

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

The Season of Advent is perhaps the most confusing, and yet the most inspiring, of our church seasons. In it, we anticipate both the coming of the Christ child at the first Christmas, and the second coming of Jesus at the end of the world. It is a season in which the readings focus on the contradiction between the sometimes harsh reality of the earthly world, and the hopeful dreams of the heavenly realm to come. In Isaiah, the image of the wilderness as transformed by God's hand is described quite vividly: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground; springs of water."

We, in outport Newfoundland, because we live near the ocean, can fully appreciate how threatening the desert was to people in the time of Isaiah, and John the Baptist. Like the ocean is to us, the deserts in the Middle East were, and in some regions still are, places of danger and death, places to be feared and avoided. The concept of the desert wilderness is not restricted to physical places. We can find ourselves in physical, emotional, financial, social, or spiritual wildernesses. Those of us who have been in one of those places know just how terrifying these so-called wilderness' can be. Maybe our life is so wonderful that we cannot relate to the metaphor of the desert wilderness. But as we observe the world, we meet people living in the desert

wilderness. And when we, or someone we know, is in a desert wilderness, we know it intensely and profoundly. It assails our spirit and challenges our faith.

Dreams: that is what Advent is about; that is what being a Christian is about. The Isaiah and Matthew passages today called the people of those times to dream of escaping the desert wilderness. They challenged those people, and us today, to be messengers, to be prophets, to be dreamers of a better world.

The question that is timeless and universal is, how do we keep our faith, our hope and our dreams when we fall into a desert wilderness?

We live in a world which worships success, power, wealth and beauty. We live in a world of expectations that are sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to meet. As Christians, we must realize that many of these standards and expectations are not consistent with Jesus' life and ministry; they do not promote love, justice, and compassion, but rather lead us into the wilderness of greed, deception, and selfishness.

How do we keep our faith, our hope, and our dreams in the midst of a secular world that is a wilderness of greed, lust, injustice, and hate? The answer is simple: prayer, study, worship, community and service.

If a parish church is at its best, if it is faithful to Christ's call, it will provide the environment to bring its members out from the desert wilderness. It will provide fellowship with other pilgrims and dreamers. It will nourish members by the Sacrament, the liturgy, and the preaching of the Word. Educational programs, such as Sunday School and Confirmation help members know Jesus more deeply so that they can follow Him more intentionally. Opportunities for service to the community are provided so that members can be the hands and feet of Christ in

this world. This is why regular attendance at worship and participation in the programs of the Church, are so important.

This is how Christ's people are fed and strengthened for the journey through the wilderness.

What are our dreams this Advent season? What is our image of the realm of God? What are we doing to make those dreams become reality?

Today, many of the maladies of which Isaiah and John spoke have been conquered by modern medicine, science, and technology. Medicine may not have fully conquered blindness, deafness or many other diseases, but physically, we are certainly healthier than our ancestors. We still do not raise the dead, as that power is reserved for God alone, but many lives are extended by scientific discoveries. Because of advances in transportation, we are no longer in danger of being stranded in the desert wilderness, and the technology of modern irrigation systems has made barren places fruitful.

As members of a parish community, of a diocese, of a national church, as followers of Christ, all are called to work and pray to bring about a world that fulfills the ministry of Jesus Christ.

What does this world look like? It is a world described by three words: love, justice, and compassion. In the context of today's society, this is a big dream. But those who share this dream are in good company. Throughout the ages, there have been people in the Church who have devoted their work and lives to proclaiming love, justice, and compassion in the name of Jesus. If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that we all need some stirring up as we find ourselves in the wilderness of modern day society. Advent is the time to renew our dreams and to resolve to work to make those dreams become real. Advent is the time for us to renew our commitment to this vision and this

mission. If we are to accept the challenge of being followers of Christ, we must be dreamers, and we must be doers as well.

Being a Christian means that we are vitally engaged in ministries that will bring the love, justice, and compassion of Jesus to the desert wilderness of this world. We must be prophets, messengers and ministers of the Good News of Jesus. Our dreams are precious. Advent is the time that calls us to dream of the future coming of Christ, because we know that Jesus promised that He would come again. Let us be messengers and ministers of God's love, justice, and compassion in all that we say and do. Let this be our Advent dream and hope!

AMEN.