

Lent Is for Grown-ups

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We didn't observe Lent, at least not so that you would notice, in the little Presbyterian church where I grew up. My friends who did, Roman Catholics and a few stray high church Episcopalians, were exotic creatures in middle Mississippi. They would show up at school after an early Wednesday morning mass with a splotch of black on their foreheads. Then maybe they wouldn't eat candy bars until Easter. I did not delve into the mystery of all that until I married an Atlanta version of one of them.

My husband does remember Lent. He remembers the nuns telling him and the other children to scoot over in their desks and to make room so that their guardian angels could sit with them and watch over them and help them make a holy Lent. He remembers trying to figure out what to give up as his Lenten discipline. There is an art to that. He tried to give up root beer one year, but his mother made him switch to Coca-Colas, which was a real sacrifice.

And he remembers everybody in the school lining up to make confession – perhaps about talking in class or bothering your sisters. And one by one each child would enter a little closed, snug booth and whisper the sins of their lives and receive God's forgiveness along with a few Hail Marys and Our Fathers.

A gentle time – the Lent of children. A time of learning the faith through the mild disciplines of self-selected denial and confession of childish sins. Lent for children is mostly a time for forming habits for living the faith within the boundaries of the church's snug, safe walls. And discipline, after all, is the defining activity of the disciple.

The churches in my life tend to model their Lenten practices along the pattern of a Lent for children. People are encouraged to make gentle renunciations. We usually do a general confession on Sunday anyway, but maybe during Lent we put in longer pauses before the absolution. Actually the whole liturgy slows down as if to teach slightly dull students. "Now get this children, we are in a Pen-i-ten-tial season." The Lenten music is somber, leaden, pretty boring; endless repetitions of "For-tee Days And For-tee Nights" come to mind. The preaching gets predictable. We're pretty sure we're going to get wilderness, temptation, stuff like that. And for some reason the preaching gets more *preachy* during Lent. A friend told me once that one of his greatest thrills upon leaving parish ministry was not having to preach through Lent ever, ever again. I bet there are many people sitting in the pews who would love not to have to listen through one more Lent.

How do we take the most dangerous season of the year and bore people with it? Why does Lent put so many of us to sleep?

Two years ago, the ordained and lay staff of All Saints' Church, Atlanta, tried an experiment. We divvied up some Lenten words – ashes, suffering, wilderness, sin, doubt, death – and everybody agreed to write a short reflection on their word for the purpose of making a Lenten tape of music and meditations. I thought it was a terrible idea, but to my surprise the thing really worked. We had all gone to the recording studio separately and our organist had chosen the anthems so nobody knew what the

finished product would be. Frankly, the tape was splendid – deep and passionate and faithful – and people told us moving stories about its power for them.

This little tape of meditations and anthems was everything I don't find in much of our Sunday Lenten worship. Though we were the same preachers, same musicians, we offered a very different quality of Lenten experience. I wonder if there was something in the way we prepared for it. We did not go strictly by the lectionary guides, but we tried to just allow the old, old Lenten stories of lost-ness and wildness and sin and testing which have been handed down to us to become awe-fully and frightfully alive in our hearts for this generation. We prepared out of our memories and hearts and the old stories. Normally, I think we need the boundaries of the lections, but maybe a way to get at Lent is to go outside the boundaries, outside the walls of the church. Maybe Lent is about being outside the secure walls. Maybe Lent is for adults after all. We know about the wild beasts first hand, and our tests are not the kinds that come back with a grade.

Really Lent is the most terrifying season of the year. Let us preachers walk toward it with our eyes wide and our bodies trembling and our shoes off, for we do stand on dangerous, holy ground.

I offer the following homily as basically a Lenten wilderness story someone told me from outside the walls of the church. I think that's where we need to preach from during Lent, outside the walls, in the wildernesses. That is where the holy ground of Lent can be found.

Lenten Sermon

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
That questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the healer's art.¹

That's what the One who blesses looks like to T. S. Eliot. Like a wounded surgeon. With bleeding hands. Not crisp and antiseptic and professional, but bloody and in pain himself. As big a mess, in as much trouble as the patient. Wounded and wielding a knife, no anesthetic in sight, just the pain we are in and the pain of the surgeon.

