

February 23, 2021

The following article is located at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april/love-in-desert-of-lent.html>

Christianity Today, March, 2020

EASTER

Love in the Desert of Lent

This season's greatest gift has nothing to do with discipline.

JULIE CANLIS/POSTED MARCH 17, 2020



Image: Ameer Basheer / Unsplash

When I hit a desert season in my spiritual life some years ago, I felt haunted by the abundance I had left behind. I missed about 10 years of sermons due to pregnancy nausea, crying babies, toddler tantrums, dirty diapers that needed changing right in the middle of the service, or my own human sin. (At least I thought it was sin, but it was more likely total and complete exhaustion.) I was a frazzled mother who brought my children to church in their pajamas and often felt disconnected from Christ there and everywhere else.

At the time, I thought my spiritual dry spell simply reflected how poorly I was doing and how undisciplined I felt in the chaos of parenting young kids. I believed that my faith could only grow in abundance—the abundance of felt worship, prayerful focus, and passionate commitment. But I was wrong. It took me years to learn that the Lord speaks in silence. And years again to learn that he holds onto me more tightly than I hold onto him. And still more years to realize that grace is best understood in periods of apparent failure, absence, and desolation.

As I look back on those desert years, I see that hard-won truth for what it is—a Lenten lesson. Although we often think of Lent as a time of strict discipline and self-denial, it requires something much more: a deep

understanding of our belovedness.

The life of Christ bears this out. In the story of his encounter with Satan in the desert, we often think Jesus had victory over temptation simply because of his divinity. But the early church had a different perspective. They believed the secret to Jesus' strength in the desert came from the event right before: his baptism in the Jordan River. Christ's endurance lay not in the abstract power of "being divine" but rather in the human experience of being cherished by a Father who opened the heavens and said, "This is my Son, whom I love" (Matt. 3:17). That love was the secret of his ability to resist temptation. (In fact, this view was so important to early believers that they celebrated Jesus' baptism long before they celebrated Christmas Day.)

This same love carries over to our practice of Lent. In the dry, arid season before Easter, we encounter the satiety of God's care for us. When we turn to him, our disordered loves are exposed. And when we embrace the biblical promise that we're cherished and known by him, we begin to put those disordered loves in proper order. That is the life-giving message I received from my wilderness experience. The Lenten desert does indeed expose us, yes, but it exposes us not for the *sake* of being exposed but rather for the sake of being healed.

We see this "desert love story" play out in the history of the early church. In A.D. 313, the Roman emperor Constantine made Christianity fashionable, and the church was flooded with new Christians (often with dubious motives) banging down the doors, wanting to be baptized. Priests were faced with a crisis.

Overnight, the requirements for all Christian initiates—three years of training and 40 hours of strict fasting—suddenly became impossible to enforce. So the church charged all new believers with 40 days of study and partial fasting before their baptism on the Saturday night before Easter. By A.D. 339, a mere 25 years later, the church father Athanasius reported that the 40-day fast was practiced the world over.

This baptizing of thousands of people might make some of us uncomfortable, and for good reason. Christianity as an empire religion should never sit comfortably with us. Nonetheless, the age of Constantine set in motion an innovation that radically changed the church: The original 40-hour fast became part of the ecclesial calendar in the 40-day form of Lent. It invited believers to eschew a "spectator faith" by participating in Christ's wilderness trial.

The third-century desert fathers took this call literally and went and lived in the barren landscapes of the Middle East. One of them was Saint Anthony of Egypt. After hearing the gospel call to "sell your possessions and give to the poor" (Matt. 19:21), he sold everything and went into the Nitrian Desert.

In this inhospitable space, Anthony discovered that, even though he'd given up wealth, security, honor, relationships, and comfort, these very things followed him into the desert. He couldn't pray. He couldn't focus. He was tortured by thoughts of what he had given up—possibilities left unfulfilled, relationships left behind. He was in the desert, but his mind was back home.

