

Challenge and Invitation: Preaching Lent Today

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The Dirt and the Divine: Lenten Aspirations

When you step off the boat onto the Isle of Iona, an Inner Hebrides island off the west coast of Scotland, you immediately perceive it is a “thin place.” Though only four miles long and one mile wide, this island has been a place of pilgrimage, refuge, and religious devotion and drama since its first recorded history in the sixth century. For those who visit today, there is a sense of both peace and faith-filled expectancy. As you walk from the arrival dock to the Abbey Church and Cloisters, the centerpiece of the island and the Iona Community, you wind through the ruins of a Nunnery, and you sense the ghosts of the faithful who sought (and found?) God’s presence in this place; you journey down the rocky street that has been traveled by Scotland’s kings and monastic scribes; and your eyes feast upon the lush landscape and high crosses that seem to dot the island as if declaring this place as God’s land.

A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to stay in the Abbey Church cloisters and participate as a part of the Iona Community. When I arrived at the Abbey Church, a sense of calm and anticipation filled my soul. I felt immediately as if I were “home,” and yet I hoped that God would meet me on that island in the ways I so desperately needed. After we took in the glorious stone structure that would be our place of residence and devotion for the next week, our hosts invited us into the cloisters. I expected to begin our time with prayer or worship or at least an opportunity to bond as a community. Instead, they sat us down in the Refectory on the rough-hewn benches and handed out group assignments and chores for the week.

My group’s responsibility was to clean dishes and chop vegetables every morning for the daily meals. Starting the next morning, it became routine after breakfast to clear the tables and begin to scrub all the dishes by hand. Every morning I found myself elbow-deep, literally, in the large porridge pot that never seemed to get clean. After the overwhelming pile of dishes were done and all the water mopped up off the floor, the vegetables demanded our attention—bushels and bushels of vegetables to be cleaned, chopped, and prepared every day. For some reason, the giant bushels of carrots regularly ended up on my workstation. By Wednesday I swore that if I never saw a carrot again, I would die a happy woman. Straight from the garden on the mainland, the carrots were caked with dirt from the ground and dust from the journey across the sound. They required intense scrubbing before they could be peeled or chopped so that dirt didn’t find its way into our soups, stews, and casseroles. Even in the middle of these messy jobs, I did my best to live into the Iona ideal that every work is worship. But to be honest, I wasn’t the “ideal” Iona resident when it came to engaging my chores with joy.

Moreover, every morning without fail, our chores were interrupted. Amidst our daily cleaning, peeling, and chopping, the 9:00 a.m. bell would ring in the Abbey church, calling all to prayer. Upon hearing its tolls and feeling its vibration in the kitchen adjacent to the bell tower, we would stop whatever we were doing and all go to Morning Prayer. With carrot debris and soapy water covering my apron, with hands wrinkled from cleaning the porridge pot and nail beds soiled with dirt from

the vegetables, I would take my place in the choir stalls and join with the rest of the community, declaring these lofty words:

Leader: The world belongs to God,
ALL: The earth and all its people.
Leader: How good it is, how wonderful,
ALL: To live together in unity.
Leader: Love and faith come together,
ALL: Justice and peace join hands.
Leader: If Christ's disciples keep silent
ALL: These stones would shout aloud.
Leader: Open our lips, O God,
ALL: And our mouths shall proclaim your praise.¹

In the middle of the dirt and grime of vegetables, in the midst of the scrubbing, chopping, and mundane activities of sustaining human community, we were summoned to participate in the transcendent work of worship. We prayed and sang and heard God's word read and proclaimed. We declared great truths and often felt the Spirit at work among us. And, when Morning Prayer ended, we returned to the unfinished work that awaited us, poised on the cutting boards, reminding us that our earthly tasks were not yet complete, and perhaps they might be God's work too.

This is the wonderful and mysterious dialectic we encounter in the Christian life, but most especially at Lent. Lent, at its best, invites us to venture into a deeper exploration of both the earthiness of our humanity and the transcendent wonder of God. In seeking to deepen our own spiritual lives and relationship with God, we are asked to poise ourselves on both the brink of God's future and the edge of our present. In the words of Dr. Don Saliers, "The church's Lenten journey is a double journey: into the mystery of God's unfathomable grace and into the depths of our humanity. Both are required."²

Since the fourth century, Lent has been a unique time set aside in the life of the church. In its earlier iterations (and continuing in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions today), the forty days before Easter were devoted to the preparation of those who were to be baptized at Easter Vigil. Soon enough, the practices of those preparing for baptism were extended beyond the catechumenate class, and the Lenten season became a time for personal examination and faithful renewal for the already-baptized as well.³ With an emphasis on fasting, prayers, confession, study, and service (almsgiving), the church sought to make Lent a time of both deep attention to human need and imperfection as well as a time of reinvigorating one's faith in a gracious and powerful God, that would culminate on Easter with baptisms and the "hallelujahs!" of resurrection. Lent (coming from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning "spring") was intended to be a time of revivification of both personal faith and a season that called for new energy within the life of the church.

