Lent is about to begin. That word in English comes from an Old English word that means “to lengthen,” and it’s a reminder of the days getting longer as we move toward summer out of the dark of winter.

But in a number of other languages, particularly Spanish and French, the word for “Lent” reflects “forty days,” “cuaresma.” Forty days of wandering in the desert, forty days of Jesus out in the desert.

It’s also about a journey. And it’s a journey that is about enlightenment if we’re willing to think about it that way.

Lent is an ancient tradition of solidarity and preparation for those who look forward to Baptism at the Easter Vigil. It has always been a time for prayer and study, fasting, self-denial, and alms-giving, sharing what we have with those who do not have. Prayer is an opportunity to reflect on who walks with us in the desert, who brings light into the world. Study is an opportunity to do the same kinds of things, looking at the history of our tradition – where have human beings found light and direction in
their journey through this world? Fasting and self-denial are an inward reflection on what it is that keeps us in the dark, or what it is that keeps us directionless, or that keeps us overly self-focused. And it becomes an invitation to turn outward and share what we have with those who have not. To build solidarity among God’s people and the rest of the earth.

One of the most memorable Ash Wednesdays I ever spent was in San Jose, Costa Rica, in a school for children. I was asked to place ashes on the foreheads of toddlers. It was a provocative experience in the deepest sense, reminding very small children that they are mortal.

That cross that comes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday is a reminder of the cross that’s put there at Baptism. You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever. The cross that comes at Ash Wednesday is a reminder that you are dust and to dust we shall return, that we share that dust with every other human being who has ever walked this planet, that we share that dust with the stars and the planets, that we share that dust with all that has been created. We are made for relationship with creator and creation.

Lent and cuaresma is a journey to walk toward that light. May it be a blessed one this year.

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