

Forty Days in the Womb: Worshiping in Lent

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It is the beginning of Lent. As Nora Gallagher walks into the sanctuary for the evening service on Ash Wednesday, she anticipates the litany of repentance and the imposition of ashes. She is already wrapped in a cloud of guilt and remembering what it was like to give up smoking. A friend quips, “Anne’s giving up drinking, Terri’s giving up chocolate, and I’m just giving up.”¹

I imagine they laughed—I would have laughed. But behind the humor there is a bit of truth. Lent is, in fact, giving up. Not just chocolate or wine, but the giving up of the will, the giving over of oneself to God. For some of us, it is a matter of daily remembering and relinquishing, a constant, steady practice of saying “yes” to God. For others of us, giving oneself over to God is something like collapsing in a heap and crying “uncle!” before the hound of heaven after a protracted chase.

Whether “giving up” is a daily practice or a dramatic conversion (or return) to God, it is part of the continual and ever-deepening baptismal journey. Baptism, as the funeral liturgy goes, is complete only in death. Congregations who travel together through the liturgical year recognize that this baptismal journey is not so much a straight line through time, but rather more like a spiral. Each time we encounter a new season of the church year, it is both familiar and new. We’ve been this way before, but we are not the same – and so the journey continues and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, faith is enriched and renewed. To enter into Lent is to enter into an annual cycle of giving up, letting go, so that God might work wonders with us. That makes Lent a liminal time—a time when we are opened to being re-formed. Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354–430 C.E.), saw Lent this way. New believers (and the congregations that nurtured them) spent Lent in preparation for baptism. It was, he said, like “time in the womb.” That made it, says William Harmless,

a “liminal” or “threshold” phase during which they found themselves marked off—physically, socially, ritually—as people in transition. . . . In this transition, Augustine played midwife, mixing firmness and gentleness: on the one hand, calling them not to flee the labor pangs, and on the other, encouraging them to look forward and love the new self coming to birth.²

Augustine, the Catechumenate, and Lent

By the fourth century, many churches interpreted baptism as a dying and rising with Christ (cf. Romans 6) and so viewed Easter as the most theologically rich day of the liturgical year on which to baptize new believers.³ The forty days of Lent, then, became a time when many churches readied converts for baptism.⁴ In Augustine’s day, people preparing for baptism (catechumens) would come to Hippo from the surrounding villages and stay for the forty days of Lent, the Easter vigil, and Easter week. They went through a process that involved penitential disciplines, self-examination and exorcisms (performed by breathing on the baptismal candidates to force out the demonic spirits within them), and teaching. Lent was the time to reshape

one's life and prepare for the sacrament of baptism and the first receiving of the Lord's Supper. As Paul instructed, "they were to strip off the old and put on the new."⁵

Augustine regarded the baptismal preparation during Lent as something of a "boot camp" for catechumens. Like Chrysostom and Ambrose, he compared the process (the catechumenate) to military or athletic training that prepared one "for a wrestling match with Satan or for a battle against the forces of darkness." It was preparation that involved the whole person, body, mind, and soul. And not only the catechumens took part in the rigors of the Lenten discipline. All of the faithful (as they were able) took on the same practices as the catechumens: fasting each day until three in the afternoon, abstaining from meat and wine, refraining from sex, and distributing alms.⁶

Yet Augustine did not only use these masculine images to describe the time of preparation for Easter; he also spoke of the Lenten period as time in the womb. In one sermon, Augustine explained that while a woman in labor is not particularly happy, once she gives birth joy abounds. During Lent, he says, "people 'fast and pray since this is the day of labor'; moreover, the Spirit 'stirs up in our hearts the indescribable pains of holy desire,' a sort of spiritual equivalent of a woman's labor pains."⁷ Baptism was a new birth, and those who were baptized were, in a sense, themselves born. Nevertheless, as Harmless puts it, "while certain labor pains ended, others continued. True rebirth would happen only with the coming of the kingdom in which 'we shall be poured out from this pregnancy of faith into eternity's light.'"⁸

The eschatological thrust is impossible to miss. While baptism was birth to new life in this earthly realm, suffering and sorrow remained mixed with joy and confidence. Only in passing from this life to the next did the Christian experience true and complete birth to new life. For Augustine, then,

these twin threads within human life found expression in the seasons of Lent and Easter: Lent symbolized the darker one, the painful coming to birth that took a lifetime; Easter symbolized the happier one, that periodic foretaste of an eschatological birth into God. Thus, in these two liturgical seasons, Christians drank in by turns, the 'not yet' and 'already' of New Testament eschatology.⁹

