

GIFTS
of the
SPIRITUAL
WILDERNESS

- A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL -

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Introduction

Dear Readers

We tend to think of “wilderness” as a dry, thirsty place. The word “wild” itself conjures up an unpredictable habitat in which humans are especially vulnerable. But Christ reminds us that what, on the surface, may seem dangerous, uninhabitable, and deserted—is a land of plenty.

We are no strangers to places of drought. The world’s grit has left us parched. Years of communal and individual loss, grief, violence, injustice, oppression, and unrest have made us exhausted. We are no strangers to the wasteland. But what does this unruly, scarce, and wild landscape teach us about faith, spirituality, and the Triune God? How does Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness intersect with our own twenty-first-century experiences? This Lent, you are invited into daily exploration: discerning the unlikely gifts of our discomfort.

Consider These Questions for Your Journey:

- What does Jesus’s biblical retreat into solitude, sacrifice, and spiritual practice teach us about the gifts of our modern wilderness experience?
- How might a spiritual drought actually create a more meaningful Lent experience?
- What do fasting, sacrifice, and temptation look like in our contemporary daily lives?
- How might we prepare our bodies, minds, and spirits to experience new life—and gifts—on the other side of this Lenten journey?

Through daily devotions with scripture, meditations, practices, prayers, and “living water” tools for our parched lives, this Lenten guide is a companion for a contemplative and transformational journey from the wilderness to resurrection.

Your Invitation: Chalice Press and I encourage you—beseech you—to be open to the spiritual gifts of the wilderness, including drought lessons that bear fruit all year long. This little book is your fellow traveler: Place it near your favorite Bible, journal, or scratch pad. Set a time that suits you to complete each day’s reading. Take some deep breaths. Reflect earnestly. Sit with any discomfort—and surprises—as you move through the deserted places to Easter communion.

Scripture References and Themes: This book uses the *New Revised Standard Version’s* Old and New Testament to center our reflections and

enrich your journey. But feel free to use whatever version you have on hand. As we move through Lenten days and weeks, you are invited to consider these themes deeply: facing spiritual droughts, taking inventory of our parched lives, sacrifice and spiritual practice, walking through the wilderness to get to living water, living water for our parched lives, and gifts of the spiritual wilderness. When you encounter a scripture, reflection, or question that loosens a difficult emotion, allow it to bubble up. Take it one breath at a time. This guide is an honest, sincere, and empathetic real-talk book about discovering the gifts of comfort in the uncomfortable—like a well-stocked backpack that will not leave you empty and alone. We are on the path together—and I brought snacks.

Spiritual Practices: Each day contains a one-minute journal prompt and a prayer. As the weeks progress, the journal prompt will be woven with additional spiritual practices of meditation (breathing and silence) as well as the Ignatian Examen (noticing). Practice the art of “progress, not perfection” with these tools: Journal imperfectly, meditate poorly, and pray clumsily. Spiritual practices are a launch pad for receiving God’s gifts.

Finally, I must confess: The wilderness makes me itchy. I don’t like literal or metaphorical dirt and dust. And I’d certainly rather not shake out grit from the cracks, crevices, and folds I didn’t even know existed. But I also know, symbolically, that the gift of bright blue living water I love so much is nearly always surrounded by rough topography and textures. I know that I cannot get to the heart of the matter—the restorative waters—without trekking the sand. We cannot arrive at Easter resurrection without wilderness wrestling.

On this journey with you,

J. Dana Trent, April 2021

Prayer: *Loving God, guide our sandy feet and our weary way. Equip us to turn inward and face the dreaded drought in order to discover the spiritual abundance. Amen.*

Dust and Ashes

Job 42:6

*“Therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”*

My friend the chaplain quotes this line from Job each time she makes a mistake. Tiny or large, in jest or deliberate, she offers this earnest and biblical confession of transgression. When we discuss her Job reference, she reminds me that no one says “sorry” like Job.

On Ash Wednesday each year, we are called to humility and apologies. But most of us dread a day of *teshuvah*, re-turning toward things we’d rather not be reminded that we thought of, said, or did. We’d prefer not to face what needs mending because we’re already ashamed. We’d prefer not to face death, because we already feel the pinch of time. But these reminders—that our actions matter and our bodies are finite—are a good start to discovering the spiritual gifts of Lent.

