The Desert of Compassion

Devotions for the Lenten Journey

Rachel M. Srubas

WJK Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville • Kentucky

"Rachel M. Srubas weaves a rich fabric of spiritual and psychological wisdom, knitting the personal and communal, inward and outward, ordinary and profound. Each meditation sparkles with a vivid story and masterful metaphor. Her gift for overhearing the divine voice amplifying each Scripture often arrested me in my tracks. Every page is laced with word associations that break open fresh meaning. Over and over, her words led me to deep reflection and contemplative awareness. I didn't want this book to end. It is one I will return to often and gift to others."

—**MARJORIE THOMPSON**, author of *Soul Feast*

"During Lent, we recall Jesus' sojourn in the desert—a time for generosity, simplicity, and, most of all, prayer. Rachel Srubas's vivid meditations make the season come alive as she invites us into our own desert places where Christ meets us with a love that will transform our hearts."

—**CARL MCCOLMAN**, author of *Eternal Heart*
and *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism*

"Presbyterian minister and Benedictine oblate Rachel Srubas not only resides in the Sonoran Desert but also is immersed in desert spirituality. So, when you choose this desert dweller as your guide for this Lenten journey, you will get Scripture references, evocative stories, reflections, pauses, prayers, and Sabbath rest-stop experiences. You will savor the short Scriptures, hear what a divine voice might be saying, smile at the personal stories, and be lulled into contemplative repose when you dive deeply into Lent with *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*."

—**TERESA BLYTHE**, director of the Phoenix Center for
Spiritual Direction and author of *50 Ways to Pray*
and *Spiritual Direction 101*

"Rachel Srubas has transformed my experience of Lent, rearranging my expectations for this sacred season. 'Compassion flourishes' in the Lenten journey, she says. And here's what she means by that: Lent is a compassion practice–a grace-filled path of experiencing and enacting divine compassion for ourselves, others, and the world."

—**ANDREW DREITCER**, Professor of Spirituality and Codirector of the
Center for Engaged Compassion, Claremont School of Theology

Find digital resources for study,
worship, and sharing at
www.wjkbooks.com/DesertOfCompassion

For Laura Munroe, Shirin McArthur,
and Brad Munroe—
desert dwellers, faithful friends,
creative keepers of the Word.

Contents

Orientation at the Trailhead

*W*elcome, traveler. You and I are about to embark on a journey through the Lenten desert with the compass of compassion in hand. To orient you toward the days ahead, I offer you here a few wayfinding words.

The reading for each weekday and Saturday of Lent begins with a Scripture passage relevant to the day's compassion-centered theme. An italicized message follows in which an imagined divine voice speaks. An ornamental break then suggests a meditative pause. The day's devotion goes on to explore a feature of Lent's inner and outer landscapes, concluding with a prayer. On each Sunday, a "Sabbath Rest Stop" introduces the coming week's compassion-focused theme and encourages you to devote part of the day to worshiping God with others. The book concludes where Lent reaches its culmination: three sacred days signifying God's encompassing compassion for all creation, made real in Jesus' death and resurrection.

If there's a spiritual journey more needful these days than the trek through life's hard places toward the sacred land of loving-kindness, I don't know what it might be. What I do know is this: I'm setting out on the wilderness way that points toward Easter's promise of mercy and wholeness for all. Our mutual companionship in Lent, yours and mine, could make the lonesome valley less so.

Lent's Early Days

Go to the Land That I Will Show You

Ash Wednesday

Go from Here

> Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."
> —Genesis 12:1–2

> *Leave everything you know and everyone you love. Walk away from the land you live on, the language you speak, the relations who connect you to this place, the ancestors who anchor you in history. On the strength of nothing but my word, with nothing to go on but your faith in me, set out for a future you cannot imagine. I have great intentions for you and for people yet to be blessed through your trust in me. You can't prepare yourself for what I will do. You can only follow my voice.*

There once lived a monk named Father Louis. In the heart of a century, at the heart of a country, in a monastery called Gethsemani, he was appointed master of scholastics. In this role he ministered to monks preparing for the priesthood. This was, he confessed in his private diary, a responsibility he had once feared would interfere with his single-hearted relationship with God. But six months into the work, he understood that "the care of souls can serve to lead one further into the desert." The desert, for all its severity and solitude, was the place where Father Louis, better known as Thomas Merton, felt summoned to go.

