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# INTRODUCTION

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*True solitude is the home of the person.*

—Thomas Merton,

*New Seeds of Contemplation*

*Always visualize your soul as vast, spacious, and plentiful.*

—Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*

*The LORD is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul that seeks him.*

—Lamentations 3:25

In my first years as a parish priest, I was completely overwhelmed. I found some relief for the stress by talking with my husband, seeing a therapist, going to yoga, and cooking. I also found solace in reading many, many books about hermits: Thomas Merton, May Sarton, Julian of Norwich, and many others, lesser known (see the Further Reading list for more details). I read about Carthusian monks and Orthodox *startsy*. I combed real estate websites in search of tiny houses for sale. I spent time alone at retreat centers for a night or two. Parish life was busy, noisy, and fragmented, so I fantasized about living all alone in a tiny house somewhere, where it was just

me and God. (Thankfully, my husband didn't take this personally.)

Living alone in a little house is a fantasy I've had at many times in my life. When I was little, one of my daydreams was that I would grow up and live in a little cottage all by myself. In my early twenties, I lived in a one-room cabin in rural New England for a year and loved every minute of it, even waking up in the middle of the night all winter to throw another log into the woodstove.

I had the chance to live as an almost-hermit for a month as part of a sabbatical in 2014. I stayed in a hermitage on the grounds of the monastery where I'm an oblate. I read, napped, cooked, walked, wrote, and went to the liturgy of the hours every day. It wasn't total solitude, because I regularly shared meals with the sisters and a local friend, I used social media twice a week, I went to a prairie workday and a workshop on prayer, and I saw a spiritual director.

Although I savored those days and hours that spread out before me like an open road, I also fumbled and fidgeted with so much freedom. I'd move the hermitage furniture around for better "flow." I spent a lot of time at the grocery store and at Target, chasing after things I thought I needed: brown sugar, an extra throw pillow, a colander, knitting needles. I didn't have much of a spiritual framework for using my solitude. I threw myself into the thrill of an open schedule and introverted bliss, but I hadn't read enough of the desert fathers and mothers, Teresa of Avila, or other experts. Thankfully, the daily office with the sisters and the manual labor of preparing my own meals helped structure the days, but something was missing. One night, with less than a week left in my stay, I got spooked, and the very next day moved into the monastery guesthouse, where other people were sleeping right down the hall.

Scripture does not generally encourage solitude:

Woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? (Eccl. 4:10b–11)

The one who lives alone is self-indulgent,  
showing contempt for all who have sound  
judgment.

(Prov. 18:1)

Admittedly, at that time, it was important to be part of a clan, tribe, or household because being alone was dangerous. Encountering God, however, was usually a solitary encounter, experienced, for instance, by Abraham, Hagar, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, Jesus, Peter, and Paul. However, God's presence was somewhat dangerous too—rarely quiet or restful—more often intrusive, corrective, and even aggressive. Many people quote the verse, “Be still, and know that I am God!” (Ps. 46:10) in peaceful moments, without realizing the violence of the verse that comes before: “he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; / he burns the shields with fire” (46:9). Stillness with God in scripture wasn't always tranquil, but it was certainly always life-transforming.

Jesus had a different relationship with solitude, compared to others in the Bible. His first time of holy solitude was very deliberate. The Gospel writers recount that before Jesus' public ministry, he went alone into the wilderness, where he spent forty days in prayer and fasting. There, his life-transforming encounter was not only with God, but with Satan. (Early desert fathers and mothers, too, encountered demons and the Evil One in their solitude. Perhaps I did in my hermitage, too, on that night I got spooked.) Later in his ministry, Jesus' relationship with

solitude is more recognizable to modern people; he takes breaks. All four Gospel writers noticed Jesus' habit of taking time by himself: to pray, to recover from the travails of ministry, and in Mark and Luke, to grieve the death of his cousin John the Baptist.

Even though more and more people live alone nowadays, life-giving, healthy solitude isn't something we talk about much. *Being alone* sounds sad, aimless, or lonely, to hear ads or memes describe it. *Solitude*, however, is chosen and purposeful. It isn't loneliness, but the practice of a deep integrity. It's learning to be present to God wholeheartedly, as your true and simple self. Richard Foster wrote, "Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment."<sup>1</sup> There is an opening in the heart and mind in solitude that frees the soul to notice, listen, and reflect on the existence of God beyond and in all things, including the self. Teresa of Avila teaches in *The Interior Castle* that this awareness will grow into love: love of God, love of self, and love of neighbor. Solitude isn't about escape or introversion but about greater love; solitude creates space within us for God and all that is most important to us.

