

Year A, 2016
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Advent 3
St. Matthew 11:2-11

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It rains in the desert—not often and not a lot, but it does rain. Any barefooted goat herder or shepherd knows that. And when it does rain, the seemingly dead wilderness blooms with grass and wildflowers and riverbeds full to overflowing. It takes a poet to see and celebrate the fleeting desert beauty. John Updike, in *A Month of Sundays*, writes that the Spanish called Death Valley “The Palm of the Hand of God” and understood it to be teeming with life. It takes a poet or a prophet to transform that passing reality into a timeless metaphor of liberation. The road from Baghdad to Jerusalem does run through a very dangerous desert. The people, however, did return (at least some of them). They may even have taken advantage of the winter rains but the journey was nowhere as magical as Isaiah imagined it. But without the metaphor, without the dream, without the vision they could not have even conceived the trip. It compares to what JFK did when he said the words we’re going to put a man on the moon. Nobody before that thought much about it; people were curious about the moon, but reaching the moon was pretty much left to songwriters and lovers. Before you can bring something into reality, you have to be able to see it as a possibility. When God stirs prophetic imagination, the impossible becomes possible, the captured are released, the lost are brought home, and even deserts blossom with life.

The response to the Isaiah passage this morning is not a psalm but a canticle—The *Magnificat*, Mary’s Song of praise and joy: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Why such joy? Mary’s imagination had been stirred by something powerful and holy. God has chosen the lowly to bring a blessing to the entire world: the proud will be confounded, the mighty humbled, the hungry fed, and the rich sent away empty. Something that we never see happen in this world is about to happen—the impossible is about to come and take hold. This is what the Advent message is all about: imagining, preparing and waiting for the great reversal when the poor will have plenty and rich will be refused, the great undoing of the haughty and the greedy and the abusers, God’s movement of inclusion when the left out will be brought in, the downtrodden lifted up,

and the ignored attended to. That's a little different than simply waiting for Christmas and the exchange of gifts.

We've watched on our televisions all year long the vast emptying out of Syria and Libya, of refugees coming by the thousands, tens of thousands; men, women, and children crawling out of dinghies and making the trek across the countries of Europe, fleeing the wrath of war and seeking a safe place to land. We've seen mass migrations before in some countries of Africa; but nothing on this scale. Not since World War II. Every night, watching the news, I said, "Those poor people. Look what they have to risk to choose life!" After a while, pictures came of fences erected, walls built and open-door policies closed. I sympathized with them too—they're going to be overrun, financially strapped, culturally altered. I wouldn't want that over here. But then I thought ... what if that was me? What if that was us? The birth of Christ has already come and it has and is continuing to make a difference. In the end it will make all the difference. So rejoice! Sing Mary's song! Dream Isaiah's dreams! Believe in what is so crazy and out of step with the world, so impossibly good that this could only come out of the heart of the God who is Love.

Can we believe it? Or is it just a figment of our imagination? John the Baptizer had imagination too. He was right in his assessment that the kingdom was at hand and that God was about to bring forth new possibilities. But he was wrong in his expectations for the Messiah. John expected a messiah with some muscle and a short fuse. He would come with judgment, clear the threshing floor, burn the chaff, and fell fruitless trees. That's not what Jesus did. That's not to say Jesus was nothing but meek and mild, or that God is nothing but an indulgent father, or that the God the Holy Spirit is nothing but some new age therapist. In the kingdom of perfect love that awaits us at the End, that which is not love must either be converted or destroyed. But Jesus didn't come threatening; He came demonstrating.

You can see why John was having second thoughts. From his prison cell he sent his disciples to ask the question that disturbed his sleep: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" John really needed to know—he was only days away from the chopping block. His

expectations in the desert had been so certain. He identified Jesus as the One. But still the judgment didn't come; the wicked still prospered; Herod still sat on his throne. Are you the one to come, or should we look for another?

A simple yes or no would have been fine, but Jesus hands the question right back to John: look at the signs and decide for yourself. Nobody can decide if Jesus is "the One" for us. We have to decide for ourselves. Have the blind received sight or, to put it another way, are people being enabled to see into the meaning of life and the mystery of God with us? Are the lame walking or, to put it another way, are there people who once staggered through the day who are now dancing with God? Are lepers cleansed or addicts released to become "clean and sober"? Are the spiritually deaf perking up their ears? Are the spiritually dead showing signs of life? Is there any good news for the poor, the hurting and the needy?

I know what I want for Christmas. I want it for my children and grandchildren...and yours. I want Isaiah's dream. I want them to find a safe highway through the dangerous desert in which we live. I want them to find the water that can quench their most burning thirst. I want them to have songs to sing and dances to dance and dreams to dream. I want them to have the gift of insight to be able to see into life's mystery and meaning. And wouldn't it be great if they could be grasped by Mary's vision of the great reversal coming into the world ... and have their imaginations stirred by God's call for love, compassion and justice.

We have many collects for the Sundays of the year which are great prayers, but this one for the Third Sunday of Advent has to be a special one: "Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...." Stir up our imaginations, fan the flames of our passion for justice and open our eyes to envision the kingdom you intend. Amen.