



**Department of Religious Education**  
Diocese of the Armenian Church of America  
630 Second Avenue • New York, NY 10016-4806

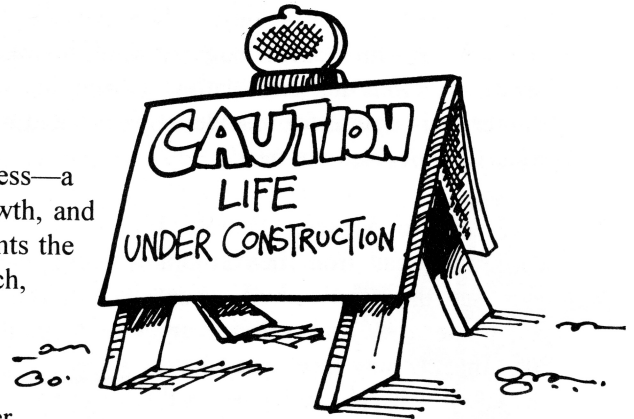
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## THE LENTEN JOURNEY

### The Wilderness

The Lenten journey begins in the wilderness—a place of tangled vines, disorder, rank growth, and spiritual twilight. The wilderness represents the interior self, our spiritual dimension, which, when due to the scant attention we give to it most of the year, becomes thick with overgrown weeds that choke our life and openness to God and to each other.

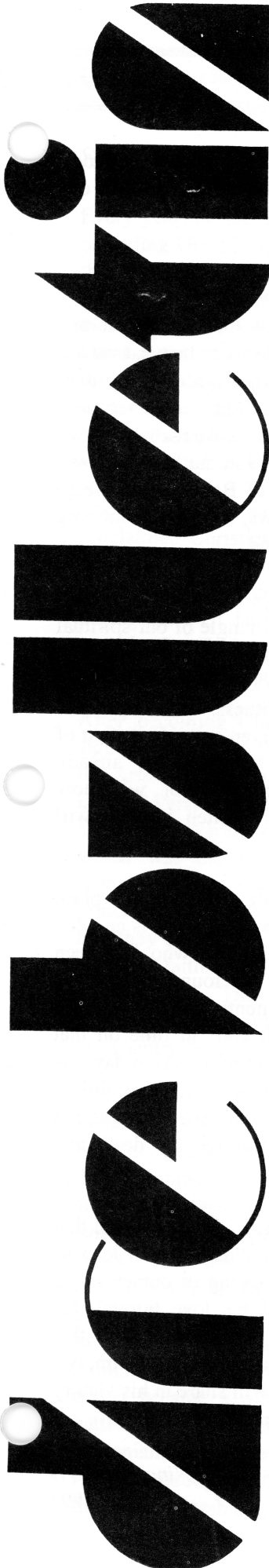


The Israelites in their flight from Egypt had to pass through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land; in our spiritual journey to greater growth, we cannot avoid our own inner wilderness. We cannot bypass it or take any detour to avoid it if we are going to reach our destination, for, in order to grow spiritually, we must first face the reality of our own condition. When we do turn and face the entanglements of our inner life, we open ourselves up to the change and growth which can then begin to take place.

One of the basic principles of quantum physics is that to examine a phenomenon is to cause it to change. Nowhere is this principle more applicable than in the spiritual life. To search ourselves honestly, to face the morass of inner contradictions and unresolved pain within ourselves, is to set in motion the process of healing and renewal.

As we enter the wilderness of our Lenten journey, we must attempt to identify and name that interior darkness. We may find that a primary cause of this darkness, of this internal disorder, is our lack of faithfulness to a regular time of prayer and communion with God. Too often a neglect of regularity in this essential activity of the Christian life can prevent us from opening up to God's transforming love, through which we can be led to a more creative, vital, and vulnerable way of life and so into deeper communion with our sisters and brothers.

But whatever the cause of the chaos of that inner landscape, the initial task on the Lenten journey is to restore that inner landscape to order. It must be pruned, weeded, and the ground must be ploughed so that seeds for new growth can be sown. Through the light of Christ's love and the fresh breeze of the Spirit, the wilderness can take on the appearance of a garden fertile and fruitful for God.



