

Lenten Reflection 2024

Through the Desert God Leads Us to Freedom

When you think of a desert, what words come to mind? Hot? Dry? Barren? God?! Freedom?! Chances are those last two are not part of your thoughts, but they are how Pope Francis describes the desert experience in this year's Lenten Message.

Here are a couple more words that may not jump into your head when you think desert, but they are very relevant to Jesus's experience of the desert and to what our Lenten experience might be if we follow Jesus's example: retreat, reflection. The season of Lent is modeled after Jesus's 40 days in the desert where he retreated from the distractions of ordinary life, prayed, was tempted, and grew in his relationship with God and in his self-knowledge.

But how does the word "freedom" fit in? Pope Francis brings us back to Exodus, the freeing of an enslaved Jewish people from Egypt as they journeyed through the desert. It's a challenging journey that requires time to let go of the familiar and to embrace the new, to see with new eyes the realities around us, and to change—that is to be changed and to change—the pain, the suffering, the oppression and violence, the indifference, and the stagnation that plague our world and leave us feeling devoid of hope. Pope Francis writes, "The desert is the place where our freedom can mature in a personal decision not to fall back into slavery."

His Holiness also warns us against idols that paralyze us, idols such as money, status, and even some traditions. Our Lenten desert is a place to free ourselves from these idols. Lent is a time to pause to pray, fast, and give alms as acts of love in solidarity with God, to become brothers and sisters to all without exception.

Another freedom that comes from our Lenten desert is the freedom to go against the tide, to be countercultural, as Jesus was. It is a time to reflect on our lifestyles and to make necessary adjustments that will better serve ourselves, others, and creation, not to be stifled by what others might think or what the norms of a dysfunctional society are. Lent is a time for conversion and the creativity that conversion can birth.

Pope Francis concludes his Lenten Message by repeating what he told the young people at World Youth Day in Lisbon last year, a message we all can benefit from hearing again:

Keep seeking and be ready to take risks. At this moment in time, we face enormous risks: we hear the painful pleas of so many people. Indeed, we are experiencing a third world war fought piecemeal. Yet let us find the courage to see our world, not as being in its death throes, but in a process of giving birth, not at the end but at the beginning of a great new chapter of history. We need courage to think like this.

And he adds, "Such is the courage of conversion, born of coming up from slavery. For faith and charity take hope..."

May your Lent lead you through the desert to the freedom of renewal, conversion, faith, hope, and charity for all.

Please spend some time with this reflection. Also consider doing the following:

- Read the complete Lenten Message of Pope Francis at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/20231203-messaggio-quaresima2024.html>.
- Take time to go into the "desert." Open yourself to its freeing graces. Listen for God's guiding voice. Pray. Reflect.
- Reject the idols of power, pride, profit, and prejudice. Practice the virtues of love, mercy,

- compassion, and generosity instead.
- Stand up. Speak out. Help feed the hungry, house the homeless, welcome the stranger, build peace with justice. Believe and hold onto hope. Accept the challenge to change yourself and the world for the better.
- Join the 42nd Good Friday Way of the Cross organized by Pax Christi Metro New York (PCMNY) on March 29th beginning at Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, E. 47th St. between 1st and 2nd Avenues at 8:30 AM.
- Visit the Pax Christi websites for more ways to pray, study, and act: www.paxchristinys.org and www.nypaxchristi.org.
Share this reflection with others.