

The season of Lent—those forty days *before* Easter—is about far more than trying not to say “alleluia.” It is a time in which we are invited to prepare for the new life that Easter offers us, a time to get ready by taking a spiritual inventory of our lives and to make whatever amends and course corrections will get us to turn (and re-turn) to God.

But Lent also gives us a vital metaphor: we journey into the *wilderness*—into the desert—for forty days. Why? Because the Gospels tell us that after his Baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus went out into the Judean wilderness to be tempted by Satan for forty days. And why did he do that? Because his own people, *God’s* own people, had spent forty years in the Sinai Desert as they journeyed from slavery to freedom. This metaphor connects us with important aspects of the spiritual life, and gives us a window through which to see our own faith journeys, because sometimes we may find ourselves in the desert. Sometimes life is a struggle. Sometimes we find ourselves in the midst of trials and tribulations, sorting through loss and grief.

This is simply a part of life’s journey. But Lent gives us a way to be assured that when we do find ourselves in such places (perhaps literally but more often metaphorically) that we can know that we are not (as it may at first seem) in a godforsaken place. There are dry and uncharted aspects of the journey, to be sure. But even there, God’s blessings and miracles abound. Even there, angels minister to us. Even there, there is manna and water, one day at a time. Even there, God helps us to find the courage and strength to keep putting one foot in front of the other, as we continue to make our way toward the Promised Land. Ultimately, as we all remembered on April 24, Lent leads us to the empty tomb, where on Easter morning we dared to make our song: *alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*

These past forty days or so since then have been a time in which we have been reflecting on the presence of the Risen Christ in our lives. A month or so ago when I asked Robin Carlo to preach on Good Shepherd Sunday, she asked me if I had a theme in mind for Easter. I sarcastically responded, yes: resurrection. I know that Robin was a bit disconcerted when the Bishop “stole” her sermon by preaching at confirmation about finding a community where we can wrestle with Scripture and ask the difficult questions and experience the risen Christ calling us to mission—basically what she was planning to say in speaking to us the following week about EfM. But in fact, *that is the theme*: this Easter life we share in Christ’s name binds us together in community, where we experience the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread, and indeed whenever two or three are gathered together in His name. Our journeys include those moments when our eyes are opened and we experience Christ as alive, as fully present, and then we are sent out to do the work God gives us to do. All you can do in such moments is to sing “alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”

I don’t know whether or not, over the long haul, these times in the desert and these times of abundant blessing are more or less evenly divided. But over time, it does seem to me that this way of marking liturgical time is helpful to our real lives—forty days in the desert and forty days feasting and celebrating the paschal feast feels about right.

*But of course there are not just forty days of Easter, but fifty.* Forty days into the Easter season, however, this past Thursday we marked the Feast of the Ascension. It’s still Eastertide, but these last ten days of Easter represent a shift. The last ten days are a bit different from the first forty. As we heard, Jesus goes out to Bethany to say goodbye to the disciples, and then he ascends to the right hand of the Father. Don’t get too stuck on the ancient world’s three-tiered cosmos: the point is that

the Risen Christ is no longer so obviously among the disciples. Next weekend we'll celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, on the fiftieth day, the Feast of Pentecost. Don't forget to wear red!

So how might we describe these last ten days of the Easter season, this time between Ascension and Pentecost? *I want to suggest that it is a time of waiting.* It is about letting go of Jesus, even as we pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Our collect today suggests some level of anxiety, because an uncertain future always brings with it some anxiety. And so we implored God: "*Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit, to strengthen us, and to exalt us...*" As we heard in today's epistle reading from First Peter, we are invited to "cast all [our] anxiety on [God], because he cares for [us]."

