

FIRST READING: Isaiah 54:1-10

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

Raise a glad cry, you barren one who did not bear, Break forth in jubilant song, you who were not in labor, For more numerous are the children of the deserted wife than the children of her who has a husband, says the LORD. Enlarge the space for your tent, spread out your tent cloths unsparingly; lengthen your ropes and make firm your stakes. For you shall spread abroad to the right and to the left; your descendants shall dispossess the nations and shall people the desolate cities. Fear not, you shall not be put to shame; you need not blush, for you shall not be disgraced. The shame of your youth you shall forget, the reproach of your widowhood no longer remember. For he who has become your husband is your Maker; his name is the LORD of hosts; Your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, called God of all the earth. The LORD calls you back, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, A wife married in youth and then cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great tenderness I will take you back. In an outburst of wrath, for a moment I hid my face from you; But with enduring love I take pity on you, says the LORD, your redeemer. This is for me like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah should never again deluge the earth; So I have sworn not to be angry with you, or to rebuke you. Though the mountains leave their place and the hills be shaken, My love shall never leave you nor my covenant of peace be shaken, says the LORD, who has mercy on you.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 30:2 and 4, 5-6, 11-12a and 13b

I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me.

I will extol you, O LORD, for you drew me clear and did not let my enemies rejoice over me. O LORD, you brought me up from the nether world; you preserved me from among those going down into the pit.

I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me.

Sing praise to the LORD, you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger lasts but a moment; a lifetime, his good will. At nightfall, weeping enters in, but with the dawn, rejoicing.

I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me.

“Hear, O LORD, and have pity on me; O LORD, be my helper.” You changed my mourning into dancing; O LORD, my God, forever will I give you thanks.

I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me.

GOSPEL: Luke 7:24-30

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

When the messengers of John the Baptist had left, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John. “What did you go out to the desert to see – a reed swayed by the wind? Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine garments? Those who dress luxuriously and live

sumptuously are found in royal palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom Scripture says: *Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, he will prepare your way before you.* I tell you, among those born of women, no one is greater than John; yet the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he." (All the people who listened, including the tax collectors, who were baptized with the baptism of John, acknowledged the righteousness of God; but the Pharisees and scholars of the law, who were not baptized by him, rejected the plan of God for themselves.)

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 3rd Thursday of Advent

Jesus asked a question to the crowd, "What did you go out to the desert to see?" I've been to the deserts of the southwestern United States several times. I went to visit a friend in New Mexico, family in California and on sabbatical in Arizona. I found family and friends, wonder and awe and environments foreign and beautiful. I was able to see the desert too in all its harsh beauty. I saw a lot. I enjoyed my trips. I may have traveled there alone, but I was not alone after I arrived. I have fond memories of my visits. This is the answer I would give to Jesus' probing question.

I learned to wear a hat and long sleeves, wear sunglasses and sunscreen. I carried water and a jacket; all for my safety. I also brought a camera. The pictures help me to remember the places, wonders and people that I visited. I learned that I can endure hot and dry better than hot and humid. Relief from high temperatures came with a breeze in the shade or a fine mist of water in and outdoor café. In these experiences, in the moment and upon further reflection, I found the presence of God.

Was this the response that Jesus sought from the crowd? If not, it's still my response to his question. The desert and the people I visited have added much to my life's experience and understanding. My visit deepened my relationships and discovering God's presence among us and in those places, deepened my relationship with God too. I believe that this response to Jesus' question is close to the one he sought.

What do we see in all our experiences? The images that Isaiah put forth do not normally elicit positive responses from us. A deserted wife with children or an unwed mother may be on welfare. Do they deserve our scorn for their shame or our compassion as human beings? What does Jesus question ask here? Do we see foreigners or those different from us as taking over from us and as threats to our way of life? What is Jesus asking here? Haven't we, or our ancestors, once been foreign? What does Jesus ask of us as his followers and siblings? Aren't they Jesus' brothers and sisters too? What do we see in lying, deceptive and crooked political leaders; leaders in general for that matter? What in criminals do we see? How does Jesus probing challenge us?

Is there any place, person or event where God is absent? All creation and creatures exist having been created by God. Each human person is made in God's image and likeness. God is infinite, eternal and unconditional. God is powerful. The Catholic Dictionary has defined God's divine power as "the magnificent out pouring of love by the Holy Spirit." We, however, are finite, moribund and come with strings attached. We are all limited by death, imperfection, weakness

and, especially, sin. We rely on God's love and upon God's nature for life, faith, salvation and forgiveness. God makes up in us for what we lack by his amazing and loving grace.

When God first looked at all creation, God saw it was good. God saw God's own imprint upon the cosmos. When God looks into the lives of sinners, God can see God. Can we look at the chaos around us and see God? Can we look into the lives of sinners, of whom I am first, and see God too? Through faith in God and in God's son, Jesus, can we see through their eyes? Granted we will not see God face to face until we die or Jesus returns to finalize God's Kingdom, but we can catch a glimpse, especially when we know what to see; Jesus.

Today's chapter from Isaiah was written while God's people were in Diaspora. Taken as booty by the Babylonians, they were dispersed throughout the known world. Generations of Jews lived, for the first time, beyond the borders of the Promised Land and among pagans. Their descendants still live dispersed throughout the world. The author Thomas Cahill wrote a powerful book, "The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels." I recommend it. In experiences that, on the surface, may seem cursed, one may find blessing deeper within. For blessing is none other than perceiving, recognizing and then knowing the presence of God. One may even discern God's presence through sin.

We approach God to forgive us when we sin. God never turns a sinner away. God seeks to lead sinners to new life and into a deeper relationship with God. This is true of ourselves and those with whom we disagree or can't stand. The entire human race is part of God's creation and family. God is our beloved father and we are his beloved children. All God's children are siblings. Jesus is our brother. "What did you go out to the desert to see?" We may always see God.

Instead of the coming of Christ later, may we seek his immanent presence now.

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December 16, 2021