



Community of Christ

Daily Bread

Monday, 27 March 2017 – By Vickie MacArthur of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Encountering God in the Desert (Part 1)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. —Matthew 4:1–2 NRSV

What does “spiritual formation” mean? About fifty adventurous souls from all over our church in North America, are now beginning the third and final year of the “Spiritual Formation and Companioning Pilot” training program. Together we are learning what it means to risk being “spiritually formed” ourselves, and learning how to be companions for others in our ministry in both individual and congregational settings.

Through spiritual practice and exploration we are being asked to take a long, loving look at everything: ourselves, our beliefs, our church, our community. It is a journey into the wilderness. It is a journey into and beyond our false selves to discover the Christ beyond boundaries of personality and religion.

In preparation for our latest gathering in Powell Butte, Oregon, part of our homework was to read a book titled *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* by Richard Rohr (Jossey-Bass, 2013). Father Rohr speaks of a True Self and likens it to a diamond, buried deep within us, formed under the intense pressure of our lives. It must be searched for, uncovered, and like Jesus, resurrected. It is a shedding of who we think we are, so we can discover the slumbering Christ who lives and breathes within us.

After our gathering in Powell Butte, there was an optional two-day hiking retreat for those of us who wanted to stay longer and explore landscapes of the sacred in the beautiful desert landscape of Smith Rock. The desert is a powerful metaphor for spiritual exploration and growth.

We are invited to walk into wilderness places with Jesus. Jesus retreated into the desert for 40 days of intense spiritual practice, 40 days essential to the discovery of his True Self. He invites us on a similar journey of discovery during this Lenten season.

Prayer Phrase

God, may my deep hope align with your deep vision. Release in me anything that keeps me from freely following your Spirit. Amen.

Invitation to Spiritual Practice

Spiritual Freedom

Breathe deeply as you enter a time of silence. Become gently attentive to what may be restricting you from faithfully responding to the divine invitation in your life. Are there priorities, attachments, tasks, or motivations competing for your response? What does freedom for God look or feel like in you this day?

Tuesday, 28 March 2017 – By Vickie MacArthur of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Encountering God in the Desert (Part 2)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. —Matthew 4:1–2 NRSV

We began a two-day ‘Landscapes of the Sacred’ retreat by gathering in a circle and listening to a number of readings about nature and desert spirituality. Before we left, we each reached into an envelope and chose a piece of paper with a poem or phrase written on it. I stuck mine in my pocket without reading it.

The majesty of Smith Rock is overwhelming—towering granite rocks reaching up into a clear blue sky. We began the hike by walking down into a beautiful river valley, surrounded by these huge, volcanic rock formations.

As I hiked along the river, I noticed steep stairs in the rocks climbing the side of the mountain. Something about those stairs called to me. An older man was sitting at the top of the steps enjoying the vast view of the valley below. As I approached him, I remarked that this probably wasn’t part of the hiking trail. He smiled, then, sizing me up, told me there was a small opening in the rocks that led to the ridge on the other side. Someone small and nimble like me might be able to squeeze through. As I watched him slowly fade from sight, I felt that irrational nudge to keep going.

As I gazed upward, I saw the opening with a small patch of blue sky beckoning. Coming out on the other side, I looked down from dizzying heights, catching my breath. Above me were boulders and rocks strewn everywhere. I climbed a bit higher in hopes of finding the other side of the ridge. Slipping a bit on the gravel, I listened to the sound of rocks and pebbles displaced by my unsure feet. The taste of fear began to rise in me. “I’m alone. Nobody knows I’m here. What if there’s an earthquake!”

As I looked at the huge rocks towering above me, I sat down. I took a long cool drink of water, gazing at the beautiful river winding its way like a snake below. I sat and breathed in that feeling of both fear and heart-expanding beauty. As I looked around, I realized, like Alice in Through the Looking Glass, I wasn't sure where the opening was that I came through. How would I find my way back?

I reached in my pocket and found the piece of paper I chose before the hike.

Always in the big woods when you leave familiar ground and step into a new place there will be...a little nagging of dread. It is the ancient fear of the Unknown, and it is your first bond with the wilderness you are going into. What you are doing is exploring. You are undertaking the first experience, not of the place, but of yourself in that place.

—Wendell Berry, as quoted in *Backpacking with the Saints*, Oxford University Press, 2014

This hike is the perfect metaphor for my life, perhaps for all of us. I've been going through a bit of a "dark night of the soul," questioning everything in my life, my beliefs about God, what I do, who I am, my place in this church, my place on this planet. I realize that this fear of change, this fear of loss, this not knowing where I am or where I'm going, or whether I can go back has to be faced. It is a necessary part, indeed the very essence, of the spiritual journey. Once we've begun this journey of uncovering our True Self, we can never go back to who we were before.

Prayer Phrase

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Spiritual Freedom

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Wednesday, 29 March 2017 – By Vickie MacArthur of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Encountering God in the Desert, Part 3

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. —Matthew 4:1–2 NRSV

As I sit on a rock in this desert place, contemplating the landscape of my life, I have no answers, just a sense of resting in this desert, perhaps even belonging. I can let go of my questions. I can let go of my need to know both the way back and the way forward. I can just be here, enjoying the warm breeze on my face. A small lizard

darts out from behind a rock. I can see its tiny chest moving as it breathes. I feel the movement of my own breath in tune with God's creation.

The fear has left me. I slowly get up and start exploring different paths to find my way back to the river bottom. There are many different openings in the rock. They all look the same. I try a few and finally find one I can fit through. It's more difficult squeezing myself down than up, but I land on my feet on the other side. I breathe a sigh of relief, and make my way back down to the path by the river, walking slowly, enjoying the firm feeling of solid earth beneath my feet.

We all have our deserts to face, both individually and collectively. The world and our church community are in a state of unprecedented flux and change. Like the ancient Israelites, we feel like we are in a place of exile, a place of not belonging in a spiritual-but-not-religious society, a place in between what has been and the prophetic imagination of what is yet to come.

As a church or as individuals, it's impossible to go back to how things were or how we think things should be. We have to learn to breathe and to let the spirit breathe through our doubts, our fears, our judgments, our uncertainty.

Will we stay in the familiar walls of our small church buildings, or will we listen to the still, small voice that calls us into the empty, trackless desert of the world? In Celtic spirituality, the desert is seen as a crossing place, a place of transition. It is a sacred space where the invisible world penetrates our visible world, where something fresh and new can be born from that which has had to die. Sounds like resurrection to me!

Prayer Phrase

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