



# A pilgrimage in Advent:

Rivers in the desert

BY JENNIFER GRANT

**MY BEST FRIEND AND I HAVE AN ANNUAL TRADITION**, that was born of loss. Every September, we make a spiritual pilgrimage. I don't mean the usual sites; we've yet to walk the Camino de Santiago, for instance, and haven't visited Lourdes in France or India's Bodh Gayā.

Instead, we plan our trips around the anniversary of her husband's death.

The time she and I spent together after he died was sacred, suffused in the love of community, in grief, and in a palpable sense of divine care. A month or so after we held his service, my friend and I made a commitment to be together every year on day he died.

A year ago, in September 2024, we visited Morocco. After seeing the capital city of Rabat, spending a few days in Moulay Idriss and then Fes, we

traveled to the Sahara Desert... to Erg Chebbi, to be precise. If desert topography isn't your thing, an "erg" is a large "sand sea." (Fun fact: ergs can also be found on Venus, Mars and Titan, Saturn's largest moon.) The legend surrounding Erg Chebbi is that God created it after a rich couple refused to host a weary traveler. In response to their lack of hospitality, God dropped thousands of tons of sand on top of their home.

Our camp—outfitted with "tents" best described as fancy little cabins—was surrounded by that sandy ocean of massive golden dunes. Scattered about the camp were inviting outdoor seating areas with lanterns, woven rugs and pillows. Camels huddled in groups, their front legs demurely tucked under their bodies, waiting for the end of the day when they'd be summoned to

take guests on sunset rides high into the dunes. We were served, as was the case throughout Morocco, many glasses of mint green tea.

The guides at camp were all men and wore either head scarfs called *keffiyehs*, to protect against the sun, dust and sand, or small skull hats called *kufis* to express their devotion to Allah. The guides would pray several times over the course of the day at specific times related to the position of the sun. Like everything, there's an app for that: phones would issue a soft chime, and the devout would gracefully excuse themselves.

## **STREAMS IN THE DESERT**

When we arrived in Erg Chebbi, the anniversary of my friend's husband's death was a few days off. Riding camels and marveling at this unfamiliar landscape

provided a welcome distraction, but the date loomed large for both of us.

On our first full day in the desert, I took an hours-long walk with our guide while my friend stayed in her tent. We walked up and over the steep dunes, and then down the center of a dried riverbed. My guide, a gifted teacher, told me about the nomadic people who were living there and introduced me to the few plants—drought-resistant grasses and shrubs—that grew in that harsh landscape. We stopped at the home of one nomadic family and were welcomed with a warm meal and, of course, more mint tea.

On our way back to camp, my guide stopped to peer down into wells when we passed by them, troubled by how low the water levels had become.

“We pray for rain,” he said, slapping his hand on a well. A hollow sound echoed up in reply.

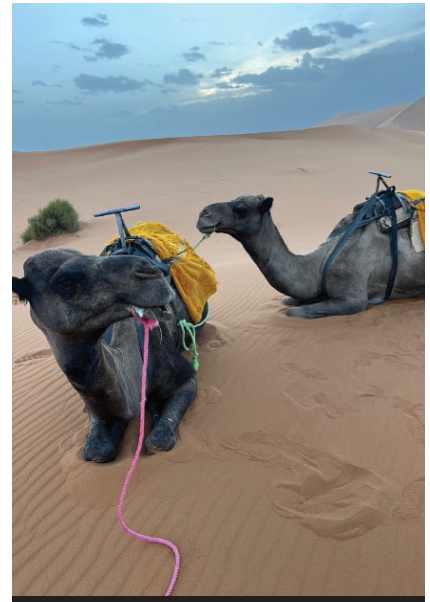
That evening, taking even the locals by surprise, the prayers of the people were answered with not a sprinkle but an out-and-out deluge. Thunder rumbled. Rain battered the sand. Intermittent lightning vaulted along the sandy peaks. All night long, the storm continued. Water slipped under the door of my tent, saturating the thick, fur rugs and pooling

near the entrance.

Very early in the morning, amid the sound of continuing thunder and rain, I heard a loud knock at my door. It was the guide, telling me to pack quickly and hurry up the hill to a waiting 4x4. I heard “river overflowing” and “roads flooding.”

What followed felt like a dream. Because the roads out of camp were impassable, a driver gunned his vehicle’s engine and got us up and over the dunes. Windshield wipers frantically jerked back and forth as he shouted over the phone to other drivers trying to make their way out of the area. We only stopped once; our guide wanted his picture taken with the now swollen river behind him. Grinning, he said that he had never in his life seen it that way.

Once out of the desert, finding safe passage was just as difficult. We’d drive an hour in one direction, only to have to turn back again. Later, we’d hear people describe this rainfall as unprecedented, with as much rain in a few hours as they’d get in more than a year. As we drove away from the desert, toward Marrakesh, we saw whole families taking selfies on bridges or jumping in puddles, their joy irrepressible. We learned that nomadic families, like the one I



met, were able to remain in the desert instead of seeking new land. The new vegetation and the availability of water would sustain them.



### REVIVING TRUST IN GOD

It's Advent, a time to wait, hope and trust that despite the many times God feels distant or even unreal to us, God is present and is always "doing a new thing." As we enter this season, I invite you to join me in reflecting on one of my long-time, favorite passages of Scripture. For reasons you'll appreciate, it's become even more meaningful to me as the years pass.

*I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not  
perceive it?  
I will make a way in the  
wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.  
(Isaiah 43:19)*



This Advent, I will remember walking over the steep dunes and through the dry, cracked riverbed in Morocco. I will remember looking down into the almost empty wells. I will remember the people's faithfulness in praying for relief, year after year. And then...I will remember hearing thunder and feeling the rain and seeing people dancing in puddles, celebrating the surprise and gift from above.

I invite you to reflect on

part of your life that feels like a harsh landscape right now. Perhaps you can take time during Advent to journal or speak with a trusted friend about these questions:

- What are you hoping and waiting for?
- What griefs do you carry?
- How might you bring relief to others, as you await the coming of Christ?
- Who are the "weary travelers" around you now? How might you welcome them?
- When, in the past, did your well seem nearly empty but then was filled? Can you trust that God will fill it again?
- Can you invite God to do a new thing in your life and in the life of this world?
- What would "rain" look like in your life?

In short, I invite you to join me in renewing a sense of trust this Advent in a God who does new things and can make rivers in a desert place. 🌿

