

Lent will always be a very significant and meaningful time of year for me. During this time in 2010, I was accepted into the Catholic Church as a convert, and I was making the final home stretch toward baptism, communion and confirmation at St. Julia's Easter Vigil. I recall my experience captured in this quote: *"Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, with weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God."* (— Joel 2:12-13)

That first Lent forever changed me: my first Ashes left an indelible mark on my forehead and on my heart. When I prayed with my catechist through the Stations of the Cross, I found myself weeping uncontrollably. During my first reconciliation, again the tears flooded me as I spoke to my confessor. I didn't understand what was happening to me, but my transformation was palpable. And, I had to carry a lot of Kleenex.

With each Lent, the Stations of the Cross becomes my spiritual path of discernment. Of the past year, working during the pandemic at a Senior Assisted Living community (in Lincoln), I reflected on the parallels of my life and of those around me with Jesus' path to Calvary.

As Christ fell many times bearing his cross, I worked tirelessly on the front lines until my body could no longer bear it. As Simon helped to carry the cross, I comforted the elderly and infirm in isolation until their reunion with their families. As Mary, a mother weeping for her son, I wept fearing for the safety of my son frequently exposed to the spread of the virus. As Veronica wiping Jesus' face, I consoled those whose loved ones were very ill or near death. Or, as the women of Jerusalem who mourned, I mourned with our community over the loss of fragile lives and the livelihood of many. At the end of a path of much suffering, Jesus trusted and accepted his return to God. With Christ alongside me, I trust in God's plan — even when it is challenging or I can't quite fathom the 'why.'

Living through the pandemic has also prepared me for Lent and the 'desert': letting go of the things which clutter or pollute my heart, body and conscience. I have fasted from selfishness and expectation, detached myself from material consumption, given to those suffering more than myself, mourned for the loss of civility in our society, and long for our redemption and renewal. Lent is the crucible that offers a time to purge the non-essential — so that we might 'return our hearts' to what remains pure and essential: God, love and hope.

Postscript: Acknowledging the ten-year anniversary of my Catholic conversion (and a significant birthday), my son took me to Israel to visit Old Jerusalem in 2019. There I was able to walk the *Via Dolorosa*, the ‘Way of the Cross’ and follow Jesus’ path through the Stations of the Cross. I include a brief visual meditation of this path (click on the link to download/view): <https://share.icloud.com/photos/0YTD9N9eUyY9sna8kEySsLzpQ>