

“Desert Discipleship”

One of my favorite classes in seminary was called “Desert Discipleship”. It was a class that was not required, but that I signed up for due to the way it fit into my schedule and provided a history credit. I remember wandering into that class on the first day not quite knowing what I was getting myself into.

What unfolded was one of the most spiritually meaningful semesters of my time during seminary. “*Desert Discipleship*” was a class that focused on a specific season of history: the 3rd and 4th centuries in the deserts of Egypt. This time period was marked by an unusually large number of Christian people seeking solitude and spiritual reflection in the harsh climate of the Egyptian desert. This was a place where they would come face to face with their own weaknesses, their temptations, and their desperate reliance on God’s preservation and grace. These disciples chose this isolated life because they were inspired by Jesus’ commandment to give all of their worldly possessions to the poor and to live in full trust in God’s care for them. They were seeking a new and different way of life—one unburdened by societal pressure, by idolatry, greed, and anger. In search of life focused solely on God, these disciples fled to the desert.

Perhaps the most famous desert disciple is Anthony the Great, who lived from 251-356. Anthony retreated to the desert to get away from all of the temptations that captivated him, things that tempt us today, too: greed, anger, comparing ourselves to others, jealousy, hatred, fear, stereotypes, resentment, refusal to forgive. Anthony recognized that all of this sinfulness was keeping him from right relationship with God and with others, and he sought a place of solitude and quiet in order to weed those things out of his heart.

And yet, even all on his own in the desert, Anthony still came face to face with all of these same demons. Anthony spoke regularly about the swarm of enemies that accosted him in the desert—demons that would twist his heart and mind toward anxiety, fear, anger, and all of the other feelings he had attempted to flee from. The demons that stalked him in the desert were the same ones that we face today, symptoms of evil and brokenness in our world that reside within humanity. We cannot run away from our own brokenness—even (and especially) in the desert we will come face to face with it.

Instead of being a retreat from brokenness, the desert became the place where Anthony learned to trust the power of God’s grace in the face of sinfulness and evil. Rather than believing that these things could be escaped, Anthony realized that he could be protected from and healed from the impact of this brokenness by learning to pray regularly, to ask God for help, to make the sign of the cross on his body, and to turn to scripture.

The intense faith of these disciples, often referred to as the desert fathers and mothers, is incredibly inspiring, especially now as we navigate a pandemic season of increased isolation. More time alone with our thoughts has revealed to us over the course of this year that we desperately need God’s help to live in loving relationship with one another and to heal from our own broken tendencies. By learning to pray, by asking God for help, by making the sign of the

cross on our bodies, and by turning to scripture, we can encounter the power of God in the desert that we find ourselves in, trusting that God will preserve and heal us.

In Peace, Pastor Marissa

P.S. For more on the Desert Fathers and Mothers, check out the short book “*The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*” by Henri Nouwen.