

In the name of God who through the Word and in the Spirit, creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

Our Gospel reading this week takes up the theme of beginnings by going into the desert. In Jewish religious thought at the time of Jesus' ministry, the desert wilderness was looked to with hope; it was not a place of fear or desolation: it was a place of possibility, a place of new beginnings.

It makes sense, then, that in our passage from Isaiah, the cry for comfort is a cry to go into the wilderness, the desert, to make a path for the coming anointed one. The desert wilderness is bare only of the distractions and false comforts we might find in a city or a settled place. The desert is unsettled and unsettling. To go into the desert wilderness is to leave behind all the layers of protection we try to build up around our selves. To go into the physical desert means to leave behind the comfortable enclosures of our houses; to go into the wilderness means leaving behind the fences and walls we build to make ourselves feel safe. To go into the spiritual desert is a similar act of leaving behind; spiritually and emotionally, we also build enclosing walls to make ourselves feel safe and we raise barriers against untame things. But here's the problem with these

spiritual barriers: the Holy Spirit is a most untame thing; and the Holy Spirit is the source of true comfort and abundant life. If we want to welcome the coming of the anointed, we need to prepare ourselves to walk in unsettled and unsettling places.

One of the oldest forms of defensive barrier is the system of deep ditches and high earthen banks that people would construct to surround their towns or their castles, or their little settlements. From the top of the bank of earth, a watcher could see any potential enemy coming; and anyone trying to get into the fortified town would be confronted with a ditch which they could not get across. The people inside the defensive barrier could decide who to let in by way of a bridge and gate. But in our Gospel reading, we see people leaving their settled and safe places and going into the desert, where they can no longer pretend to be in control of what they meet and who enters their lives.

Enter, John the Baptist, an embodiment of the unsettling and the untame. John the Baptist brings a message to come out of the defensive places we've built that cut us off from relationship with our neighbor and with our God. People come out to John in the desert wilderness for a baptism of

repentance, a physical gesture that is the outward sign of an inward change of heart; people seek John in the desert because they come to understand the trappings of status, of title, or of property that they used as a defensive barrier to make themselves feel safe, were all an illusion and hold no possibility of abundant life. Seeking right relationship with God through the love of neighbor was the hope that they saw in the desert wilderness, this place of beginning. And certainly, the vulnerability required to open ourselves up to love of God and love of neighbor is to walk into an unsettled and unsettling place.

John the Baptist lived in a space of unhindered access by the Holy Spirit; John's spiritual desert is a space where every defensive ditch and bank, every hill and valley, have been made into a level path to welcome fully the Holy Spirit in all her untamed glory. Those who seek this place with a heart open to change will find the comfort that transcends the uncertainties of this mortal life; those who walk into the unsettled spiritual wilderness of their own soul will find it a place where the Anointed One, the Christ, is hastening to meet them with abundant, unending life. Leave behind and lay low every thing, every thought, and every act that would hinder his coming: the fear that makes every stranger an enemy; the mistrust that

causes us to take from our environment and each other more than we need; the contempt for our common humanity that makes daily encounter into daily strife. Let our hearts be turned and lead us into the wilderness of possibility where wonder makes welcome; where trust that if God's hand is feeding us, in community there is enough; and such awe that we are made in God's image that love for one another brings us to live in peace, peace that passes all understanding. Amen.