

“Scared Movement”: An Introduction to the Lenten Texts

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I am writing these reflections on Lent within the comfortable walls of a Dominican retreat center near my home. Lent is still a few months away, and the center is largely empty. Vacant dormitories stand open as I walk the halls, pondering the Lenten texts. I take my meals in a deserted dining room; I look out the windows upon dry, falling leaves and wonder what the landscape will look like once Lent arrives. All is quiet and still.

During Lent, it will be a different story around here, I expect. Pilgrims will flock to this place for workshops, retreats, and days of prayer. Dormitories will be full, and the dining room will clink and shuffle with seekers, wonderers, people attending to their Lenten disciplines and the peculiar rhythms of this season. It is an irony: during a time in which Jesus’ forty days of fasting and prayer should serve as a sort of pattern for us—a time of simplicity, if not peace—this place will likely be busier than ever.

Even in our Protestant churches, chances are good that we will be in a state of Lenten industriousness. Many of our congregations will undertake special programs: prayer circles, small-group studies, speaker series, labyrinth walks, discipline groups, devotional guides, fasts, quiet days, and/or the “40 Days of Purpose.” The impulse is an honorable one—Lent is a time of preparation and penitence, and it should be undertaken in all seriousness and with intention. For many denominations, the liturgical seasons are still a relatively recent rediscovery, and we are still grasping the full impact of these “old, new” rhythms for our lives and our communities. And the spiritual hunger of our culture makes Lent a unique time of outreach to the community, through teaching prayer practices and other disciplines. The shadow side of all of this is the temptation to view Lent as something to be *done*, another item to be marked off our spiritual checklist.

It is undeniable that spiritual disciplines and practices undertaken in Lent can and do bear fruit. While we do not know the full nature of Jesus’ wilderness sojourn (and this year’s tale, from the Gospel of Mark, omits the three temptations, leaving even more to our imagination), Jesus did in fact emerge from the experience transformed, shaped for his public ministry; the Gospels show us a Jesus who is ready for action, shaking off that desert dust and getting down to work. That said, I fear that over time Lent is in danger of becoming Christmas-ized by our culture, something to be consumed. We purchase the products of Lent, not with our money, but with our time.

So how are we to proceed? In our spiritually-starved culture, how do we “keep Lent” without reducing it to a program, a consumable?

Not surprisingly, the Lenten lectionary texts can guide us.

Several years ago, I led a workshop for a youth event called “Sacred Movement,” in which I shared ways to pray with our bodies and different ways of encountering Scripture through drama and movement. When I arrived to set up for the workshop, I found a sign on the classroom door. It said, in huge letters, “*Scared Movement*.” This is not a typo that the computer’s word-processor would catch!

And neither does our own spiritual spell-check, if we take this year's Lenten texts seriously. There is a bit of a *scare* in the sacred, because the texts remind us again and again that it is God who is in control, God who transforms our lives—not our prayers, not our labyrinth walks, and not Rick Warren's book. Indeed, many of the Lenten texts seem to break us down in order to build us back up again.

The First Sunday of Lent (Psalm 25) sets the tone: "God teaches the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble God's way... God will teach them the way that they should choose" (vv. 9 and 12, emphasis added). The God of heaven and earth (and Psalm 25) is the one true teacher, not the small-group leader, Sunday School teacher, Lent series lecturer, and not the preacher. God is the one in whom we put our trust, the one whom we worship—and God is a reliable recipient of our trust and adoration. At the same time, we are called repeatedly in the psalm to "fear" God, to look with awe upon the One who is beyond our comprehension and all our prayerful wrangling. God is *unreliably* reliable, as we will see throughout the season of Lent.

