Lent

Christian Reflection

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Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

In the Lenten season, which begins the Church's second cycle of preparation, celebration, and rejoicing, we together work to root out the blindness and deception that prevent us from receiving each other as gracious gifts from God.

This issue begins our exploration of how the Church's second cycle of preparation, celebration, and rejoicing—Lent, Easter, and Pentecost—should mold our discipleship. The companion issues *Easter* and *Pentecost* will follow in subsequent years.

"People think it's strange to like Lent," Sarah Parsons has noted, because it is a penitential season. Yet she has found Lent to be a season of joy, when we "look at our lives and ourselves, not so we may criticize ourselves more harshly but so we can identify the obstructions that keep us from God. Lent gives us a chance to look at such obstructions and to move them gently away so that we can come closer to the Love that gives us life, the Love whose triumph we will celebrate on Easter morning." Our contributors probe the origin of Lent and examine its central practices so we can observe the season faithfully and winsomely today.

In *The Early History of Lent* (p. 18), Nicholas Russo searches for the roots of our forty-day Lenten season in the various fasting practices of the early church—preparing catechumens for baptism, reenacting Jesus' fast in the wilderness after baptism, or keeping vigil for Easter. Perhaps each of these in some way inspired the Council of Nicea to construct the season we celebrate. Their traces are significant, for we prepare for Easter by remembering the grace of our baptism and walking with Christ in his sorrow for sin in ourselves and the world.

Surprisingly the Orthodox liturgy opens this season proclaiming "Let us begin the Fast with joy," Norman Wirzba observes in *Preparing for Joy* (p. 11). So, where is the joy in giving up things we enjoy? "Lent is an invitation to honesty and clarity," he explains. "It can be our preparation for joy because

it is the concentrated and disciplined time when we together work to root out the blindness and deception that prevent us from receiving each other as gracious gifts from God."

The characteristic disciplines of Lent cut "against the grain of American culture [and]…of personal spiritualities of all sorts," Scot McKnight warns in *Lent as a Season of Responsive Fasting* (p. 27), because they bring us to be honest about our sinfulness and turn to God for forgiveness and correction. We resist these disciplines in many ways, sometimes by twisting their meaning. For instance, we misconstrue fasting as an instrument to purge our bodies of bad foods, become intimate with God, evangelize others, or enhance our prayers. "Fasting in the Bible," McKnight reminds us, "is a *response* to something instead of a *means* to something else. Lenten fasting, then, is a response to sins and the prospects of death in our culture, our nation, our church, and our own life."

In *Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)* (p. 55) Carmen Butcher commends the discipline of meditating on the stations of the cross. This Lenten devotion, which emerged over the centuries from practices of pilgrimage and *lectio divina*, is being adapted in creative ways by many denominations. "Learning to listen to divine silence is the crux of walking the stations," she writes. "Church leaders through the centuries have encouraged this practice for the simple reason that it attunes a sojourner's soul to the Word's loving wordlessness." The recent adaptations of a related, but more ancient Lenten discipline is explored by Heather Hughes in *Keeping Vigil* (p. 65). "Keeping vigil engages our natural, physical response to extreme states of love, sorrow, compunction, fear, or awe," Hughes notes. "Our basic need for sleep is not diminished, but is overshadowed by something so demanding that we 'keep watch' in love." She also describes related practices which, like late night prayer, can foster "an attentive openness to the work of God in our lives and in our world."

The physical stance of penitence has been an important theme in Christian art through the centuries. Georges Rouault's *St. John the Baptist* (on the cover) powerfully depicts "the suffering of the messenger sent to prepare us for the coming of the Lord through repentance and baptism," Heidi Hornik explains in *The Voice in the Wilderness* (p. 34). In related articles she interprets two sculptures, Donatello's *The Penitent Magdalen* (p. 38) and Bernini's *St. Jerome* (p. 40), which present respectively the figures of Mary Magdalen as the forgiven sinner (as she was understood in earlier centuries) and St. Jerome as a penitent monk in the wilderness.

The Ash Wednesday liturgy (p. 48) by Eric Howell integrates prayers and familiar hymns of confession for the service of worship that traditionally opens the season of Lent. The refrain of Howell's new hymn "Come Near Today" (p. 45), with music by Susan Thrift, is a moving Lenten prayer: "With love assured, your healing Word, / the Spirit's flame, your holy name. / Redeeming grace in this place—/ come near today to help me."

In their Lenten meditations, two young pastors find the invitation to penitence and the joy of forgiveness in unusual places. In *Lessons from a Donkey* (p. 74) Alan Rudnick is struck by the Lucan emphasis on the binding and unbinding of the animal in the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. This moves him to ask, "What needs to be untied in our lives, so that we can praise and honor God? When it is untied and let go, nothing can stop the love of God and neighbor that is inside of us." Elizabeth Evans Hagan's *Remember Our Dust* (p. 78) finds a lesson in a quotidian experience—the dust from a renovation project that pervaded her house. This reminds her of "the dust of our lives." She writes, "We miss the mark of God's best for us when we believe the illusion that our dustiness is only in part of us. Our lives are not in fact as shiny clean as we like to think they are."

Rachel Marie Stone, in *The Why and How of Fasting* (p. 82), reviews resources to guide us in the central practice of Lent. She notes how Kent D. Berghuis's *Christian Fasting: A Theological Approach* and Scot McKnight's *Fasting* explore the biblical roots of abstention from food and its incorporation into the church year's alternating seasons of feasting and fasting. She commends Lynne M. Baab's *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom beyond Our Appetites* for realizing that "fasting from food can be problematic in a 'diet culture,' especially for women" and for stretching the biblical concept of fasting to include abstaining from other good activities that are necessary to our existence. She says Catherine Mandell's cookbook *When You Fast...Recipes for Lenten Seasons* is an excellent way to make fasting in community a joyful experience. "While fasting is a winding and varied journey," Stone observes, "its destination is, across traditions, a greater love of God and neighbors."

"We miss an opportunity during this penitential season if our Lenten practice only involves subtraction from our lives," Elizabeth Sands Wise writes in *Adding In, Not Giving Up* (p. 87). She appreciates Paula Huston's *Simplifying the Soul: Lenten Practices to Renew Your Spirit* for adding daily practices of humility, and Emilie Griffin's devotionals in *Small Surrenders: A Lenten Journey* for inviting us to reflect on themes in the Revised Common Lectionary. For short-term group study either during Lent or Ordinary Time, she recommends John Indermark's *Gospeled Lives: Encounters with Jesus, A Lenten Study* and Frederica Mathewes-Green's *First Fruits of Prayer: A Forty-Day Journey through the Canon of St. Andrew*. So, "What are you *adding in* for Lent this year?" Sands Wise asks. The answers in these four books—"adding in practices that free us from false cares, setting time aside for reading, cultivating humility, praying through ancient texts alone or in a community, or digging into Scripture to encounter Christ anew"—can deepen our understanding of "Christ's journey to the cross as we follow behind him on the path."

Preparing for Joy

BY NORMAN WIRZBA

Lent is an invitation to honesty and clarity. It can be our preparation for joy because it is the concentrated and disciplined time when we together work to root out the blindness and deception that prevent us from receiving each other as gracious gifts from God.

In Orthodox theological traditions, Christians are invited into the season of Lent as a time to prepare for joy. Lenten worship instructs us to begin with rejoicing:

> Let us begin the Fast with joy.
> Let us give ourselves to spiritual efforts.
> Let us cleanse our souls.
> Let us cleanse our flesh.
> Let us fast from passions as we fast from foods,
> taking pleasure in the good works of the Spirit
> and accomplishing them in love
> that we all may be made worthy to see the passion of Christ our God
> and His Holy Pascha,
> rejoicing with spiritual joy.[1]

This emphasis on joy may surprise us, and perhaps even strike some of us as perverse, because we are accustomed to think of Lenten observance as a time of deprivation, a time when we give up or say "No" to a host of things and activities we otherwise love. How can we be expected to rejoice in the giving up of things that give us joy?

To answer this question we have to move deep into the heart of Christian faith and life. We have to get clear about our most basic commitments and attachments and then determine if they have their impulse in a clean heart. The time of Lent is not about saying "No" to anything made or

provided by God. It cannot be, because everything God has made is good and beautiful, a gift and blessing that God has provided as the expression of his love. If there is a "No" that has to be said, it will be a "No" directed to the distorting and degrading ways we have developed in appropriating these gifts. The problem is not with the things of this world. The problem is with us because we so readily misperceive and misuse what God has given us. We do not appreciate how in mishandling the gifts of God we bring ruin to ourselves and to the world *while we are in the midst of having a good time*.

Repentance is learning to see each other rightly as gifts of God's love. This is no small thing. It involves the difficult labor of rejecting impulses, whether self or culturally produced, to turn everything we meet into a means of self-satisfaction.

Lent is such an important part of Christian rhythms because we need regular and sustained time to assess and address the ways in which human desires become distorted and off-track—what Orthodox writers call the "passions." If we can think of our entrance into the Christian life as putting on a new set of glasses so that everything we see now comes to us from Christ's point of view—Paul speaks this way when he says that to be "in Christ" means that we see everything and everyone from his point of view rather than our own (2 Corinthians 5:16 ff.)—what often happens is that our glasses lose focus. They become dirty or scratched and we gradually lose the ability to see things as the gifts of God that they really are. Instead we see them in terms of what they can do for us. Our glasses, rather than helping us see everything in their relation to God, promote a vision of the world geared to self-enhancement and self-glorification.

The distorting and ultimately degrading vision I have just described happens easily. Simply by living in a consumerist culture like our own we are daily taught to see everything as a means to the satisfaction of whatever end we choose. We are not, for the most part, mean-spirited about this. We are simply performing a script that is written out for us in thousands of media and marketing messages. It is a message that tells us we are the center of the world, and that we should expect to enjoy things on demand, immediately, conveniently, and at an affordable price. This picture of life as a quest for personal enjoyment and entertainment is difficult to assess and correct because the very glasses we are using to look at our situation are already out of proper focus. Put theologically, we are oblivious to much of our sin because the faculties we need to assess it are themselves infected.

This is why the season of Lent begins with repentance. In his wonderful short book *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*, Alexander Schmemann says Lent "is a school of repentance to which every Christian must go every year in order to deepen his faith, to re-evaluate, and, if possible, to change his life."[2] Christians need this school so that we can begin to appreciate how much our vision and handling of the world is a distortion and degradation. Repentance is the time when we learn to see each other rightly as gifts of God's love. Schmemann continues: "repentance, above everything else, is *a return to the genuine order of things*, the restoration of the right vision."[3] Seeing rightly is no small thing. It involves the difficult labor of rejecting impulses, whether self or culturally produced, to turn everything we meet into a means of self-satisfaction.

During Lent it is common for the gospel story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) to be read. In it we are reminded of how much we are like the young son who enjoys a life and a home of provision and care but instead chooses to go into exile. Looked at from the outside, his decision astounds us because it is clear that he is choosing a path of quick pleasure but long-term ruin and misery. We wonder about why he does it, why he chooses exile over home, but then fail to see that *we make the same decision ourselves all the time*. Though we may not find ourselves eating and living like pigs, we nonetheless willingly participate in practices that too often bring about the suffering or ruin of ourselves and whatever we touch: in the pursuit of professional success we neglect or abandon family members, communities, and neighborhoods; for the sake of cheap food and convenient eating we degrade our lands and waters and consign farm animals and farm workers to misery; and, with the hope of a good retirement plan we give our proxies to companies that uproot communities, destroy land, and mistreat workers. Of course, we do not wake up in the morning asking how we can neglect our children or abuse the world! But the effect of so many of our choices and practices—all of them expected and deemed by our culture to be normal—put us precisely where as Christians we should not be.

To repent we need to be confronted with the blindness and the foolishness of our ways. The confrontation can be painful because few of us like to come face to face with the arrogance, anxiety, and pettiness that animate our hearts. Deep down we are more fearful than we know and less trusting in God's love than we care to admit. Will God really take care of us? Does God really love us? Wouldn't it be wiser if we took life into our own hands? Fuelled with these kinds of questions, we make the decision that it is better for us to stick with the life we know, the "old life" with all its injustices and pains, rather than risk the "new life" that Christ reveals on Easter morning, the resurrection life that is victorious over suffering and death. If we stay with these despairing questions long enough, we eventually come to think that life *cannot* change. Sloth (acedia) and pride—sins of the spirit—now have the opportunity to take over.

It is part of the wisdom of liturgical traditions to stress that these are not matters that we can simply think our way through alone. We need corporate, embodied practices like fasting that are worked on together as a community if we hope to deal with the self- and world-damaging sin that animates our desire. To fast properly, however, we need to understand that Christian asceticism is often falsely characterized as a simple rejection, even punishing, of the body. We might think of "extreme" monks who perform acts of denial and deprivation that either leave us astounded or sick. Schmemann makes a crucial, correcting point when he says, "Christian asceticism is a fight, not *against* but *for* the body."[4]

When we fast, we are not despising our bodies or declaring food as an enemy. Rather than being a rejection of food, fasting is the rejection of all forms of eating that train us to relate to food (and to others) in an improper way.

It is a great error to ever be against any material body, our own or anyone else's, because every body is a gift and a physical manifestation of God's love. This means that when Christians fast they are not despising their bodies or declaring food as an enemy. Rather than being a rejection of food, fasting is the rejection of all forms of eating that train us to relate to food (and to others) in an improper way. What is improper eating? It is eating that is presumptive and that assumes food is ours for the taking. It is eating that has regard primarily for the pleasures of one's own belly but not for the bellies of others. It is eating that dishonors God because it degrades the sources of food—land, water, plants, animals—and abuses the means—farm workers, cooks, waiters, clean-up crews—that put food on our tables. It is eating that forgets food is a blessing to be shared.

Among early Christian writers it was significant that the first sin in the Garden of Eden was an eating sin. Eating is central because it is utterly fundamental to all of creaturely life. It is also one of our most intimate and embodied acts, the daily means through which we relate to the created world, communities of humanity, and ultimately to God. Eating is thus a paradigmatic act that expresses—often with far greater honesty than the verbal piety we offer—who we think we are and how we fit into the world. It bears witness to a system of values that ranks and prioritizes all others in relation to ourselves. Adam and Eve sinned by turning an action that unites us to the Creator and the whole creation into an exercise that was self-serving. Rather than receiving food as a gift from God and as a means of communion with divine love, Adam and Eve ate apart from and in forgetfulness

of God. They made food into an idol, an entity that would reflect and serve their interests. Their thinking about food was thus drastically reduced or shortened to the narrow register of their own concern. They moved from being humble to being arrogant creatures.

Like fasting, humility is much misunderstood. To see what it is about, we should look more carefully at Genesis 2-3 because it is there that we find a profound story about who we truly are and what we are supposed to do. God is revealed here as the first Gardener who takes the soil of the ground (*adamah*) and, by holding it close and breathing into it, makes it come alive in the diverse forms of human (*adam*), plant, and animal life. This is a picture of profound intimacy and interdependence. All terrestrial life circulates through soil, which is itself saturated with the warm and fertile breath of God. No creaturely thing exists in isolation or through itself or its own means. All that exists reflects the attentive, patient, and care-full action of God who forever stays near to work and water and protect. Astoundingly, God the Gardener then invites the first human to join in the care and preservation of the Garden of Delight (which is what Eden really means). We need to see that the gardening work to which humanity is called is not a punishment. It is, instead, an invitation to know deeply and in a detailed way the intricacy and the vulnerability of creaturely life together. Tending and keeping each other is the expression of a commitment to see the world whole and in terms of its interdependence.

Arrogance is the denial of interdependence. It is a dishonest assertion of ourselves as able to stand alone, no longer in need of others or God, and determined to appropriate the world as we want. From God's point of view, arrogance is a form of blindness and stupidity. It is the refusal to see our need for what it is, namely a blessing that draws us closer to each other and to God. In a profound observation, Anthony Bloom, the leader of the British Russian Orthodox Church, has noted:

> This assertion of self is a sign of insecurity and lack of fulfillment. Also a measure of our lack of love, because love is forgetful of self and affirms the loved ones. It reveals an uncertainty with regard to the vigor of our being and our inability to trust other people's love. We assert ourselves to be sure that our existence is recognized and that our own being is not endangered, and by doing so we become small and void of content.[5]

Arrogance is such a destructive sin because it causes us to think we could live alone and primarily for ourselves. It is a posture shown to be a lie every time we eat.

Our brief reflection helps us see that humility is not an exercise in self-loathing. It is rather the honest admission of personal life as necessarily enfolded within and dependent on the lives of others and the gifts of God. Humility equips us to see creation in its interdependent wholeness.

Schmemann says, "*Humility* alone is capable of truth, of seeing and accepting things as they are and therefore of seeing God's majesty and goodness and love in everything."[6] We are not to despise ourselves or each other because the humble person appreciates how every creature is loved and nurtured by God. Humility makes possible the true enjoyment of others because we now perceive and receive them properly: namely, as gifts and blessings meant to be cared for, celebrated, and shared. Without humility, in other words, it is impossible to love another.

Lent is our collective movement into genuine life *together*, which is why *communion* is such an important term during this season. What makes Lent difficult for us is that we would like to think we can enjoy communion without offering ourselves to each other. It would be so much easier if we could experience real togetherness simply by relating to others always on *our* terms. But this cannot work. Bloom says, "We must act ruthlessly against this tendency we have to judge everything from the viewpoint of our little self."[7] Communion is built upon love, and love is always an hospitable act that welcomes, nurtures, and sets others free to be themselves. To love another is to give oneself and one's abilities and gifts to them. Only then can our presence in the world be a source of joy to those we meet.

