



L . E . N . T .

IN THE DESERT

BY JOHNNETTE BENKOVIC WILLIAMS



THE SEASON OF LENT IS UPON US.

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we read “By the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert” (§540, see Matthew 4: 1-11).

In Matthew 4:1-11 we read the passage in which Our Lord fasted for forty days and forty nights in the desert, being tempted by the evil one. The devil strives to lure Him with three of the great temptations – pride, presumption, and lust for power – and yet, he is no match for Our Lord. Jesus defeats him by trusting God, knowing truth, and remaining steadfast – three counterattacks to temptation that lead to victory. Our Lord banishes the evil one and is ministered to by the angels.

This account of Jesus’ temptation in the desert gives us much to ponder. But, its relevance to the liturgical season of Lent is especially poignant. St. John Paul II stated, “*It can be said that Christ introduced the tradition of forty days fast into the Church’s liturgical year, because he himself ‘fasted forty days and forty nights’ before beginning to teach. By this Lenten fast the Church is in a certain sense called every year to follow her Master and Lord if she wishes to preach his Gospel effectively*” (General Audience, Feb. 28, 1979).



DESERT DWELLERS

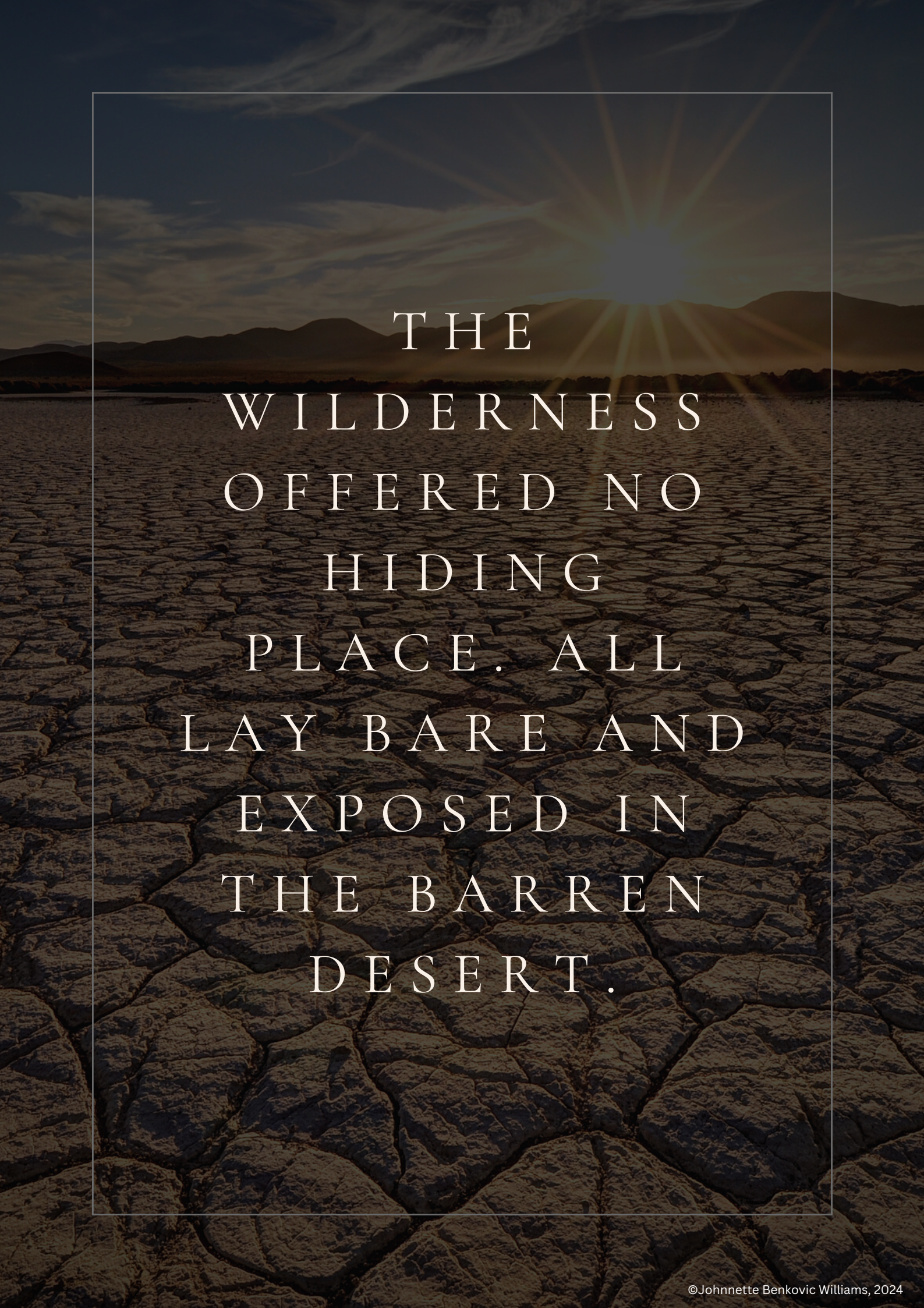
This first withdrawal of Jesus to a place of stillness was but the beginning of a life-long habit. At key moments throughout His life, the Son of Man retreated into the solitude (cf. Mt. 14:23-24; Mt. 26:36, 42, 44; Mk. 1:35; Lk. 6:12; Lk. 9:28); there in the stillness of the wilderness, He communed with His Heavenly Father, and drew from Him the strength and the fortitude needed to fulfill His mission. In so doing, Our Lord teaches us much about conforming our lives to the Father's will.