Solitude can be revolutionary. According to the world's standards, it means wasting time, doing "nothing." Taking time to be with God in solitude means stepping outside what is measurable, discovering "that being is more important than having and that we are worth more than the result of our efforts."<sup>2</sup> Moments of solitude can be for Christians what the Sabbath is for Jews—a time when nothing is consumed, produced, or achieved, but we are free and privileged to simply rest in the presence of God. As Walter Brueggemann points out in his book, *Sabbath as Resistance*, "YHWH is a Sabbath-keeping God, which fact ensures that restfulness and not restlessness is at the center of life."<sup>3</sup> He points to the words of Jesus, who taught: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28); not, "I will give you more work." It's a radical choice to see

and value your life in the way God does, that our being is more important than our doing. That doesn't mean that our doing isn't important at all but that the quality of our being is the foundation of our doing, as well as our serving, loving, dying, and rising again—in the same way it was for Jesus.

I don't read books about hermits or shop for tiny houses (much) anymore, but moments of solitude are the bread and butter that keep me going. God didn't create everyone with that same need, but if you've picked up this book, I imagine there's some hunger for solitude in you, too. Healthy solitude is not an escape or an end unto itself but a way to more deeply be yourself, allowing you to be more available to the presence of God and, in turn, to be available in a wholehearted and healthy way to the needs of other people.

This book is an attempt to share with you ways to reflect, deepen, and practice solitude as a fulsome Christian discipline, rooted in the Lenten journey of sacrifice and introspection and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The book is laid out thematically, exploring ways that other Christians have experienced solitude: listening, struggle, journey, hospitality, resistance, and confinement. Each day's devotion usually explores that theme through the life of a particular person, whether from Scripture or Christian history.

There are some concrete suggestions for practicing solitude: (1) on Sundays, I invite you to choose a practice for that week in light of its theme, and (2) on Fridays and Saturdays, I offer ways to push yourself further into inner solitude by practicing fasting and/or almsgiving. These two are ancient practices, especially used during Lent, that have stretched and enriched the lives of many Christians for generations, including most of the saints, hermits, prophets, and rebels I profile in this book. You may or may not feel up to them yourself this Lent, and that's fine; take them or leave them as seems right for you this year.

I want to leave you with the last paragraph of a bidding prayer for Lent from the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*. When I first heard it read in worship, probably in about 2002, it sounded strange and archaic to me, but now I find I'm inspired and humbled by it every year:

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer.

*Silence is then kept for a time.<sup>4</sup>*

Heidi Haverkamp  
Lent 2017

## PREPARING YOUR CALENDAR

*So teach us to count our days  
that we may gain a wise heart.*  
—Psalm 90:12

Modern life is busy. Plan ahead and put a few things on your calendar for Lent so that you are sure to make space for your spiritual life in the midst of everything else that will be demanding your attention. Strive to attend church on Sundays and holy days even if you are going to be out of town. Make a point of putting them on your calendar, being sure to check your church's website or newsletter for the right time and place. I encourage you to include:

- Ash Wednesday
- Maundy Thursday
- Good Friday
- Easter Vigil / Easter Sunday

### Activities Suggested in This Book

- Mark Fridays as special fasting days; indicate the particular manner of fast for each Friday so that you can be ready and schedule around it as needed
- A retreat day; overnight or all day (in Week One, but can take place at any time)
- A long walk or a hike (in Week Two)
- Appointment with a pastor, priest, or close friend for a confession of sins (in Week Three)
- Visit to a crowded place for prayer and solitude for 20–60 minutes, perhaps over lunch (in Week Four)

## Common Lenten Practices

- Holy Week or Palm Sunday weekend: time to prepare for Easter with cooking, shopping, flowers, and decorations
- Holy Week: dying eggs, which can be fun for both kids and adults (For a change of pace, see appendix B for a recipe to dye eggs dark red using onion skins, according to an Orthodox tradition.)
- Holy Saturday: time to remove any Lenten home decorations you may have used and to reset for Easter

## PREPARING FOR FASTING

*“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

—Matthew 6:16–18

*Fasting appears gloomy until one steps into its arena. But begin and you will see what light it brings after darkness, what freedom from bonds, what release after a burdensome life . . .*

—Theophan the Recluse<sup>1</sup>

Fasting creates a kind of solitude within us, an emptiness that many Christians throughout history have found makes more room inside them for God, grace, and guidance. In my early thirties, I became curious about fasting.