"What is my new desert?" he asked. "The name of it is compassion. There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid, and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion. It is the only desert that will flourish like the lily."[1]

The desert, as Merton's words make evident, is a paradox, a place and a spiritual condition in which terror leads to beauty and aridity bears fruit. Compassion is such a desert. The "com" of compassion means "with" and "passion" means "suffer" but can also mean ardor, all-consuming love. Compassion is the human capacity to do what God does in Jesus: suffer with another out of deep, self-giving love and discover that through such suffering comes solace and—dare I say it?—even joy.

I call this book *The Desert of Compassion* because I am a follower of Jesus and the desert is the place where he went for forty days to fast, pray, and prepare for the life God intended him to live and give. Jesus' forty days of desertion and temptation led him to a compassionate ministry so fruitful it made water sweeten into wine, bent-over women stand upright, blind men see, and dying children live. Jesus loved and suffered with broken-backed, overlooked, written-off people. He entered, heart and soul, into the deserts where they struggled in exile, having been deemed useless and demonic by their own society. In reality, they were God's beloved people, inherently worthy and intended for blessing. Jesus could see this as no one else could until he spat in the dirt and smeared the muddy plaster of compassion on the unseeing eyes of the world. Even then, many still refused to recognize who Jesus was and what he meant.

He means even now to lead you into the desert of compassion, the place within you where hurt gives rise to hope and devastation births the desire for redemption. You don't want to go there on your own, and why would you? Why would you want to go alone into that hospital room, that bad memory, that miserable meeting, that place of captivity, that land where people's lives are taken? The pain, the scary scenery, the struggle that summons you to the desert appears devoid of mercy and goodness.

And here is the holy dilemma. The only way to get to the goodness of God, to make it to the mercy that saves this world, is to move headlong into hardship and through it. I am not—let me hasten to say—urging you to go looking needlessly for trouble. I am saying that to

be human is to hurt, sometimes very badly. Yet the One who made us, the Creator whom Jesus called *Abba*, does not intend hardship to be a dead end but a point of departure toward a life so transformed it can only be called new.

Ash Wednesday is a day of departure, and Lent is a long walk down a desert path. Deceptive signs along the way may announce "NO OUTLET." But the follower of Jesus in the desert suspects that Jesus knows a truth the signs don't tell, and presses on, fear be damned. In this journey through Lent, I offer to walk with you day by day. I reflect on some old Scripture stories and on some newer situations that echo the gospel calling us to love God, ourselves, and others with abandon. In so doing, we will surely die and rise.

Rising sounds good. It's the dying we dread. It's the suffering—our own and other people's—that we often try to circumvent, and that gets us nowhere. So, in these pages I also offer prayers to help you get to the land that God will show you. Take this book with you as you set out on your desert pilgrimage toward a compassionate life. Along the way, may your heart be broken open in blessing.

God of dust and ashes, of departures and paradox,
why did you let Jesus hurt and die like us?
Lead me to the desert where I may come to understand.
Make me brave enough to feel the heat of the day,
the hungers of my body, the beat of my heart,
and your love for all mortal flesh.
Amen.

First Thursday of Lent

The Roundabout Way

> When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt." So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle."
>
> —Exodus 13:17–18

A route may appear to include few detours and delays. But there are no shortcuts. The seeming fast track will force you to backtrack and consume the time you meant to save. The wilderness path to the eventually parted Red Sea wends through hard terrain because the only way home is the long way. You can neither rush it nor go it alone. Alone, you'll get lost in a hurry. With me, you'll reach your destination in due time.

Lent's opening day is behind you. No one's forehead bears an ashy smudge today. Clean-faced, forge ahead into this season with only a general sense of direction. You're bound for Easter, weeks away.

The original, literal meaning of the English word "Lent" is to lengthen. In the Northern Hemisphere, as Earth emerges slowly from winter's dark, the daylight hours lengthen and natural signs of new life appear. Trees sprout tender green leaves. Infant birds break free from their shells, blessedly oblivious to climate change. They know only that it's spring, it's their birthday, and they're hungry.

