

Introduction

Lent and Easter—what a privileged time in the calendar of our lives. It is no season for standing pat. Even though Lent begins in winter, the pilgrim has to set forth boldly, with baggage greatly reduced. It is time to shuck our dependencies.

The task of Lent is to accompany Jesus, and the task of Easter is to let the risen Christ accompany us. We start out with Jesus at the Jordan and follow as he is driven into the desert. The daily meditations proceed through Jesus' public life, which itself points increasingly to Holy Week and the cross. After three days the landscape transforms completely, as it did for the disciples exiting Jerusalem, and the risen Lord is with us.

ASH WEDNESDAY

The Great Baptismal Retreat

*Behold, now is a very acceptable time;
behold, now is the day of salvation.*

2 CORINTHIANS 6:2

Years ago, when I was teaching at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, a student came up to me and said, "You have a smudge on your forehead."

"Robert," I answered him, "it's Ash Wednesday."

And he said, "Oh no! You mean I missed Mardi Gras?!"

This was the excuse for Mardi Gras: You'd better crowd in your enjoyment because the season ahead will be grueling. Indeed, in the early centuries, Lent was as demanding as Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting: one meal a day, toward evening, with flesh meat, fish, and dairy products forbidden. In the second millennium, practices softened gradually, but the penitential spirit remained, as it still does.

What the Church has wanted to emphasize recently is conversion, a more wholehearted turning to Christ. The spirit of self-offering—not just "offering up"—is integral to conversion, provided we are clear on the why of our small deprivations and services to others: to join in the great offering of Christ for the world.

From its start, Lent was associated with baptism. It was taken as preparatory to Easter, the baptismal feast. The forty days are really a great baptismal retreat. The Church as a whole is bid in these days to relive the full mystery of redemption. Every mode of purifying the heart and turning toward the Lord in prayer is of value to us seeking renewal of our spiritual youth. Always gaze ahead to the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Christ. As Paul said, "Behold, now is the day of salvation."



**Lent spurs us to relive
the full mystery of redemption.**

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

To Go on Pilgrimage

*I rejoiced when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD.” And now
our feet are standing within your gates, Jerusalem.*

PSALM 122: 1-2

One of the best-known passages of English literature, the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, celebrates pilgrimage. When the sweet showers of April awaken spring in the countryside, says Chaucer, then in every shire of England, “folk do long to go on pilgrimage.” They aim for the shrine of Saint Thomas, “the holy blissful martyr.”

An even more well-beaten pilgrim path in the Middle Ages was the Way of Saint James, ending with the long trek across northern Spain to Compostela. Devotion to this grueling walk, at least in its final stage, has reawakened in recent decades.

Pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in a lifetime, has long been one of the devoutest longings of Islamic people. It is one of the basic requirements of their faith. It illustrates the powerful pull of what lies at one’s religious center.

In Old Testament times, the presence of God in the Temple of Jerusalem exercised an unparalleled magnetism. The psalms let us feel how much the hearts of the people were stirred by thoughts of arrival at their all-holy place.

For those who cannot just pull up stakes for the Holy Land, Lent provides incentive for an excursion even more earnest—out of our narrow ambit of self-concern into the mysteries of our redemption and toward the Lord Jesus. In meditation, in palpable sacrifice, in charitable service, we are called to awaken the baptismal spirit. We are pilgrims in progress into the death and resurrection of Jesus.



**Pilgrimage is toward what lies
at our religious center.**

Daily Prayer

Dearest Lord Jesus,
somehow
may I always be
thinking about you
and reaching
toward you.
Help me lift up
my heart to you now.
Keep me with you
this day.
And may your
holy Mother,
who watched you
so closely,
be my guide to your
dying and rising.
Amen.

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Pilgrims' Progress

*Happy are those who find refuge in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrim roads.*

PSALM 84:6 (1991 NEW AMERICAN BIBLE)

Saint Bernard is known for an Advent sermon in which he speaks of three comings of our Lord. In between the Nativity of Jesus and his final coming in glory and judgment, we can perceive, he says, a middle and hidden coming to his elect in spirit and power. Saint Bernard compares it to a road on which we move, starting from the Incarnation and progressing through the mysteries of Christ.

