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-- Twenty years ago this month, I hiked about 7 miles of the desert wilderness near where Jesus spent time in prayer and fasting. It was pretty stark, and there were dangers from rocks, boulders, snakes and other animals, and even flash floods. It was certainly not a place where you would want to be lost.

-- Jesus' experience here was not just a physical challenge but, more important, a spiritual challenge. He knew he had a special mission and a special relationship with his Father in heaven.

-- But so did the devil. And he struck at the heart of that relationship. He tempted Jesus to compromise that relationship by using his powers for himself and his glory and fame. But Jesus stood firm, even when the devil quoted scripture to him.

-- The desert experience has come to many people in many settings. Take Dorothy Day, who was in New York at the time of her desert experience. She had recently been baptized along with her young daughter. As a result, the father of her child deserted her, as did most of her friends.

-- She thought it would get better eventually, but it didn't. Finally, out of desperation, she took a train down to Washington, D.C., to the shrine of Our Lady (now the site of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception). She prayed that she might find a way forward in her new-found faith.

-- She returned that same night to her apartment in New York. Waiting at her doorstep was a man named Peter Maurin. He had an idea, and from that idea they founded the Catholic Worker, which became her life's work and ministry.

-- Most prominent Christians of our time have had similar desert experiences, including MLK and Mother Teresa. But you don't have to be famous to be tested like that.

-- Today, a number of priests who were removed from ministry due to past sins (most around 2002 or shortly after) are in that desert. They

chose not to return to the lay state but to live a life of prayer and penance. Many struggle to find employment and to make ends meet. But they continue to say Mass daily, alone, for the needs of the Church.

-- That desert is experienced by parents who made the choice not to abort a child with Downs Syndrome or some other genetic "defect." Now they struggle to raise that child in difficult circumstances.

-- It is experienced by the spouses of people with terminal conditions such as ALS and other degenerative diseases who choose to keep and care for them at home, sometimes without a lot of family support.

-- Even if we don't face such dire situations, most of us will experience a desert time sometime in our lives. Maybe it will be the loss of a loved one, or losing our job we've held for years. Perhaps it may even be the difficult decision whether to take a job that will pay more but keep us away from our family more often.

-- At these times we may feel like we are alone. Even if we have friends and loved ones, we know the burden falls upon us. Where will we turn? Will we fall upon the mercy and love of God, who alone can bring us through these times of testing?

-- That is what Jesus did. That is what those Christians we admire in our own time did. And God alone will be our source of strength when we find ourselves in that desert, whatever form it takes for us.

-- This Lenten season, may we learn to trust in God's strength when we face the ordinary challenges we expect from day-to-day. Then, we will be ready to fall upon the Lord's mercy when the real desert comes our way.