

**“In the desert, prepare the way of the Lord!”**

We usually connect the desert image more with Lent than we do with Advent; on the first Sunday of Lent, Jesus goes out into the desert for 40 days to prepare for his public ministry. And yet, today, on the Second Sunday of Advent, the desert is very clearly the locus for the message of Isaiah in the first reading, and for the message of John the Baptist in the gospel. As Isaiah relates the Lord’s words of comfort to his people, he invites them out into the desert to prepare the way for the return of their God. For 50 years, they sat in exile in Babylon, thinking that their God had abandoned them; but now, their punishment was to end; their God would come and take them back to their beloved Jerusalem. In the gospel, John the Baptist appears in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins – all in preparation for the coming of the one mightier than he, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, the one who would be called “Messiah.”

One might wonder why John the Baptist didn’t walk through the streets of Jerusalem, instead of going out into the desert to proclaim his message and call people to repentance. Was he perhaps ashamed of his camel hair clothing, or maybe the grasshoppers gave him bad breath. . . . Did you know that grasshoppers, along with over a thousand other insects are quite edible and even healthful – high in protein and contain only about 900 calories per pound! Not a bad diet actually! As you read more about John the Baptist, you definitely get the sense that he didn’t much care what people thought of him. His mission was to preach a baptism of repentance as the way of preparing for the arrival of the Messiah. John the Baptist knew that, if people were going to repent, they had to get

away from their usual, ordinary, comfortable surroundings. They had to go out to a lonely, almost forbidding place, to confront their sins in all their stark reality – without the many comfortable distractions that were always around.

So today, as we continue preparing for the coming of the Savior once again, the Word of God invites *us* out into the desert – not so much in the literal sense, but certainly in the spiritual sense. We obviously don't have a desert handy to go to; the gospel is not talking about geography.

If we really want to take an honest look at ourselves, confront our sins, acknowledge them, and turn ourselves around, we have to do what John the Baptist is telling us to do; we have to leave our usual way of thinking and responding. We have to stand back, observe, and question. Above all, we have to take some time. Not like a 5 or 10 second look in the mirror, after which we decide that we look OK, and don't need any changes in our life.

So, out into the desert with John the Baptist we go. The desert might be here in church; it might be a little hermitage somewhere; it might even be our own room, but with all the distractions turned off: the television off, the computer off, the CD player off, the cell phone off; with all the other tools we think we need to survive – ipod, ipad, and iphone: all of that stuff silenced.

A good block of time, just to think, to pray, to spend some quality time with God: time to discern those things in our lives that prevent Christ from breaking into it, all those things

that keep Christ at a distance, all those things that keep us from seeing Christ present in our world.

Today, in the second reading, Peter says that our God is a *patient* God, not wishing that anyone should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But he also says that there's a limit to God's patience: the Day of the Lord will come – like a thief in the night. And he encourages his readers and us to “be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace.” Our call this week is to spend some time in the desert, and to come to sincere repentance, which makes peace possible.