Not a sight to inspire confidence, this wounded surgeon, but rather terror. So what if they, the faithful, tell us that he does not wield a knife to butcher but to heal. That we need a surgeon even if what we want is an anesthesiologist. So what if they say the operation is not for death but for life. That the pain of the present is the door into peace and joy. That's what they say. But we'd rather not be operated on; thank you all the same. If this is God's blessing, we would just as soon go without.

One of you told me a story about an AA meeting. Not just any AA meeting, but a meeting of old men. In their sixties and seventies, been coming together for twenty or thirty years. Telling the same stories and the same tired old jokes. Gruff voices, loud laughter. You said you knew better than to open your mouth at this meeting because it was *their* meeting. Everybody knew it was *their* meeting. God forbid that a woman should stick her head in the door. Then all the rough old voices would yell, "Men's meeting. This is a men's meeting." Grumps and grouches and know-it-alls. You couldn't imagine why you went back from time to time except you needed a meeting,

any meeting.

Everybody is settling down. The old jokes start up and the little rituals. Same old, same old. And then you look up and see a young boy, twenty-two or twenty-three, kind of creeping in. Shaky, sweating, smelling. And your stomach knots. Because you can see what's going to happen. Sure enough the boy starts talking. Some long story about four pitiful little days of sobriety and then relapse. Whiney, whimpering, on and on he drones. And your stomach is in a knot because you know what's going to happen. You know they are going to annihilate him.

And sure enough you hear one of the deep old gravel-pit voices clear his throat and you wait for the sarcasm, wait for the attack, wait for the cutting to begin. And then the voice says, "Son." And then the voice says "thank you." And the voice says, "I've been sober for thirty-five years. Thank you for helping me remember who I am and why I'm here. Going on thirty-five years and I'm still scared. Still grieving for what I've lost. And scared of losing what I haven't lost already. And scared of what's coming, of getting sick and dying. Thank you for helping me remember why I am here."

Gravel voice looks around at everybody and then back at the boy. He says, "You know I am a member of a society. You want to know what it is? The White Knuckle society. Grabbing, gripping, holding on by my fingernails every day of my life. That's me. Anybody else here a member of the White Knuckle society? Anybody else in here holding on by their fingernails?"

And then all around that room, all around that boy, ninety people creaked up out of their chairs and stood in silence, and some in tears. And the old gravel voice said, "Son, this here is the White Knuckle society. And you're welcome."

And that's blessing. And one of you witnessed it. You said that foolish weak wounded old man recognized that boy and thanked him for the gift of his life. And that's blessing. Thanked him for simply being a human being. Holy and unholy. In pain. Needing some help. And so the old man offered his life back. So they could hang on by their fingernails together. And that's blessing.

You know we have a meeting of the White Knuckle society in here every week. A lot of us are hanging on by our fingernails. Sick. Or alone. Or grieving. Or all three.

Or families needing more from us than we know how to give. Maybe kids wandering around, lost. Or parents getting old and weak.

Or we're working ourselves to death. Running faster, getting nowhere. Insane office dynamics. Ruled by the bottom line. Or we're not working. Squeezed out, and scared to death about that.

Or we've made it. And "it" is hollow. "It" isn't what we had in mind at all.

Or we're gay. And again and again we are hit in the face with how profound are the fear and distrust of us. To be gay is to be predator we hear from the preachers and senators and we are sick at heart.

Or we just keep being stepped on somewhere by somebody. And we don't know how to fight back. We try to make peace and peace doesn't come.

Or we've made a fool out of ourselves for some cause, some ideal. And the purity of our hopes and dreams is ground in the mud.

Or we have sinned. Deeply. And we don't know how to get forgiven.

There are a lot of us here hanging on by our fingernails. We are a White Knuckle society. Sitting in the pew and in the choir and back by the altar and in these prayer

desks or at this pulpit. White-knuckling it. In the chapel for healing. At the rail for bread and wine. Because we know we need help. We know we need God. We know we need each other. We know that. I guess that's the beginning of blessing, isn't it?

It's a stumbling block. And foolishness. This cross-shaped mystery. But here goes. Here's the Word to the members of the White Knuckle Society. You know who you are.

Blessed are you.

Amen.

Note

- ¹. T.S. Eliot, "East Coker," *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).