In the early centuries of Church history, many holy men followed the pattern set by Jesus. For weeks or years -- a special few for a lifetime -- they went to the wilderness to detach themselves from the distractions of the world and enter the solitude of the heart. In the austere silence of the desert and amplified stillness of the soul, they sought communion with God: a continuous awareness of His presence about them, among them, and in them. Through this union, they yearned to make the whole of their being a conduit of the Father's love, a receptive channel through which divine charity could flow into the lives of others.

The "desert fathers," as they came to be known, knew that the call to the desert was a radical call. The desert would allow for no pretense or disguise, no haughtiness or pride, no shortcut or delusion. It was a call to radical simplicity and radical integrity. It was a call to hard living, self-restraint, and unyielding mortification. It was a call to fortitude and steadfastness, perseverance and strength. It was a call to vigilance, and a call to honesty, truth, and humility. The wilderness offered no hiding place. All lay bare and exposed in the barren desert.

For the desert dwellers, the external perils of the wilderness were mirrors of their interior struggles. The barren environment represented man's impoverished condition and need for a savior. The wild beasts were reminders of unbridled passions and heinous sin. And the restless spirits who roamed the arid wasteland were Satan's pawns, tormenting and tempting the beleaguered and the unaware. Yes, the desert offered countless opportunities to develop virtue while wrestling vice. And, when God's grace met with man's cooperation, the desert became the furnace in which fire-tried holiness was forged. The desert experience, in all its severity and asceticism, was meant to do one thing and one thing alone: to bring all aspects of one's life into union with God in Christ.



The background is a sepia-toned photograph of a desert landscape. The foreground is dominated by a vast, cracked, and dry lake bed, with the cracks forming a complex, polygonal pattern. In the distance, there are low, dark mountains or hills. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds, and a bright sun is positioned in the upper right quadrant, creating a strong lens flare effect that radiates across the sky. The overall mood is one of desolation and natural beauty.

