

Water in the Desert

Shrove Tuesday is upon us, marking a break in this trackless time of pandemic disruption. Today we all become the Emperor Constantine, who waited until the last moment before death for baptism, because, well, you know, one might

sin again after baptism, and better to leave some room to maneuver. Or Augustine, who prayed, as recorded in his Confessions -- "Lord, make me chaste -- but not yet!" Lent begins tomorrow. We will join our Lord Jesus in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights (Sundays, being always Easter, are not counted), preparing our hearts for the coming Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. So, might as well eat up all the butter and sugar and beef -- don't drink all the whiskey; it will keep and you would expire -- live it up a little before the somber reminders of mortality that come tomorrow on Ash Wednesday.



Sometimes, a targeted fast during Lent is just the spiritual ticket -- a recognition of the abundance in our lives and a release of the things that distract us from communion with our God. At other times, it can feel contrived to do a traditional, very-limited Lenten fast- maybe refraining from one indulgence or another -- the Sonic Fried Fish Sandwich with Fries and a Soda Lenten Special, anyone? Would you like tots or onion rings with that? And THIS year, giving up hamburger meat, or even chocolate, feels like overkill when we've been fasting from all social life, from working around the conference table together, from WORSHIPING together. Fasting from the Eucharist -- for going on a year. I'm not sure we need to fast from Ghirardelli's, too. I don't know about you, but the starved parts of my soul just feel weary at the thought.

We've been in the desert for forty weeks, and then some. What I'm looking for is water. I know the Resurrection water is coming, but I'm thinking this Lent, instead of paring back, my soul needs to spend the time priming the pump. The pipes have gotten so dry, the well seems to have receded so deep, that connecting to the Living Water is going

to take adding something, instead of the usual need to subtract a few distractions.

Listening to the Lenten plans in several of our Regions -- notably in Fredericksburg, the Upper Tidewater, Potomac, and Culpeper -- I'm inspired to reconnect with a more disciplined, rhythmic way of prayer and dwelling in Scripture. Many of our congregations have rediscovered the great treasure of the Anglican/Episcopal Book of Common Prayer; that is, the habit of Morning, Noonday, Evening, and Bedtime (Compline) Prayers -- collectively called "the Daily Office" or just "the Office." Clergy were once required to "read the Office" daily; now it's encouraged, and many do, and more probably slip in and out of the habit. Even in monasteries (where the practice was formalized centuries ago), the Office has shrunk in modern times.

The set-apart time, Lent, is an especially good time to use the Office to mark our days.

Praying the Daily Office does several things. It grounds the day -- beginning, middle, end -- in prayer, framing our time in a way that's different from a Daytimer or TV schedule. It reconnects us to the ancient rhythms and words and songs of faith. It reminds us to pray, to connect with God, even when we don't think we have anything to say. It connects us with others praying in these rhythms -- all the Abrahamic faiths, really -- and very tightly to other Anglicans. And the readings take us through the Bible much more thoroughly than the Sunday lectionary, and in only two years.

So, I am recommitting to this full practice, at least for Lent, with most of the scripture reading in the morning to launch my day, with the brief reorientation of a quick noonday prayer, and with a peaceful Evening Prayer or Compline. I'm going to use the Office as my map and divining rod through the desert of Lent, leading me to the fountain of Life. I'll drop in on some congregations that are broadcasting the Office (there are MANY doing so -- check around your region!) And I'll put some serious mileage on my Daily Office Book, which collects the sets of prayers and all the readings in order ([here's a newer version](#)). The compilation is very handy, but not necessary -- I'm going to give you some simple (and free) steps to get you started.

How to begin. If you're an old hand at the Office, I hope you'll recommit with me. And if you are new to the idea, I'd recommend joining one of our congregations once a day, and/or using the very handy daily recorded service at Mission St. Clare in English -- or

Spanish. [Click on this link](#) to find a treasure trove of easy-to-use resources. They even have a shortened written Daily Devotions section if you're short on time. The recorded regular morning service, with readings, take less than fifteen minutes; Noonday about three minutes, and Evening Prayer about six minutes. The daily readings are collected there, too. Your Rector or Vicar may have other favorite sources; they'd be thrilled to their very toes if you asked them about it.

Where to Find It All in the Prayer Book. Of course, it's all laid out in the Book of Common Prayer. You can find it online at www.bcponline.org; just click on the Daily Office in the Index. Morning Prayer Rite I (p. 37) is the version older folks remember, in old-fashioned English and with a somewhat more penitential emphasis. Morning Prayer Rite II (p. 75) is the contemporary version. There's only one Noonday Prayer (p. 103). Evening Prayer comes in Rite I (p. 62) and Rite II (p. 115), and there's a single form of Compline (bedtime prayers) (p. 127). The one-pager Daily Devotions (p. 136-140) are good for families or when you're really in a hurry. The Daily Office Lectionary, which is the two-year schedule of readings that go along with the Daily Office, is located at page 934. We're currently in Year 1 (in the two-year cycle), and we begin the Lenten schedule tomorrow with Ash Wednesday (p. 951; middle of Week of Last Epiphany). If you're getting fancy and doing it all yourself from your prayer book, it helps to know that the schedule of Canticles is on page 144.

And yes, it counts if you use the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer, or one from Iona or the Order of St. Helena or another monastic order, or whatever other source you love. The point is to connect with the water of the River of Life, and to moisten the dusty pipes of our souls in the desert season.

Today -- go ahead and enjoy your pancakes and jambalaya, whether you plan to observe a traditional fast or not. Fat Tuesday comes but once a year, and tomorrow, as we remember that we are but dust and to dust we shall return, I hope you'll join me at the well, as we dip our buckets all the way down to the source of life, refreshing ourselves for the journey ahead.