Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Hassan Pasha)



by Gabrielle Bibeau

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

February 26, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

> "*I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.*"
>
> —*Hosea 2:16*

As someone who grew up in the heart of the Midwest, my idea of wilderness was always tall trees, acres upon acres of corn fields, and flatland that stretches to the horizon. So I was not at all prepared for a new type of wilderness that greeted me when — in preparation for my canonical novitiate year — I began a weeklong retreat in the Texas Hill Country outside of San Antonio.

I had visited San Antonio before, and I had even been to the retreat center where I was staying, but nothing could have prepared me for the brutal reality of South Texas in August. The intensity of the noonday sun at that time of year is almost unbearable, and while 106 degrees in the shade was a new experience for me, I personally found that I did not enjoy it.

Despite the heat, or perhaps *because* of it, I received so many blessings during that retreat. For one thing, I left with a newfound appreciation for the desert. Now, we can split hairs here — I realize that the Texas Hill Country isn't technically a desert, but for this Midwestern woman, it is as much a desert as anything else.

After being immersed in this wilderness for several days, I began to appreciate the unique beauty of my surroundings. I could better understand why Jesus, John the Baptist, Moses, Anthony of Egypt, Benedict, and so many other holy men and women have gone to the desert to commune with God.

The desert, in all its barrenness, heat and aridity, confronts us with our human vulnerabilities. Without shelter, water and food, we are completely exposed, opening ourselves to sunburn, dehydration and death.

I found that facing my vulnerability and weakness led me to gratitude. Every drop of cold water that touched my lips that week brought with it a prayer of thanksgiving; each scrawny mesquite tree, no matter how little shade it gave compared to the thick canopies of the oaks and maples of my home, was such a welcome sight, it felt like God had put it there *just for me.*

Each Lent since that retreat, I visit this desert place in my imagination when I pray. I imagine the heat and the emptiness and the silence. I imagine that Jesus is there, too, spending his 40 days in the desert with me. I imagine us delighting in the wild beasts we encounter — armadillos, deer, wild boar, snakes, scorpions — while we are tended to by angels. I imagine us lying on our backs in the moonlight, gazing at the stars with wonder.

Advertisement

I imagine us facing our temptations together, learning that we confront our own darkness when there is nothing else to distract us. This is why when Satan eventually appears, he looks exactly like us, taking advantage of the fact that it's often our own false images of ourselves that encumber our relationship with God.

This has been my prayer every Lent since that retreat, accompanied by the usual almsgiving and fasting. I think it's a very wise aspect of our Christian tradition (and of most faith traditions, for that matter) to insist that our spiritual practices have a bodily component. In the case of fasting, depriving ourselves of something we want draws attention to our deepest desire, which is union with God.

Fasting is, for me, a way to enter into the desert. Making some small sacrifice heightens my awareness of dependence on God. Fasting reminds me of my own vulnerability and weakness, which is an awareness that comes so naturally in the harshness of the desert.

Most importantly, praying with Jesus in the desert is how I try to turn my whole self towards God, for Lent is about placing God, not ourselves, at the center. These 40 days are not about shame for how we may be failing at our Lenten promises or pride for our fidelity to our promises, for both shame and pride make Lent be about *ourselves,* not about God.

Lent demands that we strip away what prevents us from placing God at the center so we can turn to God with our whole selves, ready and attentive to remain with God when Easter comes. And I think *that* is what the desert has made me and so many others across the centuries understand.

This story appears in the **Lent** feature series. View the full series.