

Topic 3: Discovering God in the Desert, Part 1

Overview: One of the earliest movements in Christian spirituality was the withdrawal or movement into the desert. The spirituality of the desert is ancient and foundational to all spiritualities. The way each spirituality embraces the desert will vary, but every authentic spirituality will include the silence and solitude that we find in the cave of the human heart. It is an interesting phenomenon that, in today's busy technological world, the thirst and need for silence is becoming more palatable. All significant figures in the history of world who have made a difference in society have experienced periods of withdrawal, not for withdrawal's sake, but rather to deepen in the inner self so that it has more to offer others.

Rooted in the Scriptures

- The desert was a place where the Israelites came to know God and themselves. It was the context from which Jewish spirituality was formed.
- The New Testament begins with John the Baptist going into the desert. He comes to us from the desert with a basic spiritual principal: to repent, to change. It is a place where the human heart is purified. Jesus himself follows this tradition.
- In the Gospel of Matthew, we read about Jesus going into the desert and experiencing temptations from Satan.

1) This is a template for desert spirituality, which builds upon the experiences of the Israelites, John the Baptist, and Jesus.

2) Jesus withdraws in order to deepen his relationship with the Father and to purify his spirit.

3) Jesus wrestles with three basic human temptations:

(a) Pleasure

(b) Power

(c) Relinquishing responsibility

4) Desert spirituality resurfaces through the centuries.

The Development Desert Spirituality

- Desert spirituality flourished in the 3rd to 5th centuries, beginning with St. Anthony of Egypt.

- St. Anthony went into the desert not because he was running away from the world, but to seek the deeper way.
- Desert communities evolved around St. Anthony and the experiences of other early desert fathers and mothers.
- This early paradigm of Christian spirituality has retained importance throughout the centuries. It continues to be expressed in new ways.

The Religious Meaning of the Desert:

- By its very definition, the desert is a barren and inhospitable place.
 - 1) It is a place where the human spirit is tested, refined, and forced to face itself as it is.
 - 2) From a religious perspective, the desert stands for an arena in which one submits to a spiritual test, meeting one's salvation or doom. The desert of life either brings us closer to God or pushes us away.

- We should see the desert in relation to other symbols in the scriptures.

1) The Garden: Exodus 3:8 - The garden stands in contrast to our understanding of the desert. The experience of the garden was lost when Adam and Eve chose to move away from God. In Exodus 3:8, God is drawing the Israelites to himself, in the land of milk and honey. In the end, the desert is a place of transition, while the garden is a place of attainment.

2) The City: Genesis 11:1-9 - In the Old Testament, the city is a counter-symbol to the desert, populated and civilized. However, it also readily suggests evil. In Genesis 11, the city is a symbol of division and movement away from God. The city is depicted as a distraction that pulls us away from the desert and from purity of heart.

Review Questions

1. Read the account of Christ's temptations by the devil (Matthew 4:1-11). What are your temptations, struggles? Bring these into the desert of your heart and allow yourself to enter into the struggle.
2. Think of ways that might create desert times within your daily life as well as a longer desert experience for a weekend or weeklong retreat.