

HOMILY
March 5, 2006

Rev. Andrew A. Czajkowski
St. John the Evangelist Parish
Davison, Michigan

A little girl was totally engrossed in drawing a picture one Sunday after church and Sunday school. Dad walked up behind her to look at the picture when the little girl said, "There! All finished!"

On one edge of the drawing there was a group of people standing next to some water. A couple of the people were actually in the water. One guy had his hands held up in the air. On the other edge of the picture there was what appeared to be a very large bird driving a chariot. And riding in the chariot with the bird was a character that looked a whole lot like Jesus. So, Dad asked, "That's pretty, honey, but what is it?" The little girl gave Dad one of *those* looks...you know the one I'm talking about...the one that says, "Don't you know *anything*?" Then she said, "It's our Sunday school lesson. That's John the Baptist in the Jordan River baptizing people."

Dad pointed to the bird and the chariot and asked, "Okay, then, who is this?" Again, the *look*. And in a tone that conveyed just how out of touch Dad really was, she answered, "Well, that's the Holy Spirit driving Jesus into the desert so he could be tempted."

The desert these days seems like a very ominous place. We Americans have found ourselves in the past few years peering closely at terrifying events in deserts or desert-like places across the world. From our family rooms, we've had front row seats for the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, the very volatile situation in Israel and Palestine, the African lands reduced to desert by drought and the destruction of forests, crops and villages.

From the beginning, the desert has been a special place of formation for God's people, both communally and individually. They have been "born" or "reborn" there. Certainly, they met God there and sometimes they were tested. We recall the generations spent in the desert by the Israelites after they were led across the

Sea of Reeds. They became a people in that challenging place. Jesus, too, was led into the desert after being washed in the waters of the Jordan. And from that barren place, he emerged with clarity and urgency about his mission.

Often in life, we find ourselves in some kind of desert. Life experiences can create “dry” periods when things seem devoid of meaning. Other deserts are of our own making when we pull away from all that is familiar for one reason or another. We struggle with who, what, or where we are. But is that all bad?

An old priest in Russia in the days of the tsars was stopped by a royal guard asking gruffly, “What is your name? Why are you here? Where are you going?” The priest looked at the soldier and asked, “How much do they pay you to ask these questions?” The soldier replied, “Three kopeks a month.” “I’ll pay you 30 kopeks a month if you will stop me every week and ask me these same questions.”

Just as the old priest was stopped by the guard and asked those three questions, so too, in the desert, Jesus was asked by Satan those very same questions: “What is your name? Why are you here? Where are you going?” Just as Jesus withdrew to the desert, we need to withdraw to the desert to ask ourselves these three very same questions: “What is your name? Why are you here? Where are you going?”

In a way, for us Christians, Lent is the prime time to do just that. Like Jesus, we withdraw to the desert. Look around. The baptistery is bone dry and no longer filled with warm, flowing water. The altar is bare and without the usual signs of life to brighten our way. We enter the church in silence and even the hymns we sing are subdued. But all of this is just an attempt to help each of us create our own inner place where, like the desert, there is nothing to distract us, where the air is clear, and God has a chance of being more clearly seen or heard. A few stolen, alone moments of deafening quiet, when all we can hear is the sound of our own beating heart and the chattering inside our heads is silenced.

Our desert might be in the bathroom, in the car, in bed before dawn, or in the twilight before sleep invades. We might steal a little time in church before liturgy begins or tiptoe into the basement where phone, televisions and computers can be turned off. Remember the three questions that the guard asked the old priest: “What is your name? Why are you here? Where are you going?”

Jesus came out of the desert and stepped resolutely into the calling he had affirmed in his own baptism. He knew who he was, what time it was, and what he was to do. After his desert sojourn, Jesus proclaimed that the reign of God was at hand.

If we are willing to travel into the desert, we will be led out by the God with whom we have discovered. We will be renewed, ready to resume—perhaps for the very first time—the purpose for which we have been put on this earth.