Lent continues to be a time for conversion and repentance—for turning again to God and for renewing our baptismal covenant even as we wait and work for the reign of God. It is indeed a gestational period—a journey from the old life to the new. It's true whether we walk steadily toward Easter as long-time Christians seeking to deepen our baptismal covenant, or stumble back toward the font after being away from home for a long, long time. It's true whether we're new believers seeking baptism or parents bringing children to the waters, or sponsors accompanying them as companions along the way. Churches are reclaiming Easter as the heart of the liturgical year and the time when new believers, or the children of believers, are baptized, young people are confirmed, and the whole congregation celebrates the resurrection of Jesus with a renewal of baptism.¹⁰ That means that Lent is not only a time for *personal* self-examination and spiritual discipline, but a time for the *whole community* to prepare for sharing in the dying and rising of Christ. It's a time to move from death to life, from old to new, from repentance to resurrection.

"On Ash Wednesday, I enter the desert," writes Nora Gallagher.

I become the woman at the well who demands, “Give me some of that water.” I am the blind man begging for sight, the sisters of the dying brother, the halt and the lame calling out from the alleys and hedgerows, “Jesus, remember me,” as the sweet song goes, “when you come into your kingdom.”

Finally, on the eve of Easter, a priest lights the tall, white paschal candle in a darkened church. A deacon sings, “The light of Christ.” It is a journey, as a biblical scholar put it, from ashes to fire.¹¹

We may enter Lent with our individual longings and needs, but we do not make the trip alone.

Ash Wednesday

The journey begins with ashes. Placing ashes on the body is an ancient biblical practice associated with turning back to God. As Jon Walton reminded us in a sermon that appeared in these pages, Nineveh put on sackcloth and ashes in response to Job’s call to repentance. Jeremiah called for Israel’s repentance by putting on sackcloth and rolling in ashes himself. Jesus reproached sinful cities because they wouldn’t put on ashes and return to God.¹² When ashes are imposed on our foreheads, we receive a stark reminder of our own need to repent—again—and to once more turn away from the forces of evil and turn to God.¹³ Repentance is not just about owning up to our various sins; it is an acknowledgment of our very nature—frail, flawed, fickle, and always less faithful than we intend to be. In short, ashes remind us of our *human* nature—our mortality—and the shortness of our earthly life. When God first tells Adam that he is destined to die, God says, “Dust you are and to dust you will return.” And so we say those same words: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”¹⁴

During one memorable Ash Wednesday service at the church where I worship, we went forward for the imposition of ashes. Instead of being marked by a pastor, however, we marked one another with an ashy cross. After I had taken part, I watched from my perch in the choir loft as people imposed the sign of the cross on one another, flesh upon flesh, and spoke those words, sometimes to strangers, sometimes to friends, often to spouse, or child. As I watched a mother lean down to trace a smoky cross on her child’s forehead, tears rolled down my cheeks. How could a mother begin to speak words of death to her own child? Quickly tears of pain became tears of joy as I realized that in that gesture a mother does not curse her child but pronounces blessing: You will turn from God only to be drawn in again, she says with that mark. You will die, but in order to live. In life and in death, *you belong to God*. And so begins the journey from death to life. To start here, with a bold expression of our creatureliness, is to break open the veneer and create a space for God to lead us through to a renewed life of intentional truth-telling and more profound trust.

The Sundays of Lent

One of the simplest and most revealing ways to grasp the Lenten season’s movement from death to life is to read in succession the Prayers of the Day commended for each Sunday (cf. *Book of Common Worship* 242-246). Since the prayers reflect the lectionary readings for the day, they offer a compendium of the scriptural themes at work. The prayers for the first Sunday of Lent, for instance, make use of the image

of the wilderness. Just as Jesus was tempted in the desert, we come face to face with our need for God:

Almighty God,
your Son fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are but did not sin.
Give us grace to direct our lives
in obedience to your Spirit,
that as you know our weakness,
so we may know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ our Redeemer,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.¹⁵

