

WATCHING & WAITING
SPACE AND STUFF

Texts on Sunday, December 15, 2013

Isaiah 35; Matthew 3: 1-12

Have you gone to the desert wilderness? If you only drove through, did you stop long enough to feel its challenge—astounded, threatened, appalled? Each fall for many years, I have hiked several days into the Adirondack wilderness, but once, and only once, I trekked into the mountain desert in Arizona. I knew I did not know that world, so dared not venture further than the water I could carry would last—one day, one night, and out. How unyielding and indifferent that vastness, how great that silence, that challenge, that threat, that possibility.

For many, this city bears more than enough challenges, astonishments and threats for one life; going to a desert place must seem extracurricular. But let us not glide us over a constant fact of our Bible stories. Time and again, they are set in the wilderness world. Why? Is the desert incidental? Is it mere history that the pioneers of faith happened to live in the Middle East, which happens to be dry as dead bones? Or is the case more complex, more disturbing? Is it that the Holy Dove is everywhere always swooping down, fishing for men and women drowning in stuff, but that we have almost always been so stuck to our stuff that we can't have heard the sound of the saving wings swinging for our soul? And is it that those who abide in desert places, where there is not much stuff; that those around whom space extends so far and deep as to appall their sense; that they are the ones able to feel the beating wing of God, and learn to hold still enough in space to hear the unlippered voice of truth in faith; and try then to tell us in a Word?

Is that it? Are we all in debt to the desert fathers and mothers of the Word—to Abraham and Sarah, to Jacob, to Sinai and Jethro and his daughter, to Moses and Miriam, to David desert-hid from a mind-sick king, to Elijah desert-hid from a power-sick king, to exile across immense sands, to the valley of the dry bones; to the yearning for home across a terrible wasteland, to Jesus tempted to discover himself against the desert will, then crossing to the desert of the Cross, to generations making the middle passage across a watery desert to slavery, thence coming through hatred, oppression, violence and crucifixions for home? Can we cross now? Will God go with us there?

With that question, all history is inscribed. Pioneers have gone before us into awesome desert spaces, to bring out a word for us and for all. You can hear it from the poet of faith in Isaiah 35. He fairly sings his: ♪ *The desert shall rejoice, and blossom like a rose; it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice*

in praise and singing. This is a song of liberation, a sign of a power and a possibility in the desert to leave bondage and cross to blessing. But as we said, we must not glide over the desert. It is not merely the awful thing we wish we had not to pass through. No, the blessing comes in the desert and to the desert. This means—we have said it before—that God comes to nothing. God only comes to nothing. That is why desert plays opposite the lead in most of the Bible stories.

The universe—at least the one we're in—is made of two kinds, matter and no matter; things and no-thing; stuff and space. With stuff—boards and nails and gypsum—we build a house . . . in order to have space to live. From stuff, farmers grow the food we need. They sow the corn inch by inch, row by row—in space, and thin the stuff if they must, for stuff needs space to grow. This big blue earth matters to us beyond all saying, and this big thing may be the most beautiful ball in all space; but only from space could we finally see it, forty-five years ago this season.

We love stuff. We hug stuff to ourselves. We are afraid to lose stuff, though we know we must. And though we know, if dimly, that we are not our stuff; and that we ourselves are not a thing at all, but no thing, a mystery; we only see this from a space. Why, the scientists tell us that inside every tiny atom of matter, even the densest of them, there exists more nothing than something; more space than stuff. But this they only saw from space.

From a little space, you can see your stuff. You can see yourself, how you've been: afraid, courageous, or bold. From a distance, the world looks blue and green / And the snow capped mountains white. From a distance, the ocean meets the stream, and the eagle takes to flight. From a distance, there is harmony, and it echoes through the lands—the voice of hope, the voice of peace, the voice of every human. To see this, to be this, you need space. You need nothing, for God comes to nothing. You've got to get a way.

When John the Baptizer came in the wilderness preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sin, and throngs went out to him, you see again this whole symphonic movement of consciousness. John's *Repent!* declared the possibility of *new mind*. That is what his word means from the original language, In order to receive a new mind, a new being, the people just had to get a way into the empty space of the desert. But John understood that even desert space is only a help toward seeing our stuff. The desert is not salvation, rather, just a space for grace to come. That grace would come in Christ Jesus in a new way—in a way that would leap over the lines we draw in space, separating nations and classes, sexes and skins. The Word that is to come would not depend on a real desert for its blossom. Rather, it would

call to each and to all to leave your stuff, to cross your own desert, no matter where you dwell, and grow to the full stature of your being. *Nudos amat eremos*, wrote St. Jerome. "The desert loves to strip bare."

What you receive in your desert, when you face it, can never be taken from you. What you receive in your desert, when you dwell there for a space, is consciousness, a pure consciousness, that you did not need what was taken from you; that your peace did not hang on the stuff you had depended on. That you are not made of the stuff you thought you were, but another substance altogether. No thing, really. God comes to nothing. Then you see a little more of all divine doing. A little more, how all you see belongs in one creation, no being ruled out through fear or force. This is love. This is the beginning of justice.

It matters altogether to the future of the earth that you, an individual, get a way into a desert place. We can't know but that the whole world is waiting for you, for me, for us, so to mature, so to grow up and get a life without end but God, to become so able to see our stuff, and so free of it, so spacious, so conscious of being, that the forces of evil, which so depend on fear in people stuck to their stuff, will fail. Yes, not alone your own peace, but the peace and justice of the whole world hangs on your growing up, in space, not stuff.

How? With the life you are given, how? In every congregation, there are some who dismiss the seriousness of a preacher as not relevant to their life. Perhaps they find earnestness awkward, or perhaps the preacher is too vague, too abstract, too wordy. They are practical people. They want practical help with their stuff. Some want reassurance that God's in his heaven and all's right with the world. But it's not all right with the world, is it? And thank God God is not in his heaven, but has left there a sign: "Gone fishing."

Look, the whole point of this religion thing was always dead serious. It was to get you as soon as possible to the edge of the desert of your life, to prepare you for the great crossings you must make until the last. This was the whole point. God was dead set on you from the beginning. If you wanted religion lite, you did not want what God gives, for God comes to nothing, to space, not stuff, and gives power to cross every mountain. This power is not in your stuff.

To prepare, you must practice. ♪ *Let every heart prepare him room*. You must have a practice. This is what disciples have always sought: a way away from their stuff, out into the space. A practice in prayer, meditation, a journal—and a desire so great, so watching and waiting for the gift of God, that you hold nothing back. Then heaven and nature sing, heaven and

nature sing.

Remember—

No mirror ever changed to iron again.

No bread became wheat.

No ripened grape ever turned to sour again.

Mature yourself and be secure

From a change for the worse. Become the light.

— *Jalal Al-Din Rumi*

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in the City of New York*