In the *Second Sunday of Lent*, we receive a second inoculation against getting puffed up with our own diligent efforts, with a healthy dose of the mighty other-ness of God. In *Romans 4:13-25*, Paul reminds us of Abraham's faith and reiterates that God's promise is a gracious gift, not a reward (not even a reward for "doing" Lent properly!). This Pauline theme continues the following week (*Third Sunday of Lent, I Corinthians 1:18-25*), in which we are warned that God "will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and discernment of the discerning [God] will thwart." So much for figuring out the meaning of one's life in the Forty Days of Purpose! Of course, Paul is contrasting the wisdom of this world with the true wisdom of God, which is what we search for in all of our prayers and discernment. However, even our best efforts at humble Lenten seeking can be colored by our own desire for spiritual status, and by the desire for God's rubber stamp that ours is the right and righteous path. Paul cautions us against such status-seeking. The fruit of Lenten discipleship is relationship and humble obedience, not a gold star.

Many of the Gospel texts cut our pious Lenten endeavors down to size as well. On the *Second Sunday of Lent (Mark 8:31-38)*, Jesus lays out the path for those who would follow him: "Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake... will save it." It is a familiar call to discipleship, and one repeated in one form or another in each of the Gospels. But the four accounts are not exactly the same. Matthew's version of Jesus' words assures us that those who lose their life will "find" it (Matthew 10:39)—and the word contains the sense of discovering or encountering something *for oneself*. Luke (in 17:33) and John (in 12:25) render Jesus' words in a similar vein, although using a different Greek term: their word choice carries meanings of "preserving oneself, acquiring, gaining, and *obtaining for oneself*."¹ Modern readers might hear resonances of self-help language in these terms (although certainly these resonances would not have existed originally); it is a hazard of Lenten observance in our modern therapeutic age, in which the healthy pursuit of self-discovery can tip over into narcissistic self-indulgence.

Mark provides no wiggle room for any self-help tricks. When we lose our life for Christ, Mark writes, we will *save* it—save it not in the sense of bland self-improvement, but in the sense of rescuing it from grave danger and harsh afflictions; save it in the sense of being wrested from the very throes of eternal death. Here Mark's

apocalyptic orientation comes to the fore. Spirituality is not something we dabble in for personal enlightenment; a relationship with Jesus Christ is a matter of life and death.

While we're still contemplating the gravity of our Christian discipleship, the Gospel text for the next week (*Third Sunday of Lent, John 2:13-22*) breaks us down even further. In his cleansing of the temple, Jesus reminds us that God can do quickly what we try through years of dogged effort to do: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up," he says. The response is incredulous: "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" The timing of forty-six years for the temple's construction is historically credible², although reading this text through the lens of a busy Lent offers another possible meaning for us—a spiritual one. The forty days of Lent, plus Sundays, yield the number forty-six as well—forty-six days on which to pray, to read devotional guides, to study, to attend classes, to abstain from chocolate or reality television—and *still* it is not these pursuits that ultimately matter, but the power of God in the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. In this passage, "Jesus challenges a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God..."³ Let us hope that we are not so embedded in our own spiritual construction projects during Lent that we miss God's fresh revelation, which lies at the center of our faith story and alone has the power to make all things new.

So what are we to do? Cancel our programs? Bolt the doors of the retreat centers? Certainly not, but faithful Lenten preaching of these texts can move us toward ways of experiencing the Lenten wilderness, and even its attendant activities, in faithful, God-centered ways. At least three themes emerge from these texts to guide us.

"There's a Wildness in God's Mercy"

First, the texts call us to take seriously the image of wilderness as a place to expect the unexpected. Just as the Israelites passed through the Red Sea and landed in the wilderness, so Jesus is similarly thrust into the wilderness, still soggy from his baptism in the Jordan. Jesus' forty-day sojourn is not just the first Gospel text in Lent; it provides a template for the rest of the season.

Mark's wilderness story (*First Sunday in Lent, Mark 1:9-15*) seems to provide much less to work with than the other synoptics—no litany of temptations, no scriptural repartee between Jesus and Satan. All we have are Jesus, Satan, angels—and the wild beasts. It is a particular, peculiar detail. Are the beasts included solely for the sake of ambience? Are they simply background figures in our mental diorama of the scene, or do they serve a higher spiritual and theological purpose? At the very least, we can hear echoes of Advent: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them... They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" (from Isaiah 11:6-9). While the link to Advent is noteworthy, I wonder whether there is more to the story than Jesus' simply "walking with the animals, talking with the animals" as a means of prophetic fulfillment.

