

*A Spring*  
**IN THE**  
*Desert*

**REDISCOVERING THE WATER OF LIFE IN LENT**

**FRANK & VICTORIA LOGUE**

Photography by Frank & Victoria Logue

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**Forward  
Movement**

inspire disciples.empower evangelists.

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**FRANK & VICTORIA LOGUE**

**FORWARD MOVEMENT  
CINCINNATI, OHIO**



# Introduction

*O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you,  
as in a barren and dry land where there is no water.*

—Psalm 63:1

“Yes, I understand you are hikers, but have you ever backpacked in the desert?” The question was only a little self-serving on the part of the park ranger. We were standing in the Visitor’s Center of Arches National Park seeking an overnight permit to camp in an area beyond the park’s services. Our daughter, Griffin, then eight years old, was with us. If we got into trouble, the park staff would have to go looking for us. Even though the gift shop sold the guide *Backpacking in the 90s*, we were still from the East Coast. The ranger wanted us to understand: Backpacking can potentially be dangerous anywhere, but a trip into the desert can be lethal.

We answered his questions confidently enough to secure the permit. We enjoyed a late afternoon hike through Courthouse Wash under the towering Petrified Dunes, camped that night above the wash, then hiked back out the next morning. The overnight hike was worth the effort as Arches is a very busy tourist destination and was filled that summer day with bumper-to-bumper traffic. The backcountry permit offered us a portion of the park to ourselves.

Years have passed. Griffin now lives in the shadow of the Superstition Mountains in Arizona. She has come to know the Sonoran Desert landscape well, including the adaptations of the plants and animals that thrive there. Together with family trips to Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, we have gained a real appreciation for the parched places on our planet. Connecting arid wilderness to following Jesus takes no effort as the Abrahamic faiths were born and took root in the Middle East. Scripture is saturated with images dependent on some understanding of life in seemingly uninhabitable terrain.

These wastelands were fruitful places in scripture: Jacob the trickster on the run from his brother Esau slept with a stone for a pillow, only to dream of a ladder reaching to heaven with angels ascending and descending. Moses turned aside in the Sinai to see a

bush that burned but was not consumed. Ravens fed Elijah while the prophet hid from King Ahab after prophesying of a coming drought. John the Baptist cried out “prepare the way of the Lord” while living in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey. Jesus fasted and prayed in the desert the first forty days after his baptism before beginning his active ministry. The Bible was written by people for whom these wild lands were close at hand, part of the religious and cultural as well as physical landscape.

This strand of scripture reveals how powerful a symbol Living Water would be to the ears of the Samaritan woman Jesus met one day at a well. Water was scarce. Knowing where sources of water were located proved vital for farmers and shepherds alike. Many stories in scripture take place in and around wells as these were important gathering places in a desert land. God opens Hagar’s eyes so that she sees a well when she and Ishmael are near death. Rebekah offering water to a stranger at her community’s well is the sign that she is to marry Abraham’s son Isaac. When the Israelites thirst in the wilderness, God makes water flow from rock that he has commanded Moses to strike with his staff.

When King David is on the run from his son Absalom, he hides in the Judean wilderness. He

compares his longing for God's presence to his desire for water in the desert, "O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1-2).

The image in Psalm 1 compares those who delight in God's law as a tree with a steady source of sustenance: "They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper."

As we make our way to Holy Week and Easter, we will use a variety of sources to unearth the relationship this wisdom of the desert offers our life in Christ. As we arrive at Easter, you will have discovered anew ways to nurture your faith that are as life-giving as a spring in the desert. First, we will be guided by early Christians who retreated to the desert and the sayings they left behind for those who followed their path.

## **DESERT MOTHERS AND FATHERS**

In the third century after Jesus' resurrection, Christianity had become the religion of the state. Men and women began to gather in the Desert of Scete in Northern Egypt, living as hermits and

getting together on occasion to worship. This was a countercultural movement not unlike the thousands who would follow Jesus in the way of Saint Francis or Saint Dominic in late twelfth and early thirteenth-century Europe. With something akin to those who travel with the Grateful Dead, Phish, and other rock bands, followers flocked to hermits like Anthony of the Desert and Amma (or Mother) Syncletica, attracted to a very different way of life than found in the homes they left. The desert came to hold thousands of these forbears of monks and nuns who practiced a very austere faith focused on prayer and fasting.

