

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B)
DECEMBER 8, 2002

Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11 2 Peter 3: 8-14 Mark 1: 1-8

Dear Preachers:

The gospel tells us that it's in the desert where the messenger and message are to be found. And there in the desert the voice is “crying out”—trying to get our attention. A woman at the door of a church said to me recently, “Please say a prayer for me, I'm going through a desert time in my life.” She didn't have to say much more than that; the expression on her face and the term she used to describe what she was experiencing were enough. Life had taken an unexpected turn in the road; it had taken her out to the desert. Not a trip she wanted to take; nor would I! Was it her advanced age and its subsequent ailments; had she lost her husband; was she alienated from any of her children; was her prayer dry and without consolation? Deserts don't come in any “one-size-fits-all.” Some desert sojourns last a long time; others may be very intense and mercifully brief. Some are inner spiritual desolations, when faith seems to offer no solace. Others are outer struggles when life's sureties collapse, and the old supports fail us. But, as difficult as desert periods are, the scriptures today suggest they may also be the place we meet the messenger from God, with a message we need to hear.

Israel knew its deserts. The Isaiah reading evokes Israel's desert memories. In the sixth century B.C.E. the prophet, called Deutero-Isaiah, consoled the people who had been taken off into Babylonian captivity. The prophet is making a promise on behalf of God—Israel will return to her homeland. Surely the desert images Isaiah used must have evoked the Israelites religious memory of the escape from Egyptian slavery. God once took these people across the desert to freedom; now God will do it again. So, as difficult as desert journeys can be, they also offer the possibility for freedom and a new relationship with God.

The people are dispirited and decimated and so the prophet is told to, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem....” God will have to smooth the way for them (“Make straight in the wasteland a highway....Every valley shall be filled in; every mountain and hill shall be made low....”) The desert, though harsh and uninviting, will be the way out of slavery again. This will be God's work with “power...and a strong arm.” But this power will be used tenderly, for the people are in a weakened condition. God will be like a tender shepherd feeding the flock, carrying

the lambs and “leading the ewes with care.”

I am thinking of that woman at the church door and all the others who have come up after a service or during a chat, to ask for prayers. In one or two brief statements they sum up the cause of their anxiety or sadness—family turmoil, health concerns, loss of jobs, worries for their children, faith crises, etc. Somehow and somewhere, Isaiah says, God will come to us and lead us through our current deserts. As difficult as the desert is for us, the prophet promises that there the “glory of the Lord shall be revealed.” Where we are most vulnerable, there God’s power will be felt. Perhaps God won’t provide a quick escape hatch, instant relief, but the tender God the prophet describes is concerned about exiles and refugees who see a long desert journey ahead of them.

I write these lines in the waiting room of an orthopedic clinic, while an aged friend is being examined after a recent fall at home. Old age isn’t for wimps; someone told me once. It looks like an exile from the person we once were and the things we used to be able to do for ourselves--- to a land of limits, dependency and fragility, not for all, but for many. So, it seems to me today, as I look around the clinic’s waiting room. My grandmother used to quote a Neapolitan expression, translated it said, “Every day after forty a new pain.” Modern medicine and nutrition may have advanced the 40 years to a later time, but on this day at least, the medical conditions of the seniors and injured around me in the waiting room tell me they are traveling their own unique desert trip. But to hear Isaiah tell it, God is here with them, and us, to guide and support, and even carry us through the very rough terrain to keep us from getting lost or overwhelmed.

Today’s selection from Mark is the Prologue to the gospel. Before the story gets going and a cast of characters enters the scene, Mark gives the reader an inside piece of information. We learn a lot about Jesus in these first eight verses and are immediately told that Jesus is “the Son of God.” He is empowered with the Holy Spirit and ready to give it to those who accept him. He is not just a shadow or echo from the past for us. This Jesus is God’s way of opening a whole new future for us. God the Creator is ready to start again with us; to remake us. We don’t have to be stuck in our old selves for, while John baptized with water, Jesus will bring God’s Spirit and recreate us from within.

Strange place for the crowds to go to hear a message of renewal—the desert. There was a temple in Jerusalem that could have been the place for people to meet

their God and be renewed. Instead, the renewal and fiery encounter (for that is what God's Spirit provides) comes in the desert, the place the slaves fleeing Egyptian bondage first met and got to know their God. It is where God still wants to meet us, in the place where we are stripped of distractions and ready and anxious to listen. In the desert all our facades are removed.

Mark tells us today that the desert places may very well be a suitable place to hear God speaking to us—and what we hear there is good news for desert travelers. He links us to Deutero-Isaiah's words as he evokes the Israelite desert times. In the desert, the Israelites were asked to believe that God was going to bring them home, to a permanent place of security and intimacy with God. John the Baptist's voice announces that now the time is at hand when God will fulfill the ancient promises to Israel. Those who heed his voice are to repent, turn from their self-delusions and thoughts that they can make it on their own. John says that God has noticed their plight and that One is coming who will be powerful, where they are weak. This One will pour God's Spirit into them, to revive their own drooping, discouraged and road-weary spirits. A new road is being cut through the desert and it is Jesus who will walk with us along it; help us deal with hills and valleys that would make it impossible for us to travel them on our own. I hope the woman who approached me at the door of the church gets to hear this message this second Sunday of Advent, and I hope she receives it as the good news it is for people who find themselves in one desert or another.

CHRISTMAS CARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a Christmas card to one or more of them to let them know that we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Eddie Davis #0100579
 - John Jones #0216650
 - Leroy McNeil #0275780
- Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

QUOTABLE

Advent then is dedicated to the last things, to death, judgment, heaven and hell, but above all to Jesus' glorious coming to complete his Easter work. The church goes so far as to set aside an entire liturgical season to the end of the world and the final coming of the Lord, so important a part of the faith does she consider these truths. —Charles K. Frieze, quoted in, *AN ADVENT SOURCE BOOK*, edited by Thomas J. O'Gorman. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988, page 12.

JUSTICE NOTES

The future constantly calls to us. We're always awaiting developments: a child's birth, a possible job change, the results of an urgent medical exam, the solution of financial problems.

Many feel they always are racing toward the next awaited development; it arrives, and they being awaiting another development.

The future threatens to wear us out.

We're actually in the habit of looking to the future. But since we don't know exactly what the future will be like, anxiety and dread may dominate our approach to it. Another possibility is to wait in a spirit of hope and trust. Would it mean utopia, a problem-free paradise for a while?

The Mass holds clues to what heaven is like. It's a nourishing environment; we're fed. It's sacrificial too; no time for egocentrism, our focus is outward. It's a reconciled, unifying, welcoming occasion. Relationship of love and care are of the essence. It's Christ-centered.

The future calls out to us. It's actually inviting us to do something to bring a little heaven into our world.

—David Gibson, Editor, *Faith Alive!*, quoted in the *N.C. Catholic*, October 20, 2002.

READER'S RESPONSE

Thank you for reflecting on St. Matthews gospel. I am thinking of the words of St. John of the Cross..."

"in the evening of our lives we will be judged on love alone."

God bless,

Fr. Colm Mc Glynn....Servite parish of St. Vincent, Dundee, Scotland

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

Our webpage address: <https://PreacherExchange.com> - (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes these reflections and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P.

Email: FrJude@JudeOP.org.