

Dignity / New York - Homily
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Tonight I want to invite you into the desert.

It was in the desert that Moses spoke to the Jewish people in Deuteronomy.

And it was in the desert that so many Christian mystics have found their inspiration.

So what are deserts all about?

The great American artist Georgia O'Keeffe was once asked in an interview why she loved the desert of the American Southwest so much.

She responded...I don't want to tell you because then you will get interested.

Do you remember the first time you went to a desert?

I still remember vividly as a child at age 9 when we classmates and I went to outdoor school for a week at camp Hancock in Eastern Oregon.

I remember watching brown dust getting kicked up by cars driving us out there from Portland. And there there the hikes through the green sage brush, the scorching heat, the thirst, the parched itch on the back of my throat, and the sand getting stuck in my toes.

You don't realize how precious water is until you get to a place where it is scarce.

But there was also immense beauty there in the deserts of Eastern Oregon, like this hill of all red volcanic rock the local American Indians had worshiped as sacred. And there was a stillness I felt on the hikes through this arid land that I have found nowhere else.

It's crucial for us place our first reading from Deuteronomy in the textures and feelings of the desert.

As we all know, the Jewish people escaped slavery but wandered in the hot desert for 40 arduous years before they found the promised land.

They were led by a prophet named Moses.

A prophet who never gave up.

A prophet who confronted oppression.

A prophet who led his people towards a promised land he only glimpsed. He never arrived there.

The book of Deuteronomy focuses on Moses's last and parting words to the Israelites. He knew in his heart, his time was up.

He wanted so badly for the Jewish people to go from surviving in the desert to thriving in the promised land.

In today's excerpt, he tells the people to listen to the prophets of the future.

Now a standard interpretation of this passage might be, take a look, Moses isn't the final prophet and he is foreshadowing Jesus. Although, as we all know, Jesus was so much more than a prophet.

But I don't want to lead us down that familiar road.

Instead, I found myself reflecting on the prophets in my own midst.

I was honored to discover that I would be preaching on a night that Jamie Manson is presiding.

I am very proud that at this little church - nestled away in the crooked streets of the west village - talented lesbian catholic women like Jamie Manson and Patricia Russell can preach and preside.

I experienced a difficult moment at the Gay Pride parade a few years ago. A woman from St. Francis Xavier gay Community asked me to start turning up at their events and liturgies.

And I had to tell her that I don't want to participate or worship at a place where women can't preach and preside.

I had the same conversation with a young man from the gay group at St. Francis of Assisi, and with the Out at Saint Paul cohort.

It makes everyone feel very awkward.

But the simple truth is that I don't want to be part of a place where women can't speak as prophets. Because women inspire me.

Jamie Manson was a prophet for me in the sense that once I discovered her writing in the National Catholic reporter, and then got to meet her one night at the Cubbyhole over drinks after mass here, I realized that I was not alone in this desert of being young, queer and catholic. And something changed in me that night.

Patricia Russell was a prophet for me when she gave an incredible homily last summer at our dignity gathering in Boston. Her words that day changed how I felt and thought about hospitality. And many choices since that journey to Boston have been informed by a new mysticism I find in acts of Hospitality.

I spent Thanksgiving and Christmas this year with the Sisters of the Cenacle out at their retreat center on a long island in Ronkoma.

I met sisters who once thought they were going to be ordained as priests. Including my great aunt Sister Monica Kaufer, who I had the pleasure of seeing last night when she was in the city. It's been a great gift in my life to get to know the sisters better this past year and to receive pearls of wisdom over a festive supper.

I believe that one day we will reach the promised land where women and men can both serve as priests in our church.

It saddens me that day is not today - so many spiritually gifted women bear the pain of a dream deferred - and so many Catholics are missing out on the incredible wisdom our Catholic women prophets offer.

I draw great inspiration from women prophets in our midst - advocating, inspiring and carrying on - with full knowledge that they - like Moses - may not see this promised land themselves - but know deep in their hearts that the future will.

I draw great inspiration from the gay activists who came before me - many did not live to see the day the Supreme Court decriminalized gay sex - Many did not live to see the day when gay marriage became the law of the land - Many did not live to see the day of life saving HIV medications - and it is not lost on me - how much my life is better as a young gay man because of the gay prophets who came before me.

