

The Second Sunday of Advent

December 10, 2006

Baruch 5:1-9

Psalm 126

Philippians 1:1-11

Luke 3:1-6

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We were traveling from Texas to California in a change of assignments, driving west across the staked plains of New Mexico and the barren desert, then the pine-covered hills of Arizona. This day we had left well before dawn; it was high summer, and the heat of day came early. The road was filled with early travelers. Then, as though some unheard message went out to us all, it seemed that every one stopped to see the desert sunrise.

First we stood in darkness, the darkness of a sky free from city lights, a blackness punctuated by fading stars. Then there was the soft, almost imperceptible presence of light. Clouds appeared, first pink, then orange, then red, and the tops of mesas far out across the desert were defined by that same advancing orange light. Then the sun, a glaring physical presence on the eastern horizon, long rays of light reaching out across the desert, so bright that we had to look away. Then suddenly, it was a new day.

There was a man named John who appeared in the wilderness of Judea, the Eastern desert of the people of Israel. He appeared in the deepest darkness of a night of estrangement from God, calling God's people to come out to the desert, stop, repent, and be reconciled.

Was he truly a man or an apparition – the very embodiment of the hidden, unspoken guilt and shame of the people, touching their souls?

John stood there in the waters of the Jordan, planted in the path that had led the people of Israel to the land promised them by their God many centuries before, calling them to enter those waters again, be baptized and rededicated, turn and go home.

They came by the hundreds, perhaps the thousands, from Jerusalem and the villages and the countryside, all sorts of people, to answer that call, shepherds and farmers and merchants and Pharisees and Scribes, to see this apparition and to hear his call. They came in their humility and in their pride, their power and their weakness, their wealth and their poverty, seeking one thing: hope.

They came because they were pained and exhausted by the futility of a seemingly endless darkness of sin and estrangement; they came seeking words of comfort and assurance. They came seeking the light of a new day. They came because in their hopes this John was the new Elijah, the herald prophet who would proclaim the Messiah: God's anointed one who would reconcile all creation to Himself.

They came in their hopes to see the path of the Messiah made straight and smooth by the presence of John, the valleys filled and the hills made low, the beams of the light of God's presence cutting though the darkness of the desert of their lives. They came to stand in the overwhelming power of the presence of God, dispelling night and darkness.

There stands John today, planted in our own metaphoric Jordan, yours and mine. He is calling each of us to the brightness of God's presence. Advent is our time of journey. Leaving those places of ease and comfort, we walk our own silent paths through our own wilderness whatever it may be.

At the end of that journey stands John and the light of the rising sun.

In His Holy Name.