John Bunyan, a nonconformist preacher in the seventeenth century, gave his version of the necessary steps in his classic allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. His pilgrim, Christian, fleeing the City of Destruction, works his way through Vanity Fair, the Slough of Despond, the Delectable Mountains, and thence toward the Celestial City. Bunyan makes vividly clear how rife the path is with obstacles.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius of Loyola sketches out another pathway to union with Christ our Lord, an intense thirty-day experience of prayer. It is not unlike Lent and Easter week in its time frame, but above all in its orientation to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Ignatius takes it for granted that "the enemy of human nature" will be laying traps, first of all for those emerging from a disorderly life, and then for those eager for God but inexperienced. For each of these distinct stages, he provides Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. He presumes that an experienced director will be at hand with guidance along the way.

Let us then, with self-knowledge and recourse to the Holy Spirit, set out.



**Let us then progress
through the mysteries of Christ.**

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

The Holy Way

The wilderness and the parched land will exult....

A highway will be there, called the holy way;

no one unclean may pass over it...

not even fools shall go astray on it....

But there the redeemed shall walk.

ISAIAH 35:1, 8, 9

Every so often a parent rejoices to see an apparently aimless son or daughter find something that galvanizes their interest, some objective that will serve as a compass point. I remember a woman who had wasted time as a college undergraduate, done terribly, dropped out, married unwisely, and given birth, only to come back years later as an “A” student because she had found her path.

Isaiah describes what this experience is like spiritually. “With your own eyes you shall see your Teacher, and your ears shall hear a word behind you: ‘This is the way; walk in it,’ when you would turn to the right or the left” (Isaiah 30:20–21). This voice needs to be the Holy Spirit, the one whom John Henry Newman addressed so pleadingly, “Lead, kindly light.” We say it more roughly, “Lord, help me get it together.” Help me get headed onto the holy way.

What stands at the end point of our journeying is not success or accomplishment so much as the paschal mystery, emergence from our ego, which is always costly, into the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. “Know him and the power of his resurrection and [the] sharing of his sufferings”: That is what Saint Paul urged the Philippians to ask for (Philippians 3:10). Be immersed in him. That is the holy way.



**Emergence from our ego—
this is the way.**

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

With Christ in the Wilderness

*At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert,
and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan.
He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.*

MARK 1:12-13

With this laconic brevity, Saint Mark sums up what is called the temptation of Christ. Notice the telling phrase “drove him out.” The Greek original has the nuance of “drove him away.” Away from where? From the Jordan River where he has been baptizing with acclaim, and where he is identified as the beloved of God when John baptizes him. Why? Because he has first to prepare interiorly, lest preaching to others he himself becomes a castaway. At all times Jesus is modeling for his followers.

Some translators insist on “wilderness” rather than “desert.” Our imagery of a sandy stretch does not correspond to the barren hills of the Judean desert. There is a cliff-side monastery west of Jericho that tradition, as a help to imagination and devotion, has singled out as the place of the temptation. As to “wild beasts,” some of them were roving in the time of Jesus, but the phrase can just as well refer to the untamed instincts and bad influences with which every nascent apostle will be at war.

A deserted or secluded place takes us away from the busyness of action and our habitual world. It enlists the benefit of silence so that we may listen for God. Jesus, in his prayer, focused intently on his *Abba*, or “dear Daddy.” This time apart was a high tide of intimacy. A spiteful enemy, of course, lay in wait for him, but the ministry of angels, a conduit from God, meanwhile buoyed him up, as it will any of us.



Jesus is modeling for his followers.

Lent and Easter is no season for standing still. Our task during Lent is to accompany Jesus, and our task at Easter is to let the risen Christ accompany us. We begin with Jesus at the Jordan, follow as he is driven into the desert, walk with him as he lives his public life, and pray as he lives through Holy Week and dies to save us on Good Friday. Then after three days the landscape transforms completely, as it did for the disciples exiting Jerusalem, and the risen Lord is with us.

DAYbreaks offers daily Scripture passages and reflections designed to open and deepen our relationship with God, and help prepare us for Christ's death and resurrection. Father Torrens provides insight to help us focus on the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior.

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