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LENT: A DESERT EXPERIENCE

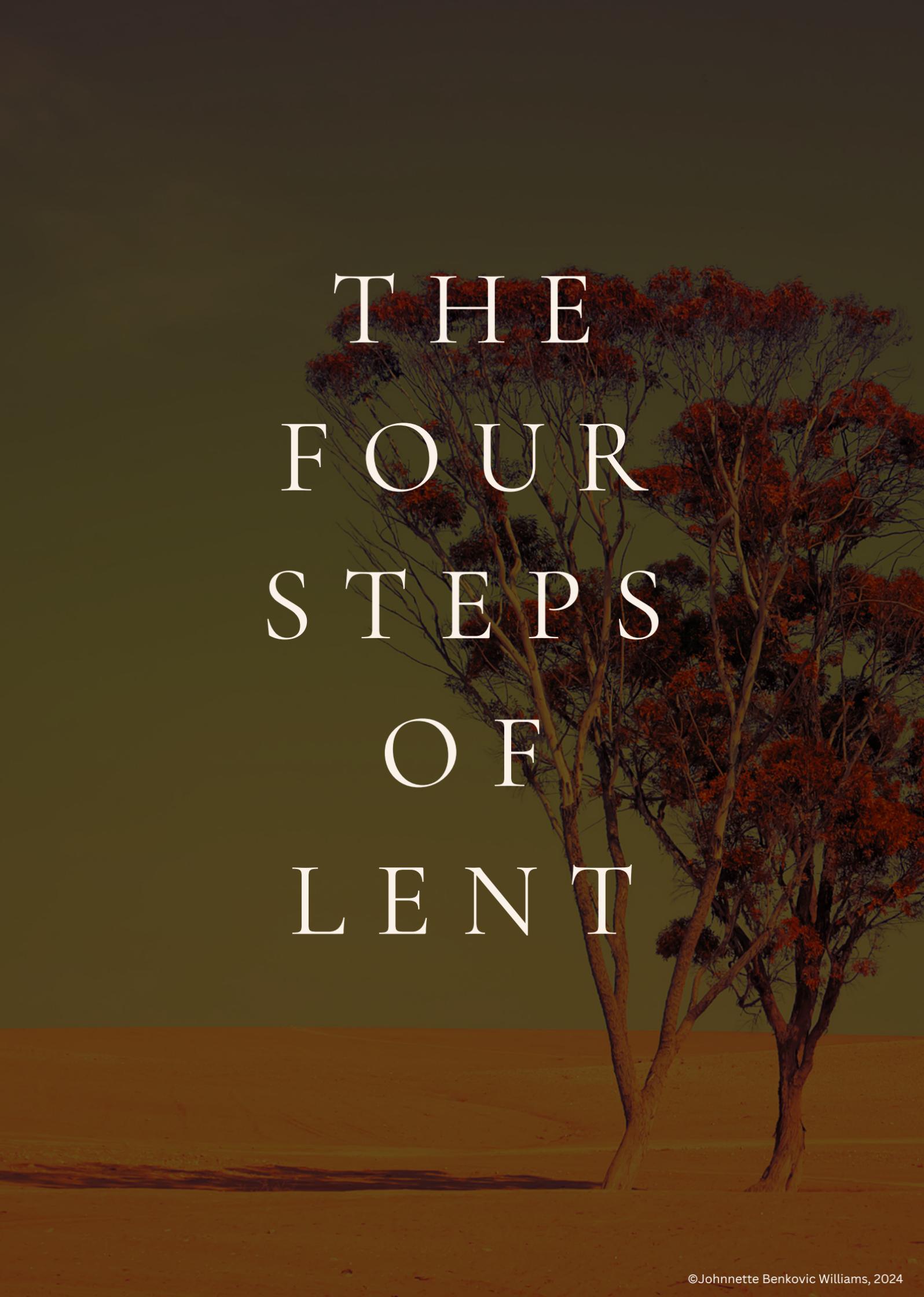
By virtue of our baptism, all of us are called to mission that has both an exterior and an interior quality. God intends for us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are to bring His word, His love, His healing to His people. Each of us is called to be a conduit of the Divine Life in the world in which we live. That is the exterior mission we have been given.

But, in order to accomplish this holy task, we need to bring everything within us into conformity with the Father's will. Our words, our deeds, our actions, our attitudes, our hopes, our dreams -- everything needs to be brought into right order according to God's holy plan for mankind. Our fundamental vocation as baptized Christians is to holiness of life. And, as Our Lord Himself shows us, this comes about through union with God. If He who was perfect went into the desert to be prepared for His mission of redemption, then how much more do we, who are imperfect, need this time of preparation as we seek to fulfill our mission as the sons and daughters of God?

