

## **“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord”**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent, Yr. A. December 9, 2007.*

In the fortieth chapter of Isaiah is the verse, “*A Voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’*”

A dove perched high on the top of the Temple in Jerusalem could look straight down into the Court of the Priests. There, sacrifices were continually being offered to the God of Israel – lambs, and goats, and bulls, and turtledoves, along with sweet-smelling incense, grain, wine, and olive oil. Day by day, without fail. The Temple was the most sacred spot on earth for the people of Israel. It was thought of as the very footstool of God, whose throne was in heaven.

But if our little dove perched on the façade of the Temple had taken wing and flown straight east from there for only two or three miles, she would be out of the city and at the edge of the Judean Wilderness – a desolate desert that was even more empty in the time of Christ than it is today. It looks like pictures of the surface of the moon, an arid wasteland of steep, gray, rocky hills and ravines stretching down to the Jordan River and the green oasis of Jericho.

It was there, in the bleak Judean wilderness, *not* in the crowded, but beautiful, holy Temple in Jerusalem, that John the Baptizer lived from his youth until he began to preach. And thousands of people went out into that desolate wilderness to hear him: multitudes of every social class – rich, poor, Pharisees, priests, collaborators with the Romans, and Herod’s private soldiers. Everybody, it seems, went out to hear John. Of course, some went to mock or to act as spies, collecting information to get him in trouble. But the majority was drawn by the power of his message and his charismatic personality. It would be an anachronism to call him “a celebrity,” but he was the Billy Graham of his time – and more – since there was no one else doing what John was doing. Not until Jesus came along.

John was a priest, you know. He was the son and grandson and great-grandson of priests, as far back as one could trace his pedigree. He had a hereditary right to minister in the Temple. But John was also a *prophet* – a man who spoke for God, who said “the Lord says...” and people believed him. John chose to do his prophesying *in the desert*. I want to tell you why... why John went into the *desert* to preach... and why the crowds left the City behind and went out into the wilderness to hear him and to be baptized by him.

*It was because they expected to meet God in the desert.* The religion of Israel had been *born* in the desert. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had revealed himself to Moses in the Burning Bush in the desert of Sinai. God had made his covenant with Israel in the desert and had given the Law in the desert. God had welded his people into a nation during forty years of wandering in the desert before they entered the Promised Land. And so the People of God *always expected their deliverance to come from the desert, from the wilderness!* They expected the Messiah to come to them in power *from the desert!*

Now, this *isn't* just an item of interesting Bible history for you to file away with other bits of trivia I have handed out in sermons. This information actually can have a direct bearing on your immediate future. It can make the difference between your experiencing Christmas as a year-end spending spree or a celebration of too much to eat and drink, or your experiencing Christmas as a time of fresh encounter with the living God.

John the Baptizer identified himself clearly to those who came out to hear him. He told them straight off that he was *not* the Messiah. He said that he was, instead, “*The Voice of one crying, ‘In the wilderness Prepare a way for the Lord.’*”

I believe that if we want Jesus Christ, the Messiah of God, to come into our lives this Christmas – or at any time – we must, somehow, go into the wilderness, into the desert, to make a path for him to come to us. We must figure out a way to do that! We don’t need to make a pilgrimage to the nearest “real” desert, over in Utah or down in New Mexico. We just need to discover how to find – or create – desert places in our own lives.

Let's think for a minute about what "*desert*" means. The Biblical word does not mean burning sands and scorching heat, like the Sahara. The Biblical "desert" is not necessarily a place like Death Valley. In the Bible, the word "desert" means simply *a place of emptiness*, "a deserted place." It's a place of *solitude*. It's where no one lives, no one is pasturing sheep, no one is doing business, nothing is going on. The desert is a place of pervasive *quiet*.

In Bible stories, the desert is the scene of both revelation *and* temptation. In the desert people could meet the Lord, but they could also run into the Devil. Very inspiring things and also very frightening things could happen in the desert. — And the desert is still like that.

The gospels tell us that Jesus spent forty days and forty nights praying in the solitude of the Judean Wilderness before he began his ministry. And at the end of these forty days he was tempted by Satan. —Yet, in spite of that, Jesus regularly continued to withdraw from everybody and go away alone "to a desert place" to pray.

You and I cannot lead lives that are free from temptation. If it happened to Jesus, it can happen to us. If we go into the desert, we *may* meet Satan there, as Jesus did, and we may be tempted as Jesus was. But, if we *don't* go into the desert, we'll never meet God either!

In Advent we need to have a *desert* experience. We need to be able to go —at least in the spirit, if not in the flesh—to a place of *solitude* and *emptiness* . . . to the place where there are no distractions, no preoccupations, no entertainments, no idols, no toys, no prizes, and no goals *except* to "prepare a way for the Lord" . . . to make straight in that desert a highway for our God to come to us.

If we're going to do this... If we're going to have a genuine desert experience, we will need to practice the *opposite* of what the world is proposing, particularly at this time of year. We'll need to practice *renunciation* . . . a renunciation of the compulsiveness, materialism, obsession with success, and craving for entertainment that characterizes our life.

*This won't be easy!* There's a reason why few people choose to live in the desert. Have you ever tried to spend a week alone with no work, no activities, no recreation, no visitors, no TV, no telephone, no computer, no iPod, no entertainment, and no alcohol or "fun food"? It's *scary!* We get *scared* when there's neither work nor diversions nor distractions —when we're *in the desert*, all by ourselves.

But it's in the desert, in solitude, that we meet God — who comes to save us. He comes to us through the desert way. That's the testimony of the Bible, the life of Jesus, and the saints.

It's ironic that the weeks before Christmas are so full of activity for most Christians, because this is the time when we most need to be in the desert, in the quiet place of preparation and expectation, in the spiritual solitude of prayer and waiting on the Lord. But, instead... we're *shopping!* (—worrying about what to buy for whom.) We're *going to parties!* (—even if we're tired and really don't feel like it.) We're trying to *get extra work done!* (—so we can take at least a one-day break at Christmas.)

If you and I want the Lord to come to us, to be born in us anew this Christmas, we've got to *go into the desert* for a while to wait and listen in solitude, just to *prepare a way* for him to come to us.

Friends, find the time and *go to the desert to wait for the Lord!* If you can't take a weekend, then take a day... If you can't take a day, then take an afternoon... If you can't take an afternoon, then take an evening...

Be alone, be quiet, be still. Empty yourself and *pray*, there in the "desert place" that you've found within your own existence, in the sacred place of meeting with the One who comes to us — our Emmanuel. In your own emptiness, prepare a way for Him to come and *fill* you. —And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed to *you* this Christmas.