

## Special Delivery **WEEK TWO** Dec. 6 2020

If you wanted to feel the presence of God, where would you go?

For lots of Catholics, the obvious answer would probably be: church.

And as a priest who spends hours and hours in church every week, I'd say that's a pretty good answer.

Our faith teaches God is present here any time we gather.

But church wouldn't be everybody's answer of where they'd go to feel God's presence.

Lots of non churchgoers say that they encounter God most in nature.

One of my nieces says she feels close to God on a mountain top.

Another relative feels most spiritual at the ocean.

Nature has the power to awe and inspire like almost nothing else in creation - it is truly God's handiwork.

I've mentioned before that when I was studying to be a priest

I spent a summer at an air force base in Tucson, Arizona - it was my first trip to the Southwest.

One Saturday the chapel staff organized a trip out to the desert.

And my first reaction was, *'a field trip to the desert?'*

*Really? It's going to be hot and barren. Why would I want to go there?'*

I was a reluctant participant but ended up totally awestruck

by the beauty and majesty I experienced - it was completely unexpected.

I felt the presence of God there more than I thought possible.

### **SCREEN: Special Delivery main screen**

This is week two of our Advent message series titled, Special Delivery.

For us to prepare to welcome God's Son at Christmas, you and I need to look for God in unexpected places.

The readings this month describe some unexpected encounters with God.

Let's jump into today's scriptures.

Our first reading was from the Prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah is **the** messenger for Advent.

If you joined us for Rejoice on Friday evening,

you heard three readings from Isaiah -  
we hear from him three times in this series.

Today, Isaiah offered this message about God:

**SCREEN: A voice cries out:**

***In the desert prepare the way of the LORD!***

***Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!***

This can sound like a strange place to hear a message about God,  
but for the Jewish people the desert was the place  
where God often appeared and spoke.

Moses first met God there in a burning bush.

When the Israelites were led by Moses out of Egypt,  
they wandered in the desert for 40 years until  
they entered the Promised Land.

In the desert, God was with them - guiding them, speaking to them,  
molding them into his Chosen People.

Isaiah described God as gentle, loving shepherd who  
feeds his flock, gathers them close and leads them with care.

When Isaiah wrote this is the Jewish people  
were in a time of crisis and doubt.

They were living in exile in Babylon.

How did they end up there?

Their leaders had wandered away from God.

Rather than trust in the Lord, they made disastrous foreign alliances.

Then the mighty Babylonian empire overran their country.

The city of Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple torn down,  
and many people were taken as captives back to Babylon.

The Jewish people wondered if this was their punishment for being unfaithful.

They feared that God had abandoned them.

Isaiah's answer to them was,

*'No, God is with you to comfort you in your time of distress,  
God offers forgiveness so you can be reconciled.'*

Isaiah's message was so unexpected.

*'You mean we're not being punished or judged?*

*Instead, we're being offered mercy and love?'*

Yes! This is who God is.

The reason why Isaiah framed this as a message from the desert is because he wanted them to remember a time when God was with them always - when he was their God and they were his people and nothing separated them from his love.

Seven centuries later, John the Baptist repeated Isaiah's message.

John was literally in the desert - in the wilderness - preaching.

Now, to say that John was an unlikely messenger for so powerful a message would be an understatement.

His appearance alone was unexpected - clothed in camel hair, feeding on locusts and wild honey, living out in the wilderness.

And yet, crowds flocked to hear John preach.

And that message again:

**SCREEN:** ***"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths."***

John taught that the greatest way to prepare to welcome the Lord was to repent.

To repent means to leave the past and one's old life behind, and to turn back to God.

Maybe you are looking at your life and feel lost.

With all of the disruptions and upset of the past year you've gotten off track; you're not even sure how you got to where you are.

And you're even less sure which way to turn.

It can seem like a contradiction, but

we can experience God's presence most powerfully after a disappointment or failure, when feeling rejection and despair

Because in these unexpected places - these barren, desert moments -

God appears and gently calls us to turn back to him.

So, if anything I said describes how you're feeling right now, hear the message of Isaiah today: know that God is with you, God loves you and wants you in the loving arms of his embrace.

God forgives and God gives second chances.

So prepare the way for the Lord to enter your life again.

And I want to mention a few ways you can do this.

### **SCREEN: Pray & Confess**

On Thursday December 17<sup>th</sup> starting at 7pm, we will be offering confessions and quiet time in church.

The lights will be dimmed, our Advent environment is out, you can come for some quiet, peace and prayerful meditation.

And if you feel so inclined, you can also celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation that night with either me or Fr. Greg Apparcel - we'll both be hearing confessions.

Consider taking advantage of this opportunity to pray.

See it as a mini desert experience to be alone with the Lord and to experience his love for you.

And if you aren't able to be here that evening, create a desert experience at home.

Find a room, shut the door, turn off all your devices and take some time for God to speak to your heart.

Start with 10 or 20 minutes.

Talk to anyone who commits to regular prayer and they will tell you the enormous difference it makes in their lives and in their relationship with God and others.

### **SCREEN: Give**

Here's another way to heed the message of Isaiah and John and prepare the way of the Lord.

As you heard last week, our parish's Advent mission project, called the Giving Tree, has begun.

Your donations will assist Assumption Church in Washington DC,

the Gabriel Network which helps women dealing with an unplanned pregnancy, and the Bowie Interfaith Pantry.

Next Saturday evening, from 6:30pm-8pm you can drop off any of your donations outside of church, without having to leave your vehicle.

Our property will be decorated with lights and a special guest from the North Pole will be here to thank you.

For more details, check out our bulletin and website.

Why is giving so essential to prepare for Christmas?

When you freely give to help someone in need, you open up a space in your heart for God to enter in.

Your priorities and purpose in life become clear - life is not about how much you get, but how much you give.

So another opportunity to prepare the way of the Lord: give to those in need.

### **SCREEN: look for unexpected blessings**

And the final thing I'll mention today is to encourage you to be open to God's unexpected blessings - the ways God may come into your life during these weeks of Advent.

I mentioned some of them last week:

the call or text from a family member or friend,

the invitation to help someone in need,

the offer to participate in one of our Advent activities,

even just being aware of God in nature and the little ways God nudges you everyday.

Amazing and unexpected things are possible in Advent

when we open ourselves up to God's grace.

We can experience renewal and new life if we allow the Lord to smooth out the roughness of our hearts, lower the mountains of our pride,

and raise us up from the valleys of despair and distraction.

May we hear the voice of the Lord calling us to prepare the way

and make room in our lives this Advent. Amen. +