

The Call of the Desert

“The word of God came to John ... in the desert.” That is what Luke said to introduce the prophet who would prepare the way of the Lord. According to Luke, John’s ministry was the pivotal point in salvation history; the new and final era was coming into being.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, unless we live in an area such as the Southwest U.S., the desert is probably about as far from our imaginations as a herd of camels. (Now you’re thinking about camels, right?) Luke wants us to think about the desert and why John was there instead of protesting around the palace or preaching in the Temple. (John eventually did the first; Jesus did the latter.)

The desert was Israel’s birthplace. God brought the people out of slavery and then led them on a 40-year desert trek to teach them what it meant to be the people of God. They needed that time to get over their identity of being slaves. They lived those 40 years without the distractions of building homes and businesses; that long experience of being on the move taught them to rely on God alone. When they forgot the lessons of the desert, God sent them into exile for 60 years. In both instances, hardship stripped them of everything so that they could figure out what was essential.

We see something similar in the lives of people who suffer in our days. A cancer diagnosis can force people to clarify the purpose of their life. An unexpected death reminds us that relationships are more important than any activity or achievement. A fire or storm often leaves people with a new sense of the relative value of their belongings. An accident often leaves us thinking about how we might have prevented it. All of the above adjust our vision in ways we probably never would have chosen.

So now in December, while everything in our world jingles with excitement about the holidays, the church invites us into the desert with John.

Of course, the desert is the antithesis of the mall. No matter how much money you have, there is nothing to buy. Far from the city lights whose twinkling grabs our attention, the desert allows us to fix our gaze on the stars, on beauty that is beyond our reach and yet seems to have been created just for our delight. The desert is where our soul finds room to expand, where we can remember what we really thirst for. This is the experience of God’s fertile desert. This is the desert we can

choose when we want its blessing. And even when we don't want it the church call us there a couple times a year!

There are other deserts as well such as the desert of the U.S. southern border where the poor wander, seeking something better as they bet their lives on a chance for peace and safety. There are deserts of loneliness in the midst of bustling cities and probably in the midst of our own families.

These are deserts of desperation, the sort that Israel knew in her exile. The promise of today's readings, the promise of Christmas itself, is made for the people in these deserts.

The word of the Lord came to John in the desert and today he tells us to prepare the way of the Lord.

To prepare the way of the Lord today, we must straighten out the crooked paths. Maybe spend some time in the quiet, in prayer, in gazing up at the stars in awe and wonder. Maybe we can enter the desert of another suffering or loneliness or poverty.

Maybe we can fill in the valleys with the hopefulness of Baruch when he writes, Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever, even though he was in exile with the nation of Israel. Or make straight the way of the Lord by a joyful proclaim like Paul proclaimed from his prison cell in the Letter to the Philippians, I pray always in joy in my every prayer for you...that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ and filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ.

There is a lot of ground to cover if we wish to prepare the way of the Lord. But it is all possible because God is already working in us. Amen

Inspired by Mary M. McGlone, CSJ contributor to Celebrations Publication.