Few of us will be called to spend forty days and forty nights in the desert. And most likely none of us will be called to the rigorous asceticism of the desert fathers. But, through the liturgical season of Lent, all of us are called to a desert experience.

In her wisdom, Holy Mother Church offers us this season to spiritually retreat from the distractions of the world and focus our attention on the great gift of our life in Christ Jesus. It is a time for each member of the Mystical Body to consider our holy union with Christ in the Father. It is a time to nurture our relationship with God even as we consider the treasure of our redemption. It is a time to face our own "wild beasts" of sin and vice and tame them with virtue and grace. And, it is a time to seek deliverance from the "spirits" that plague us – self-indulgence, unhealthy habits, lustful passions, harmful attitudes, unchristian ways of thinking. It is a time to pray and fast and do penance. And, it is a time to be a conduit of the Father's love in the lives of others. Lent is a season for renewal and rebirth, regeneration and recommitment. How, then, do we enter the experience?





THE
FOUR
STEPS
OF
LENT

LET GO OF DISTRACTIONS

We are a distracted people; Lent invites us to detach. It invites us to come away for a while and listen for the Father's voice. As we read in the Old Testament, God speaks in a "tiny whisper" (cf. 1 Kings 19: 11-13). We must slow down the tempo of our lives and tone down the volume of our days if we are to hear the voice of God. We must minimize the activity and noise and maximize the quiet and solitude. We must create a "desert" for ourselves – a quiet spot at home or in the backyard, a neighborhood park, or before the Blessed Sacrament or the tabernacle in our parish. All of these may provide precisely the perfect place of retreat.

We should seek the "desert" in the environment of our daily lives rather than searching out the unusual or special. As St. Teresa of Avila writes, *"We need no wings to go in search of Him, but have only to find a place where we can be alone and look upon Him present within us."* Our time of prayer will go much better and be more fruitful if we practice the presence of God on a regular basis. Turning off the television and the radio, pruning back some of the unnecessary activities of our daily lives, replacing recreational reading with inspirational reading are all ways we can "close out" the clutter and clatter and "close in" the reality of God's presence within us. God desires to commune with us. But, the clutter and the clatter can crowd Him out.

Lent provides us with opportunities to develop a contemplative attitude toward our lives. Our "desert" should include a time of reflection that looks back over the day in light of God's word to see what He may be revealing. Attention to the liturgical readings of the Lenten season provides an ideal framework in which to contemplate the movement of God in the midst of our life's events.



EXAMINE OURSELVES

St. Teresa of Calcutta said, *“We cannot decide to become saints without a great effort of renunciation, of resisting temptations, of combat, of persecution, and all sorts of sacrifices. It is not possible to love God except at one’s own expense.”* How this wisdom contrasts with the tenor of today’s culture, which urges us to have it all, do it all, and pursue it all! But, St. Teresa’s words state what Jesus Himself instructs us to do: “Pick up your cross and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

Like the wilderness provided for the desert fathers, our Lent provides us with the opportunity to confront ourselves, and everything within us, that needs to be renounced, converted, changed and sacrificed. We must ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate our darkness that we might submit it to the mercy of God. In this way, we come closer to Him who is All Holy. Therefore, part of our nighttime reflection should be an examination of conscience based on the Ten Commandments, the teachings of the Church, and the Beatitudes. In light of these holy mandates, we should look honestly at our actions, our thoughts and attitudes, and the words we have spoken throughout the day. Our Christian call is to be a conduit of the Father’s love. How nearly have we conformed to this ideal through the course of our day?

Be on the alert for any repetitive weaknesses, tendencies, or sins. When we err in a certain way on an on-going basis, it is time to wage a holy war against that particular vice or weakness.

