

ARCHDIOCESAN MISSION SUNDAY EVENING REFLECTION

Led into the Desert

The theme of our mission, the theme that we will be exploring and delving into over the next four evenings together, is “Led Through the Desert.”

Some of us are familiar with deserts. Are there any “snowbirds” out there? Have any of you travelled to Arizona to escape the cold of a Canadian winter? Of course, these days, in the midst of the pandemic, we can’t do that. To me, being honest, there are times when the desert seems kind of attractive, especially if I contemplate a trip there through eyes that are weary of lockdown, tired of the cold, and longing for something different!

But, in actuality, the desert is not an easy place to live in. Whether it’s the scorching heat of southern deserts or the biting cold of the northern desert—the tundra—deserts are among the most inhospitable climates in the world. Modern air conditioning and transportation have made southern deserts easier to live in, and modern heating and water systems have made it easier to live in our northern deserts- the tundra. But once we step outside our cooled or warmed buildings, we quickly come face-to-face with a keen awareness that nature is in charge- not us!

Though we tend to think of deserts as barren, sandy or frozen, places where nothing grows—that’s not really true. Even though the desert is an inhospitable climate, lots of plants and animals live in the desert or on the tundra, but every one of those living things has adapted and evolved to be able to not only survive, but to thrive in a harsh and unforgiving environment. Think of camels who have evolved to be able to store life-sustaining water in their own bodies to endure long journeys without access to water sources. Think of the dozens of types of cactus, adapted to live for long periods of time without water, and with those protective thorns or spines that keep them from becoming the target of hungry predators. Think of the polar bears that have adapted to their environment by bearing white fur that makes them indistinguishable from the landscape around them. The desert and the tundra teem with life, a life that is uniquely and specifically adapted to survive and—better- thrive in the face of harsh environmental conditions.

And the people who live in the desert or on the northern desert, the tundra, have adapted, too. They have learned at what times of the day they should move without being too warm, or too cold. They have developed clothing that protects

them from the elements. They have learned to read the signs of nature that warn them of impending bad weather, telling them when to take cover, to shelter themselves, their families and their animals. The people who live in the desert know where and how to find water, and food. They have learned how to do more than survive- they have learned to thrive.

In spite of the inhospitable climate in which they live- maybe because of it— desert people are known as some of the most hospitable people in the world.

What most of us never think of is that all life in a desert is inter-connected. All the life forms co-exist and rely on one another, even thrive off one another. To stick together is to thrive. To strike out on your own is to court possible disaster.

You and I—all of us-- have been wandering through a variety of deserts for the past year. Certainly, the Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as a kind of desert—an inhospitable environment which has driven all of us indoors. We shelter in place so that, when we emerge, nobody is lost.

I've heard it said that we are all in the same storm, but not the same boat! There is truth to that. In addition to this big desert, many of us have been wandering through other kinds of deserts as well: only you can name what your individual desert has been. There are inner and outer deserts, deserts we choose to walk into and through. There are other deserts into which we may not choose to enter, but even so, they are set before us, and we walk into and through them nevertheless. Many people have talked about the desert of loneliness or isolation, the desert of fear, the desert of depression, the desert of illness, the desert of economic hardship, the desert of life as- or with- a rotational worker, the desert of grieving.

Having some sense of this, we very deliberately chose the words of our theme for this mission- Led *Through* the Desert. The desert us not our destination. We are not meant to take up permanent residence in the desert, but to pass through. But how can we safely pass through if we do not know the way?

So... the other important word in our theme is the word "led". We are being led through the desert. I think it's very important to ask, right off the bat, "Who is leading us?" and also "How are we being led?" For those of us in Newfoundland and Labrador, our minds easily jump right to Dr Janice Fitzgerald and the excellent guidance that she and her team at the Department of Health have given

us over the long haul, never losing heart, always encouraging, always exhorting us to “hold fast.”

Who else has been leading us? Who has been guiding us through this desert? If we look behind the Dr Janice Fitzgeralds and the caring neighbours, the grocery store employees, the housekeeping staff in our hospitals and long-term care facilities, the artists who have lifted us up and the musicians who have given us hope and joy, surely we can name God—the God who works through human hands and eyes, voices and hearts. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins once put it idea this way:

Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his.

