

Dear Friends,

Today, Friday, November 7, begins the last week of my clergy renewal leave. This will be a week's retreat in the deserts of New Mexico. I arrived at the Norbertine Hermitage Retreat in Albuquerque yesterday afternoon. I had been here a few years ago for a retreat with the Peer Study group of which I was a part. Tomorrow I will travel to Christ in the Desert Monastery near Santa Fe, New Mexico, where I will stay until next Thursday morning. Annette Nauth's brother recommended Christ in the Desert as a place for a desert retreat, and I am looking forward to being there.

I began this renewal leave with a week-long retreat at St. Gregory's Abbey in Michigan. Now, I am ending it with a week retreat in the desert. Like the first week, this week will provide me some extended time in quiet; to pray; to read the Bible; and I am sure to reflect on the past three months.

I chose to end this time with a desert retreat in order to have two different retreat experiences. I know the desert has been a place of retreat for many people – including Jesus. Also, I think I am drawn to the desert because the topography is so very different than what I am used to. In a different place I believe we are challenged to think and look at life differently. The desert is that kind of place for me. Can I hear the Scriptures differently? Can I look at my life and my faith differently? Can I hear God differently in the silence and the solitude of the desert?

I am using *Fertile Soil in a Barren Land: A Desert Odyssey for the Soul*, a book by Renee Miller, to guide some of my time in quiet and reflection. She begins with writing about the silence and the solitude of the desert. Today, I sought to walk in that silence and solitude as I walked in the desert. Even in the solitude, I was aware of the sounds of the desert around me – insects, small animals, and the wind – as well as the sounds of my own movements.

The desert is silent, yet filled with sound.

(The sounds are just different than the ones we are used to hearing.)

The desert is dry, yet there is evidence of moisture.

(There was even frost on my car this morning.)

The desert seems barren, even dead, yet is alive with life.

(I managed to send several jack rabbits running today.)

The desert is vast, yet intimate.

(My attention was often drawn from the vast horizon to look at a single plant or rock.)

The desert is warm in the day, yet can be cold at night.

(At this time of the year the cold descends quickly when the sun goes down.)

The desert is paradoxical – like much of life.

Our lives are seldom either/or. More often, I find life is both/and. Life is both joyful and sad; exhausting and strengthening; hurting and healing; simple and complex; understandable and confusing. I am sure you can find your own words that reflect the paradox of your life. Often what we need to be able to do is see God's presence in all of our life; to hear God speaking in both the silence and the cacophony that surrounds us; to allow God's love to grow in the fertile soil of our soul, even when we feel barren and dry.

This week is a time for me to enter into the silence and solitude of the desert – to be in a different place and to listen to God in a new way. I will also be preparing myself to return to the day-to-day ministry of parish life. I think the parish visits to Church of the Epiphany in Washington, and Calvary Church in Boulder have been a good way to begin thinking in a more focused way about parish ministry.

I know that during this final week I will be reflecting on my time away during this clergy renewal leave. I also know I will be contemplating my return to Nativity and our life together. It will be a week of both/and – both an ending and a beginning.

Peace,
Bruce +

P.S. This is Saturday afternoon. I arrived at Christ in the Desert Monastery just in time for lunch (good timing!). In the first paragraph above I said the monastery is **near** Santa Fe. **Near** is a relative term. It is more than an hour's drive outside of Santa Fe to get to the turn-off to the monastery. The last 13 to 14 miles after the turn-off is a gravel road back into a canyon. Remote might be the right description, although I'm not sure it is quite adequate. This area makes the highlands of Scotland look highly populated. It is beautiful – and quiet!