As preachers and pastors caring for congregations today, we long for Lent to be a springtime of the soul. We want the Lenten season to be a time of great spiritual awakening not just for the faithful in the pews but also for the Church as a whole. And we seek to renew that religious fervor through Lenten Bible studies, prayer groups, or unique worship services. We mark people with ashes and oil, hand them

palm leaves, and even hush their “hallelujahs,” all in the effort to push them towards stronger awareness and growth in their spiritual lives. We long for our parishioners (and those beyond our church walls) to engage in the “double journey,” to face their own imperfect humanity while glimpsing God’s grace-filled divinity. However, sometimes our efforts seem in vain. The truth is, we as people in the twenty-first century struggle to fully engage both halves of this “double journey” in great part because of the social and cultural forces at play within us and within the communities we serve.

The Challenges of Preaching Lent Today: Secularization, Reflection, Compartmentalization, and Post-Modernism

Secularization has become more than a buzzword; it is a cultural transformation that has a direct impact on our congregants and their relationship to faith. Secularization is often caricatured as a decrease in religious devotion, belief, or practice. However, this is not necessarily the case. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor describes secularization as a move from a transcendent frame to an immanent frame, a move from ordering our lives dependent upon a supernatural plan or being to ordering our lives based on that which is natural and observable in the world.⁴ Even religious devotion and practices get shaved down to fit this immanent frame where instrumental reason is valued and “time is pervasively secular.”⁵ Living in this natural, reason-driven, immanent frame, the world becomes disenchanted and there is a loss of the transcendent. It is not that religious belief or practice is eliminated or invalidated; it is that religion has been consigned to the private sphere. Religious claims no longer function to “provide a coherent, meaningful, and explanatory narrative about the world.”⁶ Instead, people look toward immediate, material stories—science, technology, or reason—to explain their experiences. However, secularization cannot merely be defined as a narrative of decline, for with it has come gifts such as democratization of power and scientific advancements that have changed our world for the better.

Nonetheless, secularization poses a challenge to the Lenten preacher. Due to this gradual yet powerful force, people in the pews today (and maybe even the preachers themselves) struggle to find a transcendent God in a disenchanted world. We have become constricted and contained by our material, immanent frame. We struggle to find meaning and power in stories about a God beyond the corporeal limits of our lives and our world. This loss has not gone without notice. As Charles Taylor describes, we have a sense that something is missing, that there is a “lack of weight, gravity, thickness, substance...a deeper resonance... which we feel should be there.”⁷ Even with this sense of loss, twenty-first century persons struggle to claim considerations of God as something of significance and see the transcendent at work in the material substance of our world.

What about the other half of our Lenten journey? Our journey into our own humanity? Unfortunately, we struggle on that front as well. Both our unreflective culture and our propensity for compartmentalization constrain us from being able to consider fully the truths of our human condition. First, we are a remarkably unreflective society. We struggle to slow down and consider our world and our lives. In a society where time is money and money is important, where it is more comfortable to *do* than to *be*, where busy-ness is a sign of status and significance (or at least offers that illusion), there is little value placed in the public eye on taking pause and

reflecting on the state of our lives and world. While pockets of resistance (the church, perhaps, being one of them) offer space to be, to reflect, and to remember, the values of our culture do not nurture such practices.

Second, our culture has also grown to value the skill of compartmentalization. We are able to arrange not only our society into different spheres (family, economic, political, religious, etc.),⁸ but also our individual lives have been broken apart and scattered into separate spheres. We have learned to separate our work “selves” from our family “selves” from our romantic “selves” from even our church “selves.” We present different parts of our personalities in different locations and among different groupings of people. As the church continues to be relegated to its own private social sphere, so the faithful often create a “religious self” that is separate from the rest of their lives. Especially among mainline Protestant congregations, this “religious self” has often been molded to be an ideal representation of what people *think* the church wants them to be, causing congregants to leave many of their struggles and imperfections in the car to be picked up at the end of worship. As a result, the church as a whole struggles to dig honestly into the truth about humanity. Because of the pressure to portray some kind of ideal self *and* the separation of the “religious self” from the rest of our identities and lives, it is difficult for us, as preachers and parishioners, to be truthful about our own brokenness and the brokenness of our world. Both our unreflective ways and compartmentalizations of identity lead to a failure to take seriously our full humanity—both our gifts and our shortcomings as individuals and as a society.

