

Second Sunday of Advent: Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:1-12

3:1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,

3:2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

3:3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

3:4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

3:5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,

3:6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

3:7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

3:8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

3:9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

3:10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

3:11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

3:12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

This past Thursday evening, after Joan and I had eaten supper and were sitting by the fire, my iPhone buzzed. Not a you-have-a-phone-call buzz, but a my-I-have-your-attention-please buzz. An electronic butler tugging slightly on my shirt sleeve, and clearing its throat. I glanced at the screen and it read *Nelson Mandela 1918-2013*. Israel had its John the Baptist, sweeping in from the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. South Africa had its Mandela, striding out of his lonely prison cell after 27 years, preparing the way of truth and reconciliation.

I fell to sleep Thursday evening thinking of wilderness and prison cells and gulags and all the other places we send those who trouble us, people in literal and metaphorical places of no-comment, and I felt so deeply grateful for them. When Nelson Mandela was in his cell on Robben Island, he was permitted one visitor a year and one letter each six months. And so in one man's solitude was born a nation.

I thought about that on Thursday evening, of John the Baptist and Nelson Mandela, and how their lives and witness were forged in the crucible of solitude. On Friday evening, I thought how often that is true for us, how often it is our solitude, our aloneness, that determines our lives.

We've been talking about Abraham Maslow's characteristic of self-actualized people. These are people who live at their utmost capacity and creativity. I call them awakened souls. We've talked about how they have a clear perception of reality, they are reality-centered. We've also learned that self-actualized people have a fresh, spontaneous appreciation for the basic pleasures in life.

This morning, I invite us to think about solitude and what it gives birth to. Abraham Maslow observed that while self-actualized people enjoy their relationships with other people, they are equally comfortable with solitude. Now when some people are alone, they despise it. They feel lonely. But there's a difference between loneliness and solitude, and it's a difference we need to learn. The poet and novelist, May Sarton, described the difference well in her book, *The Journal of a Solitude*, "Loneliness is the poverty of self; solitude is richness of self."

Loneliness is when we have no one, when we go through life feeling completely detached and disconnected from everyone and everything. It is the poverty of self. Solitude is the deliberate effort to physically, spiritually, and emotionally retreat for rest, reflection, or renewal. It was the kind of "aleness" Jesus often sought. Do you remember these sentences from the gospels?

“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”

Here is another: “After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.”

That is solitude. Self-actualized people, awakened soul people, seek solitude, even though they enjoy others and others enjoy them. When self-actualized people are alone, they are alone because they want to be. They seek periods of aloneness or solitude because they find it refreshing and restorative.

I remember knowing a couple many years ago who divorced. The man could not bear to be alone, so remarried within just a few months of his divorce. His first marriage had no sooner officially ended, than he was engaged to be married again. The prospect of being alone was more than he could bear, so he married the first woman he could find. He did not know how to be alone with himself. He reminded me of the kind of people the psychologist Rollo May was describing when he said, “There are many people who so fear finding themselves alone, never find themselves at all.”

The man's first wife, though at times lonely, realized it would be unwise to hurry into another relationship, so learned the art of solitude. She took up several hobbies, joined a few organizations, but was careful to carve out times for solitude. Five or six years later, she began dating a man she worked with, and eventually married him. Today, she is very happy. She enjoys time with her husband, but has interests and hobbies apart from him. She enjoys solitude, encourages her husband to enjoy his solitude, which he does. They return from their solitude with this wonderful energy and insight which enhances their time together.

Self-actualized people, people with awakened souls, know a valuable secret: *The best way to be together with someone is to sometimes be alone with yourself.* What an irony, that those people who teach us how to live with one another, are usually the same people who live most comfortably with themselves.