At the heart of Lenten observance there is a paradoxical movement: to genuinely live we must first die. Christ's way to resurrection was through the cross. As followers of Christ we should not expect that we can experience newness of life if we have not first been cleansed of all the old, sinful habits and dispositions that confine others to the narrow, self-serving scope of our own fears and arrogance, the very fears and arrogance that put Jesus on the cross. Lent, says Bloom, is a movement to the joy of resurrection life. "To rise again we must first die. Die to our hampering selfishness, die to our fears, die to everything which makes the world so narrow, so cold, so cruel."[8]

Lent can be our preparation for joy because it is the concentrated and disciplined time when we work together to root out the blindness and deception that prevent us from receiving each other as gracious gifts from God. It is a necessary time for Christians because without it we run the risk of experiencing what can only be termed a false joy, a 'joy' that has been rendered false by the anxiety, hubris, and destruction that make it possible. True joy is freedom from fear and alienation. Real joy is knowing that we are loved and nurtured. Lenten practices like fasting prepare us for joy because they turn our self-serving into self-offering ways that nurture, celebrate, and share the gifts of God. They remove the glasses that distort our vision and degrade our relations with others.

Lent teaches us that far too often we live a counterfeit life. It shows us that we have settled for a poor and degraded version of the real thing, which is life in its vibrant freshness and abundance. In the face of a culture that encourages us to neglect, degrade, and abuse each other, Lent invites us to see ourselves and our world clearly, humbly, and truly. Moved beyond

the stifling scope of our worry, fear, and petty desires, we can finally be opened to receive the blessings of God. Though not himself a member of Orthodox theological traditions, few have understood this with as much clarity as Thomas Traherne, the seventeenth-century British poet, who wrote:

> you never enjoy the world aright, till you so love the beauty of enjoying it, that you are covetous and earnest to persuade others to enjoy it. And so perfectly hate the abominable corruption of men in despising it, that you had rather suffer the flames of Hell than willingly be guilty of their error. There is so much blindness and ingratitude and damned folly in it. It is a Temple of Majesty, yet no man regards it. It is a region of Light and Peace, did not man disquiet it. It is the Paradise of God.[9]

Properly understood and practiced, Lent is an invitation to honesty and clarity. It is the disciplined time we need to learn to see each other and the world more deeply as the material manifestations of God's love. Cleansed of our sinful attachments, and finding God always to be near, we can then go out to welcome everyone and everything with joy.

NOTES

1 This passage—quoted in Thomas Hopko, *The Lenten Spring: Readings for Great Lent* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983), 12—is from the vespers liturgy for Forgiveness Sunday, which is the last Sunday before the season of Lent. "Pascha" is the name in the Orthodox tradition for Easter; it literally means "Passover."

2 Alexander Schmemann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1969), 9.

3 Ibid., 20.

4 Ibid., 38.

5 Anthony Bloom, *Meditations on a Theme* (New York: Continuum, 2003 [1971]), 6.

6 Alexander Schmemann, *Great Lent*, 36.

7 Anthony Bloom, *Meditations on a Theme*, 53.

8 Ibid., 119.

9 Thomas Traherne, *Centuries*, I, 31 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 15.

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The Early History of Lent

BY NICHOLAS V. RUSSO

The season of Lent appears after the Council of Nicea. With so many biblical precedents, did it really take the Church more than 300 years to seize upon the idea of fasting for forty days? The early history of Lent is interesting and complex; it is something of a "choose your own adventure."

Until relatively recently, the origins of Lent—known as *Tessarakosti* in Greek and *Quadragesima* in Latin, for "the Forty"—were believed to be self-evident. Many of the theology handbooks of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century confidently claimed that Lent was established by the apostles themselves or in the immediate post-apostolic period at the latest. They assumed this season of fasting was closely connected with preparation for Easter baptisms—a practice likewise considered to be of apostolic foundation (cf. Romans 6) and observed everywhere throughout the Church since its earliest days.[1]

Closer examination of the ancient sources, however, reveals a more gradual historical development. While fasting before Easter seems to have been ancient and widespread, the length of that fast varied significantly from place to place and across generations. In the latter half of the second century, for instance, Irenaeus of Lyons (in Gaul) and Tertullian (in North Africa) tell us that the preparatory fast lasted one or two days, or forty hours—commemorating what was believed to be the exact duration of Christ's time in the tomb. By the mid-third century, Dionysius of Alexandria speaks of a fast of up to six days practiced by the devout in his see; and the Byzantine historian Socrates relates that the Christians of Rome at some point kept a fast of three weeks.[2] Only following the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. did the length of Lent become fixed at forty days, and then only nomi-

nally. Accordingly, it was assumed that the forty-day Lent that we encounter almost everywhere by the mid-fourth century must have been the result of a gradual lengthening of the pre-Easter fast by adding days and weeks to the original one- or two-day observance.[3] This lengthening, in turn, was thought necessary to make up for the waning zeal of the post-apostolic church and to provide a longer period of instruction for the increasing numbers of former pagans thronging to the font for Easter baptism. Such remained the standard theory for most of the twentieth century.

Today, the history of Lent's origins is far less certain because many of the suppositions upon which the standard theory rested have been cast into doubt. First, scholars no longer take for granted the antiquity and ubiquity of Paschal baptism. Tertullian, admittedly, indicates that Easter was a "most solemn day for baptism," but he is only one of a handful of writers in the pre-Nicene period (that is, before 325 A.D.) who indicates this preference and even he says that Easter was by no means the only favored day for baptisms in his locale. Easter baptism does not become widespread until the mid-fourth century, and when it does, it appears to be nothing more than an idealized norm alongside which other equally acceptable occasions continue to exist.[4]

Second, the fasts observed before baptism described in many pre-Nicene sources are no longer presumed to be pre-paschal or related in any way to Lent. The second-century Syrian church order known as the *Didache*, for example, commends "the baptizer, the one to be baptized, and any others that are able" to fast to prepare for the sacrament (7:4). At around the same time, Justin Martyr tells us that fasting was also enjoined on baptismal candidates in his community, and that existing members likewise prayed and fasted with them (*First Apology*, 61). Previously, scholars assumed these and other pre-baptismal fasts were pre-paschal and related to, if not identical, with the early Lent.[5] With Easter baptism no longer the ancient and widespread custom once thought, these baptismal fasts too were reexamined. Rather than being part of a proto-Lent, they are now interpreted simply as free-floating periods of fasting undertaken whenever baptisms were administered.[6]

Third, developing research on Holy Week and the Triduum[7] has shown that these periods are not the cores of a gradually lengthening pre-Easter fast, but are actually separate periods to which the forty-day Lent has been joined or overlaps. We find this distinction first in Athanasius of Alexandria's *Festal Letters* sent annually to communicate, among other things, the date of Easter and its fast.[8] In his first five letters (329-333 A.D.), Athanasius indicates that the "holy fast" spans only the six days before Pascha, perhaps revealing that Lent had not yet been observed in Egypt. When he introduces the forty-day Lent in his sixth letter (334 A.D.), Athanasius continues to note the beginning of the more ancient six-day fast of "the holy days of Pascha," even though it is now part of the new six-week fast.

This distinction becomes more pronounced as the six days before Easter develop liturgically into Holy Week and push Lent back so that it no longer overlaps. In the Byzantine vesper (evening prayer) hymns for the Friday *before* Holy Week, for example, when the cantor proclaims, "Having completed the forty days that bring profit to our soul…," it is clear that Lent has ended by this point. On the following two days—Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday—the fasting rules are relaxed in this tradition and a new more rigorous fast is begun with Holy Week (known as "Great Week" in the Byzantine and other Eastern traditions). We encounter the same phenomenon in Antioch where the late-fourth century church order *Apostolic Constitutions* (V.13.3-4) informs us that the more rigorous fast "of the Holy Week of Pascha" *follows* the fast of the forty days and its observance is given a different rationale (V.14.20). At around the same time John Chrysostom (*Homilies on Genesis*, 30.1-3) and Egeria (*Itinerarium* 30.1) also distinguish "Great Week" from the rest of Lent and indicate that its liturgical character changes with respect to the preceding weeks.

Some have suggested that Lent is best understood as an entirely new phenomenon that emerges rather suddenly after Nicea and that any organic or genetic relationship it may have to pre-Nicene fasting practices cannot be proved.

In the West, on the other hand, the distinction between Lent and the Triduum is admittedly not as evident. It is now recognized that, as a *liturgical* entity, the Triduum is a much later development than previously assumed.[9] Accordingly, the ritual markers that would come to distinguish it from the rest of Lent—e.g., the unveiling of the statues and the singing of the *Gloria* on Maundy Thursday—emerge too late to tell us anything about the relationship between the two periods earlier in history. Nonetheless, the Triduum as a *theological* concept can be seen as early as the third century (Origen, *Homilies on Exodus* 5.2) and it gains wide currency in the West with writers such as Ambrose and Augustine. Whatever the state of its liturgical development, by the fifth century Pope Leo I considers the forty days of Lent to conclude with Maundy Thursday (Tractate 39), and he conceives of the Good Friday-Holy Saturday fast as a separate entity. It seems, therefore, that the forty days are not prolongations of the ancient Easter fasts (whether one, two, or six days long), but that they constitute a conceptually distinct unit that has been *added* to or *overlaid* on these early fasts.

These new developments in scholarship have led some to conclude that the early history of Lent is simply impossible to reconstruct. The first clear and indisputable evidence for the forty-day Lent does not appear until after the Council of Nicea, and when it does, it looks to be unrelated to the earlier

short pre-Easter fasts. As a result, some have suggested that Lent is best understood as an entirely new phenomenon that emerges rather suddenly after Nicea and that any organic or genetic relationship it may have to pre-Nicene fasting practices cannot be proved.

Other scholars have been less willing to abandon the effort to reconstruct the pre-history of Lent by focusing attention on a unique, and hotly contested Egyptian fasting tradition. According to several, admittedly late sources, Christians in pre-Nicene Egypt observed a forty-day fast that began after the Feast of Theophany (i.e., Epiphany) on January 6 (11 Tybi on the Egyptian calendar). In strict imitation of the gospel narrative, this community would have commemorated the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan on January 6 and on the following day begun a forty-day fast just as Jesus had. Some sources claim further that this community baptized its catechumens at the end of the post-Theophany fast and not at Easter. After the Council of Nicea, the theory speculates, this fast would have been moved from its original position after Theophany and joined to Easter creating the Lent we know and with it bringing Egypt's baptismal practice in line with the rest of the Church. The question is why and how did this shift occur?

The answer, at least according to one scholar, is to be found in another hotly contested tradition: the so-called "Secret Gospel of Mark." In 1958, an American biblical scholar discovered a letter by Clement of Alexandria (late-second and early-third centuries) that quotes a scriptural passage which Clement claims belongs to a secret gospel of Mark—an expansion of the original, canonical account that Mark compiled for those undertaking more advanced spiritual instruction. In the passage quoted, Jesus raises a young man in Bethany and invites him to an evening encounter where Jesus teaches him "the mystery of the kingdom of God."[10] Thomas Talley, a historian of Christian and Jewish worship, believed this newfound fragment provided the key to explain the shift of Egypt's post-Theophany fast and the birth of Lent. Talley theorized that Egyptian Christians read the Gospel of Mark chapter by chapter and modeled their liturgical practices on the unfolding narrative. Beginning on January 6, this community read Mark 1 and commemorated the Baptism in the Jordan. Then continuing their course reading of Mark, they fasted for forty days, just as Jesus had. Six weeks later, they would arrive at the point in canonical Mark (after Mark 10:34) where the secret passage was inserted. Once again, in strict imitation of the narrative, they would baptize their catechumens teaching them "the mystery of the kingdom" just as Jesus had done with the young man in Secret Mark. Then, following the Council of Nicea, the church of Egypt adopted Easter baptism and transferred its fast, giving rise to Lent as we know it.

The evidence for this hypothesis, Talley claimed, could be found in the Lenten lectionary of the Byzantine Church. On the Saturdays and Sundays of

Lent in this tradition, the Gospel of Mark is read almost in order until the Saturday before Palm Sunday. At this point, instead of reading Secret Mark, the Byzantine Church selected the nearest canonical equivalent: the raising of Lazarus from John 11. And this Saturday, known as Lazarus Saturday, was one of the favored days for baptism in the Byzantine tradition. According to Talley, these striking similarities were not merely coincidental. Here in the Byzantine tradition, we find evidence of Egypt's post-Theophany fast now transferred to Easter and adopted by other Christian communities.

The ubiquity of forty-day fasts in the early church should perhaps not surprise us given the prevalence and significance of the number forty in biblical literature. Indeed, forty days as a period of fasting is common in Scripture.

Aside from being highly speculative, there are several problems with this theory. First, some have alleged that the "Secret Gospel of Mark" and the letter of Clement of Alexandria in which it is contained is a modern forgery concocted in the twentieth century by its purported discoverer. Second, even if Secret Mark is authentic and ancient, it is not at all clear that the strange story it relates about Jesus and the Lazarus-like figure is baptismal. Third, there is no evidence that the early Egyptian church had any special preference for the Gospel of Mark for course reading. What little is presently known about the lectionary in Egypt reveals a penchant for drawing eclectically from all four Gospels and without necessarily following the evangelists' ordering of events. Fourth, there is nothing to indicate that Constantinople inherited the cycle of its Lenten gospel readings from Egypt. Influence on the early Byzantine liturgy seems to come from Syria, particularly Antioch, and not from Egypt. Finally, and perhaps most damning, Mark's Gospel makes no mention of Jesus fasting in the wilderness; only Matthew and Luke relate the tradition of Jesus having fasted. If the post-Theophany fast developed out of a slavish and literal imitation of the Gospel narrative, it would seem that that Gospel could not have been Mark's.

Another significant weakness in this theory has to do with the evidence that Egyptian Christians fasted for forty days after the Feast of Theophany. As mentioned above, the references to this unique Egyptian custom are all very late: the earliest witness to mention it explicitly dates to the ninth-tenth century and it comes from Syria, not Egypt; the earliest clear Egyptian reference is from the following century. In addition, the other bits of evidence which may allude to the post-Theophany fast are vague and mutually contradictory. As a result, some scholars conclude that these sources simply cannot be relied upon for an accurate picture of ancient Egyptian practice. On their basis alone, the historicity of the post-Theophany fast cannot be established.

Despite this justified suspicion, there are other indicators revealing that the post-Theophany fast may be something more than a late fabricated legend. As early as the mid-third century, we begin to find references to a forty-day fasting period that is not specifically connected to Easter. The earliest of these is found in a series of *Homilies on Leviticus* composed by Origen, a third-century theologian from Alexandria, Egypt. To dissuade Christians from observing the Jewish Day of Atonement, Origen argues that "we [Christians] have forty days dedicated to fasting; we have the fourth [Wednesday] and sixth day [Friday] of the week on which we regularly fast."[11] A little more than a half-century later, the Egyptian collection of church laws (or, canons) known as the *Canons of Hippolytus* similarly indicates that Christians fast on "Wednesday, Friday, and the Forty," and that anyone who fails to observe them "disobeys God who fasted on our behalf" (Canon 20).[12] The same document describes the fast before Easter in another section (Canon 22), and it is only a week in length. It seems, at the very least then, that "the Forty" does not refer to a pre-Easter Lent. While it is admittedly not certain that Origen and the *Canons of Hippolytus* are referring to the supposed post-Theophany fast, it is surely suggestive especially when the *Canons* invoke the "God who fasted on our behalf" in support of the custom.

In addition to these possible allusions to Egypt's post-Theophany fast, there are several examples of forty-day fasts of other types during this period. In his *Canonical Epistle*, Peter, bishop of Alexandria in the early fourth century, legislates a fast of forty days for lapsed Christians to be readmitted from their term of excommunication (Canon 1). The same *Canons of Hippolytus* stipulates that catechumens who earn their living by "impure occupations"—for example, by wrestling, running, acting, hairdressing, and so on—must undergo a forty-day period of purification before they can be baptized. Another mid-fourth century collection of church legislation, the *Canons of Athanasius*, prescribes forty days of fasting as penance for adulteresses and executioners who wish to be readmitted to the Eucharist. Fasting for forty-days, for whatever purpose or occasion, seems to have been a rather common phenomenon in the pre-Nicene and Nicene period, especially in Egypt.

The ubiquity of forty-day fasts should perhaps not surprise us given the prevalence and significance of the number forty in biblical literature. The flood lasts forty days and nights (Genesis 7:4, 12, 17); the ceremonies surrounding the embalming of Jacob last forty days (Genesis 50:3); and the Israelites wander in the wilderness for forty years during which they receive miraculous sustenance (Exodus 16:35) before entering the "land flowing with milk and honey." Wandering-entrance becomes a primary typology for catechesis-baptism in the early Church, and milk and honey were sometimes administered along with the Eucharist to the newly baptized.

Forty days as a period of fasting is equally common in Scripture. Moses fasts twice for forty days and nights on Mt. Sinai: once after receiving the Law (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9), and again when he discovers the infidelity of the Israelites in fashioning the Golden Calf (Deuteronomy 9:18). Elijah travels for forty days and nights without food after slaying the prophets of Baal and fleeing the wrath of Jezebel (1 Kings 19:7-8). The Ninevites fast for forty days to stave off the wrath of God (Jonah 3:4). And forty-day fasts show up in many deutero- and non-canonical texts such as 3 Baruch, *Apocalypse of Sedrach*, and the many versions of the so-called *Life of Adam and Eve*.

We can surmise that Lent's establishment before Easter was part of a broader movement toward alignment and standardization begun at the Council of Nicea and continued throughout the fourth century.

