

2011 Lenten Reflections

A Reflection on the Fifth Week of Lent

As we find ourselves in this fifth week of Lent, it has probably become clear to us that responding fully to the church's call to prayer, fasting and almsgiving cannot be done in the ordinary rush of our daily routines. We need to "go away" for awhile – maybe not physically, but spiritually. We need to find a place of quiet to examine where we are on this Lenten journey. One place that is suggested in Scripture is "the desert."

Why the desert and how can we find ourselves there?

We know that beginning with Abraham, the early life of God's chosen people was spent in the desert in a nomadic existence. Eventually, they settled in towns, but the Jewish people always remembered when God led them like a flock in the desert. Then after their exile in Egypt, Moses led them through the desert places as they searched for a return to their promised land.

The lessons the Jews learned in the desert were important ones. They discovered and relied upon the solidarity of a community that was united against all odds and all enemies. They experienced the assurance of their covenant relationship with God. Even when there was no water or food, in faith, they discovered a God who was always with them and would provide for their needs.

In the desert, God was all they needed; all they really had, besides each other. Without distractions, they remembered who they were: God's beloved children who depended upon God for everything. This is the reason that the prophets of the Old Testament saw the desert time as the ideal period of God's relationship with God's people. They realized their creaturehood and were aware of their weakness and infidelity. They were also keenly aware of God's fidelity to them.

So, in the Old Testament, spiritual growth could be found in a return to the desert. This return was not intended to be a withdrawal into the past, but rather an opportunity for a new spiritual pilgrimage. A pilgrimage that provided the space to discover what they needed to learn in order to grow in their relationship with God. The same becomes true in the New Testament. John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul all seem to have found their true identity and mission during time spent in desert places.

So, what about me and what about you? Our Lenten journey is intended to be a temporary withdrawal or retreat from life as we know it—an opportunity to find our own desert places. These places and times will serve the same purposes they always have for God's people: an opportunity to hear God's invitation to remember who we are, who God is, and how God calls us to be in this world.

The desert is the place of truth and choice. This Lent may be the perfect time to seek greater clarity about who we are, who we are becoming and the choices we may need to make in order to deepen our relationship with God and with those around us. This may be a time of truth in which you discover what you need to *start* doing, *continue* doing or *stop* doing in order to claim your identity as an authentic friend and follower of Jesus.

So for the remaining days of Lent, let's try to follow Jesus' ongoing invitation to "come away" with him whenever we can. Let's pay attention, listen and allow the experience of Jesus' presence to clarify who Jesus really is for us. We need to open ourselves to what Jesus desires for us: truth, freedom, healing, peace, joy and fullness of life.

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Then as we move away from that “desert” place, let’s ask for the grace to remember what we experienced in those moments when our usual ways of seeing and understanding were transformed in the light of God’s truth. Ask to hold on to the peace, hope, trust, forgiveness and mercy—whatever it is that Jesus shared with us that will make a difference in our daily lives and relationships.