

A Light in the Desert

Lent can lead to love — if you are committed to the journey



By Father Ronald Patrick Raab, CSC

We survive many deserts as priests. Lent becomes an invitation to explore them, to turn over the rocks we find there, to sift through the debris and face the sun. Our deserts are varied and sometimes overwhelming. Lent invites us to gaze at them with tender hearts and with great fortitude and phenomenal surrender. These Lenten deserts may become springtime within us — an eternal openness to life. The journey sets us on a path of healing and forgiveness if we can navigate them with genuine love.

Some inner arid regions exist from our own making, and some deserts are thrust upon us. I struggle to negotiate my way through deserts of alcoholic and co-dependent systems of authority. As priests, we maneuver bureaucratic systems from our leaders drenched with alcohol because the desert is wide and inclusive, and there are few people who understand the real faith journey. We tend to gaze at the ground of our busy lives and never look up to see our real life because the effects of alcohol are legion.

I scratch my head in the waterless lands of dual relationships where, as priests, we are discouraged to make friends with staff

or within our parish communities because we are always a boss and employer. Our safe-environment programs across the country accentuate such boundaries and such dry places. These deserts are particularly lonely. Profound hurt has settled into my heart when people treat me only as a commodity, as a functionary for their good or livelihood. These lifeless regions, if we are honest with ourselves as pastors

I listen carefully during Lent to people pouring out their hearts — not just in our confessional but also in other parishes. The aging mother wrings her arthritic hands, finally coming to terms with her dementia and her fear of losing her home. I hear the middle-aged man worried about his son who is gay and his son's commitment to never step inside a church again. I receive the wastelands that are articulated in a 20-something who lost a job because of her drug addiction and will not go back home to ask for help because it was there she was abused. These are the real deserts in our people's lives. This barren soil does not have GPS or a firm ground on which to stand.

These deserts can only be prayed through one day at a time.

These deserts add up in our hearts and tarnish our attitudes as pastors and priests. They can overwhelm us as well. These wastelands reveal themselves most especially within the Lenten season. These barren places find their way to our offices, our confessionals and in our parish parking lots because we are invited to help people navigate them. Our lives are filled with the twists and turns of real life if we really are doing our jobs.

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and priests, provide more than mountains to climb, but they are also hurtful and diminish our spiritual lives and open us to bitterness and temptation.

Real-life Deserts

As a pastor, I realize the temptations in the desert that Jesus encountered. Because it is here that we truly begin to question our faith, our life choices and ourselves. This is the place where Lent really distorts our minds and flusters our hearts. I also find such deserts within our people.

We also survey the wilderness created from areas of ministry that we manage, but which remain outside of our expertise. I am asked to speak about various capital campaigns from the diocese as well as from our parish. It is my job to assist in staff conflicts, to navigate pastoral councils that do not function properly, and I always am reminded that I am responsible for next year's budget, even when I do not have the skills to administrate such a task. As any pastor knows well, the real issues of our parish life may very well be boiled down to who makes the decisions, who has a key to the parish center and whether or not there is adequate toilet paper in the restrooms.

The Challenge of Lent

Lent is a never-ending journey toward the Light. I usually admit in Lenten talks that I often gain weight in the season set aside for fasting. Time somehow slips away, and I find it more difficult to dialogue honestly with God in the quiet cells of my heart during the very season where I am called to go to my room, lock the door and pray to my heavenly Father. Offering my gifts to others beyond the parish seldom goes as planned in this holy season, when I am encouraged to give alms. I search in busyness for the guideposts of prayer, fasting and almsgiving — the very signs I point others toward in preaching, especially on Ash Wednesday.

However, the Church invites us deep within our life experiences to find a change of heart. Jesus still transforms our lives in his mystery of freedom, love and liberation, no matter our life situations. The Lenten season challenges us to surrender in pure honesty to God. This is the place where the Scriptures give us authentic hope.

