

Life from the Desert
a message based on
Revelation 12:1-9

Followers of Jesus:

So it is now the year of our Lord 2010. Most of us are quite aware of the move in British Columbia to what has been dubbed “Vancouver 2010,” by which is meant the winter Olympics coming to this province. Next month people from all over the world will come to witness, either live or on television, the spectacle of athletes strutting their stuff. Ski jumping, Alpine skiing, Ice hockey, speed skating, biathlon, freestyle skiing, the luge: and that's just the first two days of the schedule! Athletes have trained for this for months, even years for their event. It takes training to be an Olympic athlete. One does not just decide to show up one day and compete.

The church of Jesus Christ is made up of athletes. Do we realize that? When we become a follower of Jesus, we are asked to engage in training every day. Listen to how the early church describes it.

Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourselves to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come (1 Tim 4:7-8).

The words “*physical training*” come from the Greek word from which we get our English word, “gymnasium.” It's good to get physical exercise, but spiritual exercise is better.

Another word that is used often in the New Testament is one from which we get our English, “agony.” Have we heard the expression, “no pain, no gain”? It's what Olympic athletes experience daily in training. So it is for us followers of Jesus.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood (Heb 12:4).

Following Jesus is a “*struggle*,” which bring agony to the soul. One sermon dating back to the fourth century, wrote that “the chief task of the athlete is to enter into his heart” (Macarian homilies). The chief task is to dig deep inside of us, to dig out all the weeds and thistles that remain there. This is painful business!

One of the central images in the Bible for this struggle is the picture of the

desert. On the one hand, the desert in the Bible is pictured as a desolate place.

“He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions” (Deut 8:15).

Kenneth Leech describes it is a place absent of human aid and comfort. That on the one hand, and on the other hand it is a place where people learn to depend on God alone.

“He has watched over your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything” (Deut 2:7).

We've seen recently how Moses met with God in a tent where he met with him, speaking face to face as a man talks with his friend. Elijah went back to the desert so he could hear, once again over the chaos of a crooked queen's threats, the voice of the LORD. Jesus himself, we're told, was led by the Spirit into the desert, to prepare for his intense three years of ministry to come (Luke 4:1). Luke tells us this, and also this about the pattern of the life of Jesus.

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Luke 5:16).

So it is not surprising that we find, in the midst of this scene of battle found in Revelation 12 that the woman goes into the desert.

The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days (Rev 12:6).

To the desert, not to hide; not to flee in terror; but to get strong, to train, to get fit, to become all God wants us to be so we will be able to engage in this battle.

What kind of training will we need to get stronger? The Christian church has recently discovered (or shall we say “re-discovered”) patterns for spiritual training that have come to be called “spiritual disciplines.” In the same way that an athlete needs to discipline himself or herself, sometimes with repetition that's not always so fun, so we are called to engage in discipline to train our bodies and our souls to get stronger.