Now I don't think that Jesus has a calendar in hand, ticking off the days until forty, when he goes out to ascend to heaven—until, ten days later the Holy Spirit arrives right on time. Liturgical calendars tell a lie, in order to tell a deeper spiritual truth. *That deeper spiritual truth is that every day of our lives does not feel like either Lent or Easter. There are also these "in-between" times.* And this Sunday after the Ascension, before Pentecost, is one of those times. Christ has ascended, but the Holy Spirit hasn't yet shone up. And so we wait. And we pray: *Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit.*

I found myself, in pondering this prayer during the past week, and thinking about some of the waiting times in my own life. Perhaps you will identify with some of them:

- ◆ Do you remember waiting for the first day of school—for kindergarten—with a mixture of hope and fear? More appropriately at this time of the year, can you remember counting off the days until the last day of school, waiting for summer vacation to begin and longing for lazy summer days of wiffle-ball and sand castles and long bike rides and kick-the-can?
- ◆ I remember waiting, after graduating from Wallenpaupack Area High School thirty years ago, with that same mixture of hope and fear I felt in elementary school as I thought about moving from a small town to attend college in a big city: saying goodbyes to friends I'd known my whole life and wondering what my life would be like apart from the life I'd known forever, waiting for that next chapter to begin and wondering, and trying to let God carry my anxiety.
- ◆ I can remember waiting for my wedding day, and waiting for each of my two kids to be born—counting the days. I remember waiting to hear about each job I've held—especially this one, as Hathy and I waited for the search committee to decide, to make a decision, even if it was no; praying it would be yes.
- ◆ I have been at enough bedsides to know that there is also another kind of waiting—waiting for death. I pray that like our patron, Francis, that when death comes for me it will come like a sister or brother, like a friend who is not to be feared.

There are times of waiting in every season of our lives. I imagine these last ten days of Eastertide as something like some of these other "waiting times:" a time of expectation; a time filled with no small amount of anxiety and fear about what comes next. *Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you.*

We worry, or at least I do, through transitions that life will not go on—that somehow we will never be comforted. Change can be scary, and it brings with it a sense of loss and a sense of anticipation. But there is also that experience of powerlessness, the kind that makes us realize we have no choice but to “let go, and let God.”

Notice what the disciples do in our reading from Acts after Jesus leaves at Bethany: they went back to Jerusalem, to the room upstairs: Peter and James and John and Andrew and Philip and Thomas and Bartholomew and Matthew and James and Simon and Judas and some certain women. (Luke doesn't seem to remember all of their names, or maybe he doesn't think their names are important enough to list; except of course Mary, the Mother of Jesus.) They devoted themselves, constantly, to prayer. They prayed and they waited.

We can do that; we need to do that in times of waiting, in times of transition, in times when it is unclear what the future will bring. The liturgical calendar is not an end in itself, of course. It's a guide that helps us to reflect on the journey of faith. It helps us to reflect on how God is at work in our lives and the life of the Church and the life of this world. These last ten days of the Easter season—this time between Ascension Day and the Spirit's arrival on Pentecost—is a time for prayerful waiting.

“*Wait for the Lord,*” the Psalmist teaches us to pray. “...*be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord.*” (Psalm 27:14) And again:

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;  
my soul waits for the Lord  
More than those who watch for the morning,  
More than those who watch for the morning. (Psalm 130:5-6)

We try to wait with wide-open eyes and with ears that hear. We wait for God to send that Spirit of Comfort, the Counselor, the One who will lead us through all seasons of change toward deeper truths and new insights: that Spirit who gives us strength and courage for facing whatever challenges may come our way. In order to embrace the new we have to learn to let go of the old. We have to navigate our way to a new “normal.” By God's grace, in part what times of waiting can teach us is that God is always about doing new things. And that God will never leave us comfortless. What we pray for, as we mature in faith, is not that everything will stay the same, but rather, that our times of waiting will lead us to new places and to new insights and new possibilities. Those, I think, are gifts the Holy Spirit brings—whether she comes like a mighty wind or as a gentle breath.

*Come, Holy Spirit...breathe on us, breath of God...and fill us with life anew.*  
Do not leave us comfortless. Come and empower us for the work of ministry. Come and renew us, and renew the face of the earth. In the meantime, help us to wait: sometimes expectantly and patiently, sometimes pacing back and forth with our blood pressure rising. But always trying, with God's help, to more and more put our trust in You, the One who has created us from the earth, in You, the One who has redeemed us through Jesus Christ, in Your, the One who sustains us through Her very own breath. Amen.