As a result of secularization, our unreflective culture, and compartmentalization, the Lenten “double journey” seems an almost impossible task to engage. We struggle to reach beyond the immanent frame and encounter the transcendent wonder of God while at the same time we struggle to take seriously the brokenness and hurting of our humanity. So, the practices of Lent—prayer, confession, fasting, and almsgiving—are reduced to clichéd New Years resolutions. Instead of genuine acts of devotion that lead to deeper self-examination and/or worship of God, we give up candy, fast from a TV program, or abstain from soda for forty days—all habits we should be avoiding anyway and which we will probably resume after (if not before) Lent is over. We have substituted shallow practices in place of authentic ones because the “double journey” of Lent asks us to enter into spaces that are neither comfortable nor natural for the twenty-first century citizen.

As if to add insult to preaching injury, all these factors are then wrapped up in the complicated forces of postmodernism. In seeking to define the elusive concept of postmodernism, David Lose offers its central question: “When it comes to *postmodernism*, the primary question is *epistemological*: How do we know for certain whether anything is true?”⁹ Postmodernism presents a direct challenge to the traditional model of preaching biblical doctrine as ultimate truth and then asking congregants to apply that universal truth to their lives. Postmodern citizens are skeptical about whether we can declare *any* truth as universal or objectively true for all people, places, and times. No longer can preachers effectively offer general truths that will be received as ubiquitously applicable to a diverse, postmodern congregation. There is a distrust of any kind of objective certainty and those who purport to have it. As Barbara Brown Taylor offers, “The days are long gone when most preachers can stand up in pulpits and name people’s sin for them. They do not have that authority anymore.”¹⁰ In the

postmodern landscape, the preacher no longer has been granted the authority, nor the right, to stand and offer unshakable principles for righteous living. So then, how can we preach to a people about the truth of God and the truth about our humanity in this Lenten season?

A Trail Guide's Invitation

While postmodernism poses a challenge to preachers, it may also open opportunities and a key to preaching Lent. Postmoderns are not suspicious of truth itself, but challenge the concept of a fixed Truth beyond review and revision. A postmodern parishioner wants to explore, construct, and build meaning out of “penultimate” truths that are always open for alteration due to new information, experiences, or understandings.¹¹ This should not be seen as a threat, but as a gift to the church and to the Lenten preacher. As discussed above, Lent is a journey—a double journey—an invitation to deep *exploration* of both our own humanity and the power and presence of God. Lent invites disciples to construct, review, and revise what they know about themselves and God through a deep engagement with the Lenten texts and practices.

The Lenten preacher, then, may not stand as a proclaimer of universal biblical truths, but instead offer *invitation* to enter this unique forty-day journey. The preacher has the opportunity to invite the seeking faithful (and seeking doubters) into the Lenten texts, allowing the stories of faith to shape their own story. Preaching invitation is about welcoming and encouraging questions from the pulpit without feeling the need to offer concrete, indisputable answers. Preaching invitation resists the temptation of didactic/instructive preaching in which preachers essentially seek to communicate biblical information or Christian doctrine. Likewise, it is to resist the temptation to be ethical exhorters, calling for a standard of moral and social uprightness that is dictated by some biblical text. Both teaching and exhorting are valuable, but there is time enough for those tasks in the pulpit. What if, for the forty days of Lent, we preach invitation? What if we *invite* our congregations to wrestle and question and journey with us?

But, to what should we invite our congregations this Lent? We have already named the challenges that seek to disrupt our “double journey” posed by secularization, our unreflective culture, and compartmentalization. To challenge all these forces at once would be futile and would guarantee a preacher’s frustration. I would suggest that we begin in the immanent frame of our own lives, but challenge our tendencies of unreflective living and compartmentalization. We should invite our parishioners to *honesty*—about ourselves, our lives, and our world. An invitation to honesty asks people to stop and be, to take time to authentically ask and answer questions about their own existence, to be honest about their own joys, gifts, doubts, and places of brokenness. This is an invitation not only to reflection and deep questioning, but it also encourages parishioners to bring their whole selves to these questions, allowing the light of faithful reflection to shine into every corner of their compartmentalized identities. This year’s lectionary Lenten texts invite this kind of honesty, offering psalms of confessions and stories about what it means to live in covenant community. These texts help us to remember our identities claimed in baptism and challenge us with prophetic words of conviction and summons. Each of the lectionary Lenten texts invites honesty from the congregation about how we are living as people of faith in this world.

