

The Season of Lent



Preparing for My Journey into the Desert

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INTRODUCTION

In December of 2016 I went backpacking and camping in southern California. We flew into San Diego on Sunday evening, checked into a hotel, and planned to camp later that week in the Laguna Mountains. Our Monday night slot, however, was open. So, on Monday morning we headed over to one of the local outfitter stores to consult regarding where to camp. After discussing different options with one of the employees there, she recommended a place known as Whale Peak in Anza Borrego State Park. It's located a little over 2 hours east of San Diego County. That was it. Desert camping. I'd never done it before. Admittedly, I wasn't that excited about it, but we took the word of the locals. We were also advised to hurry, because the sun would be going down around 5:00 in the evening. After the long drive, and a quick stop in Julian, California at Grandma's Coffee House, we packed in a couple of miles, beat the sunset, and made camp. If you have ever been to the desert, you know that it's not pretty. I mean, it's not ugly. It's just not what you would call pretty. Then, however, the real moment of beauty comes. It was about 2:00am, and I had to get up and go outside for a moment. When I stepped out of the tent, stood up straight, and looked up, I found myself completely surrounded by a view that was beyond belief and description. It was one of the most amazing things I had seen in a while. It was as if, while we were sleeping, someone had come in and completely rearranged the world around us. The first image that came to mind for me was that of a dimly lit dining room, or a dance floor. The sky was clearer than crystal clear. The stars were like diamonds against velvet. The moon was larger than life and brighter than I could believe. I was enveloped in a blanket of velvety blue light. It was as if a transformation had taken place, and it was holy. I recalled the words of our Lord to Moses, "remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." (Exodus 3:5)

Sometimes I feel as if we have lost a sense of awe and mystery in our lives. We've grown so accustomed to knowing pretty much anything, gaining answers to most questions in an instant, a click or a swipe, and most of us continually live at the speed of light, or the "speed of life" as one friend of mine describes it. I often find myself wondering why this is, where we're headed, and what it could take for us to regain what we have lost. The desert would have been the last place that I would have expected to encounter the awe and majesty of God's holy presence. It is ironic, in a sense, that it happened there, but that's how the desert can be. In the actual desert and life itself, we encounter moments of dryness and wonder. We cannot have one without the other. Lent is an opportunity for us to enter into both. Granted, it's not easy to look honestly at the places in our lives where we are spiritually dry or distant from the Lord. Sometimes our sin, our human frailty and our brokenness leave us feeling worn down or stooped over in our guilt. However, if we go into that type of reflection, if we enter into Lent believing that God loves us unconditionally and that no sin is too big, bad, or wrong to be washed away in Christ, and believing that we can indeed make lasting changes, then we will indeed be able to stand up again and see in a new way the awesome mystery of God in our lives.

Fr. Trey Nelson
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THE SEASON OF LENT

Don't Wait to Prepare

Here are few simple thoughts about how to be ready for Lent when it arrives. The problem for many of us, if not most of us, is that we wait until the last minute to do many things. So, remember, the key here is to NOT WAIT until the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday to set your Lenten goals. Map out a simple Lenten plan for yourself, tuck it away somewhere, enjoy Mardi Gras, if you do that, and be ready to go.

LENTEN GOAL-SETTING

Realistic Goals- there is a balance between “taking on too much” and “taking on nothing at all”. Seek that balance. Many of us set unrealistic goals, and when we don't reach them, get discouraged and down on ourselves. We need to set Lenten goals that are do-able. For example, what's more realistic for you: to attend daily Mass every day or a couple of times a week, and so on.

Holistic Goals- sometimes as Catholics, whether we realize it or not, we set Lenten goals “just because”. We choose to give up coffee or alcohol. We choose to lose “x number” of pounds, exercise more, or eat healthier. All of these can be good in and of themselves, but it might be time for us to break out of the “just because” mode. It might be time to move away from the “what am I going to give up for Lent” approach. Whatever we take on during Lent should serve to strengthen us overall, but especially spiritually. If that doesn't happen, then we've missed the point entirely. Perhaps ask yourself: could what I do for Lent be carried over into the remainder of the year?

