

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent II, December 4, 2011, dedicated to Xavier Mitchell Dean, born November 23, 2011, to Grace Glaros and to Wib Smith, and always to the glory of God!

“Comfort in the Wilderness”

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Both Isaiah and Mark begin in the desert. The Prophet Isaiah opens the second half of his prophecy breathing hope into this Advent season with his loving and tender opening words, “Comfort, Comfort, ye my people!” The desert is the place in which God will pave a highway from Babylonian exile to freedom and a return home to Jerusalem. One-hundred years before it happens, this prophecy drives hope through desert days. Five-hundred years later, out of the 400 ft. below sea-level wilderness surrounding the Dead Sea, a new prophet named John the Baptizer arises. He cries out for God’s straight path to deliver his people through Jesus Christ. This is the good news of liberation! Let us begin in the desert of the city. Let us begin in prayer.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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From the streets of Hong Kong, a little brother of the poor, named Carlos Carretto wrote of *The Desert in the City*. This monk in the metropolis had come from monastic solitude of the deserts of North Africa to serve the poor of Hong Kong. Brother Carretto believed that if urban dwellers could go to desert, they should let the desert come to the city.

To bring the desert to the city Brother Carretto introduces us to *poustinia*, the Russian word for desert. While *poustinia* may mean a geographical place, it is also a hermitage, a quiet place set apart. It can be a place where people go, withdraw in silence and discover God. As one Russian mystic has written:

Poustinia is the place where we raise the arms of prayer and penance toward God . . . poustinia is the place where we gather courage, where we pronounce words of truth remembering that God is truth. It is the place where we purify ourselves and prepare ourselves to act as if touched by the burning coal that was placed by the angel on the lips of the Prophet. (Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *Poustinia*, Cerf, Paris and Fount paperbacks, London, 1977)

We are called to discover *poustinia* this season of Advent. We are called to *poustinia* to gather courage and pronounce the truth, remembering that God is truth. In the desert in the city, we will discover the truth of this season in unlikely places and from unsuspecting people. Just ask Bill Goettler. Rev. Bill Goettler is a Presbyterian pastor and assistant dean of ministerial studies at Yale Divinity School. Bill discovered “truth” on Church Street in New Haven, Connecticut, in the person of Danny, a homeless neighbor of his. Bill writes:

Danny (first) appeared on our front porch on a cold December afternoon a couple of years ago, hat in hand. He was honest, at least. He had been sleeping here and there since getting back into town, he said, mostly on the porch of the Red Cross headquarters across from the church. The people there didn't seem to mind and he always cleared out before anyone arrived for work in the morning. He didn't want anyone to be frightened.

He needed some food, maybe some money for the bus. We'd just hung the Moravian Christmas star on our front porch and had placed Advent candles in our windows. It was a pretty tough moment to refuse someone aid, so against my better judgment I dug into my wallet and found a few dollars.

As he was leaving, Danny turned and looked me in the eye.

“Is this the way it’s supposed to be?” he asked.

He was off before I could reply or even register what he’d said. He came back with one need or another throughout that winter and across the years that followed.

Through housing placements and jobs that never seemed to work for long, Bill kept track of Danny, or was it more like Danny keeping track of Bill? Their conversations would always open with, “Good morning, Reverend,” and then shortly after, Danny would deliver his one-line sermon, **“Reverend, is this the way it’s supposed to be?”**

It reached the point where Bill did everything he could to avoid Danny. Slowing his steps when he saw him, crossing the street to avoid him, admitting that he did not like the relationship they had at all. He did not want to hear THAT question. He did not want to hear the one-line sermon all over again, **“Reverend, is this the way it’s supposed to be?”** (“Living the Word,” *The Christian Century*, Nov. 29, 2011, Bill Goettler, p. 20).

On the surface, this question seems innocuous. As you dig deeper it seems disarming. As you go even deeper, it becomes haunting. Is God’s creation *supposed* to be this disharmonious? Is society *supposed to be* taking care of its members on the margins? Is it *supposed* to be that some people have to beg for a living while others go into shiny bright buildings, are paid for their work and then return to a place called home? (Ibid, p. 20).

John the Baptist didn’t believe things were supposed to be the way they were. John, the odd and challenging cousin of Jesus and the first prophet of our Christian tradition, appears in the wilderness with a two-line sermon not unlike Danny’s one-liner. Drawing on Isaiah’s 500-year-old words, John proclaims, *“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make God’s path straight!”*

People must look at him as if he is crazy, but they are also drawn to him. They offer him bread to go with his wild honey. They give him a bus ticket hoping he will land a real job. Like us, they would prefer to hear about the wonderful baby Jesus. People say, “*Hey John, tell us about the young family on a journey. Tell us about the messiah born in a stable full of animals - you know the one we love to put in our Christmas cards.*”

John responds, “*You are not ready for that story. Remember Isaiah!? Every valley will be lifted-up and every hill will be knocked down. Equity for the meek, justice for the poor that is how our Lord is coming!*”

The *poustinia* out of which John comes and from which he speaks, is a desert that is courageous and speaks truth we are hesitant to hear. We want Christmas without the prophets. We want the birth narrative without the desert storm. We want redemption without judgment. We want peace without struggle. In addition, we want the echoing words of Danny on Church Street – “***Is this the way it’s supposed to be?***” – to go away.

In the popular culture of which we are apart, Christmas arrives just following Halloween and it comes to full revelation a few hours after we finished doing the dishes on Thanksgiving. It comes with a plastic baby Jesus in a manger, with songs of angels over our heads in checkout lines at supermarkets and shopping complexes. It comes from the God of consumerism.

However, we answer to a different God. Our God comes where our God comes! Our God comes from the desert, from the *poustinia* of the city. **Before our God arrives, we have to get ready.** Allow God in to make the rough places in your life plain again. Allow God in to make the anxiety of your life a place of peace. Allow God in to make the distress of your life a place of rest. Allow God in to care for the poverty in and around you. Only then, will God’s peace and God’s justice fill

the earth. When we allow God in, we can turn Danny's haunting question into a statement of faith: ***This is the way it's supposed to be.*** Amen.

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