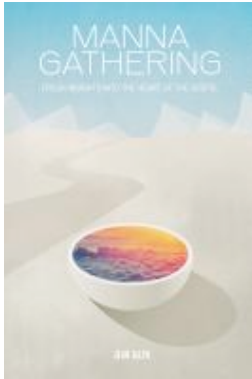


MANNA GATHERING

FRESH INSIGHTS INTO THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL



JEAN ALLEN



Manna Gathering is a collection of unique and inspiring reflections based on the Sunday Gospels of the three year Lectionary cycle (Years A, B, and C). Grounded in real life, and promoting rich inner growth, it is an excellent resource for individuals, small groups, bible study groups, and those preparing talks or homilies.

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Fresh Insights Into The Heart
Of The Gospels

Jean Allen

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ISBN 978-1-63263-592-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2014

First Edition

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1st Sunday of Lent B

On Dwelling in the Desert

Mark 1:12-15

After Jesus' baptism, he goes into the wilderness where he is tempted. After this he goes into Galilee and proclaims that the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is near. He calls people to repent and believe the Good News.

If there's one thing any serious Christian is familiar with it's the spiritual desert and the last thing we think about when we're in a spiritual desert is that it's a good thing. It doesn't seem good at all. What usually comes to mind is, "This must be my fault. I must have screwed up somewhere." When one is in a vast wilderness where God seems so far away that it's hard to recall when he ever felt near, it's natural to blame oneself.

"Perhaps if I prayed harder or more often...maybe if I wasn't so selfish...maybe if I was able to get to Mass during the week. I should be reading more scripture. It must be something I'm doing or not doing," and the real killer: "God must be teaching me a lesson, but I have no idea what it is!"

In the desert your heart is cracked and dry, scripture is lifeless and boring and prayer feels like you've been chewing gum for too long. All your prayers seem to be a variation on a theme of "Please help me...please give me..." and it feels like your petitions hit a brick wall and fall to the ground as lifeless words. But you hide these thoughts away because you are absolutely sure you are the only one who feels so isolated from the fruitful abundance of being a child of God. Everybody else seems all right so you act as if you're all right too.

The great tragedy of a lot of spiritual teaching is that we are not trained to understand the immense value of the desert and so when it comes, it is a shock to the spiritual system. And, it needs to be said, those who have discerned their spiritual vocations and have entered into them, whether it's marriage, priesthood, the religious life or dedicated single, are the ones most vulnerable to the shock of finding themselves in the middle of a howling wilderness.

We are all taught the importance and beauty of our vocations. It is impressed upon us that within our vocation is great spiritual and emotional fulfillment. Therefore, it can be a little terrifying to discover that rather than leading you to a mountain top of spiritual gratification, your vocation may actually lead you into a spiritual desert like you've never experienced before. Guilt ensues. "I must be incredibly deficient if I'm not finding all of my fulfillment, spiritually, intellectually and emotionally, in my role as a spouse, a parent or a member of a religious community. What's making me feel so empty and dissatisfied? What is stopping me from feeling any kind of connection with God?"

The Father is.

What a surprise, huh? Why would the Father keep you from experiencing great spiritual satisfaction when you have answered his call and entered into such a wonderful vocation, no matter what that vocation might be?

It's because before you were called to be married, be a parent or become a Religious etc., you were called to be a child of God, a being he created to be in relationship with him. Of course it blesses him tremendously when you answer his call to enter into a special vocation but your vocation and the people you serve within your vocation aren't meant to fill up the last aching abyss of your heart. Only God can fill that spot. There's a place within

you that is big enough for only two: you and the Lord. It's a place that's meant for you as *you*, not for you as wife, husband, parent, priest, Brother or Sister or you as whatever you are in your calling or ministry. These areas of calling are illuminated and blessed by your intimate relationship with the Lord but they are not your total fulfillment. Certainly, there will be fulfilling times within your vocation but it is impossible for the role to which you have been called to fill you up inside or nurture you the way your innermost being needs nurturing.