The ancient mystics and desert mothers and fathers I read were devoted to it, but I'd never heard it talked about in church. In seminary, I met with Father Robert Koomson, a warm, elder Ghanaian man who was our chaplain; twice, I went to him for spiritual direction, and twice, he recommended fasting to me. The second time, he gave me a copy of a slim book he had written on the subject, published in his home country. I've since misplaced it, but the clarity and confidence of the simple lessons he wrote about fasting have stayed with me. (For instance, it helps to drink warm water to settle your grumbly stomach.) When we long for clarity from God or about any other matter in life or are dealing with pain, loss, or a broken relationship, Father Koomson recommends fasting combined with prayer. I tried fasting for years and mostly felt hungry and grumpy. The problem was that I was doing the fasting part but not the praying part. The two have to go together, or it's a waste of your time and a bellyache.

You may or may not feel ready to include fasting as part of your Lenten practice this year. The most basic kind of Lenten fast is to deprive yourself of something—a certain food or other comfort. Going without a meal or fasting for an entire day requires a bit more care. In this book, I invite you to try fasting from a meal or two as a special Friday fast; more than that, I encourage you to see a spiritual director or find a book that teaches fasting. (Since Father Koomson's book is not available in the United States, I recommend two texts in the Further Reading list.) Remember that the purpose of a Lenten discipline is to follow Jesus into the wilderness for forty days—to grow in our relationship with God by stretching ourselves spiritually—not to punish ourselves or live in misery for seven weeks.

If you choose to try it, remember that fasting is about God's grace, not human endurance. If you slip up in your fast—and if you're anything like me, you will—don't give up! Keep trying. Remember that, traditionally, Sundays

are a feast day, so they're exempt from the forty days and you can take a break. Finally, remember that your Lenten fast is between you and God. As much as you can manage it, don't reveal your fasting to others. The sixth chapter of Matthew, read at most Ash Wednesday services, makes clear that fasting is private and not something to broadcast or make a big deal out of. On the other hand, there is no need to be cagey or secretive. Fasting is for you and God, but there may be times when neighbor love or hospitality calls for you to break your fast in order to share a special meal or be part of a special gathering.

In this book, you'll be invited to do additional fasting on Fridays, as Christians have done since ancient times to meditate on the mystery of the Crucifixion. You may choose to do some, none, or all of those special fasting days. If you slip up and forget or are unable to overcome temptation, remember that you haven't lost the whole day: try to get back in the saddle instead of chucking the fast entirely. Fasting is about you and God, not endurance or "being good." Fasting can help us grow in dependence on God, in solidarity with the hungry and needy, and in making space and solitude inside us for prayer and listening, which we may otherwise fill with food, noise, shopping, or other comforts. Consider giving it a try!

## PREPARING FOR ALMSGIVING

*Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than wealth with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold.*

—Tobit 12:8

*When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.*

—Matthew 6:3

Almsgiving can also create solitude within us by helping us let go of money and its security. It's an ancient Lenten practice. Giving money to the poor, whether into the cups of panhandlers or writing checks to charity, opens our grip and makes more space in us for our neighbor and God's presence, which, in the end, is the only security we have.

In this book, on each Saturday, I suggest practicing one of two forms of almsgiving:

1. Give cash on the spot—to a panhandler, to kids from a local school raising money at a stoplight, to a charity box on a store counter, to a tip jar, or to whatever “ask” God may place in your path. Do not judge the person or group asking; just give, trusting in God’s grace.
2. Give to an organization—write a check or give online to a charity that is meaningful to you. Each Saturday, I include a reflection piece to help you consider potential recipients in the spirit of that week’s devotions.

Each Saturday, choose one or the other, or do both. Do some planning for this in advance: discern in advance the amount you’ll give each weekend so that you can budget and have cash on hand as needed. Choose an amount to give away each weekend, depending on your normal weekly expenses: one dollar, five dollars, ten, twenty, fifty, or even one hundred dollars. The amount should stretch your generosity, not bankrupt you but make you wince a bit. (If you are not wincing, go a denomination higher!) You should choose one dollar only if you are a minimum-wage worker or otherwise living in poverty. For “cash on the spot,” if you are like me and do not use much cash, you may want to go the bank and withdraw five to seven bills to have in reserve for each of the seven Saturdays of Lent.

