2nd S. of Advent, Yr C.   9-12-18.   The geography of Advent.

"The word of God came to John……in the desert." Those are the words which Luke uses 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 2nd Sunday of Advent, unless we live in an area west of Birdsville, the desert is probably as far from our imagination as a herd of camels. Luke wants us to think about the desert, and why John was there, instead of protesting around the palace or preaching in the Temple.

 The desert was Israel's birthplace. God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt 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 servile identity. 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, in later years, they forgot those lessons of the desert, God sent them into exile for another 60 years. In both instances, hardship stripped them of everything, so that they could figure out what was essential.

We see something similar happen in the lives of people who suffer. 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 flood 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 these adjust our vision in ways we probably never would have chosen.

So now in December, while everything around us jingles with excitement over summer and holidays, the Church invites us into the desert with John.

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 reach and yet seems to have been created for our delight.

There are other deserts as well, such as in the border-lands of the USA, where the poor wander, the caravan we hear about, 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. The internet allows us to contemplate the desert refugee camps, where people spend hours waiting in line for water, and years waiting for a welcome to a new homeland.

These are the deserts of desperation, the sort that Israel knew while in her exile. Today these deserts have been created by the selfishness of human sin, and those who suffer in these deserts are not usually the guilty. The promise of today's readings, the promise of Christrmas itself, is made for the people in these deserts.

The word of the Lord came to John in the desert, and today he tells <u>us</u> to prepare the way of the Lord.

To prepare the way of the Lord today, we must straighten out the tortured paths that truncate our brothers and sisters' hopes as they flee for their lives, seeking a safe haven. We are called to straighten out twisted communications with words of truth and sincere compassion, even for our adversaries.

To prepare the way of the Lord, we need to muster the courage necessary to enter the valleys of depression and desperation that trap our brothers and sisters in loneliness and fear. In our personal relationships, we are called to build bridges across the breaches that have separated us from family and friends, to forget old wounds and bend low enough to say: "I am sorry".

To prepare the way of the Lord today, we must reassess the mountains (and oceans) that create uncrossable borders between us as nations, parties, ideologies, genders, orientations, etc. Then, willing to see the beauty of the other side, we can descend from our heights of righteousness and let the mountains be made low.

There is a lot of geography to cover if we wish to prepare the way of the Lord. But it is all possible because God is already working on it.

Transcript from Dec. issue of Celebration: 2nd S. of Advent, Commentary by Mary McGlone