

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC December 15, 2019
Advent 3rd Sunday of Year A Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10; Mathew 11:2-11

"Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another? The question posed by the disciples of John the Baptist is one that we might ask ourselves. If God does exist, why not show it more clearly? A part of us may want God to prove it in a more convincing way. John Updike in his novel, A Month of Sundays, remarks that even if the sky were "neonated" with a 3-D billboard flashing "GOD EXISTS" twenty-four hours a day, we would still find ways to doubt it. And, even if God does exist, what difference does it make? What we need to know is not just that God exists—not just that behind the brightness of the stars there is some Cosmic Intelligence that keeps the whole show running, but that God is right here in the thick of our day-to-day lives. And, that God may not be writing messages in the sky, but in one way or another is sending messages through our blindness, as we move about knee-deep in the muck and misery and marvel of our world. It is not just some objective proof of God's existence that we are after, but the experience of God's presence—the comforting knowledge and awareness that we are not alone. That is the miracle we need; and that is the miracle we get.

In today's first reading Isaiah describes the coming of God's presence in words drawn from nature, "The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and boom. They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song." Living in a city, these words that speak of the regeneration of a barren expanse of land may sound somewhat remote and distant to our ears. This reading speaks more directly to a people rooted in the land. We urban dwellers are somewhat cut off from the land, from its rhythms, from its awesome power and beauty, from his capacity to be transformed. For us, the land has been covered with sheeting of asphalt, tar and concrete, save for a few trees bravely poking through the sidewalks, heartily resistant to the toxic wastes of pets and to those empty-headed vandals who strip the bark of its skin.

One place where this capacity for transformation can be seen is in Death Valley, California, the hottest place in the United States, and absolutely beautiful in its barrenness, in its desolateness, in its stark, empty beauty. Looking across the horizon in Death Valley is like standing on the surface of the moon. Yet, what we today call "Death Valley" was called by another name by the first Spanish explorers who came across it hundreds of years ago. The Spanish called Death Valley, "La Palma de la Mano de Dios." They called that killing desert, "The Palm of God's Hand." Did those Spanish explorers catch something that we more settled Americans have missed? That

even in the basin of America's harshest desert, we are still in "the palm of God's hand."

In the novel I mentioned John Updike tells the story of a priest who is sent to a desert retreat house to meditate on his sins and clean up his act. The priest glimpses in the power of nature to be transformed from death to life by a single, rare cloudburst, the same healing power of God to transform his own life. Updike writes eloquently in the style of Isaiah of the desert's capacity to bloom after a cloudburst. "What a chorale of praise floats from the teeming desert life—the horned lizard, and the blacktail jack rabbit, the kangaroo rat that never needs to drink water, and the century plant the blooms but once in decades. How ingenious and penetrant is life! Tiny pupfish, transformed from the inhabitants of once vast lakes, survive in the salt-saturated pools that remain. More wondrous, still, tadpole shrimp hatch, grow, mate and die in the few hours of a flash flood's puddle's duration, and with their dried corpses leave eggs to hatch when the next puddle appears in that place many years in the future. The seeds of desert plants wait cunningly. A mere sprinkling does not tempt them to breach their carapaces—only an acid-stirring deluge dissolves them. And then the desert is carpeted with primroses and poppies and zinnias and the rock lily which entrust that tiny petals to the glare of the sun." What lesson might be drawn from all this? The lesson speaks for itself. The lesson is life. The sad truth is that we can be cut off from the life within ourselves. We can cover it over and over, as surely as we can cut ourselves off from nature.

Isaiah speaks of the possibility of the Lord's coming transforming our lives, just as the desert's barrenness can be transformed in just one cloudburst. Jesus, in answering John's disciples, points to the transforming power of his deeds. Today through surgery the blind recover their sight, and cripples can walk, lepers can be cured with medicines, hearing aids assist the deaf, even the clinically dead can be restored to life. Yet, in the desert of our soul, in our psyche, in our spirit, there can remain those barren, lifeless places which even years of therapy could not heal. I am thinking of people who could not be cured of their alcoholism, their compulsive gambling, their compulsive sex and over-eating, their addiction to pills and opioids—all those who could not be healed until they entrusted their lives to God, or to a Higher Power in some 12-step program. Here then is some evidence, some sign of God's presence—not in the sky, but in the lives of those who placed themselves "in the palm of God's hand."

We may feel that our lives are not so dramatically in disarray as those suffering from some compulsion or addiction. So, the signs of God bringing life to us will be more subtle, more nuanced, but quite real all the same. God speaks to us, invites us to a fuller life, throughout the course of our day. God speaks to us about ourselves, about

what He wants us to do and to become. In the quiet moments of our day we may discern God speaking, even if His presence is obscured to us.

How then do we make or miss those opportunities to be present to God working in our lives? Some examples. Somebody says something about somebody else; and what happens to be said is that only cruel but funny, and so everybody laughs. Do we laugh, too, or do we dare to speak the truth in that person's defense? When a friend has hurt us, do we take pleasure in hurting him or her--because hate has its pleasures, too, as does love--or do we try to build some flimsy little bridge of reconciliation? Sometimes when we are all alone, thoughts come swarming into our heads like bees--some of them destructive, ugly, self-defeating thoughts, and some of them creative and glad. Which thoughts do I choose to entertain? And we do have a choice. And finally, we will be brave today or cowards, not in some big way, but in some foolish, little way, but brave all the same? Will we be honest today or liars, just some little, pint-sized honesty, but honest all the same? Will I be a friend today, or will I be as cold as ice?

All the absurd little meetings, decisions, inner skirmishes that go to make up our days; it all adds up to very little, and yet it all adds up to very much. Our days are full of nonsense, and it is precisely in the nonsense of our days that God speaks words of great significance--not words that are written in neon in the sky, but written into the raw stuff and nonsense of our days. And the words God speaks to each of us in our different circumstances are essentially the same--be brave...be kind...do not grumble...be patient...press on toward the goal.

The words God speaks to us in and through our lives are the real miracles, if we can hear and see them. They are not miracles that create faith as we might think of as a message written across the sky might create faith, but they are miracles it takes faith to see--faith in the sense of openness, faith in the sense of a willingness to wait, to watch for the connections, to listen for the incredible presence of God in the world around us--to wait as patiently, and as observantly as does the farmer looking for the first sprouts from the seeds planted months before. We are called to wait, because as we wait we can hear and rejoice--trusting that even in the desert of our souls, still we rest in the palm of God's hand.