Misogyny, heterosexism, racism, classism - they are like deserts. And how lucky are we that there are prophets in our midst that can face them - like Moses - in all their brutality - and inspire us to keep going and to keep moving through them - knowing that somehow, some way, we will reach the promised land.

I don't want to waste my breathe on our dire political moment..

I know it feels like we stuck in the desert with no end in sight. And the promised land of justice seems so far away. And yet, deep in my heart, I still believe, we shall overcome some day.

But how do we bear this desert moment - in our church - in our political word?

Now I want to do something people normally don't do up here, which is to unpack the Psalm.

I wish someone had told me a lot earlier in my christian adventure what this antiquated expression harden not your hearts means.

I remember as a young boy singing the psalm, if today you hear god's voice, harden not your hearts, and thinking about how much I didn't want to have a heart of stone like Pharaoh in that Prince of Egypt animated movie.

But I want to push this further because the Psalm invites us back into the exodus story in the desert.

As the choir sang today in the third verse of the psalm.

"Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as in the day of Massah in the desert,
Where your fathers tempted me;
they tested me though they had seen my works."

Now of course, when I first came across this language, I said where the hell is Meribah.

And so I looked it up.

The psalm is referencing a low point between the Israelites and Moses in the desert before they reached the promised land.

The Israelites were thirsty and starting to grumble and quarrel with Moses.

And so Moses went to Yahweh, who then told Moses to walk a few feet ahead of the others and strike a rock with his rod. And water came out - and the thirst was quenched.

Now this wasn't the first time that Yahweh had done something extraordinary for the jewish people.

Three chapters earlier, you may recall that the red sea parted.

But the crux is - why did the Israelites lapse into fear when so many miracles had already taken them so far?

To harden your heart is to lose faith.

To harden your heart is to forget how far you have already come.

To harden your heart is to know miracles have happened in the past but doubt they will happen again.

I want to ask everyone in this church to pause for a moment and think back on your life.

Do you remember those amazing moments when God came to your aid and got you through the unthinkable?

How human we are to think that God is suddenly going to stop loving us.

And so I tell you harden not your hearts, my friends, because more miracles are coming to us in this desert.

Tonight is not the night to explore this strange reading from St. Paul. It saddens me - and many others - how much Paul's tortured relationship with own sexuality oozes out in his letters.

Let us turn to the Gospel with this evocative image of Jesus casting out demons.

What did demons mean to the readers of the gospel and the early Christians.

As much as I know that some of you are fans of Harry Potter, Game of Thrones, and the Lord of the Rings, let's check those associations at the door.

I am excited about this gospel's invitation to ponder the early Christian conception of demons.

What we can surmise from the gospels is that both sickness and emotional strife were understood to be a kind of unclean spirit that could be removed by a transformative faith experience.

And so we have this scene in the gospel where Jesus and his disciples arrive at a little fishing village of Capernaum, and then Jesus inspires everyone by removing an unclean spirit.

Now I want to lead us out into some interesting terrain in christian history.

And it has to do with how much demons became connected with the concept of sin by the early Christian mystics in the deserts of Egypt.

I want to put this gospel into the context of the so-called desert fathers and mothers.

And the story begins with St. Anthony the Abbot, born in 251 in Lower Egypt to wealthy parents.

At 18, St. Anthony heard the gospel message to sell everything and follow Jesus. And so he did it. He sold everything and retreated to the Scetes desert in Egypt just outside of Alexandria

He did not want be tempted by the materialism of the outside world and choose to live a holy life of seclusion.

St. Anthony became quite a sensation for walking the walk. Even philosophers came from Greece to meet him. He told them it was not about thinking, it's about doing and becoming. He healed many people that came to see him in the desert.

But St. Anthony was a tortured and tempted soul. Despite his devotion, there were moments where he was tempted to return to a life of power and money in the city.

At the Met Museum right now is one of my favorite paintings by Michelangelo. I've loved it since I studied it in college and it's the thrill to see here finally in New York.

And it shows St. Anthony levitating in the air surrounded by demons tormenting him. Michelangelo went to the fish market and studied fish for weeks to get the demons scales of just right.