If forty-day fasts were commonplace, and the typological foundations many, some may wonder why the evidence for a post-Theophany fast is so circumstantial. Especially if it could find solid biblical justification in Jesus' own fast in the wilderness, why are there no sources that tell us clearly of the custom? Did it really take the Church more than 300 years to seize upon the idea of fasting for forty days? The answer may be found in the origins of Theophany itself. When the feast appears, it seems to be observed first among the heterodox. Clement of Alexandria, a second-century theologian, tells us that "the followers of Basilides hold the day of [Christ's] baptism as a festival" (*Stromateis* 1.21). According to orthodox critics, the Basilidians were a group that held, like some other Gnostics, that the Divinity joined itself to Jesus at the moment of his baptism. This belief that Jesus was somehow adopted to divine Sonship at his baptism, or at some other point in his life, is known as "adoptionism" or "adoptionistic Christology," and it enjoyed fairly wide currency in the second and third centuries. There is no evidence that the Basilidians fasted after their Theophany feast, but based on a description of heretical practices by a twelfth-century Armenian prelate, one scholar has argued that the post-Theophany fast was practiced by certain adoptionistic groups. If that was indeed the case—that the custom was common among the heterodox—it would go a long way to explaining why we hear nothing about it in the early period and why Lent emerges suddenly after the Council of Nicea.

In addition to addressing the Arian crisis, the Council of Nicea issued canons intended to bring general alignment on matters of liturgical practice and church organization. Among these was the establishment of a common date for the Easter feast that, up until that time, had been commemorated on different days in a given year depending on the method of calculation. While

there is no evidence that the Council also dealt with Lent, one may surmise that its establishment prior to Easter, drawn from among the various and sundry fasting customs already being observed (including, perhaps, an Egyptian post-Theophany fast), was part of a broader movement toward alignment and standardization begun at Nicea and continued throughout the fourth century. And, if a post-Theophany fast was a hallmark of groups deemed heretical, the establishment of a forty-day Lent prior to Easter would stand in contradistinction as a touchstone of liturgical and theological allegiance.

At this point, the early history of Lent becomes something of a "choose your own adventure." The current state of research points to three possible conclusions. Because the evidence is slim and admitting of any number of plausible interpretations, one position has been to view Lent as a *sui generis* phenomenon—completely new and unique—that simply appears after the Council of Nicea. In this view, any attempt to hazard connections or lines of evolution from pre-Nicene fasting practices is too speculative to be of any value. Another, rather opposite, position has been to accept as historical the alleged Egyptian post-Theophany fast, to identify it as the dominant antecedent to Lent, and that Lent's rapid dissemination throughout the Christian world is best explained in relation to the program of liturgical and theological alignment begun at Nicea. A final position, a sort of *via media* or middle road, acknowledges the incomplete and sometimes-contradictory nature of the evidence, but asserts nonetheless that Lent develops as an amalgamation of several early fasting customs and typologies of which the post-Theophany fast (if it existed) may have been but one of many. As with most issues in the study of the early history of the liturgy, certainty is elusive and we must be satisfied with possibilities. *Judicet lector*: let the reader decide.[13]

NOTES

1 See, for example, Alban Butler, *The Moveable Feasts, Fasts, and Other Annual Observances of the Catholic Church* (New York: John Doyle, 1836), 135-243, especially 141; and Peter Gunning, *The Paschal or Lent Fast: Apostolic and Perpetual* (Oxford, UK: John Henry Parker, 1845), 82-85.

2 Rome observed the forty-day Lent by the time Socrates wrote in the mid-fifth century. It is presumed, therefore, that he is misinformed for his own day, but that the three weeks he reports may have indeed been accurate at earlier period in the Roman church. Sozomen, another fifth-century Byzantine historian, also claims to know of some locales where three weeks are fasted within a six- or seven-week Lent and others where three consecutive weeks of fasting are kept before Easter (*Historia Ecclesiastica* VII.19).

3 See, for example, Vernon Staley, *The Liturgical Year: An Explanation of the Origin, History and Significance of the Festival Days and Fasting Days of The English Church* (London, UK: A. R. Mowbray and Co., 1907), 190-200; especially 191.

4 Paul F. Bradshaw, "'*Diem baptismo sollemniorem*': Initiation and Easter in Christian Antiquity" in E. Carr, S. Parenti, and A.-A. Thiermeyer, and E. Velkovska, eds., *EULOGHMA: Studies in Honor of Robert Taft, S.J.*, Studia Anselmiana 110, Analecta liturgica 17 (Rome, IT: 1993) 41-51; reprinted in Maxwell E. Johnson, ed., *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on*

Christian Initiation, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 137-147.

5 W. K. Lowther Clarke, ed., *Lent: A Manual for the Clergy* (London, UK: SPCK, 1933), 1.

6 Maxwell E. Johnson, "From Three Weeks to Forty Days: Baptismal Preparation and the Origins of Lent," *Studia Liturgica* 20.2 (1990), 185-200; reprinted in Johnson, ed., *Living Water,* 118-136.

7 On the Triduum, see footnote 9 below.

8 The traditional ordering and dating of the festal letters has been corrected by Alberto Camplani, *Atanasio di Alessandria: Lettere Festali; Anonimo: Indice delle Lettere Festali* (Milan, IT: Paoline, 2003).

9 See Harald Buchinger, "Was There Ever a Liturgical Triduum in Antiquity? Theological Idea and Liturgical Reality," *Ecclesia Orans* 27 (2010), 257–270. When the Triduum emerges as an identifiable *liturgical* unit in the medieval period, it comprises Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. As a *theological* concept, however, it is much older, and it encompasses Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter—the days on which Christ "suffered, rested, and rose again;" cf. Ambrose of Milan, *Letter to the Bishops of Aemilia* (386), 13; English translation in J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 286.

10 See Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 447 and 452.

11 *Homilies on Leviticus* 10.2:5-6; English translation in Gary Wayne Barkley, *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus: 1-16*, Fathers of the Church 83 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 206-207.

12 The *Canons of Basil*, a later canonical collection dependent on the *Canons of Hippolytus*, orders the faithful to "observe *the fast of the Lord* in their churches" (emphasis added).

13 I wish to thank the Rev. Dr. Maxwell E. Johnson for reading a draft of this article and for his helpful suggestions. Any errors that remain are the author's alone.

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Lent as a Season of Responsive Fasting

BY SCOT MCKNIGHT

Fasting in the Bible is almost always focused on a grievous condition. Fasting is a response to something instead of a means to something else. Lenten fasting, then, is a response to sins and the prospects of death in our culture, our nation, our church, and our own life.

Lent cuts against the grain of American culture. Lent is preparation for confession, forgiveness, and the absolution of sins. One could say the entire season of Lent is embodied confession of our sins as we prepare for the great gospel weekend of cross and resurrection. If that is the case, Lent cuts against the grain of American Christian culture as much as culture in general. We are a happy culture, or at least we feel entitled to happiness. We are also a consumerist culture, and we feel entitled to have the latest—from iPhones and iPads to cars and guns and shoes and fresh organic food and pizza and BBQ. We are also a pragmatic culture since we think there is a technological means to nearly everything we want, from healthcare to safety on our roads to spiritual formation.

I'd like to camp on that comment about spiritual formation. There is an industry of conferences, retreats, resources, blogs, websites, and books about *how* to get spiritually formed. No one seems to think it takes a lifetime of small choices and gentle nods of the soul and disciplines. Instead, we want to know how and we want to know how right now. And we want guarantees that if we do Y we will inevitably get to Z. The sooner the better, so we can move on to the next thing to consume. I am reminded of that great classic, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, where we learn that the way to learn to pray is to pray—for a long time. We learn spirituality in the ordinary grind of daily communion with God, not in the tricks of the game.

Lent cuts against these raw and rambunctious grains in our culture because Lent is connected to a discipline called fasting. Yet, somehow our culture has given rise to a theory of fasting that makes it an *instrument* for spiritual growth leading to the oddity that fasting sits quite well in a culture that does not spend much time thinking about national and corporate or individual sins, that does not go to church to experience grace and forgiveness at the Lord's Table, and that does not see Eucharist as the aim of worship. Lent and fasting belong together, but they are often separate in our culture.

INSTRUMENTAL FASTING

I spent one summer reading a number of well-known books about fasting and came to the conclusion that the vast majority of them sell fasting by promising results. In other words, fasting is the instrument or the means by which we acquire what we are after. Let's call what we are after the benefits, and I shall call the inflation of benefits, or at least the increasing list of items one is promised by fasting, "benefititis."[1] How so?

To begin with, fasting is now tied to the American fetish with *foods and diet*. To be sure, Americans are overweight in global comparison; they are also keenly aware of calories and cholesterol; and restriction of calories and disciplined eating make a person more healthy. Since the prophet Daniel chose not to eat delicacies and the foods of the wealthy some believe God's original intent in fasting, at least in part, was so we would learn to purge the body of bad foods in order to regain a proper dietary and chemical balance. Here is what Daniel said:

> At that time I, Daniel, had been mourning for three weeks. I had eaten no rich food, no meat or wine had entered my mouth, and I had not anointed myself at all, for the full three weeks.
>
> *Daniel 10:2-3*

The simple fact is that "fasting" was reserved for the choice not to eat *any* food or drink, or at least any food, so technically this "Daniel fast" is not a fast but an act of abstinence. There is a context, of course, having to do with the king mocking the Jewish holidays and so Daniel's choice not to eat delicacies is an act of solidarity with his people and an expression of grief over Israel's/Jerusalem's condition. But the last thing on Daniel's mind was his health. Many Christians have laid aside Daniel's historical context and have discovered that the choice of not eating dainty foods and not indulging ourselves is the path to health. This insight, though accurate, has nothing to do with Daniel. This is the only text in the Bible to my knowledge that is used to support fasting as a form of dieting. If we see Daniel for what it was, we are led to the conclusion that fasting and dieting have nothing in common. The Bible's sense of fasting was not about health.

I cannot mention fasting and dieting without warning each of us to be careful about urging folks to fast. Bulimia, anorexia and other food disorders

are on the rise and restriction of diet can easily slide into a food disorder. In my years of teaching college students I know at least one of my students died of anorexia nervosa, and we had a neighbor whose daughter died of the same. Severe and rigorous dieting complicates the body's health even if a person looks healthy and has lost excessive weight. My doctor told me he can think of no good thing that comes from fasting beyond twenty-four hours and a former colleague, who was also an M.D., said nearly the same thing to me.

A second form of instrumental fasting is contending that if we fast we will become more *intimate with God* on our own terms. At Mount Sinai, Moses, after all, fasted forty days and saw God; perhaps fasting had something to do with it. One is tempted to say that if fasting had anything to do with seeing God, the vision of God for Moses was a hallucination. Here is a biblical fact: at no place in the Bible does it say we are to fast in order to increase our intimacy with God. Of course, one feels lighter and sometimes that sensation is understood as intimacy with God but, as my medical doctor said to me, "lightness" is a sensation caused by a chemical reaction in the brain and it is far from health or intimacy with God. Promising the feeling of intimacy with God as a result of fasting is irresponsible Christian teaching. (I will say more about this below.)

Another instance of the instrumental theory of fasting, which emphasizes fasting as a means to get something, is connected to *evangelism*. Some are overcome by the burden of folks who are lost or who live away from God or who have not found the joy of knowing God—however one wants to define the benefit of salvation—and this prompts them to fast in their prayers for those who are outside the fold. The language I have used above to describe evangelistic fasting comes closer to the biblical model of fasting, which I will explain below, but for now I want to argue that not only is fasting for lost souls not found in the Bible but it runs the risk of becoming an unconscious or conscious manipulative device. That is, some think if we fast we can trigger the work of the Spirit of God in another person. I want to call our attention at this juncture to this dimension of evangelistic fashion: the moment it becomes a technique or a strategy or a tactic or a technology, it has ceased being what biblical fasting is all about.

Somehow our culture has given rise to a theory of fasting that makes it an *instrument* for spiritual growth, leading to the oddity that fasting sits quite well in a culture that does not spend much time thinking about national and corporate or individual sins.

This particular form of instrumental fasting can now be expanded to a fourth: *fasting and intercessory prayer*. From the time my Christian faith came alive—back in the 70s—I have had friends who have ramped up their intercessions with fasting. Here is what I mean: prayer seems not to be good enough; the most intense form of prayer is prayer born of fasting. Fasting here is understood either as a demonstration before God of our deepest seriousness and intensity or it is understood as the divine means of strengthening our prayers. There are books that make the claim that if we are not getting answers to our prayers, then we need to consider (and it often moves from "consider" to "command") fasting. Fasting, therefore, becomes the means of getting our prayers answered.

RESPONSIVE FASTING

For years I taught a Bible survey class and we routinely came upon fasting passages in the Bible—from David and Daniel to Jesus and Paul. There was in me a profound sense of dissatisfaction when each of these instances provoked conversation in my students about what fasting was, and I found to a person that fasting was understood instrumentally. One time a student regaled us with a story about a prayer meeting that led to a week of fasting over the need to exorcise a demon from someone, and he attributed the successful exorcism to the ramping of their prayers with fasting. Time and time again I've had friends tell me their intimacy with God was increased when they fasted, and many in fact call "fasting" a spiritual discipline. And spiritual disciplines are understood across the board as the divinely-ordained means of spiritual growth.

I sense a curmudgeonliness coming on. Fine, I say to myself, I'm glad someone is liberated from demonic assault; and I'm happy to hear of my brothers and sisters growing in their intimacy with God and of their spiritual formation. But I'm a Bible guy and I don't see any of this in the Bible. Perhaps it was a part of the well-established Jewish custom of fasting twice a week, but frankly I've read every text I've ever seen referenced about Jewish fasting and I've not seen one ancient text that ever suggested that fasting led to greater intimacy with God. So it is very hard to establish that the twice-a-week fasting practice of Jesus' contemporaries was a "spiritual discipline" for spiritual growth.

When I was teaching Bible survey and we came upon passages where fasting was present I paid attention to the factors at work and this is what I learned. Fasting in the Bible is either entirely, or at least almost always, *focused on a grievous condition*. Put differently, fasting is a *response* to something instead of a *means* to something else. Here is my schematic to explain it:

A → B → C

A is the grievous condition.
B is the act of fasting.
C is the result or benefit.

The Bible's focus is not B leads to C, but B responds to A. So, perhaps this is the Bible's most accurate fasting schematic:

A ← B, sometimes leading, but not all that often, to C.

But what is this "grievous" condition. The term refers to severe and serious and tragic conditions. In the Bible the grievous condition prompting the response of fasting is almost always connected to death, or the threat of death. Hence, war or tragedy or the threat of war or calamity or capture, but especially sin and its consequences—these are the precipitants of fasting in the Bible. Of course, the Bible's characters who fast are turning their face toward God and often in petition to ward off the threat of death, but the focus in the Bible is that fasting is a response not a means. And it surely isn't a common means of the well-to-do or comfortable for their inner development. (Do we realize the social condition of some of our spirituality?)

I want now to add another factor to the mix before we get to Lenten fasting as responsive preparation. One of my favorite writers is Abraham Joshua Heschel, and his book *The Prophets* is my all-time favorite writing of his (with *Sabbath* running in second place).[2] One of the themes developed in *The Prophets*, and Heschel's the master of evocative thematic repetition, is the notion of divine pathos. In summary, divine pathos is the condition of a prophet who catches a glimpse of the divine disposition toward Israel or some leader in Israel. The prophet's calling is to enter into that divine pathos—wrath, grief, sorrow, threat, promise, healing, love, or grace—and embody the divine pathos. Hosea's famous entering into relations with a prostitute was how Hosea entered into the divine pathos of YHWH's complicated scorned-lover relation with Israel. I want to suggest that fasting is entering into participation in the divine pathos over death and sin in Israel and Judah, and therefore also in the Church and our culture.

In the Bible, fasting is a response (usually to death, or the threat of death), not a means. It surely isn't a common means of the well-to-do for their inner development. (Do we realize the social condition of some of our spirituality?)

LENTEN FASTING

Here is my proposal for us to enhance our Lenten theology and at the same time to enhance our Lenten experience. (The irony of suggesting instrumentality!) My suggestion is that we learn to see Lenten fasting as a response to sins and the prospects of death in our culture, our nation, our church, and our own life, and that we also learn to see fasting as entering into the divine pathos about sin and death.

First, let us get some biblical texts on the table to see how fasting is responsive. In the middle of Psalm 35, we read this from David:

Malicious witnesses rise up;
they ask me about things I do not know.
They repay me evil for good;
my soul is forlorn.
But as for me, when they were sick,
I wore sackcloth;
I afflicted myself with fasting.
I prayed with head bowed on my bosom,
as though I grieved for a friend or a brother;
I went about as one who laments for a mother,
bowed down and in mourning.

Psalm 35:11-14 (italics added)

Without an extensive commentary on context, we simply observe that David's fasting here is in response to the sickness of his enemies, those for whom David grieves and prays and intercedes for health; but the fundamental point is that David is less concerned with fasting as an intensification of his prayers than with fasting as an expression of the depth of his grief over the threat of death. Let us never forget that ordinary sicknesses and death were tied closer together in the ancient world than in ours.

The famous passage in Isaiah 58 about fasting is neither an example of a spiritual discipline leading to formation nor an intensification of intercession. It is the fast in response to the poverty of others that spurs the fasters to use their resources for the good of others. And the standard fast of Israel's history was on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:26-32; cf. 16:2-34; Numbers 29:7-11). On that day the Israelites were to "deny yourselves" (or "afflict yourselves"), and time revealed that this was understood as denying oneself the normal pleasures of life—food, comfortable bedding, sexual intercourse, and washing one's body. Why? Because they were to face their sins, prepare themselves to confess their sins, and to present themselves as genuinely ready to receive the blessings of forgiveness.

Lent not only cuts against the grain of American culture, it cuts against the grain of personal spiritualities of all sorts, especially those typical in the West. Without wanting to suggest our gospel or our theology are morbidly fascinated with sin and death, and without denying that the gospel tells a story that leads us through the cross into the resurrection, at the core of the Christian gospel is the forgiveness of sins (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Lent reminds us where we were, who we were, what we were doing and have done, and teaches us to tell the truth about ourselves—that as image-bearers of God we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, in what we have done and in what we have left undone, in not loving God and ourselves and our neighbors as ourselves—and to turn to God for mercy. This is not a morbid voyeurism into our previous sins, but a candid recognition of our past and the reality of current sins.

