



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

Transformed by the Desert

The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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Our time in the desert of Lent is nearly done. Next week we turn from our own journey to walk with Jesus through the hard days of Holy Week. But we do so having been transformed by our experience in the wilderness and by those we have met along the way. We have moved from solitude to testing, encounter, and transformation. We have met Nicodemus, who learned what it means to die to old ideas and eventually be born anew—into awareness of a different relationship with God. We met the woman who brought a water jar and all of her baggage to the well and was transformed from outcast to beloved, her thirst quenched by the living water of Jesus' love. And then we met the man born blind, who was given his sight, so that he could see the wonder of all creation and a vision of what God's kingdom might become. All of them were transformed from diminished expressions of who they were meant to be, into new states of spiritual awareness and understanding.

It is fitting that on this last Sunday of Lent, we hear the story of Lazarus – Lazarus friend of Jesus, raised from the dead and given the gift of life begun anew. Interestingly, the stories of most characters in the Bible are told in such a way that we get very little background information about them, and Lazarus is no exception. He appears only in the Gospel of John, and his significance seems to be limited to being raised from the dead. We know that he is the brother of Mary and Martha and that Jesus loved him, so they obviously have some history together. We also learn in the next chapter that a plot to kill Lazarus develops because he is living proof of Jesus' power. That's it. Don't you wish that there was a little bit more, at least some feedback about what he experienced? Surely, he must have had some awareness of having come back from "some place", like the many descriptions provided from those who have near death experiences? Surely, he must have emerged a "new man", with a totally different perspective on life.

Well, unfortunately, we are not given any of these insights, so let's consider for a moment how Lazarus might have approached the rest of his life? He had his own desert experience. He was sick before he died, and that brings its own kind of solitude and testing. And then there was the emptying that takes place in the process of dying, perhaps even made more poignant when his friend Jesus did not arrive in time. We do not know what happened to him between death and Jesus' call to "come out!" But surely he was different. No doubt he never again took for granted the bright morning sun, or the taste of his favorite food, or the sweet smell of the spring air. He probably found the company of his friends more comforting. But my guess is that something changed inside him too. For one thing, I bet he became more fearless.

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It's probably hard to scare someone who has experienced with such intimacy the power of Christ's love, which is what raised Lazarus to new life. The love that flowed through Jesus is what called Lazarus back, it is that love that keeps calling us back into relationship with God.

Ultimately, love is the message of the desert. Love is the invitation to the solitude and trial, the inspiration to let go of all that holds us back. Love is as persistent as the tide, flowing in and out, wearing down our rough edges. The transformation that has been calling us during Lent doesn't happen all at once. It isn't an aha! moment, but one of growth and incremental progress. The journey through the desert slowly brings us through to where we begin to understand, to see, and to live.

I want to tell you that this has probably been the best—in other words, the most meaningful—Lent of my life. Working on my Lenten sermons, following the thread of a desert journey, as well as preparing and leading the Spiritual Journey conversations for the Lenten series has taught me much. At first, I felt as though I had been somewhat let down by my religious upbringing. I've been a practicing Episcopalian for most of my life and in all the churches I had belonged to prior to entering the priesthood, I don't recall encountering much mention of, let alone emphasis on, the concept of growing in spiritual maturity. It seemed like Lent was always approached with a formulaic "give something up and pray for your sins to be forgiven." If I've heard the phrase "forgiveness of our sins" once, I've heard it a million times, and looking back on it, I'm not sure that it had any meaning for me. What I needed was someone to help me think about spiritual growth and to empower me with the sense that I could choose to learn to be more Christ-like, more spiritually mature. I am truly grateful to the Holy Spirit for guiding me into this new experience of Lent, which has clarified for me why the church is so important, as we embark on our respective spiritual journeys. We need each other's support and love to help us engage our journey through the desert and emerge as new, more spiritually aware, mature children of God. We need the constant reminder of God's love, and the church should be where we find that.

What has made this such a rewarding Lent for me is that I see how my personal experience is connected to my call here. I've been asking lots of people around here what they think spiritual maturity is or might look like, and I have gotten a number of puzzled looks, so I am guessing that the subject has not been engaged here much more than it was all the churches I had been in before.

At the Lenten Series on Wednesday night, we started to talk about the notion of spiritual maturity and even tried to define it. It was really a good conversation. We talked about some qualities that might indicate spiritual maturity, such as the ability to forgive and to focus more on the present than on events that can't be changed in the past or about something in the future that hasn't happened yet. Spiritual maturity makes distinctions – one plans and prepares for the future but isn't consumed with fear or worry about the



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outcome. One can feel righteous anger at injustice or meanness while not dwelling in the anger. It sounds like the beginning of the Serenity Prayer, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." There is a level of awareness about thoughts and what thoughts one chooses to have.

A spiritually mature person may experience fear as a legitimate response to a threat, like a charging rhinoceros or a difficult diagnosis, but doesn't view the world and life as perpetually threatening. A spiritually mature person doesn't try to control others or let him or herself be controlled. This is all found in the teachings of Jesus. It's there for us to eat and drink and be fed.

For the church, the gathered community, there is also reason to understand institutional spiritual maturity. What does a spiritually mature congregation look like? I'd say that it's one in which people listen to each other, share their thoughts honestly and with authenticity. It's a congregation that isn't afraid to talk about challenging subjects and doesn't need everyone to be in perfect agreement. *It makes distinctions between the political aspects of ideas and the spiritual ways of considering them.* Spiritually healthy congregations don't have lots of conflicts that simmer and create anxiety. Such congregations create the means for members to grow in grace and goodness.

The Lenten formula has been simple in its design, go into the desert, begin with solitude and silence, know that you will be tested, learn to let go and empty yourself out, let God fill you up with light, love, and understanding, then re-enter life transformed. I pray that you have found something of value in the season and are prepared to enter into Christ's journey from Palm Sunday "hosannas" to Easter "alleluias" with conviction, gratitude and hope. Amen

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