I have a pastor friend, wise in the Spirit, who has been a confidante and guide in the wilderness experiences of my own life. She will frequently say, "May the angels and the wild beasts tend to you." It is a misreading of the text, but a deliberate and provocative one, always bringing to my mind the *Chronicles of Narnia*, with the

Christlike Aslan and his kingdom of wise and majestic animals. Her words remind me that true transformation is unpredictable, that our journey with God can be hazardous and, well, *wild*. At times, even bizarre.

We are told that Jesus “was with the wild beasts”—they are not simply on the periphery, but nearby. Did Jesus seek them out? Could the untamed elements of the wilderness (the *wilder*-ness!) not simply be creatures to contend with and overcome, but also provide some kind of wisdom along the way?

After the tsunami in Asia at the end of 2004, many news outlets reported anecdotal evidence that animals sensed the impending disaster before it happened. *National Geographic* reported that elephants ran for higher ground, dogs and zoo animals cowered indoors, and certain birds fled from their low-lying breeding areas. Very few animals were found to have died, apparently tipped off by a “sixth sense” of trouble on the way.⁴ Certainly Jesus’ wilderness pilgrimage represented a spiritual tectonic shift—the heavens had been torn apart, a controversial and world-altering public ministry was soon to begin. Wouldn’t he do well to tune in the wisdom of the wilderness, even its wilder aspects?

We may be tempted to dismiss all of this animal business as a flight of fancy, except that just two Sundays later, in the Gospel of John (*Third Sunday in Lent, John 2:13-22*), we witness a stunning turn of events. Now it is *Jesus himself* who is wild: cracking a homemade whip, flipping tables onto their backs, dumping stacks of coins onto the floor of the temple, and freeing the animals held captive there for use in the requisite temple offerings. Only John’s Gospel mentions the presence of animals, and they are docile beasts: sheep, cattle, and doves, foils to a Jesus who is fierce, unhinged. Certainly his wilderness experience might have helped shape him for this intense prophetic display.

The wildness continues the following week, when we turn to Numbers and the story of God’s sending poisonous serpents to deliver fatal bites to the complaining Israelites (*Fourth Sunday in Lent, Numbers 21:4-9*). (It is a rather comical story. The people’s whining is totally irrational, even toddler-esque: “There’s no food! *And* the food is no good!”) God’s antidote to the plague of serpents is no soothing “balm of Gilead.” It is a bronze image, fashioned by Moses, of the same serpent that brought the plague in the first place; the Israelites are compelled to gaze upon it in order to live. Yes, God brings healing, but it is a healing tinged with terror.

And in the Gospel lesson for that day, John compares Jesus to Moses’ serpent (*John 3:14-21*): “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” The death of Jesus is foreshadowed, but this is not the meek Lamb of God slain; this is Mary Oliver’s “Black Snake,” lifeless in the road, “cool and gleaming as a braided whip...,” a stark, ghastly image of death and “its suddenness, its terrible weight, its certain coming.”⁵

There’s a *wildness* in God’s mercy, a wildness that cannot be parsed, dissected, or domesticated. As our congregations undertake our Lenten disciplines and programs, may we not be lulled and dulled by quiet contemplations and well-mannered, prayerful postures. Let us instead experience these important contemplative times as opportunities to wake up to God’s outrageous unpredictability and to move toward faithful and even passionate response.

“Your Love is Teaching Me How to Kneel”

With the wildness of God firmly in mind, we shift gears to a second theme present in these texts, that of God’s covenant with humanity. Most of the Old Testament texts this Lent cycle concern aspects of God’s covenant. As we all know, there are two parties to any covenant—it takes two to tango!—but as we will see, the lections evolve each week, from a view of humanity that is largely passive to one in which the people are called to respond in some way. Such a careful progression of texts can guide us in our Lenten exploration not to jump in too quickly with our own agendas and goals for the season, but rather, to listen to God and follow God’s leading.

