

## Second Sunday of Advent - A

There is a fair amount of desert between San Antonio and El Paso, where two of our friaries in the Southwest are located. I know from personal experience.

I know, for example, that you had better have enough gas to get to Fort Stockton, the half-way point, if you don't want to end up stranded by the side of the road.

What I don't know too well is why a person would want to go out into the desert. For me, it's always been a place to avoid, a place of foreboding, a place that I might not come back from.

Things get down to brass tacks in the desert. There are just the basics, if even that: shelter from the heat, water perhaps.

You don't take anything into the desert that you won't absolutely need, because chances are, you will be leaving it somewhere out there because it's become a burden.

And yet, people went out to see John the Baptist. They went even though his message would not have won any popularity contests: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." and "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

What sort of person would respond to that kind of message? Those looking for the latest sensation get called out.

The scribes and Pharisees were there for the wrong reasons – reasons that did not have to do with repenting or preparing.

But there were people who took John's message to heart. They were in touch with the experience that the way things were was not good. They were not invested in maintaining the status quo, because it was not working.

They could feel in their heart that who they had become was not who they were meant to be. Basically, they went into the desert for something that their current life had not been able to give them.

In them there was a longing that would not be denied. Even though the ordinary run of things had a tendency to overwhelm that longing with activities and involvements that did not feed the spirit, they had opened in themselves space for an encounter that put the lie to all that.

Our desert is Advent. Our wilderness is that space we carve out for ourselves where we can come into contact with a deeper truth about who we are—one that is not determined by what we can buy, or even by who is on our list.

In Advent we have the chance to come into contact with the question, the search for understanding of why we

## Second Sunday of Advent - A

are here, what we hope for, and what we are called to do.

Ultimately, I think that's what repentance is really about. It goes beyond the listing of things we've done that we're sorry for, or the things we didn't do that we should have done.

It has more to do with separating ourselves from all the identities given by the world or even by our closest circle of acquaintances, so that we can come to terms with who we really are—our real selves, our genuine selves.

To do that means to let go of the things we use to keep ourselves safe and comfortable, the reactions we don't even think about when encountering perceived threats to the world we've built.

It means to give room to God, who is creating a world much better than ours, one in which we will thrive much better than we do now, one in which even apparent incompatibilities are taken up into a larger, harmonious whole that's beyond our making.

That reading from Isaiah—it's not meant to be pious platitude that looks good on a greeting card. It's meant to jar us out of our usual thought patterns to get us in touch with the longing that only God can fulfill—to uncover it and give it some room to breathe.

Let this season's repentance work that way for you. Let it be less about what you've done and more about what you long for, and how willing you are to long for it. And then, let God do his work in you.