In this Lenten season, the Gospels are radiant with hope. We ponder again the merciful father and his two stubborn sons in Luke 15. This text for the Fourth Sunday of Lent (March 31) is one of my favor-

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'WHAT STANDS BETWEEN US AND GOD?'

"Lent is a time of going very deeply into ourselves. ... What is it that stands between us and God? Between us and our brothers and sisters? Between us and life, the life of the Spirit? Whatever it is, let us relentlessly tear it out, without a moment's hesitation."

— St. Josemaría Escrivá

ite stories. First of all, Luke uses the word "forgiveness" more than any other Gospel. I desperately want to believe Luke, and I rely on such words every day. I want to rest in his beautiful storytelling and heartfelt notion of whom God is and what God continues to offer people who are poor, including my own life. Luke's Gospel is rich and essential reading for any parish priest. I desperately desire to find my heart's home in relationship with these three characters in the Lenten season.

Hearing the Father's Voice

I experience within my own heart the frustrations of the younger son. Our humanity, just the way we are made, reveals the discrepancies of our entitlement and how we are treated by our families, other clergy and the world. I can feel him pull away from his father as he begins to bulge with pride and arrogance. The son's lust to create his own voice and honor his own choices echo across the centuries. I hear him shout out to create a life based on his own ego, his own strength and his own plans. I hear everything he wants to

stand for in his new life. He believes with his entire being that he deserves what he is asking for from his inheritance. I often find these sins embedded within my own heart and attitude as a leader in the Church.

Many times as pastors we think we deserve more. We all want to be treated like adults, given a platform to speak our truth. We pray to come to terms with our strengths, our bloated egos and rich talents. Yet, like the young son, we know in our deepest quiet, in our heart of hearts, we belong to something greater than ourselves. Sometimes we only find this when we are so lost by our exhaustion, overcome with guilt and worry in our ministry and frustrated to no end with our lack of accomplishments.

In the end, we look forward to hearing the Father's voice as this young man did as he ran home. For many of us priests, we are worn down, and some of us are burned out or ready to retire. Yet, we open our hearts in this Lenten season to allow God to love us again. This is the place of our hearts' desire, no matter our years ordained or the ministries that occupy our days. There is



much for us to learn from this young son, because he represents all of us in so many ways.

The older son's story reflects our stories as well. We easily understand what it is like to keep the home fires burning. We are good stewards, and we keep all the rules. We may not ask questions, and we always keep the status quo. We wear our Roman collars in public, and we always are seen as good sons. Yet, this Gospel character teaches us to be careful in this role. We may become full of grief and bitterness when we do not feel appreciated or acknowledged. We may not feel heard, as the older son so demonstrates in this Gospel. This experience of the older son has much to teach us as priests. We, too, must remember that we belong to the Father. We are still in relationship with God and are not asked to offer tasks in isolation or separate from love.

We also see shades of the Father in our ministry. We desire this character to heal our own lives. During the Lenten season, my sleepless nights become filled with worry about a catechumen who walked away just after the Rite of Election because he cannot believe he could be forgiven or loved by God. These are the moments I turn to the Father in this story for guidance so that I may bear his wisdom today. I stand at our church door with open arms as long as I can to welcome the lost and weary, because the Father also welcomes me in my foibles and nonsense.

We also long for such tenderness of the father running out to meet us when we feel lost, alone and abandoned. As a pastor, I understand this reality more than ever when I am tired of rules and regulations, exhausted by others' expectations of me. I want to feel the love God has for me — most especially in the Lenten season.

I want to find myself in the Father's embrace of his lost son and feel the satisfaction of the son who remained at his side.

The Lenten desert leads to love. The resurrection of Christ Jesus is our ultimate home. The Resurrection breaks into freedom even in the small and deadly deserts of our lives and ministry. In faith, all deserts lead to love. In this Lent, I again commit myself to the journey, where love from Scriptures is made flesh in all of us who beg for this freedom, liberation and hope. Even the darkest and deepest places shall bloom in Jesus' compassion, love and forgiveness. **TP**

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