The literary source for this traces back to some early texts about St. Anthony in which we see he was attacked by the devil in other beasts in the desert as a metaphor for being tested.

To the great surprise of Anthony and the others that came to join him in the desert, separating from society did not turn out to be the utopia they were expecting.

These early hermits - the so called Desert Fathers and Mothers - were still tempted to yell and scream at each other. They still were tempted to become greedy in small ways despite their vows of poverty.

And they began to understand these temptations as demons taunting them.

We should all pause for a moment and cut ourselves some slack.

Because if the holiest men and women that came before us found themselves tempted in the desert, the odds are pretty good we are going to be tempted to act out in ways we don't want to.

We do not know for sure how early the metaphor of demons for temptations goes in the Christian tradition for sure. But it is likely that his image or metaphor existed in one form or another since we also see it turn up in the gospels, and in other writings.

By the time Anthony died in 356 AD - he lived to be over 100 - the legend goes that thousands of monks and nuns had followed in his footsteps and they had formed a big community of desert dwellers.

The baton was passed to St. Macarius the Great who continues to lead this community of desert hermits.

In 385, a deacon and high ranking church official arrived in the desert from Constantinople.

Despite being a learned man and priest. Evangerius was frustrated with his own weakness and how much he had let high praise from his peers in Constantinople get to his head and by the lust he felt for a married women. How could he, learned as he was, still be so human and still feel urged on to do what he knew to be wrong.

And so he decided to withdraw into the dessert in the hopes he might not experience these temptations anymore.

But Evangirus was wrong. Although he took in the dessert and learned the ways of the Desert fathers. He stills struggled with all the passions and thoughts like they did. The problem wasn't Constantinople. The problem was demons.

He become legendary for what he began to term spiritual warfare with demons. He would find passages from the bible to help talk himself down from when he got triggered and wanted to overindulge at a feast, or when thoughts of being sexually inappropriate came up, or when he got mad as hell at another monk. Then and now, Christian community ain't easy.

And he wrote a treatise often called the 8 evil thoughts - which walks his monks through how talk themselves down. A scholar in Indian recently translated the entire manual from syriac into English.

The Desert believed that we as humans were fundamentally good as creations of god. And that when we go astray, it's because a demon got the better of us. And that the key is to turn to Jesus, and let him cast out the demons.

It saddens me how this original understanding of the inherently good person - tempted by an inner demons - and needing to draw closer to Jesus to cast them out - was revised in the middle ages.

When St. Gregory the Great decided to reinvent what sin means, he drew heavily upon Evangirus work, but decided the desert fathers had it wrong. He made them 7 deadly sins instead of 8 passions or evil thoughts. And he decided that humans are fundamentally flawed instead of fundamentally good.

I wish I had more time to go into this - patristics, the desert fathers and how sin metalized in the middle ages into a shame spiral is too deep of a rabbit hole tonight.

What I want you to take away from this tonight - is that you are not intrinsically wrong - you are intrinsically good - and when you make mistakes - it is not because you are once again weak and wrong - it is because you are good - and some inner demon came up - and Jesus is waiting there to help you heal.

I want to quote Thomas Merton. Some of you may now this quote but I think it so eloquently re-orientes us to this earlier understanding that we are essentially good.

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely ... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.”

I could speak for two hours and still not fully unpack this beautiful passage.

The gospel concept of the demon, developed by the desert fathers, has made it far easier for me to forgive people, and easier for me to release resentments.

Many of us know the saying that resentment is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. But I struggled to figure out how to be less angry until I integrated this material.

I now have this deep feeling that all people are fundamentally good - that everyone has this point of nothingness and this pure diamond within them - but swept up in moments of passion by their demonic dark sides that they have yet to subdue with Jesus's help.

And it has helped me to see that all of us are in the desert, trying to be holy and good, but struggling, doubting and fearing and facing our demons.

I wish you could be have been there with me as a kid at camp Hancock - there we all were in 4th grade - hiking through the sagebrush - thirsty for water - annoyed we couldn't take long showers - they limited us because water was scarce - and all covered in the desert dust together - a lot of us wrecked shoes on that trip - and yet that togetherness in the desert - it changed us as a class

We are all together in this dessert... We are all together in this dessert...