The influence of the desert mothers and fathers continued into the fourth and fifth centuries and had a profound impact on Christianity. Beyond the desert, many key leaders of the church had direct contact with the hermits of Scete. This was not an incidental Christian movement but one central to church history, helping shape the life and practice of the monasteries of Europe that would be their successors centuries later. For example, the well-known church leader Athanasius was critically involved in the early church councils of the fourth century, which created the Nicene Creed. Athanasius fled to the desert of Egypt for a time before returning as a champion of orthodox faith.

John Cassian (circa 360-435) gathered the wisdom of the desert in his books *Institutes* and *Conferences*, while Athanasius wrote a biography of Anthony. The collected sayings, known as *Apophthegmata Patrum*, survived as well. All these works show the fruits of the prayer and fasting that were central to these early monastics.

In order to have the weeks of Lent patterned by these desert mothers and fathers—known as eremites—we structured the daily readings by week following key Christian virtues. The desert mothers and fathers, notably Evagrius Ponticus, identified seven (sometimes listed as eight) evil thoughts to be overcome—often referred to as the Seven Deadly Sins. However, instead of focusing on these sins, we selected the positive inverse of each. We explore the theme of faithfulness rather than the sin of lust, and humility rather than pride. Additionally, we offer a spiritual practice each week that fits with that theme.

## SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

While you won't find a term like "spiritual practices" or "spiritual disciplines" in scripture, we find Jesus had a vast knowledge of Hebrew scripture, taught prayer, kept the sabbath, and encouraged his disciples to serve others and proclaim the Good News of the

coming reign of God. In the early centuries of the faith, these became practices that continue today, actions designed not to curry God's favor but to foster the faith planted in us. In the epilogue, we circle back to consider which of these practices you might want to take up in the fifty days of Easter and beyond through a new or revised Rule of Life.

## A QUICK OVERVIEW

The outline for this Lent:

- the week of Ash Wednesday, the theme is faithfulness with the spiritual practice of confession
- the first week in Lent, the theme is humility with the spiritual practice of prayer
- the second week, the theme is forgiveness with the spiritual practice of reading scripture
- the third week, we take generosity as the theme with the spiritual practice of tithes and offerings
- the fourth week, we pair the spiritual practice of vocation with the theme of constancy
- in the fifth week, the spiritual practice of sabbath adds to the theme of moderation
- Holy Week features loving-kindness as its theme with the spiritual practice of worship

## A KEY TO THE SYMBOLS

Each week we use a variety of sources; these icons help identify the source:



This symbol represents a reflection on a passage of scripture that we offer for each of the Sundays of Lent.



The personal reflections written by Victoria are marked with the Tau-shaped cross associated with Saint Francis of Assisi as she is a life-professed tertiary (lay member) of the Third Order, Society of St. Francis.



The personal reflections Frank wrote for this book are marked with this spiral-filled cross he designed for the logo of King of Peace Episcopal Church in Kingsland, Georgia. This is the congregation he, Victoria, and their daughter, Griffin, worked with others to found.



This symbol of a plant growing in the harsh sun signifies readings from the sayings of the desert mothers and fathers.



This image of a deer by a spring of water signifies the plants and animals of the desert.



This sun notes a photograph from our travels with a brief reflection and questions.

We vary the source each day, while working through the themes from faithfulness to loving-kindness. Two or three questions each day open up the readings for further reflection.

## A LENTEN PRAYER

We hope the Holy Spirit will inspire your reading of these reflections, and we offer a prayer for your Lenten journey. This prayer, written by the desert father Ephrem the Syrian, is considered by Orthodox Christians such a perfect distillation of the season of Lent that they offer the prayer in all of the weekday liturgies leading to Easter.