I am amazed and a bit ashamed when I notice that I will spend more on items for myself than I am likely to give to charity or put in the offering plate at church. Almsgiving

reminds us that all we own belonged to God before it belonged to us. Still, it's hard to give money away when we don't receive something in return. Giving to a charity is probably the best use of your alms, but there is something that hits you in the gut when you put a wad of cash in a tip jar or in the hand of a panhandler. It begins to open a space within, where perhaps God can be even more generous to you.

In preparation for this book, I handed out one ten-dollar bill a week for six weeks, usually to a beggar but also into a tip jar or two. I was surprised by both how hard and how easy it was. It made me notice how tightly I clutch what I believe is *mine*. Also, with each "giveaway," I noticed it felt good—even fun—to be generous and to utterly delight someone who is not used to receiving much at all, even if a panhandler or barista went and spent my (my?) money on drugs or alcohol. (One priest I know says to his congregation with regards to panhandlers: "I mean, I spend the money you give me on drugs and alcohol, too.")

## PREPARING AT HOME

*Prepare your work outside,  
get everything ready for you in the field;  
and after that build your house.*

— Proverbs 24:27

*Write [God's words] on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

— Deuteronomy 11:20

At my house, for years I changed almost nothing for Lent, even though I like to decorate for other liturgical seasons, like Advent, Christmas, and Easter. Lent is one of the most meaningful seasons of the year to me; I wanted a way to reset my home so that I would remember every day that

I was in the midst of a special and particular time. Your practice of solitude can be enhanced every day if, when you look around your home, you are reminded of Lent and your Lenten intentions. Consider one or more of the following suggestions or experiment with your own ideas.

### Tabletop Desert

Fill a bowl with sand. Add a stone, a nail, and maybe even a toy snake or scorpion. Bury a small slip of paper with the word *Alleluia* on it. Set it somewhere you will see it regularly, maybe where you eat meals or on your work desk.

### Tabletop Arrangements

Fill a vase, bowl, or bucket with bare sticks, dry flower stems, thistles, or other thorny branches. Wrap arrangements with materials like burlap, twine, and metal wire, brown or purple yarn or ribbon. On Palm Sunday, add any palms you bring home from church. Or set out a low bowl or pan and fill with gravel, pebbles, bits of metal, or pieces of bone.

### Door Hangings

Hang an austere wreath on your door, perhaps of grapevine, twigs, straw, dried flowers, or rough fabrics like burlap or canvas. Grapevine wreaths can be found in most craft stores.

### Display a Cross or Crucifix

Display a cross or crucifix in a highly visible place. Perhaps replace another art object that hangs in a prominent location in your home.

## No Candles

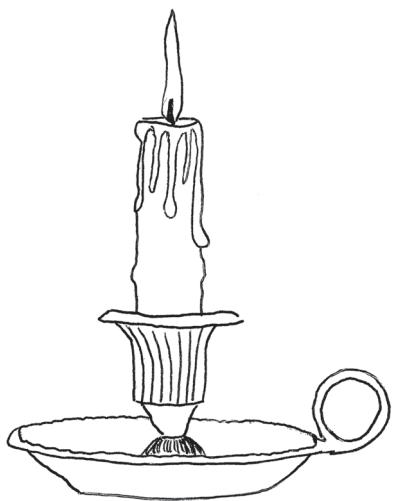
Do not light any candles in your home until Easter Sunday. You may want to put them all away, out of sight.

## Live Simply

Within reason, keep your shopping and leisure habits at their most basic. Choose the most simple, inexpensive options. When there is an option, choose the less fancy or special. If you can, try not to *buy* anything for the Lenten decorating of your home; use objects or materials that you find outside or lying around your house or at Goodwill.

## Switch to Easter Decorations

On Holy Saturday, the day of emptiness and waiting, remove all Lenten things. Wait to replace with Easter decorations until Holy Saturday night or first thing Easter Sunday morning, to increase the suspense. (It's like Christmas morning but for Easter!)



# FIRST DAYS OF LENT

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## ASH WEDNESDAY: THE INNER ROOM

*“But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”*

—Matthew 6:6 NASB

*A certain brother went to Abbot Moses in Scete and asked him for a good word. And the elder said to him: Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.*

—Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*

In the King James Bible, the “inner room” verse of Matthew 6 reads: “When thou prayest, enter thy closet.” The Greek word *tameion* means “storage room”—a humble, quiet room with a few buckets and crates but probably no beautiful view or easy place to sit. Finding a place to be in the presence of God doesn’t require much, Jesus seems to say. He is teaching, first, that prayer isn’t a public performance or a way of showing others we’re religious; at the same time, he wants us to realize the opposite—that prayer is a way to know God in a private and personal way. The

inner room he mentions may not be a place in your physical home so much as inside yourself.