## The Manna

We are fed by God in the wilderness on our Lenten journey. He knows that we need spiritual sustenance as we attempt to untangle our inner lives and restore order. We need the affirmation and manifestation of his love to support us as we give attention to the disarray within.

But just as the Israelites were fed only what they needed each day of their journey, so we are given only what we need. Lent is not a time when we are to ask for profound spiritual knowledge or illuminating truths or mystical visions that may distract us from our inner work. Rather, it is a time for silence, stillness, and openness to what God decides we need.

God said to Moses, "Behold I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day that I may prove whether they will walk in my law or not" (*Exodus 16:4*). As with the Israelites, our faith is deepened and developed most effectively when we are given only what is essential for the moment—only the amount of light needed for the next step, only the little bit of knowledge necessary to undertake the next task. The spiritual benefits to be gained from such economy are a lowering of expectations, a contentment with what is known, a profound gratitude, and a deeper receptivity. One begins to understand that a person must be truly hungry for God to receive and be nourished by the manna which he sends.

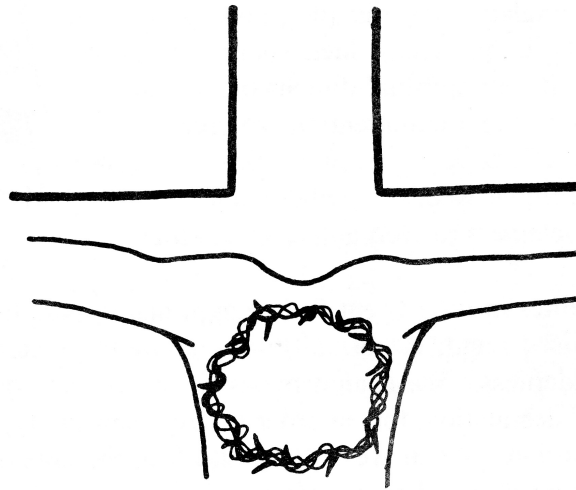
True hunger for God is one of the symbolic aspects of the physical fast we undertake during Lent. But the underlying purpose of fasting is the commitment to a deprivation that keeps one aware that our real bread, our super-essential bread and the only bread that satisfies, is the bread of heaven—the bread God gives us in the form of his Son, the bread that was broken for us in the form of his Son, the bread that was broken for us that we might be given the food of eternal life.

The daily distribution of the manna thus symbolizes our dependency on God for exactly and only what we need. And through communion with him, he totally satisfies

that need in the form of that ultimate bread—the body and blood of our Lord, which feeds us and insures our life for all eternity.

## The Promised Land

Lent is a time of sadness as we look within at our failures, our inadequacies, our inability to be what we are called to be. During Lent, we sense more keenly than ever that we are truly in exile from God. In our renewed self-awareness and resulting penitence, we realize that we are far from our Father's home, and in our alienation we can only sit down by the waters of Babylon and weep. We hang our harps on the willows, for we cannot sing the Lord's song in this foreign land.



But even in our alienation, even in the dark tangle of our spiritual wilderness, we are aware through our sorrows and through our tears of a brightness: the hope of a promise given, an anticipation of glory, a radiance that already lights our path—for we know where our Lenten journey will end.

Our journey ends at both a place and a time. The place is an open tomb where one who had been crucified and buried is not to be found, where we encounter a figure in shining garments who tells us, "He is not here for he has risen!" It ends in time on that eighth day, that day of all days, that resurrection day, the ultimate moment, when time begins anew for the children of God, who no longer fear death and have been restored to communion with the Father through the death and resurrection of his Son.

So, as we begin our Lenten journey, we are assured that the one who has brought us life abundant will lead us through the wilderness of the renewing of ourselves; he will feed us with the manna of his love through his broken body and blood, and as we move toward that promised land of deepened communion with him, we rejoice in the confidence that we will share in his victory over death on that glorious resurrection morning!

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