As we experience the real smudge of ashes on our foreheads, we are invited into a metaphorical place of Job-ness. We need not endure Job’s exact suffering to embrace Ash Wednesday as an opportunity: an inciting incident that invites us to authentic spiritual struggle and its subsequent gifts. This year, I invite us to exchange Ash Wednesday drudgery for eager expectation.

Spiritual Practice, One-Minute Journal: Make two columns. In one column, list all the things you dread about Lent. In the other, list all the things that make you eager for this liturgical season—even if small. Pay attention to both columns. From there, craft an intentional statement of what you’d like to glean from these first days of Lent.

Prayer: *God who hears our confession, help us to wear these ashes with humility, starting the journey as beginners who have a lot to learn from the wilderness and knowing that you are with us every step of the way. Amen.*

Immediacy

Mark 1:1-13

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. (v. 12)

After his baptism, Jesus *immediately* retreats to a deserted place for spiritual boot camp. Most of us, after our baptisms, were celebrated with family photos and luncheons.

But the gospel of Mark is *urgent*. It's jam-packed with verbs; the word "immediately" (*euthys* in Greek) occurs forty-one times. Mark is also the first gospel written, so it comes out of the gate running, throwing its readers and Jesus into the thick of it. There is no slow-going, no post-baptism luncheon, no midday nap. There is *immediacy*.

In the same way, we are invited into the wilderness with gusto. It's no coincidence that Christ's baptism is followed by a forty-day physical drought to induce spiritual plenty. If Jesus is our model, we are asked to practice the same essence: diving into Lent with full force.

I've always found it interesting that Jesus' ministry begins with his human vulnerability. Before a word was taught, a sermon preached, a person healed, a miracle produced—Christ is driven by the Spirit to the wild. Grit, solitude, isolation, sacrifice, temptation—these are the *first* and *immediate* practices after the lush, living water of the River Jordan. From the safety of John, friends, and family, Jesus goes to the deserted place to distill the essence of what is to come.

Christ's forty days in the wilderness is our exemplar: If we are going to get to the root of faith, we must strip bare the things of this world that keep us tethered. Instead of avoiding, evading, and running, we are invited to *immediately* dive into the wild spaces and recalibrate to our ultimate purpose: faith.

Spiritual Practice, One-Minute Journal: Make a list of what's holding you back from the *immediacy* of the Lenten wilderness.

Prayer: *Triune God, lift our hesitations and debunk our excuses. May your Spirit drive us into this bountiful season immediately. Amen.*

More Questions than Answers

Psalm 13:1-6

How long, O LORD? (v. 1)

Zora Neale Hurston, author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, reminds us that, “There are years that ask questions and years that answer.”¹

In real life, we’ve just begun to wrestle with deep questions. We began a decade (2020) with an unexpected and terrifying pandemic, catastrophic death, fear, violence, and unrest. We asked, “Why, God?” and “How long, O Lord?” over and over. Looking back, it’s no surprise that this heart-wrenching period began during the season of Lent, which, at the time, seemed unusually cruel. But in the rearview mirror, it’s appropriate: Lent is about asking the *hard* questions; it’s a journey of spiritual inquiry to distill what really matters.

The good-bad news is that during the pandemic, we remained in a sort of perpetual Lent. We were forced to examine the most awful parts of our collective and individual humanity—the gritty, uncomfortable, sandy parts of ourselves that needed to be shaken from complacency. The pandemic ripped the curtains down and showed us the service and work that needed to be done. It made us tune in to the questions that mattered, so that we could inch toward the answers we needed. Seems like a metaphor for the wilderness journey, no?

The post-2020 temptation might be to skip all future Lents, pat ourselves on the back, and say, “We lived all the questions already and now we have all the answers.” But that is not the practice. That is not the call of Christianity. When we stumble into the unknown again, how do we press our palms together in supplication and admit we don’t have the answers?

Spiritual Practice, One-Minute Journal: Write down life’s biggest questions for you *right now*. Don’t overthink it. Write the questions that come to mind first, with little concern for the answers.

Prayer: *Holy One, help us to sit with the discomfort of uncertainty and inquiry. Remind us that we don’t need to know all the answers in order to be kept and comforted by your grace. Amen.*

¹Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 27.