What is the inner room of the soul like? Catherine of Siena spoke of keeping a hermitage inside her heart. Francis of Assisi said, “Brother Body is our cell, and the soul is the hermit who remains inside the cell to pray to God and meditate.”<sup>1</sup> Teresa of Avila wrote a book about prayer, *The Interior Castle*, named after the intricate extended metaphor she used to describe the soul. You can think of the inner room of your soul as a cozy house, a simple cell, or a “vast, spacious, and plentiful”<sup>2</sup> place. However you may like to imagine it, there’s a place inside you where God is waiting to sit with you.

Abba Moses, also called Moses the Black, was a fourth-century desert father from Ethiopia who was a thief before he was a monk. He taught his monks that “your cell will teach you everything,” as Merton quotes above, and he meant both the physical cell where a hermit was living (a cave or hut) and the inner, spiritual cell of solitude. Solitude invites us to sit not only in the presence of God but also with ourselves. There’s no better way to get to know someone than to sit in a car with them for a while. The same is true of God and the self. It’s not always easy to sit still with yourself or with God, especially for extended periods of time; but like a child resting in a parent’s lap, sometimes just to sit together is enough.

Contemplation and solitude go together. Thomas Merton described it as “life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being.”<sup>3</sup> This Lent, like many saints, hermits, prophets, and rebels before you, you’re going to spend some intentional time in solitude and, I hope, get to know God’s love more deeply and enter more fully into Jesus’ Passion and Resurrection by doing so.

## Questions for Reflection

1. What image do you prefer for the inner room of the soul: cell, closet, hermitage, or castle? Why? Is there a term you do not like? Why?
2. Have you ever thought of Lent as a contemplative season before? What about Lent, specifically, could be called contemplative?
3. What made you pick up this book? What do you hope to gain from using it for Lent this year?

## Choose a Practice for This Week

- Observe the ancient tradition of fasting on Ash Wednesday. Skip either lunch or dinner. Sip tea or water to ease hunger pains. Use those twinges as a call to prayer and to “remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”
- Find twenty to thirty minutes of quiet solitude. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide and speak to you through drawing. Draw either your inner room or your “interior castle.” If you have time, or at another time this week, draw your “wilderness” as it feels at this season of your life. If you would prefer, you can describe these things with words instead of drawing.



## THURSDAY: THE WILDERNESS

*He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts.*

—Mark 1:13

*And I say, “O that I had wings like a dove!  
I would fly away and be at rest;  
truly, I would flee far away;  
I would lodge in the wilderness.*

—Psalm 55:6–8

*We must cross the desert and spend some time in it to receive the grace of God as we should. It is there that one empties oneself, that one drive away from oneself everything that is not God and that one empties completely the small house of one's soul so as to leave all the room free for God alone. . . . It is indispensable: the soul needs the silence of it, the inward retirement, this oblivion of all created things.*

—Charles de Foucauld, as quoted in Sara Maitland,  
*A Book of Silence*

Going out into the wilderness is just the opposite of entering into your inner room: there are open vistas and rough terrain instead of an enclosed, private space. In the wilderness, solitude is less about intimacy with God and more about spiritual awe and freedom. Going into the wilderness is also an act of vulnerability: there is danger from weather, snakes, scorpions, and other wild animals, or just in finding enough to eat and drink.

Jesus was probably seeking both awe and danger when he went out into the Judean wilderness for forty days before his public ministry. He went to pray in the freedom of solitude and to be alone with God. He also went to test himself. Alone in the starkness and quiet of the desert, he must have wrestled with his deepest questions about his humanity and his divinity and about what it was that God was calling him to do. The desert took away all barriers between his soul and God's wide gaze, which must have been thrilling but also quite strenuous.

There is a long tradition in scripture of faithful people going alone into the wilderness and encountering God,

including Hagar, Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist, among others. The Israelites spent forty years as a people alone with God, out in the desert. Early Christians continued this tradition when untold numbers of men and women left society to live with God in the wilderness, especially in the deserts of Egypt but in places all around the Mediterranean, following in the footsteps of the first desert solitary, Antony the Great (see Week Two). These desert mothers and fathers discovered, as Jesus did, that both God and the Devil, or demons, wait for us in solitude.

