

Ask Fr. James

How is Lent a Journey in the desert

Liturgically and scripturally the theme of the journey is central to Lent. The Journey of Abraham and Isaac to the place where God was going to bless them and the Journey of the Israelites through the desert to the Promised Land is what we are called to attempt during Lent. The idea of the Israelites leaving the painful experiences of Egypt behind them, spending time struggling in the desert and finally arriving at the Promised Land is analogous to the Christian's journey with Jesus through tribulations until arrival at the Resurrection.

The Lenten journey invites us to detach ourselves from the habits and comforts that protect and sustain our status quo and to step out into a disorienting space like Jesus did after his baptism when he went into the desert for 40 days. Lent is being with Jesus in the desert. The desert is not a physical location but a spiritual state - an inner state where we come to have an experience of God. That no matter what pains and tribulations we go through, God has a plan to bring us to victory. God's plan is to lead us to the Promised Land.

Wandering in the desert was the single most formative experience for the Children of Israel. They wandered for forty years in the desert through long and crucial road to the Promised Land. Also, we too journey in the desert. This is why the singing of "Alleluia" is suspended during Lent until we emerge singing Alleluia again on Easter Vigil when Christ our Passover is risen from the dead. The dynamic concepts of journey, movement, and growth reminds us of the text from Hebrews; "By faith [Moses] left Egypt, because he had his eyes fixed on God's reward" (Hebrews 11:27). The journey is one to be undertaken seriously, yet it is a joyful walk. A journey from death to life like Jesus.

Sometimes, our journey through life involves moments of intense exertion, physical or emotional pains and stress but we must not lose the focus of getting to the Promised Land. Our trust in God leading us to the Promised Land is like knowing that the storm does not hurt the sky. The first question for the Children of Israel on entering the desert is whether they can survive there. They express this fear in terms of doubts about food and water. The Exodus story tells how, after the people enter the desert, they were concerned with water, with food, and finally with the desire for meat.

The Lenten journey invites us to step out into a disorienting space. Instead of being like the Exodus pilgrims, to be like Jesus' 40 days in the desert. Jesus invites us into this liminal space, a space he explored to its very limits. We too need bread for the journey and so we must be attentive to his presence all through the journey lest we risk not benefitting from the manna.

The Lenten observances and abstinences are intended to bring us to this desert place from where we can emerge, refreshed, singing Alleluia again. St. Benedict says; "It is this desire and longing for Easter that motivates us to make our Lenten journey in the joy of the Holy Spirit" (RB 49.6). Thus, our lifestyles all through this season is to have a Lenten quality; prayer, love and practising charity or good works. In these ways, we are able to await Holy Easter with all the joy of spiritual desire and longings for eternal life with the spirit. Therefore, we are to always remember that Easter is the goal of our Lenten journey.

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he will answer them in our Sunday Bulletins.