

# ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Lent 1-B (21 Feb 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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## **Collect**

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

*Genesis 9:8-17, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15, Psalm 25:1-9*

## **1 Lentiest Lent**

Almost a year ago, as our country shut down schools and businesses and *everything* in an attempt to fend off this mysterious new virus sweeping the globe, the Right Reverend Rob Wright, Bishop of Atlanta, observed that we were experiencing the “Lentiest Lent we’ve ever Lented.” In other words, we were living in the desert. All the things we associate with Lent: fasting, solitude, challenge and sadness, were being imposed on us from the outside whether we wanted them or not.

So I find it ironic that we’re back online this weekend. For me, that is one of the memorable marks of the pandemic. All year long, the deprivations and the challenges of the pandemic have not let up. Think about all the terrible things we have experienced together this year. Our Lentiest Lent never left, but instead we’ve Lented it all year long.

## **2 Lent**

Lent is not always so terrible, and not always imposed so forcefully from without. Lent is the season of the year set aside by the church for special acts of contrition, confession, and repentance. Those are things we need to do all year long, but they are difficult, exhausting, and depressing. The Christian life isn’t all or even chiefly about negativity. But certainly our faith begins with the realities we find around us, and those realities are not pretty. Those realities are that I have hurt others, I have failed to live up to even my own standards, and the effects of my failures continue to impact both my life and the lives of others, especially the lives of those I love the most. Lent is a time to face up to my failures, to acknowledge them, to grapple with them. It is a time to face all the different ways that death is a part of my life. Death in the ways I treat others. Death in the choices I make. Death in the ways I cling to that which is not God.

Lent is, in many ways, an ugly season. It is a season of the cross. It is not polite. It is not genteel. It is when we pull out our dirty laundry, not presentable for company. It is not what we put up on a wall to display to the world or thumb through during quiet moments so that we can smile and enjoy the pleasant memories of Lents past. We don’t sing Lenten Carols, and though we do have a few Lenten hymns, they might not be the hymns you choose to hum as you go about your business. Lent is the season we follow Jesus out into the desert, where the wild animals are.

### 3 Desert

The Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 3rd century followed Jesus into the desert. They lived there for years at a time. They fled from society, but not from people. They fled from others' expectations, from the demands to put up a false front, to show well, to pretend everything is all right. They fled from the anxiety the world heaps upon us whenever we have the temerity to suggest that something is wrong and that the cultural defaults of fashion, politics, and economics might not have the last word. They fled from distractions and excuses. They fled from a society where people would *project* their expectations on one another, leading us to inflate our own expectations of ourselves. They fled from hierarchy and deference to an elite and from becoming "ensared in the fantasies of others and caught up in an illusory position of dignity."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes they fled from speech, the tongue which the letter from James describes as a tiny flame, able to infect the whole body with a fire it caught from hell.

### 4 Today

People then were like people today. Those same temptations and challenges continue to draw us into illusion and away from God. That's why we need Lent. We need the desert. We need fasting and confession and repentance. We need to dwell on the cross and what it meant and what it still means today. It's not the observance of this 40 days in particular that matter, but the attitudes and practices that these 40 days bring us. We don't Lent because we like it. We don't Lent because it's easy or pleasant, popular or attractive, fashionable or fun. If it was any of these things, it wouldn't be Lent. Lent is hard work, in which we acknowledge that death is at work among us and within us. Lent is where we turn away from wishful thinking about how we would like life to be and we practice facing reality. Because it is in reality that we find not only death, but resurrection.

Today we are meeting online. But February and icy days will be over soon enough and we'll be meeting together once more.

The coming of Lent is a reminder that God is looking for us. It is God who leads us back into the desert, a place that is big enough and empty enough for God to stretch out God's arm of power and reveal God's glory to us. A place where death can turn to resurrection, and the life that follows will be greater than anything we have known before. Lent is where God cuts away the pretensions that protect us from reality, that shield us from God, and God opens the way for us to experience God's embrace more fully.

I wish you a holy Lent, a healing time to lament the wrongs you have experienced, the wrongs you have perpetrated, and a fresh encounter with the God who loves you and redeems you.

**Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup>Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* (Medio Media: 2003), 66