

Second Sunday in Advent
December 9, 2018
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Reflection

In today's first reading we heard these words: "Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look towards the east, and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them." "Look towards the east." This past Wednesday, we began to celebrate Mass *ad Orientem*, which means "facing east". I stood in the same direction as the people. This posture reminds us of Jesus bringing the people towards God. It's like the Good Shepherd leading his flock to the green pastures of eternal life. "Arise O Jerusalem...look towards the east." So what do the people of Jerusalem see when they face east? The Judean mountains block the view, but otherwise they would see the Jordan Rift Valley. It's about ten miles away. It begins at the heights of northern Israel, where waters flow into the Sea of Galilee. The current continues down the Jordan River to the Dead Sea. The whole valley lies below sea level, making it warm, lush and fertile. The valley sunk millions of years ago as the geographic plate below Arabia moved away from Africa. The Judean mountains rose a million years afterwards, blocking it from flooding by the Mediterranean Sea. This is the land prepared by God for John the Baptist; a wilderness reached with difficulty, where he proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Bar 5:1-9
Ps 126
Phil 1:3-6, 8-11
Lk 3:1-6

Today's Gospel hints at the wilderness by contrast. Luke places the start of John's ministry according to the civil and religious authority of Rome and Israel: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod ruler of Galilee...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

We can say that the present age began in the wilderness. Here is where John the Baptist recognized publicly the Lamb of God. Prophecy came to an end with this last but greatest prophet. But the beginning was long in coming. It took millions of years to prepare the land, and centuries to prepare the people. The land was shifted with earthquakes and tremors, shaped by waters and seasons. The people were freed by exodus and purified by exile; mired in sin and then longing in captivity; scattered and poor, but hopeful in deliverance; kept at each moment by faithful mercy, a loyal love.

They, like us, stood in need of his love. Man was first created in the image and likeness of God. Through original sin, we've lost the likeness but we've kept the image. We have an immortal soul, free will, the ability to reason. These faculties are damaged by sin, but we can still choose. We can decide to grasp the hand reaching down to save us, to heal us, to make us whole. "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the desert of the Negev."

The baptism of John marked a turning from sin, but baptism in the spirit forgives our sins. It joins us to Jesus as his brothers and sisters, adopted children of God. Sure we're still going to suffer, but we know that it links us to Christ on his cross. One day it will bring us to his throne in heaven. And then our likeness to God will be restored in the resurrection. "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy."

The wilderness remains a place of seeking and finding, where you can be lost and found. The quiet opens your heart to hear what eludes the ear, the voice of God in the whispered wind. It's a place, but it's also a state. Alone you encounter the one from whom you came, to whom you go. He joins you to those before, those after, those all around. The wilderness is difficulty and deliverance, prepared for each one of us, in order to bring to completion the "good work" that was begun. For this Eucharist, we pray for the graces needed to make "the rough ways smooth, so that we can see the salvation of God."