

The Language of Lent

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Most days I give the impression that right relationship with God is part of normal, healthy human life on earth, like eating the right food and getting enough sleep. I order colorful resource sheets on the weekly lections for parents to take home and use with their children. I talk with the teenagers about the political and economic implications of the gospel. I preach sermons that knit the biblical story with stories from everyday life and the overall suggestion is that God is a friendly guy, eager to welcome anyone who will enter the divine embrace.

Then Lent comes along and the truth is exposed. Right relationship with God is no hobby but an all-consuming passion that offers no personal protection. It requires the willing sacrifice of everything one holds dear. It involves blood and wilderness. It bears no more resemblance to normal, healthy human life on earth than a century cactus does to a shiny red apple. But this relationship is also the source of all life, as those who pursue it have testified. To live in the presence of God is to live fully, inhabiting a world full of wonders that are not apparent to the naked eye. To live in the presence of God is to make the acquaintance of saints and angels, whose messages come scented with heaven's smoke. It is not a safe life, but it is the only real life, worth every risk.

Within the culture of the local church, Lent seems to be a time for reflection, with elements of self-examination and self-sacrifice. People give things up and take others on; they attend the Lenten series and put in extra hours helping out around the church. The focus tends to be on *me*: my prayer life, my Bible study, my strength of faith or lack thereof, my experience of God. The appointed lessons for the season press this understanding, first by widening the context to include the whole community of faith and second by shifting the focus to God. During Lent, a good pair of binoculars comes in handier than a mirror. We discover who we are by discovering who God is. Relationship is the medium of revelation.

Close attention to the lections of Lent—which, for the purposes of this essay, shall include the six Sundays of Lent, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday—yields a long list of contrasting words: death/life, doubt/faith, darkness/light, servant/leader, foolish/wise, broken/new, killed/risen, humbled/exalted, destroyed/raised. This is the language of Lent, words that go at each other head on, capturing the paradox of faith and offering the hearer a choice. Two different ways of life are being described here, by sticklers who do not seem to recognize a middle way. There is the way of life and there is the way of death. During Lent, we are asked to choose.

The ancient context for this choice is covenant with God, which builds in the Old Testament lessons of the season like a swelling bass line. First there is the covenant with Noah and his boatload, sole survivors of a disappointed God's catharsis. It is an unusual covenant in that it includes every living creature, the four-legged ones and the winged ones as well as the two-legged ones. Cows, crows, raccoons and walleyed pike are all our covenant partners, along with their more exotic cousins. From the beginning, God has been in committed relationship with all life, not just human life, which further informs our choices. What shall we say to the Lord of all life about the cemetery full of our extinct partners? Shall we explain that the quality of our lives

made their deaths necessary? Shall we expect to be excused?

God's promises to humankind are repeated and deepened in the four Sundays that follow, with lessons from Hebrew scripture that read like an index on major covenants of the Bible. On the second Sunday of Lent there is the covenant with Abraham, more human-specific than the covenant with Noah, which articulates the terms of the relationship. Abraham shall receive offspring beyond his wildest dreams, including some with crowns on their heads, and a promised land that shall be theirs forever. In return, Abraham and his descendants shall keep covenant with God, and the sign of this shall be circumcision—a flesh offering of the most exquisite kind—so that procreation is forever linked to God's promise. Every Hebrew male who stands naked before God shall remember where his life comes from and to whom it belongs.

While Sarah receives a blessing and a name change to go with Abraham's, the covenant will pass from her husband to her son—through her, but also around her. She is the bearer of the promise, but for as long as circumcision is the sign of covenant, she is also outside of it. Paul's hard work in his letter to the Romans, which is the epistle for this day, ends her exclusion. It is faith, not adherence to the law, that produces right relationship with God.

The covenant with Moses follows—the text, anyway—with ten descriptions of the way of life. It is interesting that the two longest commandments, the one concerning images and the one concerning sabbath, are the two that most Christians have left behind. In both cases, Jesus provided the rationale for their retirement. He who was the living image of God offered a new angle on divine likeness. If it pleased God to dwell in the flesh, the argument went, then surely it did not displease God for that flesh to be portrayed in wood, or stone or colored glass. Incarnation was distinguished from idolatry, and Christian imagination was set free.