As a truth-telling time, Lent is also a time when we turn toward the cross on which Christ died. Atonement theories abound and debates are currently raging across the theological spectrum, but what we confess as Christians during the Lenten season is that as sinners we turn to the one who died "for our sins." Without denying the intensity or the importance of the various metaphors of atonement, we can learn that Christ died *with* us—in that he completely identified with us in our humanity all the way to our death (Philippians 2:5-11), that Christ died *instead of us*—in that he took upon himself the guilt and punishment and death of our sins (2 Corinthians 5:21), and *for* us—in that his death brings us the forgiveness of sins (Romans 4:25). We fast and afflict ourselves, or deny ourselves, in response to our life of sin and sinning. We embody then our conviction that our sins entangle us in death.

So we face ourselves before God and repent as we contemplate our own sinfulness. And let us not withdraw from the world in contemplating only our own sins. As Isaiah told his audience that genuine fasting was care for the poor, so in our day: genuine Lenten truth-telling is the story of complicity, of systemic injustices in the United States, in the Western World, and in the stories of those around the globe, and of unrealized participation in evils that affect us all, like consumerism and individualism. Lenten fasting is the proper response to our culture's complicity in death-dealing systemic injustices.

But in facing ourselves before God, who pronounces death on sin, we know the cross is coming, and we know the resurrection is coming, and we know the ascension and exaltation of our Lord are coming, and we turn toward the gospel's comic ending—that sin can be unraveled, that death can be overturned, that disease and the infections of sin can be healed, and they can be healed because we see the Crucified One break the curse of sin and death on Easter morning in the glories of the resurrection. And we see that same Crucified and Raised One ascend to the right hand of the Father where he reigns until all enemies have been put under his foot.

NOTES

1 This has been written up in my book *Fasting* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

2 Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).

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Rouault depicts the suffering of John the Baptist, the messenger sent to prepare us for the coming of the Lord through repentance and baptism.

Georges Rouault (1871-1958), St. John the Baptist (c. 1936). Oil, ink and gouache on lithograph mounted on canvas. 36.4 x 28 in. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. © 2013 Artists Rights Socity (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo Credit: © CNAC/ MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The Voice in the Wilderness

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

Reflecting on the life of John the Baptist during the season of Lent is appropriate because he is closely associated with penitence in Scripture. He is the messenger sent from God to prepare people for the coming of the Lord through repentance and baptism: "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Matthew 3:3-4/Mark 1:2-4/Luke 3:2-6).

Thus, in art John the Baptist is usually portrayed in the wilderness and dressed in "clothing of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist" (Matthew 3:4/Mark1:6). In Georges Rouault's *St. John the Baptist*, this wilderness prophet is also an example of human suffering.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Georges Rouault, a painter, draftsman, and printmaker in Paris, had developed the highly expressive style seen in this image, influenced by Henri Matisse and other artists. Although Rouault's background was among artisans (his father worked in Paris as a piano finisher and varnisher), his training in art was classical.[1] In the atelier of Elie Delauney at l'Ercole des Beaux-Arts in Paris he painted landscapes influenced not by the contemporary Impressionists but by the classical painters Poussin and Claude.[2] The deep, fragmented colors and flat composition in *St. John the Baptist* and many of Rouault's paintings reflects an earlier apprenticeship at age fourteen to makers of modern stained glass and restorers of medieval windows.

In the fall of 1891, after the death of Delaunay, Rouault became the student of Gustave Moreau, who became an exceptional artistic and religious influence on him. Rouault had been baptized Catholic as an infant. Moreau felt that art could lead to real religion of the heart. Rouault quoted Moreau's confession of faith:

> Do you believe in God? I am asked. I believe only in God. In fact, I do not believe in what I touch nor in what I see. I only believe in what I cannot see; solely in what I sense. My mind and my reason seem to me ephemeral and of dubious reality. My inner consciousness alone appears eternal and unquestionably certain.[3]

Rouault, however, struggled with his faith in a culture where writers like Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola sought to portray "reality" in their art with little or no concern for religion.[4] Furthermore, Rouault was devastated by the death of Moreau in 1898.

Rouault's "realism" springs in small part from Flaubert and Zola, but in a much larger part from his exposure to Léon Bloy, a Catholic who was significant in one of the most important revivals of religious literature in French history. Rouault represents the pictorial expression of this literary revival.[5] Lionello Venturi, art historian and an early biographer of Rouault, stated that Bloy was the very embodiment of the necessity of faith, which Rouault felt; the writer was for him an "older brother."[6]

In 1903, Rouault became the first curator of the Musée Gustave Moreau in Paris. The artist began to explore the human condition through watching the passers-by, and this is the time of his famous works depicting clowns, acrobats, and prostitutes. Brothel scenes had become popular with other contemporary artists such as Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec. Rouault was also fascinated by Cezanne's *Bathers* and did a series of nudes.

Ambroise Vollard, an influential dealer in French contemporary art who advanced the careers of Cézanne, Renoir, and Picasso among others, became Rouault's agent in 1917. This provided the stability for Rouault's fifty-eight plates (conceived in 1912) that were printed in black in *Miserere*, a meditation on death.[7]

The 1930s were a very productive period for Rouault's religious art. World War I seemed to deepen his faith and inspire him to create religiously inspired work such as *St. John the Baptist*. Soo Yun Kang, professor of art history at Chicago State University, believes this is one of the unfinished works stored at the Pompidou.[8] She confirms the brush marks as typical of the artist and notes the white sketch marks indicate that he planned to change the composition, as he did hundreds of times.[9]

Rouault utilized a very complex painting technique that began with a lithographic print in black ink.[10] This paper piece was then glued to a stretched canvas and placed on an easel where Rouault filled in the blank areas, painting over the print with oil, gouache (opaque watercolors), and more ink. It is most likely that the artist put the gouache on before the oil because gouache dries faster than oil and oil adheres to gouache more permanently than the reverse application. It is certain that the drawing ink was applied last because after using too large brushes, the artist would have covered the original black litho markings and wanted them to reemerge in the composition. This multi-faceted application of materials was probably useful to him as a working "drawing" or cartoon that allowed him to return to another litho print and paint directly with purpose and knowledge of the desired outcome, or enlarge the idea (and print) for another canvas.[11]

This thick application of the materials allows a greater form of expression in *St. John the Baptist*. The prophet's emaciated body is depicted with the same flesh tones used by Rouault in his clowns and prostitutes. John has suffered in the same manner as so many of Rouault's other subjects. The head is very similar to the Jesus-types that Rouault painted previously. Another depiction of St. John the Baptist is not recorded in the literature on

the artist, so it is likely that Rouault chose a familiar head and then transformed it into Christ's relative by adding the hairshirt attribute. The blue background with two strong red horizontals draws the eye back to the saddened figure. The eyes look directly at the viewer, although Dr. Kang noted that they are probably unfinished as Rouault usually clearly marks the eyeball.[12]

This painting of John the Baptist was created by an artist whose own faith became stronger over the years as he reflected on the suffering of Christ and the perpetual pain and suffering of humans due to sin. So in another sense, Rouault's *St. John the Baptist* is appropriate for meditation during Lent: in this season of our repentance for sin we identify with the physical suffering and humiliation of Christ, even as we journey with him toward his bodily resurrection.

NOTES

1 William A. Dyrness, *Rouault: A Vision of Suffering and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 23.

2 Pierre Courthion, *Georges Rouault* (New York: Harry S. Abrams, 1961), 15-16.

3 Georges Rouault and André Suarès, "Gustave Moreau," *L'Art et les Artistes* (April, 1926), 240, as quoted in Dyrness, *Rouault*, 27.

4 Dyrness, 32-33.

5 Ibid.

6 Lionello Venturi, *Georges Rouault*, second edition (Paris, France: Skira, 1948), 22.

7 See Holly Flora and Soo Yun Kang, *This Anguished World of Shadows: Georges Rouault's Miserere et Guerre* (London, UK: D. Giles; and New York: Museum of Biblical Art, 2006).

8 The painting is illustrated in the forty pages of Rouault's work in the online collection of Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Search "Rouault" and "Jean Baptiste" at *collection.centrepompidou.fr/Navigart/index.php?db=minter&qs=1* (accessed December 4, 2012).

9 I thank Dr. Kang for our email correspondence (December 3, 2012) regarding the attribution of this unpublished painting.

10 Lithography is the process of printing from a plane surface (as a smooth stone or metal plate) on which the image to be printed is ink-receptive and the blank area ink-repellent.

11 I thank Professor Mark Anderson, Chairman and Professor of Art, Baylor University, for explaining this process. Professor Anderson's area of expertise is printmaking.

12 Kang, email correspondence (December 3, 2012).

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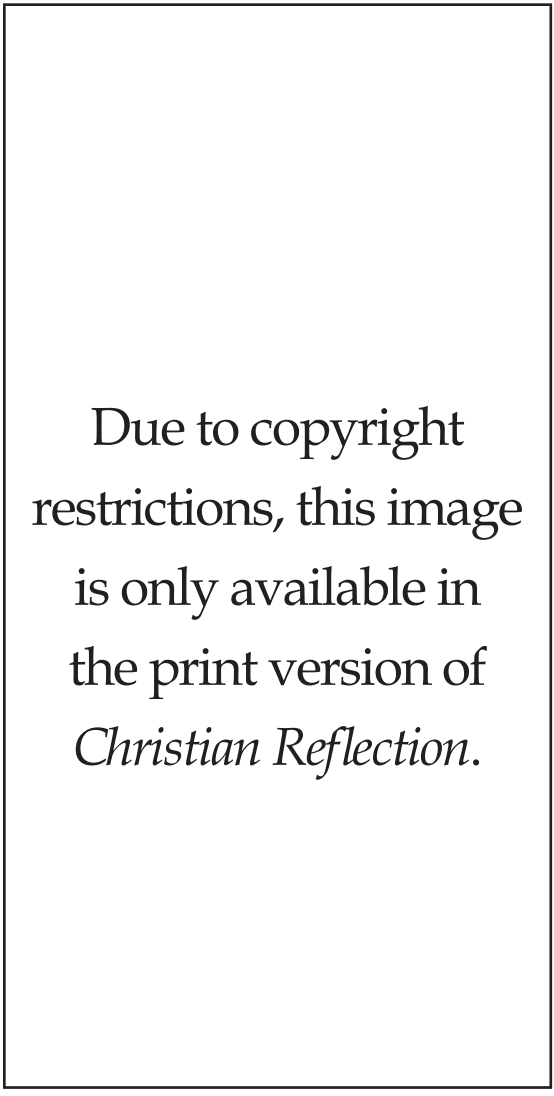


Donatello depicts the penitent Mary Magdalen with physical and emotional tenacity in the face of adversity—her suffering having increased her spiritual strength.

Donatello (c. 1386-1466), The Penitent Magdalen (c. 1453). Poplar wood with polychromy and gold. 6'2". Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The Penitence of Mary Magdalen

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

The Mary Magdalen known by Donatello and other artists of the Italian Renaissance was the composite Mary that scholars trace back to Pope Gregory the Great's homily delivered in 592. Gregory combined Mary of Magdala, Luke's unnamed "woman in the city, who was a sinner" (Luke 7:37), and Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha) along with the extra-biblical Penitent Mary from the *Golden Legend* who goes off into the wilderness for thirty years, to form one conglomerate story about Mary Magdalen, the reformed prostitute.[1]

The original location and patron of the sculpture are unknown. During its cleaning after a devastating flood in 1966 covered it with mud and oil, it was revealed that the flesh was originally painted to suggest a leathery tan produced by years of exposure to the sun in the wilderness, and the hair had gilded streaks to enhance the figure's red hair.[2] Wooden figures were often carried through the streets in processions that occurred at Lent, feast days of saints, and religious events such as Epiphany (January 6) and the Annunciation (March 25). These "highlights" in her hair would have been quite remarkable when hit by the sun if this Magdalen was in such a procession.

This is not an emaciated figure whose body has been ravaged by penitence. Although her broken teeth are obvious, her refined bone structure remains intact. She is slender, yet her limbs are strong with muscle definition. We are reminded that the Magdalen was known for her great beauty. She stands in the characteristic *contrapposto* or counter-poised position as one leg supports the majority of her weight while the other balances the body in a relaxed and natural manner.

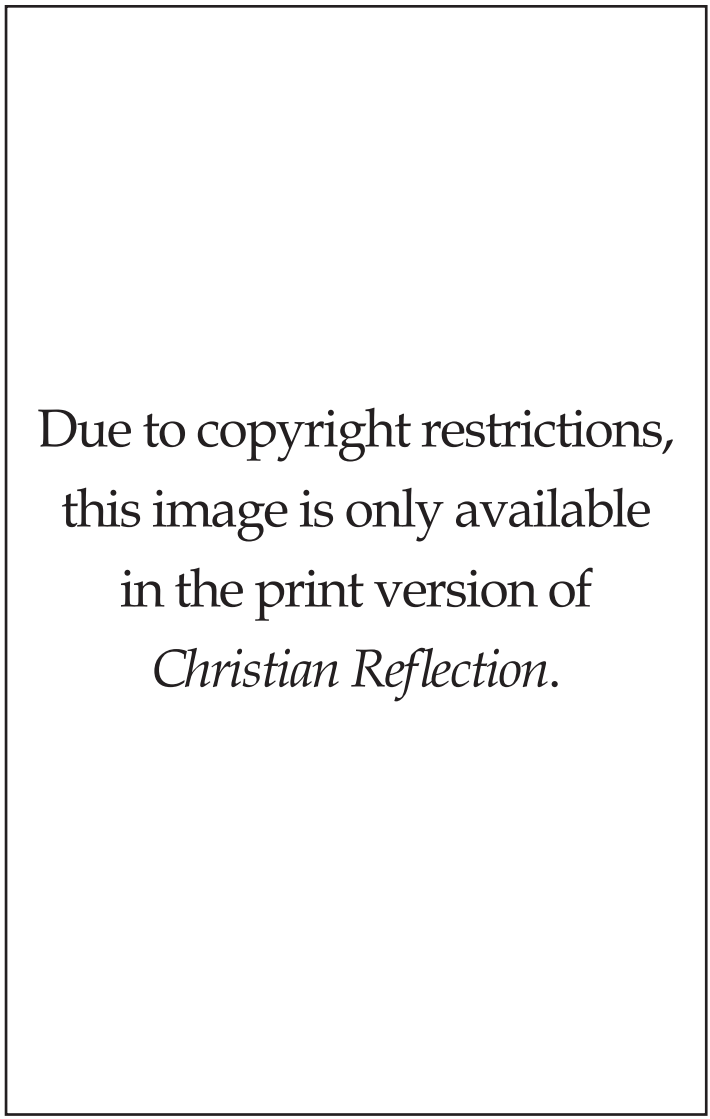
Donatello depicts the penitent Mary Magdalen with physical and emotional tenacity in the face of adversity—her suffering having increased her spiritual strength.[3] Her faith is evident as her hands are clasped in prayer.

NOTES

1 For the origins of the penitent Magdalen in the wilderness, see Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, translated by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (London, UK: Longmans, Green, 1941), 360-361. For more on the visual tradition of Mary Magdalen from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries see, Heidi J. Hornik, "The Invention and Development of the 'Secular' Magdalene in Late Renaissance Florentine Painting," in *Mary Magdalene in Medieval Culture: Conflicted Roles*, edited by Peter Loewen and Robin Waugh (New York: Routledge, 2013).

2 Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, seventh edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 298-299.

3 Mary Levine Dunkelman, "Donatello's Mary Magdalen: A Model of Courage and Survival," *Womans Art Journal*, 26:2 (2005), 10-13.



Bernini's figure of the penitent Jerome incorporates exaggerated gesture, intense spiritual drama, and inspirational humility to invoke a similar devotion in the viewer.

Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), St. Jerome (1661-63). Marble. 6'6". Chigi Chapel, Duomo, Siena, Italy. Photo: Alinari / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The Penitence of Jerome

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

Jerome, the fourth century scholar monk and translator of the Vulgate Bible, is frequently depicted in art as a hermit in the wilderness. According to a popular story in the Middle Ages, when a lion raised its wounded paw to him, the saint removed a thorn and the lion became his constant companion. Gianlorenzo Bernini utilizes the iconography of the penitent Jerome and the lion in the dramatic marble figure illustrated here.

Bernini was the most famous sculptor of the Catholic Reformation; he created the oval-shaped walkway with Doric colonnade that still encircles the piazza of St. Peter's in Vatican City. His longtime friend Cardinal Fabio Chigi became Pope Alexander VII in 1655. In the third year of his papacy, Alexander requested that Benini redesign the Chigi family chapel. Inspired by the ancient door that stood behind the chapel, the Porta del Perdono or Gate of Forgiveness, Bernini created a dramatic environment within the chapel on the theme of forgiveness. The slightly elliptical chapel contained a Madonna placed on the altar flanked by two sculptures made by Bernini's assistants. Bernini sculpted the ancient symbols of absolution, St. Jerome and St. Mary Magdalen, on either side of the entrance to the chapel. The over life-size marble saints were positioned so that viewers would walk past them as they entered the chapel and only notice them as they exited.

The Jerome statue is top heavy and his weight is only on his right leg. His left foot is buried in the mane of the lion whose paw is also visible. This imbalanced and tentative stance of the figure creates a sense of the momentary that is somewhat disconcerting to the viewer.† Jerome's lower body torques to the left as his right hand grasps at the heavy drapery while his upper body leans in the opposite direction to the crucifix barely supported by his left hand. His eyes are closed in prayer as his cheek touches gently the head of Christ. The impact of that touch is compounded by the dramatic effect of the drapery that billows out of the niche.

Bernini's figure of the penitent Jerome incorporates exaggerated gesture, intense spiritual drama, and inspirational humility to invoke a similar devotion in the viewer.

NOTE

† See Harriet Feigenbaum Chamberlain, "The Influence of Galileo on Bernini's *Saint Mary Magdalen* and *Saint Jerome*," *Art Bulletin*, 59:1 (March, 1977), 71-84.