*O Lord and Master of my life,  
take from me the spirit of sloth, despair,  
lust of power, and idle talk.*

*But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility,  
patience, and love to Thy servant.*

*Yea, O Lord and King,  
grant me to see my own transgressions,  
and not to judge my brother,  
for blessed art Thou, unto ages of ages.*

*Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This English translation is the one used by the Orthodox Churches in America (<https://oca.org/orthodoxy/prayers/lenten-prayer-of-st.-ephrem>)

# The Week of Ash Wednesday

## FAITHFULNESS

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

—Matthew 6:19-21

**Give us grace, O God,** to rend our hearts in this season of penitence and fasting that you may grant us true repentance, that we, turning from our sin, may store up for ourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal, knowing that where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also. Grant this for the sake of your only Son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

# Ash Wednesday



“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” These words, said as ashes are imposed on the foreheads of those worshiping on Ash Wednesday, are a reminder that death is a given. This is probably the only place where you will be reminded of this inconvenient fact. Even in the church, this is the only day of the year in which you will be faced with your mortality in such a clear way.

Draw the timeline out long enough and the mortality rate for humans hovers at one hundred percent. Given this certainty, Ash Wednesday’s reminder, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” is vital and well, life-giving.

In the sixth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus teaches his followers to keep their piety hidden rather than making a public spectacle out of giving alms, praying, and fasting. He goes on to say, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves

do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

We begin the penitential journey of Lent with an honest assessment of ourselves. The truth is that all of us fall short of the mark set by God. We neither love God fully nor our neighbors as ourselves. We often fail to love ourselves as God does. We disappoint ourselves. We hurt others. Yet the story throughout scripture is that God knows us, loves us, and wants better for us. This is very different from messages of our culture: Just be happy and feel good about ourselves; You are more or less okay and I am more or less okay.

If I am more or less okay and you are more or less okay, then whatever I do is fine. There are other people who are worse, right? I might have cheated on a test, but people do worse. I might have cheated in my marriage, but people have done worse. If we hold this view, then anybody other than the occasional axe murderer or child molester, ends up going to heaven with no trouble and we can all feel good about ourselves. But this approach ignores the very real pain and sin in the world—as well as the one source of healing.

Jesus offers a different path. We don't need to pretend we have our act together. We can acknowledge the

ways we hurt others and fail to see ourselves as God sees us. Rather than being cause for beating ourselves up, this realization of the ways we have messed up turns us back to God. That is what it means to repent, to turn around.

What we find in scripture is not just talk of sin and repentance, though that is very clear. We also read of a God who loves us just like we are and wants something better for us. God knows about that bad stuff, those secret sins, and will help us deal with them if we confess and give them to God. This is where the imposition of ashes has an important lesson. Ashes are imposed in the sign of a cross on our forehead, on the same spot where a cross is made with holy oil during baptism with the words, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

We are dust and to dust we shall return, but even at the grave we praise God as we have been marked as Christ’s own forever. And in that sure and certain hope, we use this season to begin addressing the sins we have been letting slide. Who do we need to forgive? What behavior do we need to stop? How can we name the anger and resentment we feel and give it to God? This journey through the desert will give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to speak to our hearts about this amendment of life.

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- *On the day when worshipers have ashes imposed on their foreheads, we read the gospel in which Jesus teaches us not to practice our piety before others. Why might we need to rub the ashes off before heading into the world? Why might we need to leave them on? In what other ways might we take care not to practice our piety before others?*
  - *How is feeling happy and good about ourselves unrealistic?*
  - *In what ways does your life need to change? What came to mind as you read this reflection? Offer this to God in prayer and ask for the grace to change.*
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*Thursday after Ash Wednesday*





Finely tuned to their arid environment, cacti all have means to store water, decrease water loss, or increase water intake. The saguaro cactus has adapted techniques to accomplish all three. Even when the plants are quite small, just inches above the ground, their fibrous roots have already spread as much as six feet out from the stem. This helps explain why a 2-inch tall saguaro is already about a decade old. While a single tap root burrows two feet into the ground, the rest of the root system lies just inches below the surface and stretches out as much as 65 feet, enabling a mature saguaro to capture the water after a rare rain and to hold the soil together, preventing erosion. Eventually growing to 50-60 feet above the rocky soil and living to be 150-200 years of age, these icons of the American West live only in the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona and western Sonora, Mexico. The plant makes the most of the little rainfall it receives, holding as much as 200 gallons of water within the tall column and stems, which the plant feeds on during dry seasons.