In like manner, Jesus' own being absorbed and transformed sabbath. It was not a day to enslave people but a day to set them free, by releasing them to do the work of God. Because they believed Jesus to be Lord of the sabbath, Christians excused themselves from ritual observances. Every day was a sabbath day in the presence of their Lord, whose example they meant to follow by healing, teaching and feeding seven days a week. While the logic remains good, the actual practice has failed. Many of us work seven days a week, but communion with God is hardly the goal or the result. Meanwhile the whole notion of sabbath languishes, the forgotten cure for what ails us: one day a week to remember that we are not the people of the clock, nor the dollar, nor even of the cloth. We are the people of God, who worship no other.

Popular wisdom has reduced the ten commandments to ten rules for right relationship with God. If we do our part, then God will do God's part and the covenant will hold. It may be a satisfying equation, but it misrepresents the nature of God's promise. The ten commandments, like the land full of descendants promised Abraham and the divine protection promised Noah, are the pure gifts of a gracious God who—in the Hebrew scriptures as well as in the Christian ones—wills life for all creation and provides the means for sustaining it. Keeping the commandments does not earn God's love anymore than breaking them shuts one out of God's heart. (What better way to make this point than to choose a murderer to deliver them?) They are God's gifts to God's people, ten characteristics of those who live in covenant with God.

On the fourth Sunday of Lent, all false optimism is quashed by the reading from second Chronicles, in which the Babylonian exile begins. The unfaithfulness of the people has led them to abandon the covenant. The result is death and destruction, as the temple in Jerusalem is burned and all Israel's treasures are marched into Babylon.

The chosen people become slaves; the promised land becomes a ghost town. The only thing that could be worse would be for God to abandon the covenant too. But God does not. This is an interlude, not an end. Seventy years will pass—a decade of sabbaths—and then God will call the people to return, revive, remember.

Remember what? The ancient covenant, which Jeremiah describes anew on the fifth Sunday of the season. He calls it a new one because it will be written inside the human heart instead of outside, where some play looser with it than others. The substance of it, however, has not changed: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” By reinventing the covenant in flesh and blood, God will place it within everyone’s reach. Then no one will need teachers in order to know the Lord. They will all know God by heart, from the least of them to the greatest, for God will forgive them and restore them to relationship—not because they have changed, mind you, but because God has changed, willing a case of divine amnesia in order to erase their sins.

There is a great deal to be said about covenant during Lent, especially as it leads up to the new covenant of Christ’s body and blood on Maundy Thursday. Blood is central to all these covenants, whether or not it is explicit within the verses selected. The first thing Noah did when he set foot on dry ground was to build an altar and make sacrifice to God (Genesis 8:20). Abraham’s covenant required the ritual slaughter of three animals and two birds, through whose severed carcasses the presence of the Lord passed like a flaming torch in the night (Genesis 15:17). Abraham’s blood was spilled when he was circumcised, and every Hebrew baby boy after him. When Moses delivered the book of the covenant to the people, he threw blood on the altar and on those who stood around it, signifying to them the life-giving nature of the bond being made (Exodus 24:6-8).

With such potent imagery in mind, the sacrament of body and blood takes on a gory reality that must not be sanitized. No, it is not real flesh and blood. It is the fruit of wheat and vine, a meal meant to nourish our bodies as well as our souls. It is stuff we recognize from our own supper tables, only the language attached to it transforms it before our eyes. This supper seals the new covenant. Consuming it, we assent to the relationship. We take part in an ancient ceremony that makes us blood kin to God through the medium of Jesus Christ.

Rewind with me now, holding the bass line of covenant in your mind, and listen to the melody of the gospel across these same Sundays. It is discordant, disturbing, with lots of kettledrums and a few crashing cymbals. Beginning with Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism, the season continues with one story after another of people who simply do not “get” Jesus or his ministry. This is Mark’s year, remember, and Mark is harder on the disciples than anyone, but even the selections from John’s gospel carry the same tune. This ferocious, haunted, cryptic Jesus is so far out on the edge of his own destiny that those standing around him are little more than stooges. All they can do is witness his anguish and listen uncomprehendingly to what he is trying to teach them.

