



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

First Sunday of Lent, March 13th, 2011

Rev. Sharon Gracen

Moving to California gave me an important desert experience. As Max the Church dog and I drove from Ithaca, New York to Laguna Niguel, CA seven years ago, I got a real taste of the wondrous variety to be found in this country. There was the Mighty Mississippi, the green rolling hills of Missouri, the tall grass prairies of Kansas, the glorious mountains and passes of the Rockies in Colorado and then the deserts of Utah, Nevada and Eastern California. The desert in Utah was spectacularly beautiful. It was easy to see why people speak of desert as painted; the colors certainly seemed to have been applied by an artists' brush.

As I drove south on Rt. 15, marveling at the scenery, it began to rain. I took that rain in the desert as a hopeful sign for this new adventure I was on. But there were other signs along the desert highway that also caught my eye. There was the one that tells you how to drive in a sandstorm. I have to admit that I'd never considered that before – that one might actually need such a strategy. It was probably around then that I started to feel tiny, in my tiny car, crossing that immense, pretty empty space. I checked my gas gage, my cell phone battery and made it a point to stay in close proximity with other cars. The desert is beautiful indeed, but it can be a scary place!

That drive through the Utah desert was not my first time in the desert – that had actually been in the same desert that we read about today – the Judean wilderness. It is an awe inspiring place, forbidding and dire. I was in Israel with a group from my seminary. We traveled in the comfort of an air conditioned bus as we went from the Mount of Masada to the Dead Sea and the caves of Qumran, where the scrolls were found. It's nearly impossible to avoid the feeling of thirst in that desert – even if you have enough water, you can't seem to drink it fast enough. For us, the idea of Jesus' forty days in this desert became heroic, from a pure survival standpoint. More than once, we stood looking at the bleak barren hills murmuring "lead us not into

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temptation..." The desert is a kind of thin place, but not the type that fills you with peace and love, at least not at first.

Since the time of Jesus and the early church, the desert has called to those seeking a deeper understanding of God and Christ. Desert communities and hermits have found challenge and growth in the dry solitude of this harsh thin place. St Anthony is the figure most identified with the idea of a desert monastery. He responded to a sermon on the teaching in the Gospel that says to sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor as a way of following Christ. He would not be the last one to do that. Many followed him across the sand and eventually were a strong influence on the development of the Christian faith.

Desert spirituality is a particular strand of Christian ideology. Throughout Lent, we will be hearing voices from the desert, voices of those who have gone seeking the solitude and discovery of pure dependence on God. The readings that have been selected are from a book called *The Desert: An Anthology for Lent*. John Moses (seriously, that's his name!) is the compiler and commentator of this volume. He says that any concerted reading of desert spirituality will reveal five major themes; solitude, testing, self-emptying, encounter and transformation. That sounds like a good Lenten journey to me. Let us begin with solitude.

As I drove through the Utah desert, I was on my way to a new life – Vicar at Faith Episcopal Church in Laguna Niguel. There was a serendipitous aspect to this call – I would be living five miles from my daughter, Melanie, whom I had seen very little during my years in Paris. There was much to look forward to. But I had other work to do as well. I had come back from Paris newly divorced and there was a lot of me that was in shambles. I was looking forward to living alone, because I knew that there was work to do on my heart and my soul. Coming through the desert felt like a good start. My plans took a bit of a hit when after less than a month in my new place Melanie called one day and said, "Mom, can I move in with you?" The words that came out of my mouth were, "Of course, Honey, isn't it good that there's plenty of room here!"



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But inside my head was, “But, this is supposed to be my time alone to figure things out!” I knew I needed the solitude, but it would have to wait. Not that the delay upset me – I had eight wonderful months with Melanie and then she went off to grad school. We were both better for it, but it was time for me to enter the desert.

John Moses says that “the call to enter the desert is the call to love God, *absolutely*.” When it was time for me to enter the desert, I don’t think I realized that it was a call to love God, but as time went on, I began to understand. I didn’t have St. Anthony’s rules for life in the desert to guide me, so I just went where I was led – mostly into silence and intentional loneliness—yes, *intentional* loneliness, what a concept.

I’d actually spent very little time alone in my life and as a result, I discovered that I really wasn’t sure who I was if I wasn’t being someone’s daughter, sister, mother, or wife. I dove into the new experience, buying food for one, eating it alone, taking walks with Max to the beach and watching everyone else’s togetherness. As I did all of these things, mostly in silence, I began to notice my thoughts and reactions. But most importantly, I experienced the loneliness, and I embraced it. All of the things that I was learning about myself would not have been possible without the desert-like solitude, without the difficulty that flowed out of feeling lonely. And what I discovered was that the more I learned about myself, the more was available to love God. John Moses was right, the desert of intentional loneliness turned into my call to love God.

The point here is not that everyone should experience the desert of loneliness so as to find and love God. But all of us are presented with our respective opportunities to enter the desert, in order that we might come to love God more. But make no mistake, as beautiful as the desert—and even solitude may be from time to time—your experience of the desert is not supposed to be easy or ordinary. Entering the desert can seem overwhelmingly difficult and undesirable at first, and sometimes we even remain there well past the time when we might choose to leave, but the reward is worth it—for by entering the desert we are stripped of our guards and brought into greater awareness of who we are, so that we might love God more.



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For this first Sunday in Lent, though, let us focus on the practice of solitude that comes with our journey into the desert. This does not mean we forsake the world and run away to a monastic life far from the din of civilization. The church year gives us Lent as our time for retreat into solitude. We can go to work in the morning and still make time for the solitude and quiet. But like my choice to embrace intentional loneliness, we do need to consciously create some solitude in our lives. How many of you find yourself filling up the silence with background noise – from the radio, television, I-Pod or computer? Can you imagine dedicating specific time to silence? Silence is a rare commodity in our times. I notice it the most around Christmas, when you can't go anywhere without being assaulted by commercialized sounds of seasonal joy. At least in this season, you aren't likely to hear Shania Twain belting out some great Lenten oldie!

This lent, I urge you to be intentional about your solitude, to turn off some of the noises that surround you, don't be afraid of who you will meet inside of yourselves. The desert, for all of its foreboding, invites you into a part of your own journey for which you have been prepared by Jesus, who doesn't expect us to do anything that he has not already done for us.