

December 6, 2020 A Desert In Bloom Homily: Nearly twenty years ago a film based on the life of Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel, appeared in our nation’s movie theaters. Siegel was a well known gangster and a close friend of Meyer Lansky, also a gangster. Sometime in the 1940’s Siegel had a novel vision to build a hotel and casino in the middle of the Nevada desert. He called upon his associates to finance the project. They demurred, and rightfully so. “No one goes into the hot desert in order to be entertained. It is sparsely populated and too far away”, protested his would-be backers. Siegel eventually realized his dream. He built the first major hotel and casino, “The Flamingo” and is now considered by many historians to be the Father of modern day Las Vegas.

If people have a legitimate reason to go into the desert, then they will do so.

In the biblical world, the desert, a most inhospitable place, was not where you would likely find a crowd of people. Unlike Jerusalem, the people seldom found the wilderness an attractive option for living.

Unless, that is, they had a good reason for entering the desolate place.

One of the key figures of the Advent season is John the Baptist. The last of the Old Testament prophets and among the first to witness to Jesus, John was drawn into the harsh Judean desert by God. His vocation was to prepare the way for Jesus, the long awaited Messiah. Mark presents John not so much as a person but as a voice shouting in the desert. What is noteworthy is that he attracted a considerable crowd of penitent Jews. Recall the words of the Evangelist: “People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River and they acknowledged their sins”. (Mark 1:5)

Why were Jews drawn to the Baptist? In all likelihood it is because he had the reputation as a charismatic preacher and was an outstanding witness to his Jewish faith. Moreover, the people were restless. They dreamed of a restoration of former glory and especially wanted freedom from all unjust domination.

John preached repentance. The many who gathered to hear him wished to leave behind their old life and begin a new one. They accepted baptism as a sign of their commitment to their new way of life.

In our secular culture, John is unappealing. He is too strong, too uncompromising, too demanding. He would be labeled a “hater”, a “bigot”, a “fundamentalist” and an “oddball”. His popularity ratings would be in the tank. But he is the one chosen who prepares the way of the Lord. Jesus loved him and honored him by calling him “a blazing light”. He said, “There is no man born of woman greater than John the Baptist”.

A story: The late Evangelist and Baptist preacher, Billy Graham, had a longstanding feud with a British journalist, William Connor who wrote for the left-wing newspaper, the London Daily Mirror. Connor often derided the minister for his simplistic faith, and to his mind, weak intelligence. Graham wrote a pleasant note to him suggesting they meet. The journalist was agreeable to the proposal. While in London, Connor suggested that they meet at a London pub, appropriately called, “The Baptist’s Head”.

The Baptist preacher was likely amused. Of course, the “head” is a reference to John the Baptist and his martyrdom.

Today the desert continues to expand in size. Spiritually our landscape has changed dramatically over the last half-century. In many places, it has become a barren wasteland. It seems that so few of us want to hear the words of God’s messenger. The forerunner of Christ would have a much harder time today than two thousand years ago when people confessed their sins and were prepared to believe him.

Do we listen to John?

No meeting of the Lord should be unprepared. How do we prepare? We should offer a prayer of gratitude for the opportunity to enter into his presence. We are called to fulfill our duties as his disciples. We are encouraged to humbly acknowledge our past sins and pray for his mercy.

A soul can be a barren desert. By His grace, God can irrigate the desert and bring forth new life. That is one of the challenges of the Advent season. We must allow the word to penetrate the soil of our hearts and make the desert a beautiful place.

Amen!