Lent is the perfect time for the struggle, and the desert fathers give us good instruction on how to do it – practice the virtue opposite the vice. If the struggle is with avarice or greed, practice generosity. If the struggle is with gossip and criticism, restrain the tongue. If the struggle is with sins against purity (pornography, unclean thoughts or desires, immodest dress), clean house: replace indecent thoughts with holy thoughts, change the wardrobe. Lent offers us the opportunity to put these debilities of the spirit to rest once and for all. At the end of forty days, we will have overcome a bad habit with a good one and Christ will be victorious in us.

Finally, make Lent an opportunity to confront some of the major obstacles and hindrances in our lives. Through the light of grace, face the truth of our situation. If we have an addiction to any substance or behavior, if we are living in a relationship that is outside of God’s laws, if we are abusive in word or deed, if we need inner healing, if we have been caught up in the occult, now is the time to break with it. God is giving us the grace; we need to cooperate with it. Seek the spiritual and emotional help necessary.

NURTURE THE INTERIOR LIFE

The barrenness of the desert produced great spiritual fruit in the lives of the desert fathers. So, too, our Lenten “desert” can yield an abundant harvest for us as well. Daily prayer and a regular examination of conscience should lead us to the sacraments, to pious devotion, and to works of mercy.

In her wisdom, Holy Mother Church instructs us to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation during the season of Lent. It is through this sacrament that we receive the grace necessary to overcome the tactics and wiles of the evil one, to gain ground in our battle against personal sin, and to deal a mortal blow to particular weaknesses and failings.

But, the Sacrament of Reconciliation does more besides. *“The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. This is the purpose of ... the sacrament of Penance (CCC #1421).”* Through the grace of regeneration available in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, our sins are forgiven and health is restored. Once again, our souls become a fertile garden, capable of producing the sweetest of fruit.

Such an interior disposition of heart leads to a deeper devotion to the things of God. Reception of the Eucharist becomes what Our Lord intended it to be: a moment of union with His Real Presence; the liturgy becomes an opportunity to enter more deeply into the Sacred Mysteries; recitation of the Rosary, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, private prayer, and other pious devotions work within the receptive soul to produce abundant fruit.

Like a garden irrigated by natural springs, grace bubbles up in the devout soul from the Fountain of Life Who is the Holy Spirit. And, as the springs prepare the soil for new growth, the grace in a holy soul enriches the lives of others through works of mercy and charitable acts. *“All that we do to transform and improve our souls serves the divine cause”* (Servant of God Elisabeth Leseur). And that divine cause is the salvation of souls. Our life in Christ, nurtured through the sacraments and pious devotion, becomes a source of new life for others.



TREASURE THE GIFT OF REDEMPTION

Through His act of total self-donation, Jesus pours out His most precious blood that we might be saved from the evils of sin and death. The Cross of Christ becomes the tree of life and all who embrace it find salvation.

