

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 7, 2008, Advent II, dedicated to the memory of Dan Callahan and Pat Patterson, and always to the glory of God!

“The Desert”

Isaiah 40:1-9; Mark 1:1-8

Part II of VI in Advent/Christmas series:

“Places on the Road to Bethlehem”

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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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The Prophet Isaiah breathes hope into this Advent season with his 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. This prophecy is pronounced 100 years before it happens. But the prophecy paves a way of hope. Similarly, 500 years later, out of the desert a new prophet arises as John the Baptist cries out for a straight path for God to deliver his people through Jesus Christ – the good news of liberation!

The arid, dry and desolate land that is boiling hot by day and

freezing cold at night is the place where God reveals hope in troubling times. Who would have guessed this? For those who have been to the desert and lived in the desert, it makes perfect sense. The desert is rich in mystery and simplicity. But it is not a place with which you mess around. To be careless in the desert brings death.

In his classic book, *Letters from the Desert*,² Carlos Carretto reflects on his life as a monastic Little Brother of the Poor. Leaving a life of social action ministry in Italy at 44 years old, Carlos Carretto headed for the Little Brothers' monastery in the Sahara Desert in North Africa. In solitude and contemplation, Carretto discovered God's call for his life. In the desert, God's profound and clear voice of peace was revealed to him. He writes:

I come into the desert to pray, to learn to pray. It has been the Sahara's great gift to me and I should like to share it with all my friends. . . . Prayer is the sum of our relationship with God.

*We are what we pray. The degree of our faith is the degree of our prayer. The strength of our hope is the strength of our prayer. The warmth of our charity is the warmth of our prayer. No more, no less . . . The story of our earthly-heavenly life will be the story of our prayer. Thus, above all (prayer) is a personal story. (Carlos Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y., pp.35-36).*

Brother Carretto goes on to say that prayer doesn't come from earth but from heaven. Each one of us cries for God's love and mercy; God's greatness and exaltation come from the Holy Spirit, who fills the world and inspires us to cry out to God in prayer. As we do so, we come to know our heavenly creator's presence – heaven to earth – and our personal story is wedded to our heavenly path.

Carretto is very aware that not everyone can physically come to the desert to pray and encounter God. He calls for each of us to "make some desert" in our lives. "Every now and then," he says, "leave people and look for solitude to restore you in prolonged silence and prayer, the stuff of your soul." (*Ibid*, p. 73)

In another book, *The Desert in the City*, written while Carretto was serving the Little Brothers in Hong Kong, the monk shares that if you cannot go to the desert, let the desert come to you in the city. To make a desert in the city, Carretto introduces his readers 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 to withdraw in silence to discover God. As one Russian mystic has written:

Poustinia is the place where we raise the arms of prayer and penance toward God . . . the desert is the place where we gather courage, where we pronounce words of truth remembering that God is truth. The desert 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).

For this season of Advent, I pray that you and I will make time and discover *poustinia*. Remembering that the desert is the place where we gather courage, where we pronounce words of truth remembering that God is truth, let us find our *poustinia* in this season of “too much” and “too much more.”

Let us turn off our TVs and Xboxes. Let us turn off our game systems, our computers and CD players. Let us be unafraid of the stillness. Let us cleanse the clutter in our lives and open ourselves to God’s movement in the “desert” of our lives. If not a highway, at least let us cut a footpath for God in the last 18 days before Christmas. We have booklets of prayer and devotions in the main office, by each exit and outside Mark Williams’ office on the second floor. Pick one up and take time each day to “rest” in it. Breathe deep the blessings of our lives. Soak in the goodness of God.

Let us all allow the heavenly and the mystical nature of this

season to saturate our souls. Take walks in the snow and let the lights and natural sounds of the season energize your walk with God. Let us open our hands to serve in this season as well. With the cupboards bare in the area food banks, and volunteers needed for Bethlehem on Broad St. on Christmas Day, and strengthened by our *poustinia* time, let us open ourselves to others in service.

If you find yourself in the desert already – a desert of sadness, a desert of loneliness, a desert of depression – I encourage you to seek and find the blossoms in your desert. Find the roses of relationship blooming in December snow. Find God’s oases of hope and God’s water of everflowing life streaming in your desert.

God is calling us to come to Bethlehem to see the newborn king. As we travel on desert highways to the manger of Bethlehem, let us pause this day at God’s table of grace to be fed by the bread of life and the cup of blessing. Amen.