The *First Sunday in Lent* (*Genesis 9:8-17*) centers around God’s promise to Noah and to creation, following the flood that destroyed the earth. “Never again,” God says. “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant.” Interestingly, the rainbow is intended to serve not as a covenant reminder to *humanity*, but to God: “When the bow is in the clouds, I [God] will see it and remember...” God is the initiator, and God provides the reminder for Godself. Throughout the passage, Noah says not a word. Noah simply *listens* to the terms of God’s covenant.

The *Second Sunday in Lent* (*Gen. 17:1-7, 15-16*) concerns God’s covenant with Abraham (still Abram at this point). Again, in the particular lection in question, the human response is extremely limited. Abram is still a silent recipient, but as if to build on Noah’s response, Abram now bows before God: “Abram fell on his face.” So we, too, are called first and foremost to listen, and to kneel, before our God. And this is where we begin our Lenten journey—not with lists of disciplines and personal wilderness projects, but with silent receptivity and humble praise.

It is only in the *Third Sunday in Lent* (*Exodus 20:1-17*), with the introduction of the Ten Commandments, that our part in God’s covenant history becomes more prominent. God is still the initiator: “I am the Lord your God,” but only now, after the silence and the praise, do we have expectations for our daily living. Without that relationship as a foundation, the commandments are empty rules, but within the context of listening for God and praising God, these commandments are life-giving.

Finally, in the *Fifth Sunday in Lent* (*Jeremiah 31:31-34*), we are called not just to receive, and to praise, and to keep the commandments, but we are called to step out in faith. The new covenant God promises Jeremiah still has yet to be; God speaks in the future tense of a new house for Israel, and of a law written on the people’s hearts. Looking beyond the lectionary passage into chapter 32, we see Jeremiah’s leap of faith in the purchase of the field in Anathoth, a visual testimony to what God is yet to do: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land” (32:15). So we, too, are called to step out in faith, having been grounded in the reality of God’s love, expressed in God’s covenant relationship with us.

It has been suggested that God’s covenant serves as an alternative to chaos.⁶ Certainly we see that in these Lenten texts: covenant is the alternative to the chaos of a world drowned in mighty waters; to the chaos of a man without an heir, a future, a purpose; to the chaos of a people living without boundaries; to the chaos of a life lived without faith in the future God provides. The U2 song “Vertigo” renders such chaos into contemporary language. The lyrics describe a muddled, frenetic, swirling scene in a dance club; the singer is looking for something visual to grab onto for balance, and he spots a girl “with Jesus ‘round her neck.” Later he sings, “Your love is teaching me

how to kneel.”⁷ So it is with us. It does take two to tango, but God takes the lead. God’s love, offered to us in covenant relationship, is what teaches us how to kneel. We cannot learn such a fundamental faith lesson on our own. It is God’s love that gives shape and meaning to all of our Lenten disciplines.

“Tensegrity”: Living the Contradictions

We have experienced the Lenten texts as filled with hope, yet tinged with horror; packed with good news, yet also with grisly images; wild at heart, yet wonderful beyond our imagining. These tensions illuminate a final theme that can guide us in our Lenten wilderness wanderings—the reality of deep paradox. A faithful Lenten pilgrim, and Lenten preacher, would do well not to seek after easy answers, but immerse oneself in the deep contradictions that, in the words of one scholar, may not make sense to us, but certainly make sense *of* us and our Christian journey.⁸