Maybe you're hungry, too, for light or renewal. Perhaps you have a goal in mind for Lent, something you'd like to get out of this season or accomplish by Easter Sunday. Hope and the hunger for transformation are good. Notice them. Feel their creative energy urging you forward from within. And hold humbly the notion that you can know where you're going or how long it will take you to get there. Make plans, but remember, God's purposes and pace can't be predicted or controlled. You can guess, but you can't foretell the changes you'll go through. Or will the changes go through you? Time will tell, but how much time? You'll grow into knowing, slowly. Revelation can't be hustled.

A few years into our marriage, when we were graduate students in our hometown, Chicago, my husband (a little like Abram called to go from his country and kindred) ventured to a desert neither of us knew, for a job interview. During that visit to faraway Tucson, Arizona, Ken bought me a necklace. He gave it to me after he learned he'd landed the job. At the end of a black silken cord hung a rectangular silver locket that opened like a book. Inside, a paper strip, accordion-folded, could be unfurled to reveal a topographic design and this handwritten message: "The map is not the territory." The necklace was Ken's way of saying, "Come away with me on a journey into the desert. I don't know where it will take us, but together, we'll find out."

In August, like broke tenants skipping out on the rent (we weren't), we emptied our apartment and left town after dark, during the coolest available hours. A heatwave was bearing down on the states we'd have to drive through, our car lacked an air conditioner, and we would be transporting two housecats more stressed-out than we were. We had never been enslaved—far from it. But maybe we felt a little like the liberated Israelites who followed God by the roundabout way, prepared for battle. We were armed only with the belief that together, by faith, we would get through this unmapped stretch of our life and be led where we needed to go.

Deep in Oklahoma, we wearily scanned the highway exits for someplace open at that ungodly hour where we could get caffeine and food. There it was, squat and glowing at the edge of an unlit frontage road—a Waffle House with a burned-out "W" on its otherwise luminous sign. Ken said aloud what we both were thinking: "It's an Awful House."

When the only way station in sight is an Awful House serving up hot, brown water and calling it "coffee," you know you've entered the wilderness. We sat at a table among the smattering of truckers. Fatigue, grief, and fear waged war on my heart. I felt tempted to hitch a ride back to the place I'd always called home. My sister and her then-little boys had thrown us a send-off party. They'd baked us a cake decorated to look like a desert, with make-believe snakes slithering through cinnamon-sugar sands. That cake tasted sweeter than the tepid waffle in front of me now. But hadn't God provided this waffle? Isn't a meal, however measly, eaten in the middle of a long, hard journey, a gift? I gave thanks for my breakfast and decided not to turn back.

It's not that gratitude eliminates grief, nor that prayer cancels fear. The roundabout trip through your life's wilderness will make you aware of how sad and scared you are. Along the way, you will pause, exhausted, and feel it all: the loss of your familiars, the doubts about where on earth you're heading and why. It may seem you're getting nowhere. Sometimes you'll glimpse your goal but realize no direct path will take you to it. You'll have no choice but to take the circuitous route.

Your body may help you understand this if you walk a sacred labyrinth during Lent. A labyrinth symbolizes the roundabout way of the wilderness. Whether it's tiled into a cathedral floor, mown into a lawn, or painted onto a canvas mat, a labyrinth's circuits are meant to be walked in slow, prayerful circles not unlike those the Israelites walked toward the Red Sea. They may have asked the same questions you'll ask: Why, the closer you get to its end, does the journey become more convoluted? What's the point? The point is the path itself, and you, following it on sheer faith.

God of the journey, you meet me coming and going.
Show me, one step at a time, the path I'm meant to follow.
Keep me from getting ahead of myself.
Walk beside me, and when I get tired,
lead me to places where I can be fed and bed down.
Watch over the interstate saints, the truckers and short-order cooks,
gas station cashiers and all whose labors make navigable
the dark, roundabout way.
Amen.