Other Voices

Observing Lent can help us enter the fullness of God. In the broadest sense, Lent re-enacts Jesus' turn toward Jerusalem and his turn toward the suffering that culminates at the cross. It is a season of preparation for Holy Week and Easter, and in the early church it was a time to prepare catechumens before their baptism on Easter.

SCOTT WAALKES, *The Fullness of Time in a Flat World: Globalization and the Liturgical Year* (2010)

O Lord and Master of my life, give me not a spirit of sloth, vain curiosity, lust for power, and idle talk. But give to me Thy servant a spirit of soberness, humility, patience, and love. O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother; for blessed are Thou to the ages of ages. Amen.

***THE PRAYER OF ST. EPHRAIM*, for the weekday offices of Lent in The Lenten Triodion, translated by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (1978)**

On Ash Wednesday we are reminded that the only fast pleasing to God is one that fosters justice and wholeness for the community and the oppressed. The church must become a community of justice that cares for the poor, for dislocated workers, and for unhappy "consumers" if it is to have any hope of pointing the world to the wholeness and fullness that sustain our hope.

SCOTT WAALKES, *The Fullness of Time in a Flat World: Globalization and the Liturgical Year* (2010)

People think it's strange to like Lent. It is, after all, a penitential season, and who enjoys penitence? The very word penitence brings to mind images of monks sitting in dark rooms wearing hair shirts. Feeling penitent sounds bad enough, but actually *liking* Lent seems to verge on masochism. It sounds as if one enjoys scrutinizing the past, dragging out every misdeed, and wallowing in guilt for six weeks.

However, Lent is not all about penitence or misdeeds or guilt. It is a time of introspection, true, but its ultimate purpose lies beyond penitence. In essence Lent serves as our annual invitation to come closer to God. It

provides a time to look at our lives and ourselves, not so we may criticize ourselves more harshly but so we can identify the obstructions that keep us from God. What keeps us from feeling the presence of the divine in our every day? How do we hide from God, and why? Lent gives us a chance to look at such obstructions and to move them gently away so that we can come closer to the Love that gives us life, the Love whose triumph we will celebrate on Easter morning.

SARAH PARSONS, *A Clearing Season: Reflections for Lent* (2005)

The starting point for the early church was this awareness of the abyss of sin inside each person, the murky depths of which only the top few inches are visible. God, who is all clarity and light, wants to make us perfect as he is perfect, shot through with his radiance. The first step in our healing, then, is not being comforted. It is taking a hard look at the cleansing that needs to be done.

This is not condemnation, but right diagnosis…. Forgiveness of past sins doesn't cure the sickness in the heart that continues to yearn after more. We will remain sick until that healing begins, and it will be a lifelong process.

What a relief it is to admit this. Like the woman weeping at Jesus' feet, we have nothing more to conceal, no more self-justification, no more self-pity. We are fully known, even in the depths that we ourselves cannot see, cannot bear to see. Instead of hoping that God will love us for our good parts and pass over the rest, we know that he died for the bad parts, and will not rest till they are made right. The depth of our sin proves the height of his love, a height we cannot comprehend until we realize how desperately we need it. We are fully loved, and one day will be fully healed, brought into God's presence without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

FREDERICA MATHEWES-GREEN, *The Illumined Heart: Capturing the Vibrant Faith of Ancient Christians* (2001)

Contrary to what many think or feel a period of spiritual endeavor (during Lent, perhaps, or while taking part in a retreat) is a time of joy because it is a time for coming home, a period when we can come back to life. It should be a time when we shake off all that is worn and dead in us in order to become able to live, and to live with all the vastness, all the depth and all the intensity to which we are called. Unless we understand this quality of joy, we shall make of it a monstrous, blasphemous caricature, when in God's very name we make our life a misery for ourselves and for those who must pay the cost for our abortive attempts at holiness.

METROPOLITAN ANTHONY, *Meditations on a Theme: A Spiritual Journey* (1971)

How sad that people misunderstand the significance of the lenten spring. How distressing that so many take this time "given by our God, the crucified Christ" as a season for sentimental devotions, anxious introspections and pietistic pseudo-sufferings "together with Jesus." And how depressing that others naturalize and rationalize the time with tepid explanations about the psychosomatic benefits of abstinence with arguments drawn from one or another therapeutic theory. And how totally tragic that still others reject the whole affair, often with good reason because of its distortion, as a barbarous hangover from the dark ages to be radically rejected in these liberated and enlightened modern times.

The lenten spring is welcomed by Christians in the Church not as the time for self-inflicted agony or self-improving therapy. It is greeted as the sanctified season consecrated to the correction, purification and enlightenment of the total person through the fulfillment of the commandments of the crucified God. It is received as the time for battling with evil spirits and blossoming with the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22). It is accepted as "the great and saving forty days" set apart for complete and total dedication to the things of God. It is the "tithe of the year" which tells us that all times and seasons belong to the Lord who has created and redeemed the world.

THOMAS HOPKO, *The Lenten Spring: Readings for Great Lent* (1983)

A journey, a pilgrimage! Yet, as we begin it, as we make the first step into the "bright sadness" of Lent, we see—far, far away—the destination. It is the joy of Easter, it is the entrance into the glory of the Kingdom.

ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN, *The Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (2001)

At this point you may be saying, "You're attaching too much significance to the Christian year. It is impossible for the discipline of the Christian year to accomplish so much for my spirituality." This objection has validity if the Christian year is seen as an end in itself. However, if we see the Christian year as an instrument through which we may be shaped by God's saving events in Christ, then it is not the Christian year that accomplishes our spiritual pilgrimage but Christ himself who is the very content and meaning of the Christian year.

ROBERT E. WEBBER, *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* (2004)

Come Near Today

ERIC HOWELL

The holy Son of God descends
to human pain and need.
O Lord, to my assistance come.
Come quickly, Lord, to help me.

With love assured, your healing word,
the Spirit's flame, your holy name.
Redeeming grace in this place –
come near today to help me.

Who is this man, the Great I Am,
who loves so fierce and free?
My Lord! You lived our suffering.
Come quickly, Lord, to be near me.

Refrain

The holy Son of God walks on
to darkened Calvary.
To bear his cross is now our path.
Come quickly, Lord, to lead me.

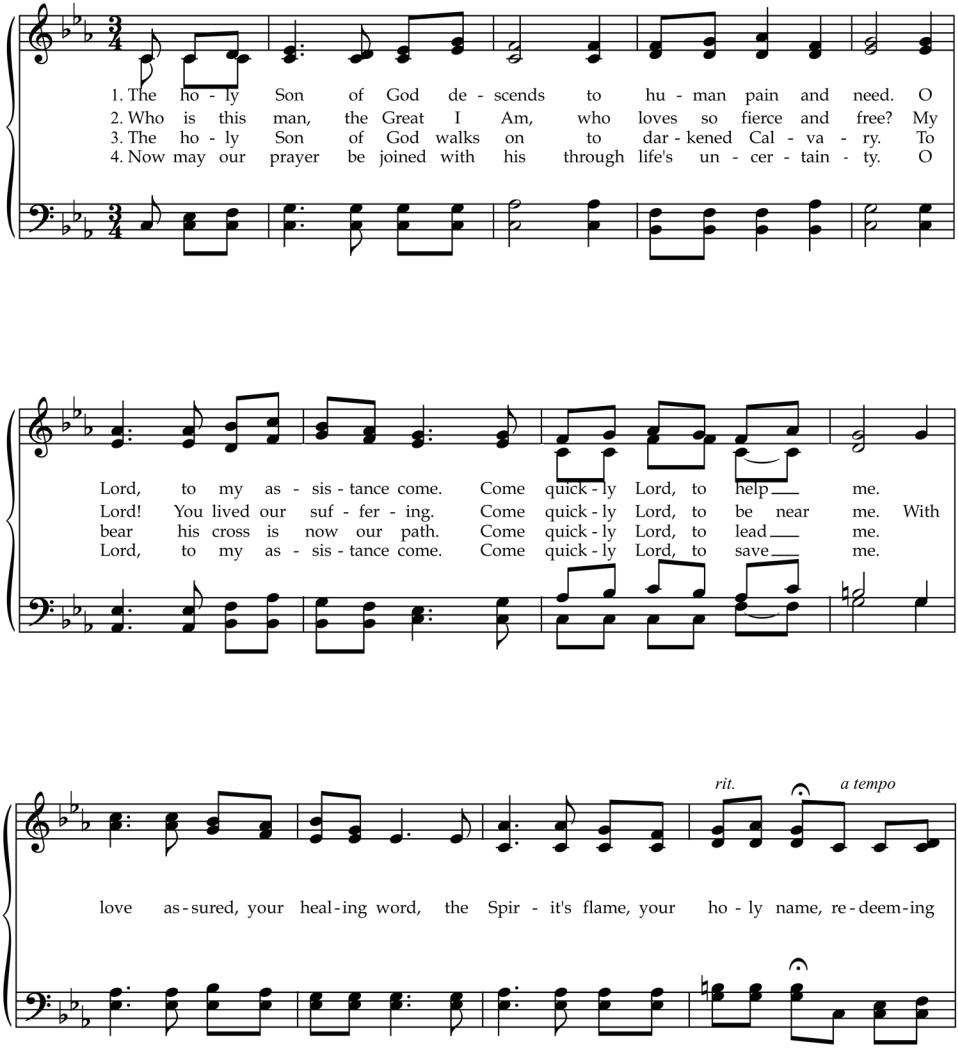
Refrain

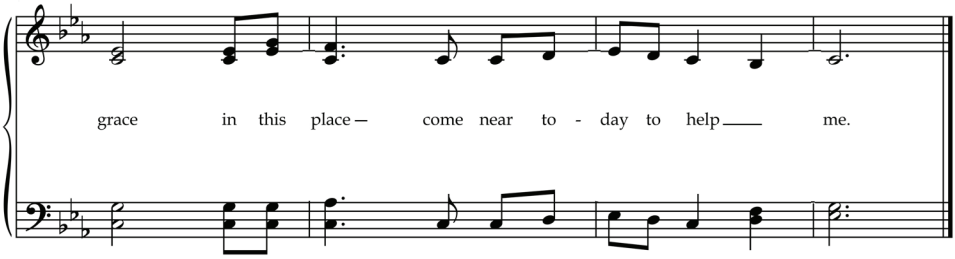
Now may our prayer be joined with his
through life's uncertainty.
O Lord, to my assistance come.
Come quickly, Lord, to save me.

Refrain

Come Near Today

ERIC HOWELL SUSAN THRIFT





Tune: COME NEAR TODAY
8.6.8.7.Ref.

Worship Service for Ash Wednesday

BY ERIC HOWELL

Gathering in Silence

Meditation

If you have sinned, do not lose hope because of your error.
Pray instead.

On the other hand, if you have done something good,
never presume too much on account of your goodness.
Never congratulate yourself excessively.

Never look down on someone else for sinning,
and remember that when the wayward soul prays and repents
of doing wrong,
the Lord will raise that person up,
as he did Lazarus.

Aelfric of Eynsham (c. 955 - c. 1010)[1]

Call to Worship and Invocation

Opening Chime and Introit

Holy God,
Holy and Mighty,
Holy Immortal One,
Have mercy upon us.

Suggested Tune: TRISAIGON[2]

Responsive Litany (from Joel 2:1-2, 12-14 and Psalm 70)

The word of the Lord
that came to Joel.
Hear this
all who live in the land.
Put on sackcloth
mourn and cry.

Wear it all night
for we are neglecting God.
Declare a holy fast
call a sacred assembly.
Gather the community
and cry out to God.
Make haste, O God
and deliver me.
O Lord,
make haste to help me.

Hymn of Preparation

"Come Near Today"

The holy Son of God descends
to human pain and need.
O Lord, to my assistance come.
Come quickly, Lord, to help me.

With love assured, your healing Word,
the Spirit's flame, your holy Name.
Redeeming grace in this place –
come near today to help me.

Who is this man, the Great I Am,
who loves so fierce and free?
My Lord! You lived our suffering.
Come quickly, Lord, to be near me.

Refrain

The holy Son of God walks on
to darkened Calvary.
To bear his cross is now our path.
Come quickly, Lord, to lead me.

Refrain

Now may our prayer be joined with his
through life's uncertainty.
O Lord, to my assistance come.
Come quickly, Lord, to save me.

Refrain

Eric Howell (2013)
Tune: COME NEAR TODAY (pp. 45-47 in this volume)

Prayers of Confession

(*A worship leader reads the prayers that guide congregants into confession. After a time for their silent prayers, the congregants join in singing the first verse and refrain of "I Need Thee Every Hour."*[3])

Lord, we confess our sins before you.
We confess that we have fallen short of your glory and
your intent for our lives.
Open our eyes that we may see ourselves with clarity and truthfulness,
that we may have eyes to see all of that within us that is not
pleasing to you.

(silent prayers)

I need thee every hour, most gracious Lord;
no tender voice like thine can peace afford.

I need thee, O I need thee;
every hour I need thee!
O bless me now, my Savior,
I come to thee.

Lord, we confess to you that we have not loved as we ought.
We have been impatient with others with whom we could have
been patient.
We have disregarded those you have called us to serve.
We have chosen the selfish way when you have called us to selflessness.

(silent prayers)

I need thee, O I need thee;
every hour I need thee!
O bless me now, my Savior,
I come to thee.

Lord, we confess that we have not tended to the care of our souls.
We have been too busy to pray.
We have been too quick to speak and too slow to listen for you.
We have filled our lives with all kinds of noise
instead of patiently waiting like sheep for our shepherd's voice.

(silent prayers)

I need thee, O I need thee;
every hour I need thee!
O bless me now, my Savior,
I come to thee.

Lord, we confess our need of you.
We need your grace.
We need your patience.
We need your guidance.
We cannot see beyond the moment.
We cannot worship you as we ought.
As we begin this solemn journey toward the cross,
we call upon your mercy and your love for our salvation.

(silent prayers)

I need thee, O I need thee;
every hour I need thee!
O bless me now, my Savior,
I come to thee.

Burning the Palms[4]

Scripture Reading: Psalm 51:1-17

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering,
you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.

Receiving and Offering Ashes[5]

To apply ashes, rub your thumb in the bowl of ashes and make the sign of the cross on the participant's forehead. As you apply the ashes say, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Or, "Repent, and hear the good news."

Responsive Reading (from Psalm 103)

Praise the Lord, O my soul,
all my inmost being.
Praise the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
and crowns you with kindness,
who satisfies you with good things,
so that you are renewed.

The Lord works righteousness
and justice for the oppressed.
The Lord is gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in love.
He does not treat us as our sins deserve,
or repay our sins.
As high as the heavens are above us,
so great is his love for us.
As far as the east is from the west,
he has removed our sins from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,
God has compassion on us.

Praise the Lord,
O my soul.

Hymn of Blessing

"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" (verse 1, 2, and 5)

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

Isaac Watts (1707)
Tune: HAMBURG

Departing in Silence

NOTES

1 This translation is from Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *Following Christ: A Lenten Reader to Stretch Your Soul* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), 4. Used by permission.

2 This prayer, called the Trisaigon (Greek for "thrice holy"), traces to the fifth century and has been chanted or sung with many tunes. This English translation is from *The Book*

of Common Prayer (1979). The suggested tune, TRISAIGON, is available on *Songs of Presence: Contemplative Chants for the New Millenium* available from Praxis (*www.praxisofprayer.com*).

3 Annie S. Hawks wrote the prayerful hymn "I Need Thee Every Hour" (1872). Her pastor, Robert Lowry, contributed the refrain and the tune NEED.

4 The palms may be burned prior to the worship service, or you may choose to burn some or all of the palms as part of the service. Traditionally, the ashes come from burning the palm fronds that were used in the Palm Sunday service the prior year. In making your decision remember that palms produce a strong odor when burned. Furthermore, they burn down to a very small amount of ash, though only a little ash is needed for an Ash Wednesday service.

5 Ashes may be offered by inviting congregants to come forward, or the ashes may be passed around the room in a small bowl so that congregants apply the ashes to one another.

Many congregations may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the application of ashes, and it can be a challenging tradition to embrace. But as our congregation incorporated the Ash Wednesday service into its practice, it quickly became one of the most meaningful services of the year for many members.

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Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)

BY CARMEN ACEVEDO BUTCHER

Walking the stations of the cross—a devotional path of reflection and repentance based on events in the passion and resurrection of Christ—is being adapted in creative ways today. How did this form of spiritual pilgrimage originate and why is it important for our discipleship?

Anglo-Saxons knew winters so bitter that writers reckoned years by their island's mettle-testing season: the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* declares one king "fifty *winters* old," the *Beowulf* poet writes that Grendel terrorized Hrothgar's kingdom for "twelve *winters*," a 1000 A.D. English translator of the Gospel of John describes the temple as built in "forty-six *winters*" (John 2:20), and the Old English poem "The Wanderer" says that no one becomes wise before experiencing "a deal of *winters* in this world."[1] Even a twenty-first-century December with central heating can seem forever. By January, eyes scan the cold, lifeless soil for tightly folded purple crocuses waiting to open into spring's promise, just as souls numb with anxiety and dark from pain crave the pilgrimage toward eternal light and hope.

During Lent, Christians express such yearnings by walking the stations of the cross alone or in groups, on Lenten Fridays, on Good Friday, and at other times during Holy Week. Many walk the stations regularly through the year. This ancient devotional exercise commemorating the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is also called the "way of the cross" (*Via Crucis*) and the "way of sorrow" (*Via Dolorosa*). Over the years it has had from five to thirty-plus stations, until 1731, when Pope Clement XII set the number at fourteen. Its tableaux of Christ's passion—painted, engraved, carved, or sculptured, using stone, wood, or metal—create a literal prayerful path that helps spiritual seekers put on Christ's sandals as they move slowly from station to station, reflecting on his life.

