

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP

Our 'bridge' in the desert

A trek into the desert wilderness is no simple matter. There are hazards, privations and loneliness; uncertainties, fickle weather, wild animals and the frightening prospect that overnight the wind could alter the landscape beyond recognition. Because such perils lurk in the wilderness, there are rules for those who dare set foot there, rules to be followed with the utmost seriousness: Do not go it alone; take water, and lots of it; carry a compass; and wear clothes that will accommodate the changing climate.

Those who follow the rules and those who don't soon discover that the wilderness is no place for joking around, that the rumors of danger are not rumors at all but the voice of experience. It is easy to lose one's way in the wilderness.

After his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert, where after fasting for 40 days and nights he was tempted by the devil.

Mirage and temptation

In "Invitation to the Gospels," Father Donald Senior writes: "The desert held many memories for the Israelites. For Moses and their ancestors it had been a sandy bridge of rescue from the slavery of Egypt to the possibilities of freedom in a new land.



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But that ominous desert landscape also held memories Israel might like to forget: constant murmuring against Moses and the God he obeyed; a willingness to abandon the march and return to Egypt; despair and infidelity which led to the idolatry of a calf of gold."

The desert wilderness is that place, literally and figuratively, where what is essential (food, clothing, shelter) is made abundantly clear. Everything about life is reduced to its most basic needs: How will I live? What will I eat? For that very reason the wilderness is also a place of mirage and temptation, where we fumble about for phantom replacements for the essential. One's imagination runs wild in the wilderness, and there is no lack of forgeries posing as the real thing.

From a spiritual perspective, the wilderness is that place we enter to be reminded of the One who is truly essential in our lives, where we stand before God with no false veneer, makeup, cologne, designer labels or pretense. It is that place where we confront the challenges of daily life not as insurmountable problems but as stepping stones to growth. It is that place where temptation seems to hover ominously over our heads in mirages of fakes and forgeries — but where mirages collapse in the light of God's strength. It is that place where we confront ourselves with no other support than God.

The Israelites knew these things first-hand. But as Father Senior writes, they also knew that the desert was a "sandy bridge of rescue" which led to freedom. They had Moses' word that God was leading them into the desert in order to meet him, experience his unfailing love and be taken to the land of promise.

Cling to me

God said constantly to them, in so many words: "Run from fakes and forgeries. Do not be fooled into believing there is anything in this world that can give you life. I alone give life, and I give it to you fully. I alone set you free. Cling to me and I will care for you. Trust in me and you will find freedom."

So it was that Jesus spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness. Harassed and tempted by Satan's scams, he proved faithful to his Father and to his mission for our sakes. He showed how

to prepare for the perils of the desert wilderness, for he unrelentingly clung to his Father, and to him alone. His Father was all the food, clothing, shelter, compass and companion he needed.

And so it is for us during the 40 days of voluntary wilderness living this Lent. Our penance and fasting take us to the desert, where, stripped of customary comforts and excess, we learn to rely on God alone. In prayer he proves a faithful companion and guide who helps us see our perils and ourselves in clear relief.

Jesus the bridge

It is Jesus who shows the way by exposing the machinations of the devil as slick fakery. It is Jesus who shows how to be patient and obedient when the perils lurking in our personal wilderness seem overwhelming. It is Jesus who is the bridge, not made of sand but of love, that takes us safely to freedom.

Not all our forays into the wilderness are voluntary, and most of them do not wait for Lent to unsettle or frighten us. There is the desert of illness, of joblessness, of anxiety, of conflict and of doubt; the wilderness of moving to a new town and a new job, or grieving the loss of a spouse or a child, or getting back on one's feet after bewildering setbacks.

Lent reminds us that though any wilderness can shake us to our bones, it can also reveal the bridge, the comfort, the rock, the strength and the freedom who is Jesus.