Yet despite the ways the saguaro fits the Sonoran ecosystem, a newer invasive species has proved much more problematic. The saguaro pictured here lives in the Four Peaks area of Tonto National Forest near Phoenix, Arizona. While the cactus stretched

toward the sun, the area in front of the plant became a popular place to target shoot. While most people shoot man-made targets, some have used this cactus for practice, with bullets tearing past the spiny defenses and shattering the plant. Slow growth had always been an asset for this plant, but the cactus can no longer fully heal from these attacks. At least two cacti that stood nearby had already succumbed to the shooting range.

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- *How might the photo be a metaphor for the ways we humans hurt one another emotionally as well as physically?*
  - *What adaptations do you need to make to your spiritual practices in order to foster healing? How might confession and absolution be a part of the healing process?*
  - *Our self-inflicted emotional wounds can often cut the deepest and take the longest to heal. For what do you need to forgive someone? Of what do you need to forgive yourself?*
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## Friday after Ash Wednesday



In her book *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel Held Evans recounts a radio interviewer asking why she is a Christian. She begins to talk about Jesus' life, teachings, death, and resurrection and then finds herself surprised to add, "I'm a Christian...because Christianity names and addresses sin. It acknowledges the reality that the evil we observe in the world is also present within ourselves. It tells the truth about the human condition—that we're not okay."

Confession is good for us whether it be in church before Holy Eucharist, privately, or to a priest. It helps us name our sins and admit to ourselves that we are not sinless and need a savior. I have been a tertiary in the Third Order, Society of Saint Francis, for more than a decade. This order for lay persons was created during the saint's lifetime and continues today with noted tertiaries including Archbishop Desmond Tutu. As part of joining the order, I created a Rule of Life, naming spiritual practices I will do daily, weekly, monthly, and annually. Part of that rule is an annual confession to a priest.

Confessing our sins is particularly appropriate during Lent when we are reminded in Genesis “For dust you are and to dust you will return” (3:19). I have found the self-examination from *Saint Augustine’s Prayer Book* to be a particularly humbling experience as I prepare for my confession, and I recommend the book. If you think that you don’t have much to confess, reading through this self-examination will teach you otherwise. For example, greed names as sin, “Partiality, flattery, or fawning to win support or affection. Dishonest praise and refusal to speak for what is true or right.” For sloth, the self-examination names “Unconcern over injustice to others, especially that caused by currently accepted social standards; or unmindfulness of the suffering of the world.”

When I confess in person to a priest, I find that I take the confession much more seriously—as well as the priest’s absolution. It is not that God hears my confession more clearly but rather that I feel God’s absolution, or forgiveness, more strongly when it is pronounced aloud by a priest. Confession is when we name aloud our shortcomings and, in the process, hopefully become more understanding of other people’s failings, as we are all far, far from perfect.

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- *What is sin to you? How do you define it for yourself?*
  - *What is your current practice of confession? Is it daily, or just when you attend public worship? What pattern would you like to establish?*
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## *Saturday after Ash Wednesday*



The abbot Pastor relates of John the Short that he once prayed, asking God to take away from him all passion. God granted his prayer; and he, being free from envy, anger, and all evil thoughts, was at peace. In his great gladness he went to a certain elder, and said to him, “Behold in me a man who has no strife nor contests. I am altogether at peace.” But the old man, being grieved for John’s sake, replied to him, “My son, go, ask the Lord to grant you occasion for strife. There is no way in which the soul advances toward God but by striving.” Then John, knowing in himself that this was true, did as the old man bid him. Afterward, when the necessity for constant strife came back upon him, he never again prayed that it should be taken away from him. Always he made this petition “Lord, give me grace to conquer in the strife.”<sup>2</sup>

The abbot Moses said, “He who is conscious of his own sins has no eyes for the sins of his neighbor.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hannay, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, 132-133

<sup>3</sup> Hannay, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, 88

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- *The mothers and fathers of the desert seemed to expect and even welcome strife and temptation. What good can come from strife and temptation? What are the negative aspects?*
  - *What have you wished God would take away from you? What benefit came from or could come from facing it instead?*
  - *How does awareness of the ways you fall short of the mark set by God change your view of others?*

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*If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat;  
and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink;  
for you will heap coals of fire on their heads,  
and the Lord will reward you.*

—Proverbs 25:21-22