And so, the Father calls you to the desert where nothing fills, nothing comforts and nothing edifies. It is a place of simplification. It is a place of stripping – because none of us know how much we have come to depend on roles, ministries, friendships, rituals and head knowledge to define our relationship with the Lord. The desert is not a place of punishment; it is a place of great grace because the Lord knows how easy it is for roles, actions, ideas and perceptions to subtly take the place of a real intimacy with him. He just wants us to get back to the beginning of everything, a place that may be relatively unfamiliar to us. It's a place where we're not following our parents' faith or our friends' faith or the faith of our favorite spiritual teachers. It's a place where all promises fall flat because we had the wrong idea of what was being promised.

Take heart! All is well. You are the beloved of God, his daughter or son in whom he is well pleased. The very first place the Father wants you to find fulfillment is in him before everything else. In the desert it is just you ... and the Lord. Not you and your spouse. Not you and your children. Not you and your vocation or ministry. Just you and the Lord.

Just like it was with Jesus. It was just he and his Father in the wilderness.

Consider this: Jesus was called, baptized and heard his Father speak excruciatingly beautiful words of love and approval to him. Then, instead of being pushed into the deep end of a fulfilling ministry, he was *driven* into the desert! The desert was as necessary for him as it is for us. When he came out he clearly knew his vocation but more importantly, he knew his Father more intimately than he ever had before. In Jesus' vocation and ministry, his relationship with God came first. It came first. It came first. It came first. It was just he and the Father out there in that wilderness. No crowds, no people to serve or minister to, no people to teach, no people to feed and no people to love him, follow him, challenge him or despise him. His one on one relationship with God came before everything else. It was foundational to everything that came after.

This is the first Sunday of Lent, a time of meditating on our spiritual life and a time when most people choose some sort of act of self-denial or spiritual discipline to reconnect themselves with the Lord. If you are presently experiencing a spiritual desert in your life, I suggest that your focus of spiritual discipline be one of complete acceptance and one of meditating on what it would have been like to walk with Jesus, day by day, in the wilderness. Allow yourself to accept that the desert is an important, valid and valuable place to be. Pray for the grace to recognize and be able to let go of everything that you have been mistaking for the face of God. Pray to be healed of false expectation.

Jesus walked into that desert and committed himself to it fully. Therefore, you are also called to accept the desert and to be fully committed to it, and then to be open to the particular kind of healing it can bring you.

It can happen nowhere else.

26th Sunday Ordinary B

The Unclenched Heart

Mk 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

John complains to Jesus that someone was casting out demons in Jesus' name. Jesus says that no one who is doing a deed of power in his name will be able to speak evil of him. Whoever is not against us is for us. He goes on to say that if our hands or feet cause us to stumble we should cut them off and if our eye causes us to stumble it should be torn out.

Some of the worst memories I have from my childhood are of being deliberately excluded from a group. Some of the most heart wrenching times I had as a parent were when any of my children experienced exclusion. Those of you who are parents now, or will be in the future, have experienced or will experience the same inner agony at some point in your children's growing years. Exclusion is one of the most constant manifestations of original sin and children and adults alike practice it.

The theme that is most often talked about in this week's gospel is the avoidance of sin in our lives and we are struck by Jesus' use of extreme hyperbole to get this point across. We generally receive his words as direction for our individual overall morality but in this gospel, Jesus actually seems to be talking about something in particular that wrenches the Father's heart and that is exclusion – the practice of elitism or a determination that we have the right to judge another individual or a group that doesn't play the game our way.

Before Jesus speaks about cutting off body parts that offend, he is instructing the disciples not to be so quick to judge that someone is “not one of us”. The first reading follows exactly the same theme. Complaints are brought to Moses that there are people

outside the camp who are prophesying. Moses responds by saying, "What's the problem? I wish you all would prophesy." In both readings we have the infant beginnings of two different religious communities and in both of them, before people even knew what was really going on, they were practicing exclusion. It's so elemental to human nature and it is as hurtful to the heart of God as it is to our hearts when our children are rejected and excluded.