First Friday of Lent

The Wellspring of Everyone's Well-Being

> But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." . . . So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.
>
> —Genesis 21: 9–10, 14

To the one whose blessedness turned to bitter laughter, I offer the mercy she refused to show her neighbor. The one who divided his own heart, reducing to rivals those to whom he portioned out its broken pieces, I love wholeheartedly, nevertheless. The forsaken ones whose masters cast them into the wilderness, I meet in the places of their depletion, to dig for them a freshwater well. And they drink.

In Lent, you enter the season of repentance. You follow the voice that calls through the prophet Joel, "Return to me with all your heart" (2:12). To repent is to return to God with your heart wide open, so that over time, you may be turned by mercy into a truer version of yourself: healed, uncorrupted, and kind.

The return trip to God, as yesterday's reflection on the roundabout wilderness way pointed out, is winding and long. It's the journey of a

lifetime; it takes you your whole life to make it. As every Sunday is a little Easter that celebrates the resurrection no single day can contain, so every Lent is a little lifetime. This Lent is one leg in your lifelong trip toward transformative compassion.

By the vulnerable way of Lenten repentance, you'll make your way back to God. Your task in this season is to seek, day by day and prayer by prayer, the One who calls you to return. Part of your spiritual work is to ask yourself, with utmost gentleness and courage, *Why did you leave? Who drove you out? Where did you go? What will it take to restore you?* The answers aren't likely to come fast. When they do eventually come, listen long and well, as the One to whom you pray listens to you. Allow time for silence. It may convey insights you can't come by otherwise.

Were you to ask Abram and Sarai, "Why did you leave? Who drove you out? Where did you go?" before their fortunes increased and their names were altered, they would say they left their ancestral homeland because the Lord dispatched them to Canaan, promising through them to bless all families of the earth. But ask the same questions of Hagar, and she could tell you the story of her sexual enslavement. When the son Hagar bore to Abram at Sarai's behest posed an emotional and economic threat to the covenantal couple's family, they colluded to drive Hagar and Ishmael to their deaths in the Negev Desert. Hagar laid her little boy under the shade of a bush, sat a bow-shot's distance from him, and prayed he wouldn't die of thirst.

Water is life. Opening her eyes, Hagar found a water well she hadn't seen before. The Lord of life turns up at wells where women weep and work and wait for salvation, their own and their children's. Hagar filled her bottle and gave Ishmael a saving drink. The two of them had committed no sin. They returned to the Lord not by the repentant way of confession and amends, but by a fount of blessing that led them back to life.

Abraham and Sarah, beneficiaries of a culture of enslavement, did not seem to see any need to repent of the harm they had done to Hagar and son. Today, however, white-privileged readers of their story may be prompted to ask, what harm has our social group's undeserved supremacy done to minoritized people? What reparations have we left unmade?

Readers in communities of color may see themselves, their families,

cultures, and histories in Hagar's oppression and her son's helpless dependence. Black and brown readers may repent by way of social resistance, refusing to drink any longer from their oppressors' wells, returning to God by reclaiming stolen sacred lands, languages, and rights. Where communal memories of enslavement and exile reverberate as truthfully as Hagar's and Ishmael's story reverberates now, repentance, in Lent or any season, can't remain purely private.

Nothing, not even your spirituality, is yours alone. From your smallest gesture to your grandest intention, you live your life alongside all other creatures. From the water you drink to the plumber who fixes your sink, everything and everyone exists in a network of creation and culture. The innermost shifts you make to turn prayerfully Godward cause ripples that reach your neighbors. Remember them as you seek to make your way back to God.

Hearing others' stories, letting their struggles infuse your awareness, can cause you to care about people you may never personally know, whose humanity intersects with yours all the same. Compassionate openness on your part can influence not only how you feel but also how you vote, the books you read, the products you purchase. Openness toward others can advance your becoming the wholehearted person God calls you to be.

Your name is on God's lips. Today, whether you identify with Hagar and Ishmael in their desertion by powerful people, or, like Sarah and Abraham, you possess the power to force your will on others, you are called to turn toward the wellspring of everyone's well-being. Drink deep and come clean in waters that restore the rejected and carry their abandoners to justice with mercy. Return to the One who forsakes no one.

