

Lori Erickson Sermon
Ash Wednesday, 2024
New Song Episcopal Church
Entering the Cave of Lent

Well, Happy Valentine's Day to all of you! Don't you think we should get extra spiritual credit for giving up a celebration of romantic love for an evening at church?

Though actually, when you think about it, Ash Wednesday is also about love. Not romantic love, but instead *agape*, the selfless love that led Jesus to the cross.

Each year our journey to that cross begins on Ash Wednesday. Speaking personally, this is my anniversary of coming back to Christianity. After being raised as a Lutheran, in my 20s and early 30s I wandered down a variety of spiritual paths, from Wicca and Buddhism to Unitarian Universalism, until I finally ended up in an Episcopal Church on an Ash Wednesday evening. I was surprised to find myself there, to be honest. Ashes on foreheads, a lot of talk about sin and repentance, and a reminder that I am going to die. It was the full-bore church experience, with nothing touchy-feely or happy-clappy about it. Whatever Ash Wednesday was, it certainly wasn't Christianity Lite.

But despite how foreign that service felt to someone who'd been away from church for a long time, it was also intriguing. Something about the mystery and power of Ash Wednesday hooked me, like a fish caught by a fisherman. Which I guess Jesus is, now that I think about it.

Ever since, I've loved Lent. I love how *rooted* it is, how ancient. I love the chance it gives us to dive deep, to take on something new. I love how it prepares us for the rebirth of the world in spring. And I love how it honors darkness and quiet.

This year, I'm thinking especially about caves in relation to Lent, which sounds weird but bear with me.

Some of you, I would guess, have read my latest book, *Every Step Is Home*. In it I explore spiritual sites and experiences in the United States through the lens of sacred elements such as water, fire, earth, and air. One of the chapters is on caves, which were likely the first religious sanctuaries. For more than 20,000 years, humans worshipped in caves. We know this because they left offerings and drew images on cave walls, deep underground, which can still be seen throughout Europe, especially.

I think the cave chapter in my new book is probably a stretch for a lot of readers, because not many of us think of caves as spiritual places—or even places that you want to tour with a guide. I'm not sure I'm very fond of caves, either. But they're a powerful metaphor as well as a powerful landscape, and tonight I want to talk a bit about how caves relate to Lent.

Mystics in many faiths have sought out caves, using them as retreats for prayer and meditation. And there are many myths that include caves, stories that symbolize the journey from light into

darkness. While we don't often find ourselves lost in an actual cave, being lost in interior darkness is all-too-common. Myths give us inspiration for how to deal with this terror, which is often personified as a fearsome creature such as a dragon or a Minotaur. These monsters guard treasures that can only be captured by those of great courage and determination. In the words of Joseph Campbell, an author and scholar who wrote extensively about myths: "Where you stumble, there lies your treasure. The very cave you are afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for."

Let me tell you about a contemporary mystic who looks to caves for inspiration, because I think his thoughts are especially applicable for Lent. Paul Kingsnorth is a British writer who is a recent convert to Christianity. Like me, he wandered through a variety of faiths before making the reluctant decision to become a Christian. I say *reluctant* because his conversion dismayed almost all of his friends, family and readers, most of whom are entirely secular. But Paul found something in the teachings of Jesus that answered a deep emptiness and longing in him, and because he is a gifted writer, we get the chance to follow along with him on his faith journey.

Paul Kingsnorth is, I think, a kind of prophet calling us back to older, deeper forms of Christianity. Not the religion of Christendom, of cathedrals, or of bishops. Instead he draws inspiration from nature, from the early Celtic Christian saints, and from the traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Last year, for example, to celebrate his 50th birthday, Kingsnorth spent the night in a cave near his home in Ireland. The cave is associated with St. Colman, an Irish saint of the seventh century. But the underground cavern was also a place to contemplate what Kingsnorth calls Cave Christianity.

In a recent essay, Kingsnorth writes about his experiences that night. He first defines Cave Christianity as the "spirituality of the hermit, the cave-dweller, the one who prays in the tombs . . . [the one] who dies to the world in order to awaken to the kingdom. It is a hard path. . . [but] I have a feeling that the cave Christians may prove to be our future as well as our past. [That's because] sometimes you need to refresh yourself at the spring; you need to hunt for the source of what gives you life, when the outward structures of your world visibly creak and shiver."

He draws inspiration from the life of St. Colman, who lived during the tumultuous years after the Roman Empire had collapsed, in a world that had shattered politically, culturally and spiritually. In response, Colman and many other saints took to wild places to worship God, stripping away everything that interfered with true worship.

Their goal was *theosis*, a Greek word meaning union with God. Theosis doesn't mean that we become gods or merge with God, but instead that we participate in the *energies* of God, the energies with which he reveals himself to us in creation. This mystical union occurs even though we still live in the world, still go to work and struggle and do our ordinary things, but underneath it all is a deep, divine river that carries us along.

It's important to realize that these early Christian saints didn't just **stay** in the darkness of the cave or the bleakness of the desert. That's because the wisdom they'd gained was needed in the

larger world. They became teachers and guides. They served as an example for a world that desperately needed their message.

Paul Kingsnorth believes (and I agree with him) that the message of these Cave Christians is increasingly relevant for today because we also live in a time of great political, cultural and spiritual change. “In a time when the temptation is always toward culture war rather than inner [transformation,]” he writes, “I think we could learn something from our spiritual ancestors. What we might learn is not that the external battle is never necessary; sometimes it very much is. But a battle that is uninformed by inner transformation will soon eat itself, and those around it. Why, after all, were the cave Christians so sought after? Because they were *not like other people*. Something had been granted to them, something had been earned, in their long retreats from the world. They had touched the hem. After years in the tombs or the caverns or the woods, their very unworldliness became, paradoxically, just what the world needed.”

So I invite you to think of the Lenten season as a sojourn in a cave, a trip to the underworld. We’re not going to actually sleep in a cave, like Paul Kingsnorth (or at least I’m not going to). But we can learn from the early Cave Christians and from their transformative journeys.

How can we do this? One way is to accept Lent’s invitation to do things differently, to help us experience this time as a set-apart season. Here at New Song, we have a different arrangement of chairs, with new icons on the walls to contemplate. On Wednesday evenings we’ll have programs that will include a simple supper, followed by a program relating to some sort of spiritual practice. We’ll get the chance to learn about icons, about the Jesuit tradition of the examination of conscience, and about visio divina, the practice of meditation on religious art. And one evening we’ll immerse ourselves in the silence and chants of a Taize service.

You can take on your own disciplines as well. You might consider fasting from social media or limit your time surfing your phone, for example. You might take on an extra period of prayer each day.

Whatever you do, Lent is an invitation to go into a cave, however you define that metaphorical landscape. This is a time to retreat, to delve deep, to be willing to sit in darkness.

Because it’s in darkness that we can truly see the light. It’s flickering in the distance, six weeks ahead of us.

So remember: in order to get to Easter, we first have to journey through the underworld.