

Incarnation in the desert

If God can be born in the wilderness, God can be born in the dry places of our lives.

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Christmas begins in the desert. It ends there, too.

I know that many of our traditional carols sing of frosty winds of the bleak midwinter, and that pine trees and evergreen wreaths are symbols of the season.

But I also know that Christmas begins—and ends—in the desert. From the cry of the prophet Isaiah in his people's exile to the birth of Mary and Joseph's child in that barn in Bethlehem, the Christmas story is a desert story.

It's not even the high desert of northern New Mexico, where I live. Nazareth is only 1,200 feet in elevation, lower than Phoenix, Arizona. Bethlehem soars to 2,500—not exactly alpine. Both areas get less than 20 inches of rain annually, enough to grow crops with irrigation in the good years.

As in other desert places, winters are bitterly cold and summers hot and dry. In late spring, sand-filled *Khamaseen* winds from the Arabian Desert blow through the region.

Jesus was born in a desert place. He was born into a desert time, too, under Roman domination. That's why his birth was in Bethlehem and not his parents' hometown of Nazareth. Flexing his imperial muscle, Caesar Augustus demanded a head count of all his subjects. What Caesar wanted, Caesar got—even if a pregnant woman and her carpenter husband had to load up the donkey and head for a strange town.

A desert time, a desert place. That's where Christmas begins. It stays there for a long time. After the child is born, the parents can't go back home to Nazareth. Caesar's toady king, Herod the "Great," doesn't want any new king around, so they

must flee to Egypt, another strange desert place where nobody knows their names.

So perhaps instead of “snow on snow” at Christmas, we should sing of “rock on rock” and decorate cholla and saguaro cactus rather than pine and fir trees.

Though it may challenge some of our Christmas traditions, I believe the fact that Christmas begins in the desert, and stays there, is actually the best part of the Christmas story. If God could be born there, God can be born in the harsh landscapes of our lives and our world.

Christmas reminds us that we need not fear the desert, nor the dry times of our own lives, nor the wilderness that this world can sometimes be. In the first Christmas, new life was born even in a desert time and place. This Christmas, in the desert places and times of our lives, new life can still be born. In dry, harsh landscapes—be they of our inner world or the world around us—God is still present, just as God was present that cold night in Bethlehem. I think that’s very good news, this season and every season.

God was in the desert for Joseph and Mary that first Christmas. God will be with us, our loved ones, and our world this Christmas, too.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,” [the Prophet Isaiah promised in the time of his people’s exile](#). “The desert shall rejoice and blossom.” That was true for Isaiah. It was true for Mary and Joseph. It is still true for us. Christ will be born even in the desert. Especially in the desert.