Two Organ Reflections for Lent:

J. S. Bach’s Prelude and Fugue in A minor (BWV 543), can bring imagery to a season such as Lent. The prelude creates a sense of tension and release in its opening lines, followed by a flurry of fast figurations, and concluding with a stately declaration of the theme. Its final chord is that of A major; a striking contrast to the majority of the piece. In the age of Bach, even an A major chord would not have sounded perfectly in tune due to the temperament of the organs at the time, thus creating a sense of tension within the resolution.

The fugue is somewhat dance like, with its meter, but still maintains a sense of darkness within the key of A minor. The fugue concludes with another round of fast figurations but does not finish in the major key. The final declaration in the fugue is that of a very firm confirmation of the minor key.

The organ, on which this recording was made, is the Craighead-Saunders Organ at Christ Church in Rochester, NY, directly across the street from the Eastman School of Music. It is a replica of an instrument built by Adam Gottlob Caspirini in 1776 for the Church of the Dominicans in Vilnius, Lithuania. It is very much in the style of the organs Bach would have known and played.

The second piece, Sir George Thalben-Ball’s “Elegy,” is a lyrical and harmonious work. With a beautiful melodic tune and harmonizations, it develops to an overall arrival point of crescendo where big chords are heard on full organ. It’s retreat from such a crescendo slowly takes the piece to an almost silent end. Some of the quietest stops on the organ are employed.

While we often associate minor keys with dark, sad, or scary music, and major keys with bright and uplifting music, this piece by Bach and George Thalben-Ball, could be compared to our “wilderness journey.” Throughout the season of Lent, reflection is given to one’s life and current circumstance. There are moments of darkness and sadness. There are moments of joy and happiness. Each of these moments, as in a musical piece, allow for reflection as the journey in and toward hope is taken.