Architect and inventor Buckminster Fuller employed the term *tensegrity* to describe the complementary relationship between two seemingly opposing forces or ideas—push/pull, or attraction/repulsion... or for our purposes, hope/horror, wild/wonderful, the good and the grisly. These tensions are inevitable and unsettling, but also creative and life-giving. Benedictine spirituality is one particular discipline that explores these tensions, acknowledging that we must tend to the conflicts and paradoxes of our lives, seeking to integrate the forces of push and pull in which we find ourselves; otherwise we will be torn apart, broken selves, lost from the fullness of life that God promises. Esther de Waal writes: “Differences will not be solved by pretending that they do not exist, or that only one orientation is legitimate.... [The goal is] not confusion but a holding together of polarities that leads to vitality.”⁹ This tending to the contradictions is thoroughly biblical. Consider: “a God who becomes a man; a victor who rides on a donkey in his hour of triumph... a king whose kingdom is not here but to come; a God who tells me that ‘when I am weak then I am strong.’”¹⁰

We have explored numerous paradoxes already in these Lenten texts, such as losing one’s life in order to save it (*Second Sunday in Lent, Mark 8:31-38*), as well as Paul’s juxtaposition of God’s wisdom and human folly, of weakness and strength, and of the “foolishness” of the cross and the cross as a source of God’s power (*Third Sunday in Lent, I Cor. 1:18-25*). John’s story of Jesus’ angrily confronting the money-changers in the temple paints a stark contrast to the story that immediately precedes it, the wedding at Cana, in which a more genteel side of Jesus comes out: the wedding guest and miracle worker who listens to his mother (*Third Sunday in Lent, John 2:13-22*). (We may wonder: can this be the same man?) And during the *Fourth Sunday in Lent, Ephesians 2:1-10*, we are presented with the classic theological paradox of our faith, that “even when we were dead through our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”

Perhaps the greatest paradox of all is the one we are inevitably moving toward throughout Lent: the cross, in which crucifixion and exaltation are inextricably linked. Paul illumines this paradox flawlessly when he writes that “[Christ] humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name” (*Palm/Passion Sunday, Philippians 2:5-11*). Our own lives emulate this tension; in the words of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, “We descend by exaltation and ascend by humility.”¹¹

This attention to the paradoxes can guide us toward a fuller Lenten experience,

from the pulpit and amidst the programs, in the Sunday School and at the small group. The basic tension for our lives is this, according to de Waal: “I am nothing without God... yet God looks to me for the activity that will make use of my gifts... If I can incorporate both of these elements into my life I shall escape the passivity that encourages me to do nothing at all and hand everything over to God, or the terrifying compulsion of over-activity that comes from reliance upon my unaided self.”¹² Given our culture of busy-ness, I have been particularly concerned in this article about the latter, but a healthy embrace of the tensions of faith, which I think permeate the Lenten texts, will keep us from overcorrecting into spiritual inactivity.

A theme throughout the rule of St. Benedict is the notion of “running” to Christ. We don’t often think about what is involved in the act of running—the relentless loss of balance with each step, the precarious moment between footfalls. “It is risky, this matter of running,” de Waal admits. “[But] by daring to lose my balance I keep it.”¹³ The Lenten texts encourage us to take the risk—moving ever closer to a God who is wild and unpredictable; a God who offers a covenant relationship with us in ways beyond our deserving; a God who encompasses deep polarities and unsettling paradoxes—paradoxes which ultimately set us free and create us anew, in Lent and in every season of our lives.

Notes

1. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Consulted entries for “sozo” (from Mark), “eurisko” (Matthew), and “peripoieo” (Luke and John).
2. Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John,” *New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 544.
3. O’Day, 545.
4. Maryann Mott, “Did Animals Sense Tsunami Was Coming?” *National Geographic News* 4 January 2005. “http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/01/0104_050104_tsunami_animals.html” http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/01/0104_050104_tsunami_animals.html>
5. Mary Oliver. “Black Snake.” *What Do We Know: Poems* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002).
6. Fred B. Craddock, et al., *Preaching Through the Christian Year B* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993), 138.
7. U2, “Vertigo,” *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*. Compact Disc. Interscope Records, 2004.
8. Craddock, 154.
9. Esther de Waal, *Living with Contradiction: An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1997), 22.
10. de Waal, 24.
11. de Waal, 21.
12. de Waal, 34.
13. de Waal, 26.