of wildflowers in the desert after the winter rains suggests the possibility of a complete transformation of the desert into a land more generously endowed with vegetation than the historic land of Israel to which the exiles were returning.”¹ Can we see parallels in this image to our own lives? Like a vast oasis, our spiritual lives can be transformed in short order.

¹ see John McKenzie, Anchor Bible Series, *Second Isaiah* p. 11

Dr. Anthony Flew was an English rationalist philosopher, author of numerous books and articles on rationalism. His classic *Theology and Falsification* in 1950 was one of the most quoted publications in the second half of last century. He presumed atheism, placing the burden of proof on those who believe, not the other way around.

But shortly after he turned 80, he began to think differently. When he speculated that there might be a God after all, his fellow atheists were shocked. But even that change of heart was quite remarkable. He co-authored a book shortly before his 2010 death entitled: *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. Some people insisted he had become senile.²

To the Israelite, the idea of healing not only referred to a physical healing, but it carried the connotation of ‘saving.’ The eyes of the blind will be opened, but they will be saved; God comes to save us.

Do we desire to be saved? And if so, from what? What is it that keeps us from drawing nearer? Part of the fear in being saved from something is that it would seem we must desire to put something behind us for good. This is true—we may not be sure we want to change a habit. We may even acknowledge that it is not good for us spiritually, but are we willing to try to get along without it.

- I have a temper. That is just the way I am.
- I tell it like it is. Some people don't like that, but I am too old to change now.
- I am a teenager— my room is supposed to be a mess!
- I have used this language for years. I don't mean everything I say.

The Lord desires to ransom us from our slavery to self and slavery to sin. People time and time again are unburdened from spiritual pain

² He essentially became a Deist (i.e. God is the watchmaker who sets things in motion, though is not personally involved in our lives).

and loneliness. It is always a most humbling experience to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance this season. Without fail, transformations happen before Christmas

It is not about a guilt trip so that we may feel unworthy. Instead, it is about creating a pure place in my heart to receive the Word made Flesh. My deepest desire is to be one with the Lord, to worship the newborn King. I believe that this will make me a different person, being in communion with Him.

Do we believe that God can work marvels in our life? If He can make the barren land blossom, why can he not warm a cold heart? Why can he not make straight the crooked ways of my past?

Change does not always happen overnight. Habitual sins have a pesky way of staying around, and character traits become ingrained. But what is called for is trust. God has worked in the hearts of the most hardened atheists; God never stops searching for us. That ought to give us all comfort.

The prophets challenged us with their words to help us, not to condemn us. They were trying to save us, even though that properly belongs to God. They tried to do their part. Let us now do ours.