For centuries, Episcopal (Anglican) churches have also observed these Catholic stations of the cross, and more recently Lutherans, Presbyterians, and other Protestant churches do. Evangelicals have begun incorporating variations of these stations into their worship services, too. A website for the interactive "Passion Week Experience" started by Houston's 58,000-member Second Baptist Church in 2011 describes the experience as "not a traditional rendering…but a fresh take on an ancient practice."[2] Its eight stations display replicas of items associated with the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus; in 2012, thousands touched a crown of thorns, smelled bottles of spices, held pieces of silver, and nailed their sins to a large cross.

Christians have always wanted to visit the Holy Land to walk in Christ's steps—from the Garden of Gethsemane, through the high priest's courtyard, by Pilate's house, through Jerusalem, out to the hill of crucifixion (Calvary/Golgotha), and to the tomb. After Constantine legalized Christian worship in the Roman Empire in 313, the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher was erected on the location believed to have been Christ's tomb, becoming popular with pilgrims. The late-fourth-century Galician pilgrim Egeria described the fervency of these pilgrimages: at "the hour of cockcrow," she, a bishop, and two hundred others walked to Gethsemane singing hymns and there listened to the Gospel passage on the Lord's arrest, after which she heard "such moaning and groaning with weeping from all the people" that it echoed "practically as far as the city."[3] A winding route emerged over time from the ruins of Antonia Fortress, held to be where Jesus stood before Pilate, then west to the basilica; the *Via Dolorosa* has seen alternative routes through the years because of diverse opinions on the locations of Christ's walk to the cross.[4] Eventually stops developed, and in 1342, Franciscan monks were given official custody of these holy sites, closely identifying them with the stations from then on.

From the first surviving narrative by the anonymous early-fourth-century Pilgrim of Bordeaux to the famous travelogue-memoir dictated by fifteenth-century Margery Kempe, Holy Land pilgrimages make fascinating reading, but not all aspiring pilgrims could manage this arduous, costly trip; therefore, pictures or sculptures representing stages of Christ's journey to the cross were erected in or near local churches or other public venues, and medieval practitioners of the stations increased.[5] Starting in the fifteenth century, open-air *Via Dolorosa* processions occurred throughout Europe, made concrete by measuring actual distances in Jerusalem and setting up memorials at relevant spots.[6]

As a spiritual exercise, the stations of the cross developed organically from the scripturally focused lives of medieval followers. Because vibrant devotional sources developed with unsystematic abundance in response to the gospel of Jesus, a linear history of this practice remains unclear, but we can witness its foundation of biblical meditation in the influential, widely read works of Birgitta of Sweden, a fourteenth-century noble woman, mother

of eight, monastic religious order founder, and contemplative who ruminated all her life on Christ's passion.[7] Only in her seventies did Birgitta make it to Jerusalem to retrace Christ's steps; but her lifelong daily Bible meditations informed her *Revelations* (inspiring the fifteenth-century English pilgrim and mystic Margery Kempe, for one), and these possess remarkable realism:

> At the command of the executioner, [Christ] undressed Himself and freely hugged the pillar. He was bound with a rope and then scourged with barbed whips. The barbs caught in His skin and were then pulled backward, not just tearing but plowing into Him so as to wound His whole body. At the first blow, it was as though my heart had been pierced and I had lost the use of my senses.[8]

Birgitta's *Prayers* also invite reflection on Christ's suffering:

> Infinite glory to You, my Lord Jesus Christ! For us, You humbly endured the Cross. Your holy hands and feet were stretched out with rope. Your hands and feet were secured with iron nails to the wood of the cross, cruelly. You were called, "Traitor!" You were ridiculed in many ways. . . . Eternal praise to You, Lord, for each and every hour You suffered such terrible bitterness and agony on the cross for us sinners![9]

Another writer who ruminated on Christ's passion is the sixteenth-century Dutch geographer and priest, Christian van Adrichem. Never pilgrimaging to the Holy Land, he drew from both a richly meditative life and circulating stories to craft accounts of Christ's walk to Golgotha. His narrative was translated throughout Europe and became another significant source for the devotion to the way of the cross.[10] This excerpt from *Urbis Hierosolymae* (*City of Jerusalem*) demonstrates Adrichem's meticulous style:

> As a spiritual exercise, the stations of the cross developed organically from the scripturally focused lives of medieval followers. Since vibrant devotional sources developed with unsystematic abundance, a history of the practice remains unclear.

> The Way of the Cross which Christ, after he had been condemned to be crucified, followed with the most wretchedly suffering and bloody footsteps, to Mount Calvary. Beginning at Pilate's palace, he walked 26 paces, or 65 feet, to the place where the Cross was placed upon his shoulders. Thence, while the whole city looked on, bearing the

> Cross on his pained shoulders he turned in a northwestern direction and walked towards the place where, according to tradition, he stumbled for the first time under the weight of the Cross; this is a distance of 80 paces,…200 feet. Thence he proceeded for 63 paces—153 feet—to the spot where he encountered Mary his mother and the disciple John. From that place he continued 71 paces and 1½ feet—179 feet—to the fork in the road where Simon of Cyrene was forced to walk behind Jesus, carrying his Cross for him…. Thence the 18 paces or 45 feet to the place where the executioners removed his clothing; and there he drank wine mixed with myrrh. After that 12 paces or 30 feet to the place where he was nailed to the Cross. Finally from that point the 14 paces or 35 feet to the place where, hanging upon the Cross, he was set in a hollow in the rocky ground of Calvary. Thus from the palace of Pilate to the place where the Cross was raised it was 1321 paces or, according to the other calculation, 3303 feet.[11]

In an epilogue, Adrichem reminds readers that they may follow this way of the cross in *templo seu cubiculo mentis* ("within the temple or chamber of the spirit"), without leaving home. As Medieval scholar Dee Dyas points out, "The aim of the true pilgrim was not in the final analysis to see Jerusalem but to see Jesus…to seek an 'interior Jerusalem'."[12]

No longer associated with the corrupt indulgences of the Middle Ages, walking the stations is increasingly embraced by Christians of all denominations seeking an "interior Jerusalem" where we can know God as "more inward than [our] most inward part," as Augustine wrote.[13] Following in countless footsteps from station to station, post-postmoderns connect in a profoundly transformative way with the stages of Christ's earthly journey. *Station* is a term often credited to fifteenth-century British pilgrim William Wey and is rooted in the Latin for "to stand." Stations are places where we stop and be still, waiting for a bus, taxi, or train, in transit to somewhere else. Similarly, in this life, we are always waiting on God, en route to heaven. The exercise of the stations helps us develop empathy for others who are waiting beside us.

Various stations have existed over the centuries, including extra-biblical ones based on inferences from the gospel and on legend. Asterisks below indicate the six non-scriptural stations in the traditional sequence:

1. Jesus is condemned to death.
2. Jesus is handed his cross.
3. Jesus falls for the first time.*
4. Jesus meets his mother.*
5. Simon of Cyrene is required to carry Jesus's cross.

6. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.*
7. Jesus falls a second time.*
8. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.
9. Jesus falls a third time.*
10. Jesus is stripped of his clothes.
11. Jesus is crucified.
12. Jesus dies on the cross.
13. Jesus's body is taken down from the cross.*
14. The body of Jesus is placed in the tomb.

Pope John Paul II shifted the makeup of the stations away from legend and toward a solely scriptural foundation, dropping from this traditional list those six non-scriptural stations and adding ones from Gospel accounts of Christ's life (asterisked below). In *The New Stations of the Cross*, Megan McKenna outlines this alternative list of biblical stations, celebrated in the Coliseum every Good Friday since 1991:[14]

1. Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane.*
2. Jesus is betrayed by Judas.*
3. Jesus is condemned to death by the Sanhedrin.
4. Jesus is denied by Peter.*
5. Jesus is judged by Pilate.*
6. Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns.*
7. Jesus carries his cross.*
8. Jesus is helped by Simon of Cyrene.
9. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.
10. Jesus is crucified.
11. Jesus promises to share his reign with the good thief.*
12. Jesus is on the cross, with his mother and disciple below.*
13. Jesus dies on the cross.
14. Jesus is placed in the tomb.

Today, a fifteenth station, "Jesus rises from the dead," honors the gospel's "Good News" (from *godspel*, Old English *god*, "good," and *spel*, "story") because, as John Paul II taught, Christ's resurrection reveals "the entire Christian mystery in all its newness."[15]

Many believers still keep the traditional list with its non-biblical stations: Jesus falling three times, Jesus meeting his mother, Veronica wiping his face, and his body taken down from the cross. Protestants largely observe only the eight biblical stations, although some Catholic churches also observe only these in order to appeal to all Christians.

In whatever form, the unrushed tempo of this practice mirrors that of another long-established Christian discipline, *lectio divina* ("divine reading")—"eating" Scripture by chanting or reading a Bible verse attentively aloud or interiorly, meditating on each word, and thus spending time with

Christ. With *lectio divina* in mind, we could call the stations of the cross *ambulatio divina* ("divine walking"), and in fact walking the stations is often practiced simultaneously with Bible rumination.[16] Today's intercessory "prayer walking" grew from these two foundational Christian disciplines.[17]

Italian bishop Alphonsus Liguori (d. 1787) composed meditations on the stations that were popular in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His prayer before the stations expresses the intimate spirit of this exercise:

> My Lord, Jesus Christ, / You have made this journey to die for me with unspeakable love; / and I have so many times ungratefully abandoned You. / But now I love You with all my heart; / and, because I love You, I am sincerely sorry for ever having offended You. / Pardon me, my God, and permit me to accompany You on this journey. / You go to die for love of me; / I want, my beloved Redeemer, to die for love of You. / My Jesus, I will live and die always united to You.[18]

These introductory words prepare hearts to receive the renewal of Christ's abiding presence.

A profound Christian mystery—complete resurrection—is highlighted by Lent's unique position in the liturgical calendar. Rooted in the lengthening days that herald earth's resurrection, *Lent* comes from the Old English for "springtime," *Lencten*, from *lengan*, "become longer." Spring's tangible earthly signs correspond to our deepest longings to let love's warmth grow our souls, and we desire spiritual disciplines that can transform our way of seeing who we are in light of God's promises; we become *expectant* ("looking fully," from *spectare* and the intensifying prefix *ex-*), as a pregnant woman is *constantly looking* for the miracle of new life. This attitude of unceasing waiting through which we enter Lent is also the mindfulness we bring to the stations of the cross. As sixteenth-century Spanish mystic John of the Cross said, "Silence is God's first language." Learning to listen to divine silence is the crux of walking the stations. Church leaders through the centuries have encouraged and adapted this practice for the simple reason that it attunes a sojourner's soul to the Word's loving wordlessness.

This exercise also treats the crippling post-postmodern dualism that spawns disembodied relationships daily. Our virtual "friends" on Facebook "like" our status updates, and if Facebook friends offend us, we can "unfriend" them with a simple click. Marshall McLuhan pointed out that as technologies extend and amplify the human body, they also numb and "amputate"; for example, the wheel "amputates" the body's feet, creating less travelling on foot plus an alienating disconnect, as walking across London Bridge is vastly different—more immediate and more connected—than crossing it in a double-decker bus.[19]

In other words, technology so distances us from physical reality that we sometimes forget we are embodied creatures. NYU anthropology professor Thomas de Zengotita echoes McLuhan, describing our culture as a "great blob of virtuality" created by the Internet, satellite cable TV, iPhones, Wiis, and Ethernets, producing the "sheer moreness" of our lives and "a spiritual numbness."[20] Poet and philosopher John O'Donohue describes this neglect of our physical selves, saying: "The body is much sinned against, even in a religion based on the Incarnation [of Christ]."[21] Or, as Roy DeLeon articulates in *Praying with the Body:* "While Christians may have one of—if not *the*—highest theology of the body among the religions of the world, they also have one of the lowest levels of embodied spiritual *practice*."[22]

By engaging us body, heart, and soul, walking the stations of the cross facilitates the authentic worship that creates real communion with Christ and with each other. It reminds us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that we worship the living Lord best with our hearts, souls, *and* bodily strength.[23] Judaism honors this divinely created integration in the concept of *nefes*, "the human person in his or her…psycho-physical totality."[24] The earliest Jewish worshippers knew the body is indispensable in worship as they shuckled, or shokeled ("shook") while reciting the Word of God, swaying side-to-side or forward-and-back, a ritual that for centuries has concentrated the worshipper's focus, sharpened awareness of the moment, deepened absorption of Scripture, and nurtured emotional openness to the Creator.

Learning to listen to divine silence is the crux of walking the stations. Church leaders through the centuries have encouraged this practice for the simple reason that it attunes a sojourner's soul to the Word's loving wordlessness.

Physically walking the stations of the cross during Lent, reflecting on God's word, we receive the gift of embodied waiting. Hebrew has many words for *wait*, each with a different nuance, as spring has not one green but many: *yachal* is "to wait in hope"; *damam* "to become silent and still" by calmly trusting in the Lord; *chakah* "to long for" with the burning passion of desperately wanting something; and *qavah* "to wait patiently and look eagerly."[25] As Scripture says: "Blessed are those who listen to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway" (Proverbs 8:34, NIV), and "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD" (Psalm 27:14, NIV).[26]

Although the third millennium's growing digital distractions may make it seem harder than ever to wait for the Lord, these diversions simply reflect

the perpetually restless nature of humanity, as the hymn "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" reminds us: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it." Walking the stations of the cross during Lent puts us squarely on the path of tending our relationship with God and transforms the physical greening of God's springtime creation into a personal invitation to accept the great promise of 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV): "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation: The old has gone, the new is here!"

Whether we journey with Franciscan monks on Jerusalem's *Via Dolorosa*, walk the stations at a local church, or proceed interiorly from station to station with a devotional book, celebrating the stations of the cross is time well spent with the God of Good News, whom Cardinal Basil Hume describes as the joy of salvation:

> Holiness involves friendship with God. God's love for us and ours for Him grows like any relationship with other people.
>
> There comes a moment, which we can never quite locate or catch, when an acquaintance becomes a friend. In a sense, the change from one to the other has been taking place over a period of time, but there comes a point when we know we can trust the other, exchange confidences, keep each other's secrets. We are friends.
>
> There has to be a moment like that in our relationship with God. He ceases to be just a Sunday acquaintance and becomes a weekday friend.[27]

Then we can experience the perpetual springtime of the heart that Flemish Beguine Hadewijch knew from cultivating her friendship with Christ: "No matter the time of year or the weather, / . . . [we find ourselves] face to face / with flowers, joy, summer, and sunshine. / . . . Winter's bitterness no longer bothers [us]."[28, 29]

NOTES

1 Benjamin Thorpe, translator, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: According to Several Original Authorities, Volume II* (London, UK: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), 6, 20-21; and Allan Metcalf, "Night and Winter," *Lingua Franca* blog in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 29, 2011, *chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2011/11/29/night-and-winter/* (accessed July 24, 2012).

2 Kate Shellnutt, "Good Friday Concludes Second Baptist's Interactive Stations of the Cross Exhibit," *Believe It or Not* blog, *www.chron.com*, April 6, 2012, *blog.chron.com/believeitornot/2012/04/good-friday-concludes-second-baptists-interactive-stations-of-the-cross-exhibit/#4271-22*, includes a slide show of the exhibit (accessed May 6, 2012); also see Second Baptist Church website, *www.second.org/woodway/passion-week-experience.aspx* (accessed May 6, 2012). On diverse approaches to the stations of the cross, including Protestant ones, see St. Peter's Anglican Church (Tallahassee, FL), "Walking the Stations of the Cross Guidebook," *www.saint-peters.net/files/8/File/Walking_the_Stations_of_the_Cross.pdf* (accessed May 7, 2012); Mark D. Roberts (Presbyterian minister), "The Stations of the Cross: Introduction," *The Stations of the Cross: A Devotional Guide for Lent and Holy Week*, *www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/series/the-stations-of-the-cross-a-devotional-guide-for-lent-and-holy-week/* (accessed May 7, 2012); and Dennis Bratcher, "The Cross as a Journey: The Stations of the Cross for Protestant Worship," *The Voice: Biblical and Theological Resources*

for Growing Christians, November 8, 2011, *www.crivoice.org/stations.html* (accessed May 7, 2012), but note it erroneously names the fourteen traditional stations of the cross as the most current.

3 George E. Gingras, translator, *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1970), 108-109. Egeria describes four pilgrimages at the end of the fourth century.

4 Tim Puet, "Stations of the Cross Date Back to the Fourth Century," *The Catholic Times*, March 8, 2009, *www.colsdioc.org/Offices/TheCatholicTimes/stationshistory/tabid/1296/Default.aspx* (accessed May 8, 2012). This paragraph refers throughout to the reliable Puet article.

5 See Eugenio Alliata, "The Itinerary of the Anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux," *Early Christian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*, March 29, 1998, *http://198.62.75.1/www1/ofm/pilgr/00PilgrHome.html* (accessed May 7, 2012). This *Itinerarium Burdigalense* dates to 333.

6 Jan van Herwaarden, *Between Saint James and Erasmus: Studies in Late-Medieval Religious Life: Devotion and Pilgrimage in the Netherlands* (Leiden, NL: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2003), 76. For well-known early sixteenth-century sculptural representations of seven stations of the cross by Adam Kraft, see "Nürnberger Kreuzweg," *Wikimedia Commons*, April 24, 2012, *commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:N%C3%BCrnberger_Kreuzweg* (accessed May 7, 2012). The sculptures on the way to the cemetery of St. John in Nuremberg, Germany, are copies of seven reliefs. The originals are in Germanische Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg.

7 van Herwaarden, *Between Saint James and Erasmus*, 75, 27.

8 Denis Searby, translator, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden: Volume II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 126 (from Chapter 7, "A Vision of the Crucifixion").

9 Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *A Little Daily Wisdom: Christian Women Mystics* (Paraclete Press, 2008), 121.

