

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT, Year B
Is 40:1-5,9-11; Ps 85:9-10,11-12,13-14; 2 Pt 3:8-14; Mk 1:1-8

THE DESERT

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun
Saturday, November 9, 2017, 7:30 p.m.
Westin Hotel, Charlotte, North Carolina

The gospel that we just heard is the first eight verses of Mark's gospel,
and Mark begins his gospel with a unique point of emphasis.

While Luke begins his gospel in the Temple (Lk 1:9),

Mark begins his gospel in the desert (Mk 1:3,4,5).

In fact, the desert is mentioned not once, not twice, but three times:

“A voice ... crying out in the desert” (Mk 1:3);

“John the Baptist appeared in the desert” (Mk 1:4);

and, “All the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to [the desert]” (implied, Mk 1:5).

Have you spent any time in the desert?

I have been to the desert in Arizona and Utah.

In Arizona, I have done some hiking in the desert north of Phoenix on the way to Flagstaff.

The desert is no place for flip flops and shorts.

There are many rattlesnakes.

The desert is a place for boots and long pants.

There are many cactuses, and they have thorns and sharp prickles,
and a person would be a fool to brush up against one.

In Utah, I've gone hiking in some of the national parks,

Zion, Capital Reef, Canyonlands.

There are dry river beds in the gorges where there have been flash floods,
and a number of hikers and campers have been killed.

People fall and get lost, and there have been terrible tragedies.

The desert is a harsh place.

The desert in the gospel is the Wilderness of Judea.

It is between Jerusalem and Jericho.

I have been there a number of times.

Would you like to talk about a harsh place?

The desert was extremely dangerous for travelers, much like the Old West.

There were bandits hiding in the hills,

and suddenly, coming out of nowhere, they would swoop down and attack and mug travelers.

There were rustlers in the hills,

and they would steal sheep and goats from shepherds.

It was so dangerous that it was foolhardy to travel alone, or even in pairs.

People traveled in caravans. There was safety in numbers.

There were wild animals,
mountain lions and wolves that sometimes attacked people.
There were scorpions, lizards, and snakes.
The footing is uneven and treacherous.
In fact, on the pilgrimages that I have led to the Holy Land,
the people really like having an outdoor Mass in the desert.
So the bus stops along the road, we walk into the desert a couple hundred yards,
and we have had two pilgrims who tripped, fell, and broke their arms.
There are cliffs, ledges, and deep ravines.
There are caves, not with openings on the side, but on the top,
some which are small and hard to see, and people fell into caves,
and they were so deep that a person could not get out.
Compound this with no food or water,
blazing heat during the day and cold at night.

Why would any person in their right mind want go out into the desert
when they could enjoy all of the comforts of home?

But the Jews had a sense of nostalgia about the desert.
The desert might be a dangerous place,
but the desert is also a place of encounter with God.
The Israelites spent forty years in the desert
on their Exodus journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.
The land may have been harsh,
but God was with them every minute, step by step.
God was with them in his mighty deeds:
the column of cloud by day;
the column of fire by night (Ex 13:21);
the manna in the morning;
the quail in the evening (Ex 16:8);
the water from the rock (Ex 17:1-7);
the awesome signs (the theophany) at Mount Sinai,
thunder and lightning, fire and smoke, trumpets and earthquake (Ex 19:16-19);
the Ten Commandments and the Law (Ex 20);
the meeting tent, the cloud, and the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 40).
The Israelites felt God's presence each and every day in the desert.

The nostalgia was this:
if our ancestors experienced God's presence in the desert 1500 years ago,
if we go out into the desert, we might experience God, too.

John the Baptist went out into the desert.
So did a whole group of people called the Essenes.
They lived in caves near the Dead Sea,
and they lived a very plain and simple lifestyle.

When John and the others went out into the desert,
they left the hustle and bustle of the city behind:
no big dinners, no parties, no socials;
no work, no daily grind, no speedy routine;
no marketplaces, no shopping, no crowds;
no palaces, no nicely furnished homes.

In the desert, it was slow, plain, and quiet.
Free of all of the distractions and noise,
a person could actually think for a minute.
In the silence, a person could hear God speaking.
And with the time away,
a person could reflect on what God had to say,
on what is really important in life.
And there would be time enough to talk with God.

If anyone ever needed to go to the desert, we do!
Just think about how busy we are.
We zoom around as fast as we can go to accomplish our many tasks.
The tasks are good.
The tasks are necessary.
But the tasks must not run our lives.
God is supposed to be the one who runs our lives.

So we need to go out into the desert,
not the desert of Arizona or Utah,
not the Wilderness of Judea between Jerusalem and Jericho,
but to a quiet, secluded place,
free of distractions where we can encounter God.

Retreat centers offer desert days,
when a person takes off an entire day or a weekend to make a silent retreat.
During the football season, that doesn't work for you.
During Advent, with so many tasks at the parish, it doesn't work for me, either.

But, even though we cannot set aside entire days,
we can set aside some desert time, some quiet time, to be alone with God.
It might be an hour, or thirty minutes, or fifteen minutes, or even just five minutes.
When it comes to these Advent days,
or any days, for that matter,
whether it is football, or meetings, or shopping,
social events, or parish duties,
they cannot totally run our lives.
God is supposed to be behind the while.
God is supposed to be in the driver's seat of our lives.

Advent is a time of preparation.
It is a time to prepare for the Panthers, Bengals, Packers, and Bears.
But it also a time to prepare for Christmas,
and to prepare for the coming of the Lord into our hearts.

John the Baptist went out to the desert to get people ready for the coming of Jesus.
Over these next two weeks we are invited to take a few trips to the desert,
even if they are short,
free of distractions,
so we can experience God present to us
and hear God when he speaks to us,
so we will be spiritually ready for Christmas.