The prayer signals not only Christ's victory over temptation in the desert, "but also...his victory over the powers hostile to God, as well as an anticipation of his glorification ('angels came and ministered to him'). It is an overture to the paschal mystery of Easter."¹⁶ In other words, the texts, prayers, songs, and preaching on the first Sunday in Lent not only instruct us about the temptations we will face and present the model of Jesus as perfect denier of all temptation; rather, they invite us more deeply into the mystery of who Jesus is and, therefore, the life in Christ to which we are called. Another prayer commended for the first Sunday in Lent points us to this possibility while reminding us that baptism is at the heart of the Easter story:

God of the covenant,
as the forty days of deluge
swept away the world's corruption
and watered new beginnings of righteousness and life,
so in the saving flood of Baptism
we are washed clean and born again.
Throughout these forty days,
unseal within us the wellspring of your grace,
cleanse our hearts of all that is not holy,
and cause your gift of new life to flourish once again ¹⁷

The texts and prayers for the second Sunday in Lent invite us further into the sacred journey that is the season's work. In Year C (2006-2007) of the lectionary, the readings remind us of God's covenant that began with Abraham and also that before the triumph of the resurrection Jesus must suffer and die. A prayer for the day signals both the promise of future salvation and strength for the earthly journey as well:

God of our forebears,
as your chosen servant Abraham
was given faith to obey your call
and go out into the unknown,
so may your church be granted such faith
that we may follow you with courage. . . .¹⁸

The first two Sundays of Lent, then, point to the goal of this earthly journey, the mystery and joy of Easter, and invite us to “travel this way as followers of Christ.”¹⁹

The third, fourth, and fifth Sundays follow the path to Easter as themes of renewal and transformation (Lent 3), the promise of the welcome table (Lent 4), and the surety of the resurrection (Lent 5), even in the face of impending death. Through the season of Lent, then, one sees clearly the movement from old to new, from death to life, from repentance to resurrection, and—since the *season* of Easter eventually ends with the feast of Pentecost, from ashes to fire.

Holy Week

More and more, congregations are observing Passion Sunday rather than Palm Sunday on the Lord’s Day before Easter. This is a wise move, as contemporary Christians are less apt to worship during the week. Throughout the whole Lenten journey it has been made clear that the road to the cross is not an easy one, and that death precedes life; it is essential, therefore, that Christians not move directly from palms to lilies during this central week of the Christian year. A Passion Sunday service enables the telling of the whole passion story and ensures that we do not move too blithely from one celebratory event to the next.

Passion/Palm Sunday is “a day of contrasts”²⁰ in which we move from “the joyous demonstration of loyalty to Jesus” to the betrayal and pain of the crucifixion. The service then, should make those contrasts plain; indeed, these are the very contrasts that we have been holding in tension throughout the entire Lenten journey. A number of resources provide suggestions for telling the whole passion story in the context of a Passion/Palm worship service.²¹

Holy Week culminates in the Three Days—Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday—which can be understood as one continuous service of worship. Gail Ramshaw points out that during Holy Week we are invited to both tell the story and enact the meaning of these days.²² Indeed, this is the most dramatic period in the whole Christian year. On Maundy Thursday we hear the story of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples and his commandment to love; we may even enact his own demonstration of love by washing one another’s feet. We share the meal, too, remembering that this is not simply a funeral for Jesus but a strengthening for the passion of Christ—and for all of life. Here we sit at a table prepared in the midst of the enemies of righteousness and grace. We remember Christ’s sacrifice for us even as we anticipate his coming again. In other words, we tell the story and we also enact it, through touch, sight, symbol.

Good Friday is not only a day for remembering Christ’s suffering, but a day of recognizing the paradox inherent in the Christian story. Ramshaw points us to the signs: in the death of Jesus, majesty is placed next to weakness; the tree of death (the cross) is really the tree of life; the shepherd becomes the lamb. The death of Jesus is also the triumph of God.²³ Sylvia Dunstan’s stunning hymn text brings the paradoxical nature of Good Friday to life:

You, Lord, are both lamb and shepherd.
You, Lord, are both prince and slave.
You, peacemaker and sword-bringer
of the way you took and gave.

Worthy is our earthly Jesus!
Worthy is our cosmic Christ!
Worthy your defeat and victory.
Worthy still your peace and strife.