Such honesty is not easy and demands great courage on the part of the congregation

and deep understanding on the part of the preacher. Lent's journey into our humanity invites us to no longer shy away from those places of doubt and brokenness in our lives and our world. It asks us to take seriously the pains of our own existence and the realities of terrorism, war, illness, divorce, grief, and shame. We are required to face the brokenness within us as well as the broken societies in which we participate. As a result, the preacher must take care to create a space in which this journey may be taken faithfully and safely. Instead of playing the role of biblical teacher or ethical exhorter or holy herald, perhaps the challenges of preaching this Lent invite the preacher into the role of a trail guide.

A few years ago, one of my best friends from high school, Anna, finally fulfilled her life-long dream of becoming a certified professional trail guide. Training since her senior year of high school, she now works for two different companies leading hiking, canoeing, caving, and climbing expeditions, lasting from a week to six months, all over the western United States and throughout South America. When asked why she wants to be a trail guide, her answer is the same every time: "Because, a trail becomes new every time you invite new feet upon it. There are never two hikes that are the same."

The best trail guides, she explains, are those who welcome all kinds of people onto the trail, recognizing that the trail will never be experienced the same way twice. Each person brings their own gifts and struggles (plus the weather always adds a certain level of unpredictability). But, the guide cannot enter blind. He needs to have *some* knowledge of the trail. She has to know which paths to take, the locations of sinkholes or dangerous ledges, or where the river is most narrow, offering the safest place to cross. Great guides know both the beauty and the challenges of the trail for themselves, while acknowledging that with each new journey, they must be prepared to experience the trail anew. The gifted guide truly journeys *with* the adventurers, suffering through the same rain or snowstorms, encountering the same unexpected wildlife, and even sitting together when one adventurer becomes paralyzed by fear or struggles to forge ahead. A great guide is not simply an encyclopedia of information nor a signpost merely pointing the right way to go, but a fellow journeyer, a friend on the trail.

If the preacher is to serve as trail guide, the preacher must both prepare for the journey and walk with others on their Lenten journey. Like a good trail guide, preachers should have a sense of the risks, pitfalls, and contours of the Lenten trail before they can invite and escort fellow travelers. Preachers must be willing to encounter their own doubts and brokenness in order to authentically invite others to the journey with them. Preachers must be willing to dig into their own humanity and be vulnerable in facing their personal wounds and the wounds of the world. Only after this hard work can the trail guide preacher invite others on the journey. Not merely pointing the way like a signpost, but traveling alongside their parishioners, preachers must be willing to "plunge back into the depths of human existence, where the words [of brokenness and faith] were first conceived and where they may once again be filled with power."¹² Preachers must name and describe encounters with their own brokenness so honestly and transparently that listeners can identify places of brokenness in their own lives and feel courage to be honest about them as well.

In challenging the patterns of our unreflective culture and compartmentalization, the trail guide preacher invites the congregation into at least one half of the Lenten journey—to recognize both the gifts of humanity and, even more honestly, our human

brokenness and imperfection as individuals and a society. But when we travel this journey well, those spaces of doubt and brokenness can open fissures for transcendent hope. In our honesty about our human condition, we break open not only the myths we have created within our own lives, but also the myth of the secular story. As we recognize the way our human reason and exertions have failed us, we recognize the way “the secular story has fallen short, providing a too-limited view of human life.” In that moment, preachers have the opportunity “to offer hearers hope rooted in the audacious claims of the biblical story... reclaiming much of our ordinary lives as arenas in which we can experience the ongoing work of God to love and bless the world.”¹³ Like Jesus and his disciples, we walk together in honesty towards the crosses of our existence; we take the long journey through Lent towards Jerusalem. But, we hope and we pray and we trust that the journey that winds its way to the crosses of our lives will be pierced through, when all is said and done, with resurrection hope.

Notes

- 1 “Opening Responses, The Morning Service,” *The Iona Worship Book*, (Glasgow, Scotland: The Wild Goose Publications, 2003), 15.
- 2 Don Saliers, “Keeping Time in Lent,” *American Organist Magazine* 47, no. 3 (March 2013): 12.
- 3 For more information on the origins of Lenten observances, see Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2011), 89-113.
- 4 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 21.
- 5 Charles Taylor, 542.
- 6 David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World—and Our Preaching—is Changing*
- 7 Charles Taylor, 307.
- 8 For an expanded discussion on the differentiation of social spheres see Max Weber. See especially Max Weber, “Science as Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Geerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 129-156.
- 9 Lose, 7. (*italics original*)
- 10 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Boston, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 2000), 4.
- 11 For a lengthier discussion of this idea of a postmodern concept of truth, see Lose, 20-24.
- 12 Barbara Brown Taylor, 60.
- 13 Lose, 7.