How have I forsaken you, my God?
Lead me to listen in silence
for your guidance. Teach me to listen
to people pushed to their limits,
whose exploiters have deserted them.
Let your compassion for rejected children and women
teach a better way than exploitation.
Finder of wanderers, call us all back to the well
where your restorative waters flow.
Amen.

First Saturday of Lent

Be Found in Solitude

> Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way." The disciples said to him, "Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?"
>
> —Matthew 15:30–33

When the weak and the strong rely on one another, the web of interdependence shines. Fortunate people taste their own hunger. Mercy nourishes depleted caregivers and equally strengthens the ones they support. In the desert of my compassion, there is bread enough for all.

"We're being 'californicated'!" So claim some Phoenicians, Tucsonans, and other desert dwellers of Arizona, where I live. *Californication* conveys a bitter whiff of territoriality—maybe even xenophobia. But the trends reflected in the term don't lie. At the time of this book's publication, the most recent available data on gross domestic migration showed "California contributed by far the most migrants to Arizona."[1]

I'm a migrant, myself, from Illinois, one of the top ten states from

which people relocate to Arizona. I've got no business resenting anyone who moves to this desert from someplace else. But as increasing numbers of people have migrated to the Southwest, desert sprawl, "low-density, haphazard development spiraling outward from urban centers," has increased, damaging ecological and social environments.[2] It's a hazardous thing to overdevelop and crowd the desert, a landscape naturally arid, hot, and fragile.

Desert crowding is not a new phenomenon. As long ago as the year 360 CE, a Christian leader named Athanasius of Alexandria described the migration of contemplative Christians into the stark Egyptian wilderness: "The desert was made a city by monks who left their own people, and enrolled themselves for citizenship in the Heavens."[3] Although far smaller than a sprawling, desert metropolis such as Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (which has experienced massive population growth in recent decades), the fourth century "city" founded by monastic men and women points to the desert's spiritual allure. Its austere terrain attracts some seekers of a deeper inner life than they find in populous areas. But mass migration to the desert overbuilds its simplicity and crowds out its serenity.

In roughly the same time and place that Athanasius of Alexandria described the monastic desert city, a contemplative Egyptian woman named Syncletica, who served as a spiritual director to other women, came to be revered as a Desert Mother. Syncletica honored varying human temperaments and spiritual styles. "Each person should have confidence in his own disposition," she said. Syncletica prized the solitude that the physical desert encouraged, but acknowledged that the spiritual desert is an internal dwelling place where anyone may abide: "Many people, then, have found salvation in a city while imagining the conditions of a desert. . . . It is possible for one who is in a group to be alone in thought."[4]

If you feel called to the contemplative path of simplicity, prayerfulness, and reflection, you can pursue it wherever you are. A natural desert's wide earthen stretches and wind-sculpted rock formations may move you to reflect on the beautiful brevity of your life. But landscape alone can't make or break your spirituality. Syncletica urges people to venture in solitude into their interior desert, the silent center of the self where the Christ of compassion makes the maimed whole and feeds hungering souls.

This Lent, if you're aching for stillness, understanding, rest, or personal healing, it's because you're being sought. Your longing and unease are leading you to look for God, who is seeking to transform your hurts and yearnings into your wholeness and fulfillment. Jesus said of himself that he "came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). In the hymn "Amazing Grace," Englishman John Newton's phrase, "I once was lost," expresses the sense of spiritual desertion that drives people to look for God, who is never missing but is frequently missed. Once the lost seeker feels the breakthrough of divine compassion, the lyrical cry becomes, "But now I'm found."[5]

Like the undernourished crowd seeking Jesus' help for hurting loved ones, "found" people are fed. Folks who have never suffered from insufficient nutrition can experience spiritual hunger. A lack of love or a relentlessly crowded calendar can famish the soul. The communion needed then, according to Syncletica, is prayerful time alone.

The desert is intrinsic to everyone. You carry your desert inside you. Go there in solitude. In time you'll be fed by the Holy One who locates the lost and nourishes the hungry in the desert.

When I turn to you, thoughts crowd my solitude.
Distractions demand the attention I intend for you alone.
I'm lost and lacking the bread of your silence.
Come, find me. I'll wait.
Amen.