Timely Goals- lastly, regarding goal-setting, I recommend that any goals we set for ourselves during Lent be timely. In my mind, this is distinct from avoiding “just because” goals. A timely goal is a response to that which is most urgent in my spiritual life. We can set good goals yet still miss the area in our life that needs the most attention. Have I become, for example, spiritually arrogant, overconfident, or lazy? What is my sense and awareness of sin in my life? Where am I turning to have my needs for intimacy, affection, and affirmation met? I call this the core issue or root issue. In other words, our Lent and Lenten practices can speak to, lead us to reflect on and address only the symptoms or the real issues. It all depends on how courageous, honest, and trusting we want to be.

Lenten Companions- I include this component at the beginning in the goal-setting section, because it would require a bit of planning in advance. It might be worthwhile to consider reflecting openly with someone on a regular basis during lent. Some issues are personal and private and have their place in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession), or counseling, or spiritual direction relationships. It could be helpful, however, to share part of your Lenten journey with a companion or group, a trusted friend, or someone else with whom you could be comfortable talking, perhaps, once a week. There are 5 weeks of Lent. That's 5 conversations, at least. How many emails, text messages, social media posts, and so on do we already go through on a daily basis? When it comes to the spiritual journey, nothing can take the place of a face to face conversation with someone we trust.

GETTING READY TO PRAY

How to Make the Most of Your Daily Reflection

Time of Day- try to avoid “praying on the run.” In other words, whatever time you choose to pray, pick a time when you can actually STOP. Prayer should not be like passing through a yield sign or hurrying to make it through a yellow caution light. I like to remind myself of what we could call the “ING’s” of prayer. Prayer can be *recharging, life-giving, refreshing, and comforting*. For it to be any of these, however, it must first be *STOP*-ping. Some days we will be hurried, rushed, and preoccupied. This is unavoidable. Still, try to find the time to STOP and breathe, or, as we say in the Sabbath sense, time to rest in God’s presence.

A Place to Pray- the Irish Jesuits maintain a lectionary based scripture resource website called “sacred space.” (www.sacredspace.ie, if you’d like to check it out.) Borrowing from that name, how can you find your own sacred space in which to pray? Granted, it might differ from day to day. In fact, you may even find yourself doing your reflection in your office, in the car, on break, during lunch, before a meeting, class, or test, and so on. Environment is crucial and often connected to the time of day that you pray. If it requires getting up a little earlier or staying up a little later in order to find a quiet, sacred space, then maybe that’s what you need to do. Either way, the place is key. Maybe consider a room or other location in which you’ve never prayed before. A change in environment could be good.

A Technology Fast- if you really want to make the most of your prayer time, then enter into a momentary fast from technology. Get away from the TV, radio, computer, and so on. Leave your cell phone in another room. It won’t be easy, but it’s all part of spiritually entering into the desert. Besides, it will all be there when you return.

A Candle- don’t laugh. If you can find a place to pray, in which you can light just a simple candle, it will make all the difference in the world. It will, as author Wayne Muller says, transform the space almost immediately. But remember to blow it out when you’re done!

Pace of Prayer- simply put, try to take your time. Allow your breathing to help you enter into a slow and reverent rhythm of prayer. This is where we come face to face with the unfortunate philosophy of “more is best and fast is better.” Some call this the “gospel of consumption.” Prayer stands contrary to this philosophy. Allow yourself the time *to take your time*.

A Weekly Journal Entry- you may wish to keep a regular journal throughout the season. Write in it as often as you are inclined, but do not feel that you must do so every day. A realistic goal might be to make a weekly entry, using the reflection questions contained at the end of this pamphlet.

Praying with Distractions- so, here’s the reality. Most of us will always be distracted in prayer, to one degree or another. We have responsibilities: children, work, our spouse, our health, and so on. Not to mention that often we are simply worried about a number of things or just tired. Remember this: there is no perfect prayer, no perfect moment. Just do your best. Let what Thomas Merton refers to as “my desire to please you, Lord” move you through. And here’s the greatest consolation of all: *every prayer is heard*.

Praying with the Scriptures

(Each week the Church offers us 3 scripture readings for Mass. You may wish to use these general questions for your prayer and reflection.)

What words, phrases, or images from today's scriptures strike you? Perhaps write them down in a journal entry.

Why do you think these words or images are of particular importance to you today, at this time in your life?

How might these words touch the life of your community: your marriage, family, friends, church community, peers, classmates, and so on?

Do these words comfort you? Challenge you? Or both? How would you state the promise or challenge that you perceive in today's scriptures?