

HOW TO FAIL AT LENT

And so Lent begins. Another Lent full of dreams of transformation. Or maybe just survival.

I wonder at the people who get excited about Lent. Lent has been rebranded in recent years. Parish programs promise a “Lent you will love” or the “Best Lent Ever!”

Yes, Lent is good. Fruitful. Necessary. Even beautiful. But I find every year that it is also grueling. It is following Our Lord into the desert for 40 days. For 40 days I come face-to-face with my faults, lack of charity, all the thin spots of my personality that I have so conveniently filled in with the noise or temporary pleasures of the world. Rilke tells us that it is not our acceptance of sensual pleasures that is bad, rather *“the bad thing is that most people misuse and squander this experience and apply it as stimulant at the tired spots of their lives and as a distraction.”*



My footprints in the Gobi Desert

Lent is the hardest work we do all year.

Let's be honest, the external things are not always that difficult. It's not so much work to avoid meat or TV or coffee or smoking or sex or whatever it is. Yes, it may present a challenge, but in reality, we can probably do it quite easily. The hard work comes when we strip away those things we have used to fill in the cracks of our lives. Then we are left with the deep interior work of conversion. Finding out why we do what we do and if we are really willing to follow the better path laid out by the Holy Spirit. If we find that we don't like what we see without the fillers, there is always the temptation to turn back and reach for the old familiar things that numb our senses and obscure our views.

And so what do we do? We make promises. We pledge to give up, offer up, give away, forgive, let go, take up.

And then we fail.

At least I do.



Lent is a lesson in failure.

“Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown by God is altogether too much privacy.” (Thomas Merton)

To really do Lent right you have to face head-on your true self, stripped of illusions of premature sainthood or at the very least the notion that you are not as bad as some others.

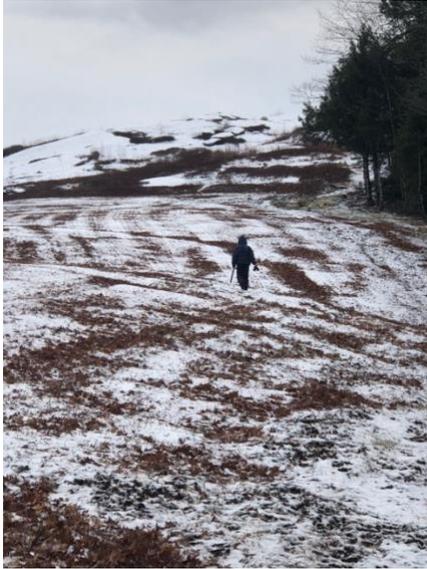
So, there I sit in the desert, facing myself without some of the illusions. (Let’s be honest, some illusions remain because I perhaps lack the courage necessary to take it all on.) And maybe the same angels that came to minister to Jesus when he was in the desert (Matthew 4:11) come to minister to me. Maybe they will whisper words of comfort. Maybe they will carry me to the Confessional or fetch me some water or help me to believe that I don’t need stones turned to bread. Maybe they will gently point out the fact that I am not the only one in the desert failing at Lent. There are other pilgrims who are also doing deep interior work with Jesus. Seeing other people on their own Lenten journeys and doing the hard work somehow helps me to feel more empathy for myself and for them.

“What is my new desert? It is Compassion.... He sits in the ruins of my heart and preaches his gospel to the poor.” (Thomas Merton)

All the ruins of my heart: the promises I made to myself but didn’t keep, my expectations of others that were not even remotely realistic, all the hopes deferred that make my heart sick.

Jesus sits there, preaching his gospel.

Failing at Lent is really what makes me stand naked in the truth of the Gospel. It is failing at Lent that makes me ready to receive grace because I have finally laid down my three-step-plan to easy transformations. It is failing at Lent that causes me to dare to believe that in my weakness, He is strong.



I know I can't be the only one whose heart doesn't leap in joyful anticipation at the prospect of a long, cold Lent. It's a little less like party planning and more like a colonoscopy prep.

Yet, that One, sitting there in my ruins. I love Him. His Gospel is for me. And He is in no hurry to leave my ruins until He has made all things new. I trust Him.