10 van Herwaarden, *Between Saint James and Erasmus*, 75.

11 Ibid., 83. Also see *Urbis Hierosolymae* (*City of Jerusalem*) in Christian Adrichem, *Theatrum Terræ Sanctæ et Biblicarum Historiarum* (Cologne, Germany: Officina Birckmannica for Arnold Mylius, 1584 manuscript).

12 Dee Dyas quoted in van Herwaarden, 76. Also see Dee Dyas, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature, 700-1500* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2005).

13 Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.vi.11, translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 43.

14 Megan McKenna, *The New Stations of the Cross* (New York: Image Books, 2003), viii. This book also serves as a splendid devotional, with scriptural meditations for the stations of the cross. Also see "Way of the Cross," *Office of the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff*, *www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/documents/index_via-crucis_en.html* (accessed May 8, 2012).

15 Several paragraphs of this article are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from the introduction of my book *Following Christ: A Lenten Reader to Stretch Your Soul* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010). This material is reprinted with permission from Paraclete Press. John Paul II is quoted from his "Apostolic Letter" (Chapter II, Dies Christi, 22), *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, May 31, 1998, *www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini_en.html* (accessed May 7, 2012).

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25 Jaeson Ma, *The Blueprint: A Revolutionary Plan to Plant Missional Communities on Campus* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007), 78-79.

26 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. *www.zondervan.com* The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

27 Cardinal Basil Hume, *To Be a Pilgrim: A Spiritual Notebook* (London, UK: SPCK, 2000), 109. For his reflections on the passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, read *The Mystery of the Cross* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2000).

28 Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *A Little Daily Wisdom: Christian Women Mystics* (Paraclete Press, 2008), 287-288.

29 For further information on the traditional stations, see David Foster, "Other Devotions: The Stations of the Cross" (Chapter IX), in *The Downside Prayerbook* (London, UK: Burns & Oates, 2003), 169 ff.; John L. Peterson, *Walk in Jerusalem: Stations of the Cross* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998); Katerina Katsarka Whitley, *Walking the Way of Sorrows: Stations of the Cross* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2003); and Henri J. M. Nouwen. *Walk with Jesus: Stations of the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990). For further information on biblically-based stations, see Amy Welborn and Michael Dubruiel, *John Paul II's Biblical Way of the Cross* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009).

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Keeping Vigil

BY HEATHER HUGHES

The season of Lent, and especially Holy Week, are traditional times for keeping vigil—an attentive openness to the work of God in our lives and in our world. But what does it mean to keep vigil today, when most of us no longer adhere to the strict discipline of late night prayer?

Developing a proper attitude toward the penitential practices of Lent can be challenging. We are tempted to mistreat them either as ends in themselves or as tools for kicking our bad habits. But if Lent is a preparation for God's saving grace in Easter, it must be about more than moderating our use of food or coffee or Facebook, taking on a new prayer schedule, or giving alms. We do not fast in order to overcome sinful habits through discipline (though that may be a good and inherent by-product of our fast), or examine our conscience to feel bad enough about ourselves, or tithe to earn something from God. Rather, we undertake these practices in order to more fully embody the fact that "if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection" (Romans 6:5, NAB).[1] In other words, Lenten practices prepare us for and express what we must give to God in order to be united with Christ: namely, our entire lives. They serve to awaken us to the reality of Easter, which can only be entered through Good Friday.

It makes sense, then, that the season of Lent, and especially Holy Week, are traditional times for keeping vigil—an attentive openness to the work of God in our lives and in our world. The spiritual alertness we pursue in keeping vigil is invaluable during this season of penitential preparation for Easter. But what does it mean to keep vigil today, when most of us no longer adhere to the strict discipline of late night prayer? What are some practices that can help us to become spiritually awake, to thoughtfully reflect on and anticipate God's coming?

When we hear the word "vigil," several seemingly disjointed images may come to mind: late night prayer, soldiers watching in the dark, or a family mourning loss. All of these associations are appropriate, because the word is multifaceted. It comes from the Latin *vigilia*, originally for a soldier's night watch, but adopted by early Christians for a nighttime *synaxis*, or worship meeting. Now we most often hear the word referring to the night office of the Liturgy of the Hours, evening worship the night before a religious celebration, or the wake after a loved one's death.

It is interesting that "either on account of the secrecy of their meetings, or because of some mystical idea which made the middle of the night the hour *par excellence* for prayer…the Christians chose the night time for their *synaxes*, and of all other nights, preferably the Sabbath."[2] There's something about being awake when we should be sleeping that enhances awareness. Think of what it's like to wake suddenly in the middle of the night—when your own room seems strange in the dark, or when you are camping outdoors. When the light, activity, and background noise of the day are gone, our senses become alert to things we otherwise would not notice. Everything is suddenly alien: the rustling of nocturnal animals, the creaking of trees, even our friends turning over in their sleeping bags become loud signals of a mysterious world—a world beyond our understanding and control. This hyper-awareness is essential to keeping vigil; it begins with our immediate surroundings, but can extend to God's action in the world and even the condition of our own souls.

In a haunting meditation on his experience of watching for wildfires one hot summer night in the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton makes the link between the enhanced sensory awareness of those on vigil and their enhanced spiritual awareness: "The fire watch is an examination of conscience in which your task as watchman suddenly appears in its true light: a pretext devised by God to isolate you, and to search your soul with lamps and questions, in the heart of darkness."[3] Merton is confronted with the immediacy of God's transcendent mystery; the darkness and isolation of his vigil provide an experience much like Job's encounter with God's voice in the whirlwind:

> God, my God, God Whom I meet in darkness, with You it is always the same thing! Always the same question that nobody knows how to answer!
>
> I have prayed to you in the daytime with thoughts and reasons, and in the nighttime You have confronted me, scattering thought and reason. I have come to You in the morning with light and with desires, and You have descended upon me, with great gentleness, with most forbearing silence, in this inexplicable night, dispersing light, defeating all desire.[4]

In his wakefulness Merton perceives more of the world around him, but also the quality of his own soul. Like Job, he learns that his questions, doubts, and accusations do not begin to confront the unfathomable enormity of God's reality.

This is what we hope to accomplish through the spiritual discipline of keeping vigil: an encounter with the living God, an increased sensitivity to his presence in our lives and in the world, and a better understanding of who we are in light of this.

Like the practice of fasting, keeping vigil engages our natural, physical response to extreme states of love, sorrow, compunction, fear, or awe. Our basic needs for food and sleep are not diminished, but are overshadowed and contextualized by the significance of birth, illness, or death—something so demanding that we "keep watch" in love.

It is difficult to express the tremendous sensitivity which arises when we are confronted with the reality of life and death. We are never so fully engaged with what it means to be human—the odd double vision of our unimaginable value and significance as those who bear God's image, with our utter insignificance apart from God. We are never so aware of our own limitation and dependence, which is why these important times become a battleground between compassion and pity, and ultimately between faith and nihilism. Compassion leads us to keep vigil with those who suffer and to suffer with them; pity demands that we end our loved ones' and our own suffering by the swiftest and easiest means at hand—which may start in love, but ends in the cruelty of absence or "solutions" to suffering like euthanasia or abortion. In faith we can wait with hope; otherwise these agonizing vigils seem void of meaning—pain to no purpose, accomplishing nothing.

Keeping vigil engages our natural, physical response to extreme states of love, sorrow, compunction, fear, or awe. Our basic need of sleep is not diminished, but is overshadowed by something so demanding that we "keep watch" in love.

My own associations with keeping vigil have evolved over the years from imaginative images of watchtowers and beacon fires (informed by a youth spent reading too many fantasy novels) to the far more concrete memories of waiting for the birth and the death of loved ones.

Sitting in a hospital room waiting for a loved one's death can seem surreal, but for me such times of vigil have been *more* real than day-to-day life. Being with my grandmother during her last days, the terrible reality of death demanded the challenging discipline of being fully present with someone I love while she was in pain. Watching her struggle with the reality of her situation—asking questions no one could answer, filled with fear and hope—I realized that there was nothing I could do for her; I could not end her pain or give her more life. I was completely helpless to do anything other than pray and be near her. Yet this "doing nothing" was one of the hardest things I have ever done. Sitting in apparent stillness, I was whirring through a cycle of desires to ease, to end, to ignore, to run from her suffering. It is easy to say "you can't know until you've been there," but I think that we can—indeed, that we are called to do this by remembering Christ's crucifixion.

The only thing I could do for my grandmother is exactly what Christ desired from his disciples in Gethsemane. Knowing what he was going suffer, Christ asked only that his disciples remain with him in the night, keep watch, and pray. Their response reveals how difficult such a vigil can be. Even when we will ourselves to stay alert and keep watch for what God's saving work actually looks like, apart from how we wish it to be (something which certainly wouldn't involve Gethsemane, Golgotha, Judas, or Pilate), we find ourselves "sleeping from grief" with the disciples (Luke 22:45, NAB). Imagining the disciples' confusion, fear, and weakness as they escaped from Christ's agony into the oblivion of sleep brings to mind the Pauline warning to "not sleep as the rest do, but…stay alert and sober" (1Thessalonians 5:6). It is far easier to escape in ignorance, or even to lop a soldier's ear off with Peter, than to watch and wait in the dark with Christ as he works for our good in ways we will never fully understand.

Especially during the penitential seasons of the church year, this is exactly what we are called to do. Keeping vigil is an act of prayer and communion with God which helps us to know him, and thus ourselves. This increased awareness then aids us to rightly discern the what, when, where, and how of future action. (The gruff Mad Eye Moody in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series does not refrain "CONSTANT VIGILENCE" in order to prevent those working for good from taking action; rather, his tragicomical warnings promote their active preparation for right action against evil.)

By keeping vigil we become aware of our surroundings—God's good, yet fallen creation. We get to know who we are and how we fit into the divine plan. Beyond this, we begin to discern how we might enter more deeply into God's work in our own souls and the world around us. In many ways, keeping vigil during Lent is our entrance into Gethsemane. With Christ, we have the agony of apprehending, wrestling with, and accepting God's saving will for the world and for our individual lives. We are given the chance to become fully awake to a world that requires Golgotha, but is also given the empty tomb.

What are some ways to wake up to these truths this Lenten season? Let me suggest some corporate penitential practices of the Church that can guide us. Faithful Christians will discover personal ways to keep vigil as well; while engaging the universal disciplines of the Church, they will also seek God in creative ways that reflect how they are wired as individuals.

First, participating in the Church's rich tradition of *corporate prayers, fasting, and almsgiving* during Lent can help us keep vigil. For instance, when we abstain from meat on Fridays, pray the Liturgy of the Hours, reflect on the Stations of the Cross, or attend Holy Week services, we are joining in a sacrifice being made by other Christians all over the world, and this can awaken us to the corporate reality of the Church. This participation grants significance to individuals, rather than reducing it. Becoming invested in the Church through alms, prayer, and fasting heightens our awareness of God's presence in our lives, because we are aware of having something at stake in God's will.

My favorite poet, Gerard Manly Hopkins, famously expressed this truth to his friend Robert Bridges who had written Hopkins asking how to believe. The poet responded not with an ornate theological treatise (of which he was fully capable), but a terse, two-word letter: "Give alms." There is no better way to increase our awareness of and concern for God's action than to literally invest in the kingdom of God. During Lent especially, we should not just seek for signs of God's love, but willingly become its expression through charitable acts—that is, not random handouts, but thoughtful expressions of the theological virtue. If there is something that we think "Christians should be doing," let us not wait for a purity of motives or an opportunity to fall in our lap before becoming a sign of God's love ourselves. We can find an organization doing good and important work, and increase our tithe through them or volunteer our time. In doing so, we keep vigil for an increased awareness of God in the world; since God is present in every act of charity, we are sure to find him there.

Faithful Christians will discover personal ways to keep vigil as well; while engaging in the universal practices of the Church, they will also seek God in creative ways that reflect how they are wired as individuals.

Another ancient practice that helps us keep vigil is *the examination of conscience*—that is, reviewing our thoughts and actions with the goal of understanding our motivations and helping us to avoid sin and grow in

virtue. Honestly facing ourselves in this way can be grueling. The Sacrament of Confession or Reconciliation forces some to do it, because confessing our sins requires that we know what they are. It is noteworthy that Catholic and Orthodox Christians schedule more opportunities for Confession during Lent than the rest of the year, and many traditions focus in worship services on the examination of conscience and participation in God's forgiveness in preparation for Easter. Clearly, this is a way during the season of Lent to keep vigil for God in our own hearts.

Ideally, we should examine our consciences when we pray every evening. However, when one is taking on this practice for the first time that is a sizeable goal. We might start by setting aside some time before attending Church each Sunday to reflect on the week, prayerfully reading through the Ten Commandments to consider how we have conformed ourselves to their instruction or failed to do so. Many useful tools in books or online can guide our examination of conscience; some are patterned after biblical lists of character traits and commandments, and others employ historic resources like the seven capital vices tradition.

The goal in all of this soul-searching is what John Climacus in the seventh century calls "the blessed joy-grief of holy compunction."[5] We examine our consciences so that we can more accurately repent and more fully embrace God's graceful forgiveness. An honest examination prevents us from thinking that we are bargaining with God—trying to feel bad enough about our sins to make God forgive us—and refocuses our attention on God's work in us. Rather than bogging us down in self-loathing, it prepares us to receive forgiveness and avoid sin in the future.

In the sixth century Pope Gregory the Great urges believers to be alert to temptation as the warhorse in Job 39:25 is alert to the looming battle.

> He [the warhorse] overcomes in every contest whatsoever, because before the contest he prepares his mind for the contest. For to 'smell the battle afar off,' is so to foresee in thought misfortunes when yet far distant, that they may not, by being unexpected, be able to overcome him. Paul was admonishing his disciples to smell this battle afar off, when he was saying, *Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith, prove your own selves* [2 Corinthians 13:5]. As if he were openly charging them, saying, Call to mind the contests of persecutions, and considering the inmost and secret thoughts of your hearts, discover, what ye are able to continue in the midst of sufferings. Holy men smell this battle from afar, when dwelling even in the peace of the Church Universal….[6]

We are to be spiritually vigilant in our consciences in the same way that warhorses show heightened vigilance in battle. The spiritual enemies that beset us, Gregory warns, are pride, the seven capital vices (vainglory, envy, sadness or *acedia*, anger, avarice, gluttony, and lust), and a host of vices that

follow their lead. Through the examination of conscience we can come to know our secret thoughts and motivations and be better prepared to resist the distorted thinking and desires of the vices. We learn to anticipate spiritual trouble from far off and to prepare ourselves for the battle with temptation and sin.

A final ancient practice that can help us keep vigil this Lent is *lectio divina*, or divine reading. Originally referring to the Scripture read aloud during the liturgy, *lectio divina* has come to refer to the personal practice of reading short passages from the Bible meditatively and repetitively. Guigo the Carthusian (d. 1188) advises reading the same passage four times with the different intentions of *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditating), *oratio* (praying), and *contemplatio* (contemplating). *The Benedictine Handbook* explains the function of this repetition:

> Lectio is at the service of prayer and goes beyond the act of merely absorbing the contents of a page…. What is read must first be digested and assimilated through a process of quiet repetition, in which we aim to become progressively attuned to its subtle echoes in the heart. The text thus serves as a mirror that brings inner realities to consciousness. This heightened awareness exposes our need for divine help and readily leads to prayer.[7]

As a form of vigilant prayer, *lectio divina* draws us into a spiritual awareness of the truths of Scripture rather than a scholarly study of its texts.

> When we open the sacred book we also open ourselves; we let ourselves become vulnerable—willing to be pierced by God's two-edged sword. This is what St. Benedict refers to as compunction, allowing ourselves to experience the double dynamic of every genuine encounter with God: the growing awareness of our urgent need for forgiveness and healing on the one hand and, on the other, a more profound confidence in God's superabundant mercy.[8]

This practice is suited for any time of the church year, but it is incredibly valuable during the penitential seasons. This explains why the *Rule of St. Benedict* provides for each individual to read books during Lent (rather than the usual practice of listening to them read communally).

Lectio divina can take a lot of time. To get started, we might space the repetitive reading through a day, set aside time each morning or evening, or read a couple times each week during Lent. "In lectio the intention is affective not cognitive, it is a work of a heart that desires to make contact with God and, thereby, to reform our lives"[9]; and so, even more than when we study Scripture, our surroundings are important. As a form of keeping vigil, *lectio divina* demands that we eliminate distractions in order to perceive the work and will of God. I find it difficult to focus on prayer when my room is a disaster or there are people around who are not participating. We can prepare

for *lectio divinia* by cleaning up our space, incorporating our senses by lighting a candle or studying an icon, and kneeling while we read. Also, it is important to read the Scripture passage aloud: "Lectio is like reading poetry; the sound of the words creates interior assonances, which in turn trigger intuitive connections which lodge more effectively in the memory."[10]

The ancient practices of the Church are certain to aid us in keeping vigil during Lent, but we should also pursue an increased awareness of God's work in our lives and the world through personal acts of devotion suited to our individual personalities.

For example, writer Jennifer Fulwiler and her family benefit greatly from a once-a-week Lenten fast from artificial light. They have found that this intentional limitation teaches them humility by restricting their schedules, increases their intentionality throughout the day, makes them less dependent on television and the Internet, reduces stress, and most importantly, in her words,

> It made us viscerally aware of our need for God's providence. Darkness can be scary when you can't control it. I have rarely felt more powerless than when I would watch the last rays of sun disappear from the sky, knowing that I would be left in darkness that I could not banish at will. Electric light gives us the illusion of having control over our lives, and I found going without it to be a stunning reminder of our littleness and powerlessness in the grand scheme of things.[11]

Like Thomas Merton's vigil in "Fire Watch," a fast from artificial light can remove the distractions and defenses that get between us and the living God, exposing us so that we can truly encounter God in the unimpeded darkness of night.