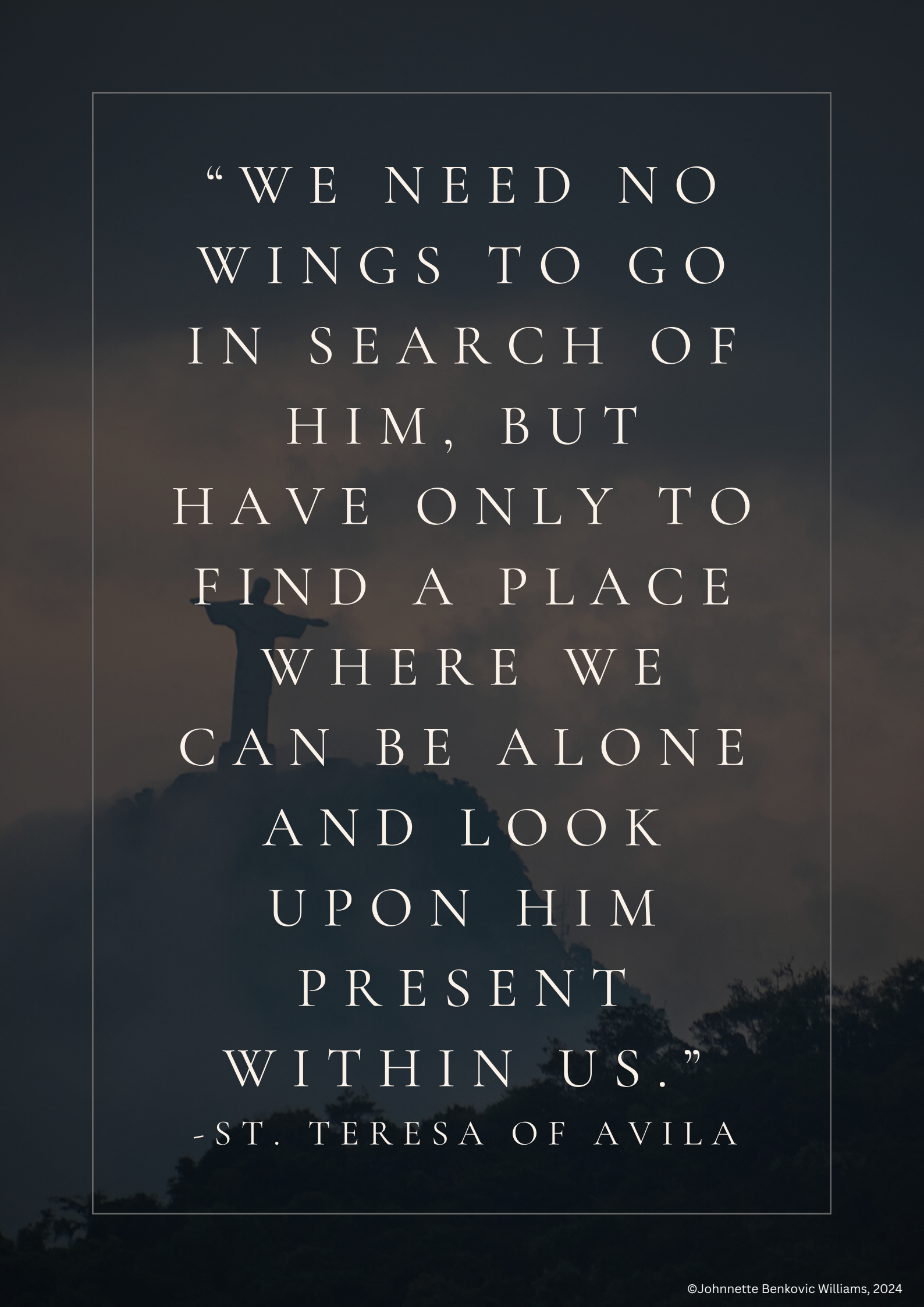
To cultivate reverence and gratitude for the passion of Jesus, we must enter into it. We must allow ourselves to meditate upon the great mystery of our salvation and the love which informed it. We must sojourn with Jesus along the Via Dolorosa uniting to His passion our weaknesses, our frailties, our sufferings, our struggles. We must keep watch at the foot of the cross with Mary, our mother, and St. John – silent witnesses to the most important moment in human history. We must hold Our Lord's tortured body in our arms, as did our Mother. And, we must lay Him to rest in the dark tomb, anticipating what Mary and John may only have known by faith, that Jesus will rise, and sin and death will be overcome.

The Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross will lead us into the passion. A prayerful reading of the passion accounts in the Gospels will cultivate gratitude for our redemption. Fruitful meditation of the passion will stir holy devotion and reverence for the wounds of Christ. By entering the Paschal Mystery our own sufferings will become a source of grace for ourselves and others as we unite them to the passion of Jesus Christ.

Our retreat to the Lenten Desert can be a source of abundant life for us and for others. God is always giving us the grace to grow in holiness and relationship with Him. We have only to cooperate with it. Through prayer, meditation, repentance, conversion, reception of the sacraments, pious devotions, works of mercy, and loving reflection on the paschal mystery, our “desert” will produce much fruit and yield a great harvest.

Let us seek to make this Lent, then, a time of discovery. As we retreat into our “desert” may we find there the love of God, the courage of Christ, and the perseverance of the desert fathers so that we might be the salt of the earth and a light in the world today.





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