So Anthony had to take an even deeper plunge into what the desert fathers later called the “full desert,” or what I call the “interior desert.” He did this “to give heed to himself,” as his biographer Athanasius later put it. He realized that simply giving up bad habits didn’t break their power. That was only the first step. In the interior desert, changing habits for good required replacing them with other rightly oriented affections and desires. He had to survey the spiritual chaos and then realign those disordered loves by the power of God’s love.

“I sang the Psalms against Satan, and he vanished away,” Anthony reported to younger monks (whom he called his “children”) toward the end of his life. “Often his devils would beat me, and I repeated again and again, ‘Nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ’ and at this, they rather fell to beating one another.”

When he was living in the desert, Anthony went so far as to move into a tomb to declare that his bad habits and thoughts were dead and had no hold on him, but he did so wrapped in the Spirit of Christ. He understood this fundamental truth: You can only confront your dark side in the presence of someone who loves you.

During the years of my spiritual desert, I told my husband that I couldn’t possibly give up anything else for Lent, because I felt as if everything had already been taken from me. I couldn’t give up coffee, because I could no longer drink a cup without being interrupted ten times. I couldn’t give up alcohol, because I wasn’t at liberty to drink while nursing. I couldn’t give up sleeping in, because I was already sleep deprived. None of my usual creature comforts were available to me, so I had to give up giving something up. And in that barren place, I began to understand that “feeling” close to God—my metric of spiritual success—was much less important than simply receiving the word *beloved*.

When he was a Yale professor, Henri Nouwen spent a six-month sabbatical with a monastic community in New York and arrived at a similar conclusion. He recognized that a monk’s journey into holiness is a journey into receiving God’s love to greater and greater depths. In October 1976, Nouwen wrote in his journal:

To respond to God’s love was a great act of faith. . . . This is the great adventure of the monk: to really believe that God loves you, to really give yourself to God in trust, even while you are aware of your sinfulness, weaknesses, and miseries. I suddenly saw much better than before that one of the greatest temptations of a monk is to doubt God’s love.

If we’re being honest, most of us dwell on our flaws before we dwell on God’s love. But the story of Jesus’ baptism in Scripture—located right before the desert temptation—reminds us that we need to listen first to God’s message of care before we try to know ourselves and our temptations. We must hear the call of Christ above our own voice of self-condemnation.

Fundamentally, Lent is an invitation to return to that wonderful and awful moment in the history of the universe when Jesus faced the Tempter. We participate in that experience by saying in so many words, “Christ has walked this dark path, and it is in him that I live and move and have my being” (Acts 17:28). We once again embrace a new identity and an entirely different way of looking at the self: It is not I but Christ who lives in me

(Gal. 2:20).

In Christ, we receive the words “You are my beloved child.” In Christ, we’re led into wilderness areas—some of our own making, some imposed upon us—where we fight the Tempter with those same words of love. And in Christ, we ask ourselves, “What would it be like to hear ‘You are my beloved’ in the midst of this specific wilderness in my life?” Or, if we’re already vulnerable, we might wonder, “How can I not resent this pain but choose it again and again?”

As the years go by, I become more and more convinced that receiving God’s love from a place of weakness is absolutely essential to spiritual health. I want this experience for my kids as they grow (and sometimes flounder) in faith. I want it for myself. I want it for my theology students and the congregants in my husband’s small Anglican church in eastern Washington. And I want it for the global church as we participate in the life of Christ day in and day out. Together, we ask the loving Lord to help us know him and know ourselves.

That’s what Lent is all about. When we fast, give up social media, or relinquish other habits, we place ourselves in the wilderness. There in that barren space, we’re better able to hear the simplicity and power of the gospel message: We are loved by God and loved to the death. Only by staying grounded in this love does sin break its hold on us. Only by his affection do our temptations wither. And only through declaring ourselves beloved can we look ahead to what comes out of the desert—the resurrection of Christ, through whom all things are made new.

Julie Canlis is the author of A Theology of the Ordinary (Godspeed Press) and Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension (Eerdmans), which won a Templeton Prize and a Christianity Today Award of Merit.