One of the most destructive forces in any community, whether it's a parish, the workplace or a family, is the formation of territories. You can see it happening all the time. One group sets up its own territory, which in a parish could even be a ministry or a prayer group, and gradually this territory has to be defended and controlled. The enemy has to be identified and that enemy is often someone who suggests changes or else another group that doesn't think along the same lines. The enemy may be more conservative or more liberal, too lax or too rigid, too much into social justice or not enough into social justice... It's human nature. Watch a group of kids and see how long it takes before one or more of them say something like, "This is my room. This is my toy. This is my space. You can't tell me what to do. You're not the boss. Don't cross this line." It's very rare that communities, institutions and workplaces aren't divided into distinct groups: this ministry against that ministry, management vs. regular employees, this division against that division and this faculty against that faculty.

This is anathema to the heart of God. These attitudes of territorialism and defensiveness have absolutely nothing to do with the Spirit of God. Notice that neither Moses nor Jesus said, "Just a second. I'll check these people out and then I'll tell you if there's anything to worry about." They didn't get all threatened, alarmed and worried. Neither Moses nor Jesus were concerned about their territories. They had nothing they needed to defend.

Their egos were not on the line. When we get into an attitude of defending what we think God wants us to defend, what we are most often defending are our fragile egos. Our group or our territory has become our identity. Jesus had no need to defend himself against anyone who might act without asking his express permission because his ego was not all wrapped up in his mission.

Instead of individual people going around wondering if they should cut off their hands to avoid offending God, I propose that whole communities should be terribly worried about this. If there's a group in the body of Christ that thinks it is God's right hand group and it is always defending its territory by pointing fingers at others, then this is the hand that should be cut off before it causes offense. I have seen parishes destroyed by this attitude. I have seen individuals and groups wounded terribly which caused them to define their own territories so they wouldn't be hurt any further; then they started to point their own fingers and the whole scenario was repeated. It literally takes years, even decades, for a parish to heal from rampant territorialism. In the work place, extreme manifestations of territorialism can cause businesses to go under. Families can die from it.

I'm being very heavy about this topic but it's too important to gloss over. We do it all the time. We do it as groups and we do it as individuals. Every time we share something negative with someone about another person or another group with whom we philosophically disagree, we are practicing exclusion and building walls. We fear we will be infected by wrong ideas. We fear we will be made to feel uncomfortable. We fear we will be judged so we judge first. We fear change.

Lose the fear. Think of Jesus. Think of Moses. It's not up to us to defend God in whatever way we think he needs defending. Lose

the fear. Open up. Love. It's not about who's right and who's wrong. It's about love. It's about respect. It's about acceptance, bridges and hands reaching out to each other to invite in, not keep out – open hands, not clenched fists with pointing fingers. We must lose the fear – it is destroying us.

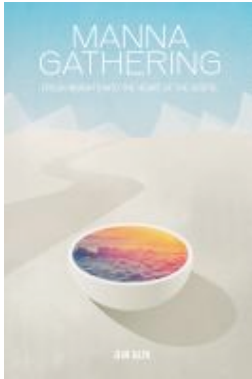
My husband and I worked in the UVic Chaplaincy where there were 14 different faith groups sharing office space. These weren't just Christian groups; Buddhist, Moslem, Jewish, Baha'i and Sikh were some of the other faiths represented. There was absolutely no way we could all agree on our spiritual and religious beliefs. Even among the Christian faith groups there were large differences. But our differences were not what we focused on. We all strove to find what we had in common. It wasn't hard to find these things. Love. Integrity. Desire to serve God. There was no sense that anyone felt they were better than anyone else. Everyone supported each other's ministries. Everyone knew that each chaplain was completely committed to his or her own faith beliefs but defensive walls didn't need to be built. Everyone recognized that the only way the chaplaincy could operate was if there was huge respect and love for each other.

Each of us is called to search inside ourselves and see if we are harboring prejudice against 'the other', whether the other is someone of a completely different belief system or a person or group within our own parish or a family member who has chosen a path different from our own. Love *cannot* operate from behind a fortress wall. Love is not love if it requires another to change before we will love them unconditionally. God does not treat us this way and we cannot – we must not – treat others that way.

The hands must be open and the heart unclenched.

“And you shall be called ‘Breach Mender, Restorer of Ruined Houses.’ (Isaiah 58:12, Jerusalem Bible)

Mend the breach – restore the home. We cannot survive any other way.



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