There is something about wilderness that draws prayer from us, whether in wonder, discernment, help, or lament. There is something about wild places that invites spiritual solitude; where, in spite of ourselves, as Foucauld says in the quotation above: “one empties completely the small house of one’s soul so as to leave all the room free for God alone.” We cannot help but feel vulnerable and exposed in the wilderness. It is a place for both awe and humility.

If Lent is a time for us to imitate Jesus’ forty days in the desert, then it should be less a time to suffer and endure and more a time to grow in this kind of wonder and vulnerability. Engaging in prayer, fasting, and alms-giving are not about punishment; they help us transcend ourselves—finding greater intimacy with God and greater clarity about who we are. These three practices are also disciplines of solitude, forms of self-denial or self-emptying to make more room in us for God. Prayer reveals our emotional and spiritual vulnerability; fasting reveals our physical and psychological vulnerability; almsgiving reveals our material and financial vulnerability. In the wilderness and on the cross, Jesus made himself vulnerable, too—even unto death.

Lent is a wilderness set in time. In it, whether or not we are living anywhere near a physical wilderness or in a wilderness time of life, we can choose to live starkly and mindfully, in a way set apart from the rest of the year and

the rest of human society. Even if you do not leave your hometown in the next seven weeks, you can find ways to “flee far away [and] lodge in the wilderness,” and there encounter God.

## Questions for Reflection

1. When you go on vacation, do you enjoy traveling to wilderness places? What about the wilderness draws you? Or what is it about the wilderness that doesn’t hold much interest for you?
2. When have you had a time of wilderness in your life where you met God in a new and powerful way?
3. Is there a wilderness in your life right now that is pushing you to prayer? How would you describe it? Are your prayers of wonder, discernment, help, or lament?



## FRIDAY FASTING: THIRST

### Drink Only Water (Eat as Usual)

*O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*  
—Psalm 63:1

*Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”*  
—John 4:13–14

## Inspiration

Drinking nothing but tepid or warm water is a small way to begin to fast. You're practicing an emptiness of your body, growing in awareness of your thirst (what are you *really* thirsty for, if you have plenty of water to drink?), and growing in awareness and compassion for people who truly are in want of clean, plentiful water. By making a water fast, you can really notice the empty, thirsty places within you and purposefully invite God into them: your own inner deserts in need of God's living water. This is an incarnate solitude!

## Practice

Drink only water, without ice and without flavoring. Hot or warm water is okay. Decide if you can realistically go without caffeine; if not, adjust accordingly. You may want to carry a water bottle with you in case only iced or chilled water is available in restaurants, your workplace, or school. Every time you crave something besides plain water to drink or you feel irritated or unsatisfied by it, remember and offer prayers for those who may not have clean water at all. Ask God: What am I *truly* thirsting for in my life right now?

If at all possible, do not announce or reveal your fast to others outside your immediate family, if even them. If you want, keep your fast for the whole weekend. If you're feeling the need of an even greater challenge, keep your "water only" fast until next Friday.

## Questions for Reflection

1. How did it feel to quench only your thirst and not to drink for pleasure?
2. Did you notice your thirst in a different way? Did you drink more or less than you usually would?

3. Did it help you deepen in solitude with God, or was it just inconvenient?



## SATURDAY ALMSGIVING: CONGREGATIONS

*I was glad when they said to me,  
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”*  
—Psalm 122:1

*In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*

—Ephesians 2:21–22

Choose the form of almsgiving you will practice this week or, if it gives you joy, do both. Give an amount that feels generous and “hurts” a little in the context of your weekly expenses. Grow in solitude by giving to others.

1. Give cash away to someone who asks you for it.
2. Mail a check, give online, or put your gift in the offering plate tomorrow for a congregation.

One of the most important centers of your spiritual life is the congregation you call home. Its sanctuary is a particular “inner room” and, hopefully, a shelter for your soul. Congregations are only as strong as the generosity and joy of their members. Make a special Lenten gift to your congregation or to any other congregation that is meaningful for you:

- the congregation you attend now
- the congregation where you grew up or where you feel you really became a Christian

- a congregation that is taking very good care of someone you love right now
- a mosque, synagogue, or other religious or spiritual center in your community

### Questions for Reflection

1. Does generosity make you feel rich or poor this week?  
Does it feel like a spiritual act?
2. How did you choose where to give your alms this week?
3. Did giving make more space within you for the presence of God? How?