

## Topic 4: Discovering God in the Desert, Part 2

Overview: Spirituality of the desert is important for everyone's spiritual life. It is marked by a withdrawal from the vanities of the world. The desert leads us to find God and ourselves. The notion of stepping back into the spiritual desert is a paradigm for growth in the human experience. We often attempt to resist growth and transformation. Change is always difficult. Yet God never tires of seeking us. Desert spirituality is not meant to be harsh, because God is not harsh. We need not withdraw to a physical desert in order to experience the transformation that desert spirituality provides. How can we create deserts within our own hearts?

### Temptation

- According to the teachings of the desert fathers and mothers, temptation increases as one moves closer to God. The basic human struggle, movement towards or away from God, takes place in the desert.
- We are attacked at our most vulnerable and lured by the narcotics of human living.
  - 1) Narcotics serve to deaden the pain of human life. In the desert, there is no running from the pain.
  - 2) The garden will come in God's time, not our time.

**Common Themes :** Certain themes can be found in the writings of the desert fathers and mothers that apply to all desert spiritualities. Our challenge is to translate these themes into our contemporary lived experience.

- 1) Fasting
  - 2) Longing for heaven
  - 3) Work
  - 4) Mutual harmony
  - 5) Stability
  - 6) Spiritual direction
- The great monastic centers of the 4th century were in Egypt, Arabia, and Palestine. In the 4th century, men and women left society behind and fled to the desert. They were the first Christian hermits. At the time, organized religion was more focused on structures than the spirit of Christianity. The

desert fathers and mothers withdrew in order to better respond to the issues and problems of their time. From their perspective, society was a place where all men and women could seek God and live in the way that God ordained.

- The key phrase of desert spirituality is “purity of heart.” The stories of the desert fathers are stories of those who were on their way to purity of heart.
- Thomas Merton invites us to let go of the ego and self-will and open ourselves to the voice of the Holy Spirit. He suggests that, while desert spirituality is a part of our Christian tradition, it transcends all traditions and is meant to be embraced by all human beings.
- The desert fathers and mothers were pioneers.
- Merton writes, “What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it all the rest are not only useless but disastrous.”

### **Review Questions**

1. Visit a local monastery. Spend some time and allow your body and spirit to slow down. If there is no nearby monastery, practice this activity in a park or hiking trail.
2. Fasting is a spiritual practice that is prominent in desert spirituality. Many seem to have drifted from this practice in the contemporary world. Give some thought on how you might rekindle the place of fasting in your life.