

Blogging toward WEDNESDAY: A desert in the oasis

By [Nadia Bolz-Weber](#)

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*Our Lent lectionary blogging will consist of individual posts by a variety of contributors. This first one comes from Nadia Bolz-Weber, whose [book](#) Amy Frykholm [reviewed](#) last month. —Ed.*

During Advent we floated in the deep blue of God's embryonic waiting, of God's preparing the world for a scandalous birth. At Christmas we sang with the angels the endless heaven- and earth-filled glory of God-as-babe, and in the white of Epiphany we followed the light of this Christ-in-the-world come to redeem Mary and Elizabeth, Herod and us. Now, in this bruised Lenten purple, the light of Epiphany has led us to dust and desert.

On Ash Wednesday we enter into pure paradox. The gospel reading warns against practicing our piety before others; then we come up to have ashes put on our foreheads. What could be more public? But the church insists we walk though a day outwardly wearing the inward reality of our own mortality not to reward us for our faith but to remind us of our failing.

Our 40-day journey through the desert of temporality and the dust from which we were formed is a countercultural endeavor. As Paul says in today's epistle,

We are treated. . . as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Our self-obsessed culture may see Lent's fasting, prayer, sacrificial giving and self-reflection as a result of low self-esteem. But by participating in this season we boldly embrace our identity and appear every bit as odd as our first-century brothers and sisters in Christ.

Ever since God breathed into our nostrils the breath of life, we have been both living beings and the dust to which we return. While this dust seems at first to be only the dry remnant of a life ended, in fact it's the fecundity of a God who creates life from void, who breathes God's self into earth to bring forth us, the creature. The same God who brings forth living water from God's own broken humanity.

Our journey is in the desert. Following Christ, we leave our false oasis of instant gratification, indulgence of every whim and stuff—lots and lots of stuff. The body of Christ is not an oasis in the desert but a desert in the oasis. In our diabetic coma of self-absorption, we are at times vaguely, silently aware that we have gorged on the promises of the American Dream and are left hungry.

We go to church on Ash Wednesday to be told that we are dust and to dust we shall return; the collagen-injected lips turn to dust, even the pilates-lengthened muscles, the 12 essential vitamins and minerals and the bottled water. We are told that we can live forever with the right combinations of exercise, diet and elective surgery. But we know—in those inevitable moments of disquieting silence—that the oasis is not all it's cracked up to be, and so we enter the desert where we can no longer turn from the inevitable dust, where the seemingly impossible happens: destructive self-centeredness is transformed into cruciform living.