

**On Holy Ground**  
**First Sunday in Lent**  
**Eastern Point Retreat House**

Many years ago, when I was living in Harrisburg, PA, God was asking me to make a considerable change in my life. As a result, I experienced many dark days. Even amid my ministry I didn't "feel" God within me. At the end of that academic year, our school had a free day at Hershey Park. While at the park, I meandered to the zoo. As I looked around, I noticed a small building that housed all the nocturnal desert animals. When I opened the door, all I saw were glass compartments that held desert cactus and other similar plants—no animals. When the guide turned out the lights, I was amazed that we could see the varied and beautiful animals that inhabit the desert but are visible to the human eye only in the dark. Their physical characteristics blend in with the environment in daylight. These animals were created to be in their best form at night.

I connected my dark days with these nocturnal animals. I allowed myself to be open to God speaking to me in my heart. I then discovered potential, inner beauty, and

security within my own darkness. God had come through in a way I had least expected!

When we deepen our love for God, we may experience these dark times in our lives—like the desert animals during the day. However, we will also discover our own potential for growth through darkness. We will trust in abandonment to God and discover our talent, inner beauty, and security within our insecurity.

We pray Psalm 91 today: (translation by Nan Merrill)

“Because you cleave to Me in love,  
I will deliver you;  
I will protect you who call upon my Name.  
When you call to Me, I will answer you;  
I will be with you in times of trouble,  
I will rescue you and reverence your life.  
All through the years will I dwell in your heart,  
as loving Companion Presence forever.

In today’s readings, the author of Deuteronomy explains how God saved all of us as one—no matter our nation, race, or language. Paul then emphasizes that our belief in Jesus invites us to convert our faith into action. We are all aware of what is happening to our brothers and sisters in the Ukraine, in Gaza, in the Sudan and other places around the world. Our prayerful support will help strengthen them. Luke elaborates on the importance of Jesus living in the

desert for forty days. As Christians, our lives, our focus is on imitating how Jesus lived in relationship to his Father and also to the people around him. We may not actually live in a desert; but since we want to imitate Jesus in all that Deuteronomy and Paul instruct, let us also take time to peer into our own desert experience.

A desert, especially in the mid-East, is a wilderness. We can extend that definition by saying that a desert is a place of solitude. Many use the term “desert” to describe dry feelings, lack of excitement, an dull place. So, why are we invited into the desert during Lent, as Jesus in today’s gospel? Luke tells us that Jesus “filled with the Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the desert.” Could it be that Jesus’ longed to hear again the words, “You are my beloved Son?” In the quiet of the wilderness, Jesus might hear the voice again, but instead he hears other voices. The voices of the tempter, tested Jesus’ hunger, his self-esteem, and finally Jesus’ relationship with his Father. In his poem, **Tempted or Tempered?** Robert VerEecke, SJ, draws us into Jesus’ experience.

*He steals away  
into the wilderness.*

*Desert’s allure*

*calls him from  
day to day  
dues and don'ts.  
He hopes to hear again  
the echo of Love's voice,  
when sky was rent,  
rending him speechless.  
Tender words, heard  
"You, the one and only."*



As we companion Jesus, let us ponder what the desert experience means to us in our lives.

Throughout our daily prayer with Scripture, we notice how God uses examples in nature, people's interactions, and God speaking directly to people. All of these are invitations to each one of us: invitations to deepen our love for ourselves, each other, and our God. Periodically, we need to take some "desert time"—alone time each day to listen with our hearts to God and to the movements within our hearts. Does this mean that we take the next plane to the Arizona Desert or travel to the deserts in Asia? Of course not. But what it does mean is for each of us to find some time in our daily schedule to sit with our God and listen.

The desert can be a very dry experience if we are consumed with social media and can't take a break from it. We can also be badgered by temptations like Jesus. We enter into the desert experience, so that we can understand and deepen our relationship with our God and then other people. At times we may find this prayer very dry and unexciting. Whenever we are cultivating our relationship with a spouse or a good friend, times are not always

exciting. We use these ordinary or even sad times to understand ourselves and our loved one. We know it takes time to deepen any relationship, whether it is with another human being or with God. Are we up to this task?

Sometimes (or often) we are invited into emotional darkness in our love relationship with God. Many of the saints—especially Teresa of Avila, Teresa of Calcutta, John of the Cross—have written about their “dark nights”—their God experiences with little or no emotional responses. Those experiences are difficult. When Ignatius of Loyola responded to God’s call to a life of deep love, he spent nearly a year living, praying, and writing in a cave. His heart told him that in order to gather men to follow him, he needed to cultivate a deep understanding and a loving relationship with God.

So, let us take time to examine our relationship with our God who loves us so much. Here are some suggestions for your reflection

- **When I sit in the desert of my heart, what do I need to tame: my ego, my self-interest, my compulsions? What fears do I have of “change?”**

- **In my day-to-day life, what prevents me from letting go and trusting in God?**
- **Am I willing to turn off all social media and devote some time each day to empty myself as I sit with God?**
- **Imagine yourself with Jesus in the desert, what would you ask him about these moments of vulnerability. Speak to Jesus, “as one friend speaks to another.”**

We can take comfort from Jesus Christ in our own periods of darkness. “God does not violate our deepest needs but fulfills slowly in our life situations our most profound desires for reassurance, unconditional love, tenderness, and special regard.”—St. John of the Cross

Just as God never left Jesus “alone” in the desert, so God never leaves us alone.

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