You the everlasting instant;
you, who are our death and life.²⁴

On Easter Sunday we will proclaim the good news unequivocally; but on Good Friday, we face the mystery and the paradox head on.

Holy Saturday and the Easter Vigil

Some churches have reclaimed the ancient practice of the Easter Vigil as a culminating event of the liturgical year. In this single service the whole of the Lenten journey is recalled—indeed, the whole of the Christian life. (See the *Book of Common Worship*, 297ff for an outline of the service.) The service begins in darkness with the lighting of a fire and a greeting that echoes the Jewish seder meal in which a child asks, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” The minister or other worship leader answers the implied question:

On this most holy night
when our Savior Jesus Christ passed from death to life,
we gather with the church throughout the world
in vigil and prayer.
This is the Passover of Jesus Christ:
through water and the bread and wine,
we recall Christ’s death and resurrection,
we share Christ’s triumph over sin and death,
and with invincible hope
we await Christ’s coming again. . . .
The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.²⁵

The light from the fire is then carried into the sanctuary by the candles of each worshiper, and the service continues with readings and songs that trace the story of salvation, culminating in the baptism of new Christians or the children of believers and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The long gestation is over; the journey is complete. We are delivered from the Lenten womb to new life.

In his book, *The Secret Knowledge of Water*, Craig Childs chronicles his journeys deep into the deserts of the American southwest in search of water holes—everything from large desert lakes to tiny hollows that collect enough water to satisfy the thirst of a single sparrow. His treks are dangerous and are as spiritual as they are scientific. As he begins his narrative he makes a surprising assertion: “If you want to study water, you do not go to the Amazon or to Seattle. You come here, to the driest land.”²⁶ In other words, to fully understand the nature of water, you must go through the desert first. And so it is with Easter and the fullness of baptism. If we want to apprehend the deep mystery of Christ, and our participation in his death and resurrection, we must

journey through the desert of Lent. In order to grasp the new life we have been promised—and indeed, the new life that is given to us again and again—we must return to the womb. That is the gift of the liturgical year—that we are led, together, through the pattern of story and prayer, each year, returning not to the same place we have been before, but to a different and deeper place, because we are different, because we are continually led through this life and to the next by a God who constantly graces us with vision and strength and hope.

Notes

1. *Things Seen and Unseen, A Year Lived in Faith* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 80.
2. *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 294.
3. Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation, Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 168.
4. As Johnson points out, there is diversity in liturgical practice throughout the early church. To say then, that Easter was the only appropriate time for baptism and that Lent was always devoted to baptismal preparation, is to generalize and oversimplify the intricacies of the historical record. For the purposes of this article, it is enough to note that these practices did exist in some parts of the fourth century church.
5. Harmless, 250.
6. Harmless, 251-253.
7. Harmless, 257.
8. Harmless, 257.
9. Harmless, 257.
10. For more insights into the ancient catechumenate and its adaptation for twenty-first century churches, see Martha Moore-Keish, "The Recovery of the Catechumenate and North American Presbyterianism," *Call to Worship* 38:1 (2004), 63-70; David B. Batchelder, "Recovering a Forgotten Way of Being Church," *Liturgy* 21:2 (2006), 43-49; Stanley R. Hall, "Reforming Christian Initiation: The Catechumenate and the Church," *Reformed Liturgy & Music* XXIX: 4 (1995), 247-253.
11. Gallagher, 82.
12. Jon M. Walton, "Imposition," *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XXIX, No. 2 (Lent 2006), 37-39.
13. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 407-408.
14. *Book of Common Worship*, 227.
15. *Book of Common Worship*, 242-243.
16. Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year, Its History and Its Meaning after the Reform of the Liturgy*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981), 100.
17. *Book of Common Worship*, 243.
18. *Book of Common Worship*, 245.
19. Adam, 101.
20. Hoyt Hickman et al., *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 131.
21. See, for instance, *The New Handbook of the Christian Year*.
22. Gail Ramshaw, *The Three-Day Feast. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 2004), 10-16.
23. Ramshaw, 47.
24. Sylvia Dunstan, "Christus Paradox," in *Voices United, The Hymn and Worship Book of The Church of Canada* (Etobicoke, Ontario, Canada: The United Publishing House, 1996), 210.
25. *Book of Common Worship*, 2979-298.
26. Craig Childs, *The Secret Knowledge of Water* (Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), xvi.