

December 11, 2016 A Desert In Bloom Homily: Brothers and sisters, sometime in the 1950's an American Jew conceived a revolutionary, if not crazy, plan to build a resort in a desert wasteland. His objective was to turn a handsome profit and make himself one of the world's wealthiest men. His business associates thought he was mad. "Impossible", said one. "The oppressive heat of the desert would discourage any tourists." Another pointed out the area under discussion was sparsely populated. Still another insisted the cost of the project would be excessive and therefore impractical. Undeterred, the visionary, an American mobster named Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, carried out his plan. He had the first resort hotel, The Flamingo, built in a sleepy little town, Las Vegas, NV!

Perhaps the Jewish businessman had the story of his own ancestors in mind. The desert plays a key role in the destiny of the Jewish people. He may have recalled the establishment of the covenant, the giving of the Law, the testing of his people and the special intimacy with God enjoyed by the Jews as they wandered in the desert. No one of sound mind would ever compare the American gangster with the messenger of God, the prophet Isaiah. The prophet's task is not to increase his wealth but to remain faithful to God of the covenant and serve as his messenger.

In today's first reading the Prophet Isaiah describes the transformation of the desert into fertile fields at the Coming of God. The desert is the world that God has not visited, but now he is on the way. Listen again to the words of prophet. "The wilderness and the parched land will exult; the Arabah will rejoice and bloom..." (IS 35:1)

Today the priest is attired in rose colored vestments. The color rose reminds us of the dawning of a new day and the closeness of God coming into our world, a major theme of the Advent season. "Here is your God; he comes with vindication, with divine recompense he comes to save you." (IS 35:4)

In our secular culture so many people are living in a "desert." In an early sermon preached by the erstwhile Pope Benedict, he pointed to the many kinds of "deserts" found in the world today: the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of death and destruction, the desert of alienation and despair, the desert of God's darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity and the goal of human life. What these "deserts" each have in common is they are places that God has not visited, but now is on the way.

In the aftermath of the First World War, T.S. Eliot, an American born poet, wrote his most celebrated poem, *The Wasteland*, in 1922. The Wasteland refers not only to the killing fields of the war, places of death and destruction, but also to the increasingly secular culture of the Western world, where there is little, if any, room for God, particularly the God of Jesus Christ. Without the presence of God, the world becomes one vast wasteland.

As disciples of Jesus our mission is to bring people out of the desert. The words of the prophet are most encouraging. "Say to those of fearful heart...be strong, fear not." (IS 35:4) We must act like believers and we must let others know that we believe indeed that God has come in the Person of Our Lord Jesus Christ. If we are faithful witnesses, the "deserts" will come to bloom and people without hope will burst into songs of joy.

Amen!