The author H. D. Beeby, reflecting on Hosea 11, the passage from Scripture that we heard tonight, says that in this short passage “we penetrate deeper into the heart and mind of God than anywhere in the Old Testament.” So, let’s hear some of those words again, the words that take us to the very heart of God, but this time, I’m going to substitute “you” for “Israel.” Hear God speaking directly from God’s heart to yours:

When you were a child, I loved you,
and out of your desert I called you...
It was I who taught you to walk,
I took you up in my arms;
but you did not know that I healed you.
I led you with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.
I was to you like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to you and fed you.

This is our God. Our God is One who knows what we have been going through, and walks with us every step of the way, accompanies us, fixes us within a gaze of love and mercy, and never lets us go. In fact, God loved – and loves—us so much that God became one of us in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God’s love poured forth into our world, offering plentiful love, plentiful life, plentiful redemption. That love is a stronger force than any force known or unknown. Our God is not stingy, and pours out love into our world, into our lives, into our

deserts—it's there, if only we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to perceive it.

And God uses any and all available means to get the message of persistent, persevering love across. God uses art. God uses music. God uses books. God uses animals. God uses plants. God uses the ocean, and rivers and streams. God uses the very heavens. And God uses other people most of all.

In the passage, we hear, "I led you with cords of human kindness, with bands of love." It's clear here that the cords of kindness, the bands of love that God uses are the actions, gestures and interventions of others. That's how God speaks to us today. That's how God has worked through the pandemic. That's how God works in whatever desert we are journeying through.

The simple, profound words of Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers of TV fame, always come to my mind:

"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news,
my mother would say to me,
"Look for the helpers.
You will always find people who are helping."

That's where God is reaching out to you and me, leading us with cords of human kindness, with bands of love, through whatever desert we are in.

It strikes me that what I need to pray for and work to develop, is eyes that see, ears that hear, and a heart that recognizes God when God shows up walking beside me, acting in my life.

But there is more! Once I see, once I recognize and accept that throughout our journey in the desert, God has been leading me, guiding me—us-- with these cords of human kindness, with bands of love; once I can see that God has most often done this through the presence, action and intervention of loved ones, friends, essential workers, nurses, doctors, store and take-out clerks, neighbours, musicians, artists and countless more—then I come face-to-face with a life-changing realization and decision. I, too, am called to be that presence of God for others. And I must make a choice, and the choice is simple:

Do I answer the call to be that presence for others, to look upon other people, and our very world, with that compassionate gaze of God, of Jesus, to do what

our God does, with God's own heart, and lead others with cords of human kindness, with bands of love?

Or do I not?

Do I choose love? Or do I choose the opposite of love, which is indifference?

The invitation is offered to each one of us. Only we can choose how we will respond to God's invitation, issued through outreached hands, pleading phone calls, FaceBook posts or e-mails.

The choice to love, then, is not a choice to feel an emotion- we have no control over what we feel. The choice to love is the choice, first of all, to see the other—especially, to see those who are affected most strongly by this desert experience, to see those most marginalized by it and through it.

Then, the choice to love compels us to act on behalf of the other, to accompany the other, to bear their burdens and their joys with them. Love looks like feeding the hungry- not just with food, but with phone calls and companionship. Love looks like giving drink to the thirsty- not always with water, but with whatever soothes and sustains them. Love looks like clothing the ill-clothed or naked- not only with coats and shoes, but with dignity and justice. Love looks like giving shelter to migrants or homeless persons. Love looks like visiting those who are imprisoned—and not all prisons have bars. Love looks like helping someone else bury the dead—and sometimes that's not a human body, but a broken dream, a lot hope, a vanished job. And Pope Francis has added to and deepened our understanding that love also looks like caring for Earth, our Common Home, for all life is interdependent.

As we are being led through the desert, we have only to look around us to see signs of God's plentiful love and faithfulness. Look at the people in Mount Pearl now who are contributing to feed the Covid-19 test teams who are working through this cold to test people and make sure that they are cared for. Look at the international students at MUN, stranded here, miles from home, who banded together to found a food bank to feed people even less fortunate than they. Look at the high school students who have sung to us to buoy up our spirits. Look at the family members who set up Sunday night Zoom calls to keep everybody in touch. And don't just look out, look in. You're probably one of them. Don't just look- give thanks. This is how you and I are being led through the desert by a God who is lovely in eyes and lovely in limbs not his. This is how God works.

One final word. Once we choose love, the desert doesn't disappear, but the journey through the desert becomes more bearable, for the one who gives, and for the one who receives. We are not alone, wandering in the desert. We are being led. And together, tonight, we pray for eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to receive and to share that love freely, for through it, others are being led.