It all begins in the river, with the intensity and immediacy typical of Mark. The heavens do not open; they are torn apart. A hawk would fit the bill better than a dove. The voice addresses Jesus, no one else. The Spirit does not lead him into the wilderness; it drives him out. Can you see him dodging those sharp talons, covering his bare head with his hands? This is what it means to be God’s Beloved. This is how it goes for those who please God.

On the second Sunday of Lent, Peter objects to Jesus’ teaching and becomes Satan in the process. Using his disciple’s protectiveness as a foil, Jesus turns to the crowd

and describes the way of the cross. Is it the way of life or the way of death? It is hard to tell, listening to him, and Easter is no part of anyone's thinking. At the very least, this is a trust exercise. When someone is telling you that safe means lost and lost means safe, it is not possible to trust the words. All you can do is decide whether you trust the one who is speaking them.

On the third Sunday there is a commotion in the temple as Jesus engages in his most violent act of ministry. The scene is captured in a clerestory window at the National Cathedral in Washington, D. C., where Jesus cracks his whip at a television evangelist in a pink leisure suit. The man drops his microphone as bags of money cascade to the floor. In John, the tumult is followed by another prediction of Jesus' death. You don't disturb the moneychangers and get away clean.

The fourth Sunday belongs to Nicodemus, patron saint of all who have tried to make sense of the mystery and have failed. All we really have in the lection are Jesus' final words to him, yet another allusion to his approaching death. The parallel to Numbers 21:4-9 is worth exploring, if only to remind us that God has been saving us for a long, long time. Even Jesus knows that his work is like Moses' work. Whoever the servant happens to be, it is God who acts.

By the fifth Sunday the hour has come and glory becomes a synonym for death. This passage is full of dichotomy: love/hate, keep/lose, serve/follow. In the face of such paradox, even John's omniscient Jesus owns up to a troubled soul, but the voice from heaven confirms his sense of purpose. Some standing near him hear what he hears. Others hear thunder. This is the truth about life on earth: even dedicated listeners do not hear the same thing. Are our stopped ears the problem, or is this God's doing—speaking thunder to some and promise to others, so that the mystery remains a mystery?

Palm Sunday and Good Friday tell the same story from two very different perspectives. Mark's version shows us a reluctant savior, praying at the last that his hour might pass and his cup be removed. He yearns for the company and comfort of his friends, who disappoint him. He throws himself on the ground, grieved to the point of death. When the worst has come to pass he is not strong. He needs help carrying his cross, and when he is lifted up on it, he dies with a loud cry of forsakenness on his lips.

By Good Friday he has become someone else altogether. John's account of the same events includes no agony in the garden at all. It is simply a meeting place for the betrayer and the betrayed, who exchange no word, no kiss. Jesus knows everything that will happen to him ahead of time (18:4) and he does not resist. "Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?" he asks Peter, who has gone and gotten protective again (18:11). When the time comes, he carries his cross all by himself. He needs no help. Presiding over his own death, he arranges for the care of his mother from the cross. Then, having discerned that all is finished, he says so and yields his spirit without a sound.

As different as they are, both accounts accomplish the same end. For weeks and weeks Jesus has been talking about his death. Here, finally, is what it looks like. Here is the reality no words can approach. It is a dying that catalyzes all witnesses. Those whom it touches become more who they are: more cruel, more loyal, more puzzled, more rapt. Just off to the side of the tragedy on the hill is the tragedy in the courtyard of the high priest, where Peter sits in for every believer who must decide who to be. His "I am not" (John 18:17) is the shadow side of Jesus' "I am" (18:5). One is; one is not. One will; one will not. There is the way of life and there is the way of death.

During Lent we are asked to choose. Do we know the man or not?

All in all, it is a wonder anyone is still in church at the end of Lent, especially if we save the good news until last. And yet there is something about Lent that is its own good news, a stripped down telling of the truth that engages the human soul weary of hyperbole. This is no padded crib version of the faith, and it is not for everyone. Certainly there is a wide margin between the congregations of Good Friday and Easter, but it is understandable. To walk willingly into the season of Lent is like walking up to a railroad crossing and waiting there, all eyes and ears, preparing to stand one's ground when the locomotive comes. Those of us who dare to draw close to such power know we are in danger. That is not the point. The point is that we have been called into covenant with the creator of the universe, who offers us relationship we cannot control. It is enough to make the Messiah cry out loud. It is enough to split rocks and open tombs. It is the way of life, which death cannot disrupt.