For artist Paul Soupiset, the practice of daily sketching is a fruitful discipline during Lent. His sketches should inspire others to explore their creative gifts this Lenten season.[12] This can be a way to keep vigil—to become more aware of who we are created to be, and of the God who created us. I am no illustrator, but I do find that writing increases my sensitivity to truth and even to God's presence. This Lent, I plan on responding to lectionary readings by writing short reflections, poems, or prayers as a way to keep vigil.

Other personal, creative disciplines do not require artistic talent. I have friends who keep vigil by praying the rosary during their morning run, or by going on prayer walks—seeking to be awakened to the necessity of intercessory prayer as they pass by their neighbors and travel through their cities.

Any Lenten vigil must start with the practices universal to a living faith: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Participating in ancient Christian practices of corporate prayer, donation of time and money, examination of conscience,

or *lectio divina* can increase our attentive openness to the work of God in our lives and in our world. But it is important to remember that popular devotions as ancient as *lectio divina* were developed by faithful Christians like Jennifer Fulwiler, Paul Soupiset, you, and me. So I think we have permission to be creative in keeping vigil in the Lenten season—as long as we are truly seeking to enter into Gethsemane and keep vigil with Christ, watching, praying, and becoming spiritually awake to the reality of the Crucifixion as our only path to the Resurrection.

NOTES

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6 St. Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job (Moralia in Job),* XXXI.71 (Oxford, UK: John Henry Parker, 1844), *www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoralia/Book31.html* (accessed December 10, 2012).

7 Michael Casey, OCSO, "The Art of *Lectio Divina*," *The Benedictine Handbook* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 106-109, here citing 106.

8 Ibid., 108.

9 Ibid,. 107.

10 Ibid.

11 Jennifer Fulwiler, "8 Reasons to Turn Out the Lights during Lent," *National Catholic Register* (February 15, 2012), *www.ncregister.com/blog/jennifer-fulwiler/8-reasons-to-turn-out-the-lights-during-lent* (accessed December 10, 2012).

11 For his watercolor sketches from Lent 2007, see *Lentenblog: Moleskin Sketches by Paul Soupiset, paulsoupiset.com/lentenblog_microgallery/index.html* (accessed December 10, 2012).

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Lessons from a Donkey

BY ALAN R. RUDNICK

What needs to be untied in our lives, so that we can praise and honor God? When it is untied and let go, nothing can stop the love of God and neighbor that is inside of us. Palm Sunday is the day when we, like Jesus' animal companion, are set loose to be used for the work of God.

When I was a boy, my church distributed huge palm branches to the children who processed down the center aisle at the beginning of the service. I remember it being a celebration filled with excitement and joy. As a seven-year-old, I was excited that we could walk down the aisle during worship waving a tree branch around and shout aloud without being reprimanded by parents. It was the only time in church that we were allowed to shout, yell, and jump. Through the years my pastor preached different themes on Palm Sunday, focusing on the children, the disciples, the palm branches, the road to Jerusalem, or the crowd's excitement. However, there was never a focus on the donkey that Jesus rides or what the donkey could teach us.

One Palm Sunday scripture, Luke 19:28-40, is not like the others, and in its peculiarity it is truly worth a second, third, or even a fourth look. Luke paints the picture of Jesus before his death with specific details. Christ is walking up to the city mount; it is quite a climb up to Jerusalem, which sits about 3800 feet above sea level. Earlier the evangelist has written that Jesus "set his face towards Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51), a prophetic phrase which means that Jesus' mission was with the Holy City. Now Jesus has reached the edge of Jerusalem and must face his last meal with his friends, betrayal, trial, punishment, and finally death. So, how is he welcomed into the city? With joy, celebration, and anticipation. How ironic it is that some people who welcome Jesus as King would be among those who shout Jesus to his death.

Jesus instructs two unnamed disciplines to go into the village ahead and look for a colt (John 12:14 states that this animal is a donkey). Who were these two disciples—John and James, or Peter and Matthew—and why are they unnamed? Usually when disciples do something significant in the Gospels, they are mentioned by name. Apparently Luke deems their assignment—to find an animal for Jesus to ride—to be of little importance. I have often wondered if these two disciples sensed the lowliness of their mission. I imagine them saying to one another:

> "Jesus is always sending us on 'go-for' missions—go for this or go for that. Remember when he sent us to get some fish and bread one time? Oh, then there was the time he wanted us to produce a coin with Caesar's face on it."
>
> "Yeah I remember that. And there was that time at a wedding when we had to get those heavy jugs of water, and then Jesus turned the water into wine."
>
> "Why is Jesus always doing the exciting work while we do the dirty work?"
>
> "How come we can't be like Peter, and get to do the cool stuff like walk on water!"

Jesus wanted to let his disciples know that he was not sending them on a "go-for" mission—the equivalent of a modern day Starbuck's run. Little did these two disciples know that their task was critical to the Palm Sunday event. They are to retrieve a donkey, which is perhaps the most overlooked character in the story. Unlike Baalam's donkey in the Old Testament, this one does not speak nor impart some divine wisdom.

This donkey was born for Jesus' wonderful work. It had not been used or ridden by anyone else. This donkey was tied up so that it could not wander away or be taken by someone else. It was waiting for Jesus to climb on to ride.

The colt (*polos*) has royal associations. Jesus' riding the donkey echoes this regal arrival in Zechariah's prophecy:

> Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
> Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
> Lo, your king comes to you,
> triumphant and victorious is he;
> humble and riding on a donkey,
> on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
>
> *Zechariah 9:9*

Nevertheless, to modern readers the donkey seems to be an unlikely and surprising device for Jesus' use. That is because we see donkeys primarily as work animals capable of carrying heavy loads, or as docile creatures used for children's rides, but certainly not as the animals of choice to transport triumphant kings.† In the ancient world, however, donkeys were used for ceremonial purposes. Whereas horses were symbols of war, donkeys were symbols of peace and often used to enact treaties.

There is more significance to the donkey in this story. Earlier I noted the donkey was tied up and had to be untied by the disciples. In five verses in Luke 19 the word "tied" or some form of it is mentioned. The detail is important. This donkey was created for a purpose and was meant for Jesus. It was tied; it needed to be untied. Why does Luke emphasize this several times? There is an insight here.

We are often tied aren't we? We are tied down by many things—by guilt, anxiety, and concern. Some of us are tied down with the need to forgive, but we cannot bring ourselves to do it. Others are tied down to obsessions or chemical dependence. We may be tied down to our smartphones and tablets, and be unable to put those devices down. Some need to let go and not be afraid to show love, peace, faith, joy, or the gospel to others. As Christians, we need to be untied from what weighs us down. Palm Sunday is not just a celebration of Christ as King, but a celebration of Jesus as our liberator from dependencies and afflictions. We need to be free to experience Jesus in our lives. We are meant to ride with Jesus: to follow him on his journey to Jerusalem, the Holy City, the city where God dwells. We were created with a purpose: to love God and love each other. As a pastor, I witness every day the real life troubles that bind people to dysfunction and they are too scared to untie themselves from the chains of fear.

We cannot fully commit to God when we are tied. We must be released. We must surrender our burdens and our weights to God, much like the owner who surrendered his donkey to the two disciples. By relinquishing our own burdens, we can praise and worship God freely. We can praise him just like those who praised Jesus with palms and coats, saying:

> Blessed is the king
> who comes in the name of Lord!
> Peace in heaven
> and glory [to God] in the highest heaven.
>
> *Luke 19:38*

When we are untied, we can live a life of faith free from the pressure of trying to hold things up. When we are free, we can praise God without any hindrance. It is a spirit of relinquishment, of letting go of that which

weighs us down so mightily, that which we fight against because we are so used to fighting it.

Palm Sunday is an occasion when we can ask ourselves, "What is it that needs to be untied in my life, so that I can praise and honor God?" When it is untied and let go, nothing can stop the love of God and neighbor that is inside of us. It is in our nature to praise God, as it is in all things; even the very rocks of the earth could proclaim the glory and power of God (Luke 19:40).

Palm Sunday is the day when we, like Jesus' animal companion, are untied and set loose to be used for the work of God. Palm Sunday frees us to experience Holy Week in way that does not hold us from truly singing loud "Hosannas" and "Alleluias" on Easter morning. Let us be untied to share in the Palm Sunday event so that we may unite with the One who was tied on a cross to be our savior.

NOTE

† The donkey is just one of the unlikely instruments of divine praise in this story, though (as I have said) it is the most neglected one. John 12:13 mentions the palm branches waved by the crowd, which gives Palm Sunday its name in the Church calendar. Luke describes the people laying their coats down on the road for Jesus (Luke 19:36), and Mark and Matthew has them spreading their coats and leafy branches on the pathway (Mark 11:8; Matthew 21:8). When some Pharisees complain about the people's exuberance, Jesus explains "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (Luke 19:40). John Wesley got it exactly right in his commentary on this verse: "That is, God would raise up some still more unlikely instruments to declare his praise." (*John Wesley's Notes on the Bible*, Luke 19:40)

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Remember Our Dust

BY ELIZABETH EVANS HAGAN

Lent is an invitation to live with the dust of our humanity—of broken relationships, of spiritual doubts, of fears about the future—to not spend all our energy trying to hide it or rid ourselves of it, but to invite dust into our homes for this season and see what we can learn.

After a recent vacation, I gleefully walked in the door of my house, so excited to be home after a long trip. I dreamed of clean clothes, putting my feet up on the coffee table, and spending the night relaxing on our comfy couch. First thing, I took my shoes off my tired feet and went straight for the refrigerator to look for a cold drink. Within seconds, though, I found the bottom of my white socks quickly turning a dark shade of grey. As my husband and I began to survey the landscape, from the stove top in the kitchen, to the bathroom countertops, to the filth on the hardwood floors, it was clear: dust was everywhere. No corner, nook, or cranny was untouched from this unwanted film. We clearly had a mess on our hands, literally. This situation was not what my husband and I expected when we had exclaimed to each other just a few hours earlier on the plane, "I can't wait to get home."

We should not have been surprised, though. Before we left, we had handed over the keys to our home and more money than I would have liked to a contractor with plans to turn our basement into an in-law suite. "We'll be doing demolition while you're gone, pulling down the dry wall and pulling up the floors," he had told us. I spent the week prior to vacation making preparations for his arrival, removing boxes we had not touched in years from the big open space. So, of course, returning home, I expected change. I expected a mess, even. But, in the basement—not upstairs too!

Being new to the home improvement world, I had no idea what everyone who has lived in a construction zone knows to be true: there is no such

thing as dust that can be contained. When demolition happens in one part of your house, the rest of your house is affected too. This is especially true if you have central heat or air and want to not freeze or burn up during the process. By turning on the heating/air conditioning unit—even if you have vent covers in the construction zone—you will blow dust throughout your entire house. For as long as your construction progress lasts, so does your relationship with dust. And in our case it lasted sixty days.

Several years ago I attended a lectionary planning retreat for clergy. We discussed theme ideas for upcoming liturgical seasons with hopes of improving the creativity in one another's preaching. When we got to Lent, a presenter was energized by the theme of "Remember Your Dust"—playing off of the phrase in Ash Wednesday services: "remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return." She explained it might be woven into narrative-based preaching, drawing upon characters from the lectionary readings for Lent such as Moses, David, Peter, and of course Jesus. She suggested the theme would encourage our congregation to remember their sinfulness without hitting them over the head with it. Her enthusiasm was contagious. Most of my colleagues were ready to borrow her idea.

But I wasn't so sure. Yes, of course, there is that whole "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" thing, but wouldn't it be better to do something else—like one of those variations on the "seven deadly sins," or "journeying with Jesus to the cross," or the traditional "last seven words of Jesus" themes? How would "remembering our dust" serve any purpose during Lent? That year for Lent, I went my own way and preached through gospel lections and exhorted my congregation to greater discipleship practices like prayer, fasting, sacrificial giving, and the like. Congregation members came up regularly and asked, "How long till we get to Easter?"—which is another way of saying, "We don't get it, Pastor!" Looking back now, I realize that talking about our relationship with dust is not a bad thing. Maybe, just maybe, this is what we need to hear more about during the Lenten season.

It is something we all have experience with—the dust of our lives. We miss the mark of God's best for us when we believe the illusion that our dustiness is only in part of us. Our lives are not in fact as shiny clean as we like to think they are. Our lives are not free of irritants as much as we like to think they are. Our lives are not ours to control as much as we like to think they are. Sometimes our dust literally takes over our whole lives, like it does when we redo our homes. Spiritually, we cannot escape it.

Maybe we need to do a better job of telling this story. Not that we are sinners in the hands of an angry God—as some of us have been taught in our upbringings. Not that Lent calls us into a lifestyle of "doing better" as some preachers are tempted to offer up every year. And not that Lent is

about engaging in some special discipline like giving up television or chocolate that makes us better Christians than all the rest.

Rather, Lent is an invitation to live honestly with our dust—to not spend all our energy trying to hide it, but to acknowledge the dust in our homes for this season and see what we can learn.

Such a relationship with Lent must begin with those of us who are pastors. If we expect our congregations to "remember their dust," we must first be leaders who are willing to remember ours as well.

I recently spoke to a small group Bible study in a different city than the one in which I pastor. All the members of this small group were members of the same church, and the group was facilitated by a lay leader who was not on staff at the church. It seemed a good time for honesty about their church experience, especially with my coming in as an outsider. As I began to ask questions about what types of ministries and programs this group needed to feel more supported in their faith journey, it was clear: all said they needed to see more authenticity from the pulpit. No, not more classes on this or that. Not more opportunities for mission trips. And not even more lively music in worship.

Rather, "We need to know that pastors struggle too," they said. "We need to know that a pastor's journey includes times of grief, doubt, questions, and reflection that has nothing to do with the next sermon."

Being in the clergy family myself, I was a bit taken aback by their words. Is this what most congregation members feel about their pastor? Do they not know that we struggle? Do they not know that there are days when we wake up on Sunday morning with feelings of complete unworthiness to stand in the pulpit? Do they not know that our lives are filled with as much dust of our humanity—of broken relationships, of spiritual doubts, of fears about the future—as theirs?

"Why do you think that is?" I asked.

"Because it would help us feel like we could be the kind of Christian who makes mistakes and feels lost more times than not. It would help us feel less lonely in the pews on Sunday mornings."

As I later reflected on these words and talked with others about them, I realized that this was not an isolated experience. So many worshippers feel the same way and are longing for their pastors to give them permission to be real, to be a little dustier than they are used to being in church.

So, if this is true, what a great time it is this Lent for us to make plans to remember our dust; to take real Sabbath from our ministerial titles, robes, and collars. I know one pastor of a big steeple church, for example, who asked her church leadership for the entire season of Lent off because she knew how much she needed soul rest. And to her surprise, the answer was yes.

Now, not all of us may get such a gift, but we can live into Lent. To rest in the knowledge of God's love for us no matter what mistakes we have made. To allow God's blessings, which have no correlation to how successful we have been, to flow into us. To practice Lent this year by taking time to breathe, take a step back from our successes and failures, and to remember our dust.

In doing so, we might just find we have greater acceptance for our dwelling place, its dust and all.

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The Why and How of Fasting

BY RACHEL MARIE STONE

Is fasting just a spiritualized form of self-denial, or is it essential to our discipleship? The theological reflections and cookbook reviewed here suggest fasting holds the promise of connecting us more deeply to God and to that which God cares about deeply.

Fasting seems so countercultural—for what could be less North American than voluntarily going without food? On the other hand, about forty-five million Americans each year adopt some form of dieting plan, and some of those diets, like Rick Warren's *The Daniel Plan* and Don Colbert's *Get Healthy Through Detox and Fasting*, claim to provide spiritual as well as physical benefits through their supposedly biblical patterns of fasting. Is fasting just a spiritualized form of self-denial—a not altogether worthless exercise in restraining our excessive consumption, but relatively unimportant to contemporary Christian life? Or is fasting more essential to our discipleship, holding the promise of connecting us more deeply to God and to that which God cares about deeply?

According to Kent D. Berghuis in *Christian Fasting: A Theological Approach* (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 2007, 308 pp., $19.95), fasting is never simply about physical health because in Scripture it is about many other things, such as repentance, humility, and holiness. Our fasting, he writes, should always be "centered on Christ" and "remember the corporate nature of the believer's community" (p. xi). Berghuis' project—an "integrative theology of fasting from an evangelical Christian perspective" (p. x)—provides a wide-ranging biblical, historical, and theological examination of fasting from ancient Judaism through the New Testament and Patristic Eras to contemporary times. Because the volume is essentially his doctoral thesis with minimal edits, it is, unfortunately, less than accessible to the general reader. Still, many of his insights—and his updated translation of the two

sermons *About Fasting* (Sermons 1 and 2) by St. Basil the Great—make the volume indispensable for those with a serious interest in the Christian tradition of fasting.

Scot McKnight's *Fasting* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009, 208 pp., $12.99) also places the ancient spiritual practice into biblical, historical, and theological contexts, but in a more engaging and highly accessible style. Berghuis might take exception to some of McKnight's simplifications, but the heart of McKnight's thinking on fasting can be expressed by blending the first and last lines of the book: "Fasting is a person's whole-body, natural response to life's sacred moments" (p. xvi); "[it] is being with God and on God's side in the midst of [those moments]" (p. 169).

McKnight proposes that biblical and historically Christian patterns of fasting have an A→B→C structure, where "A" is a sacred moment (such as death, sin, or fear) that prompts the fasting, "B" is the act of fasting, and "C" represents the expected results of fasting (such as life, forgiveness, or hope). His is a *responsive* view of fasting; in other words, the fast is not initiated solely to obtain a desired result, but instead springs from a "natural" response to serious happenings. He notes, for instance, that during times of personal illness, at the death of a loved one, or when we are depressed by a national catastrophe, the desire to eat simply disappears.

To properly understand fasting, McKnight holds, Christians need a healthier body image. By this he does not mean that we need to feel proud of how we look but that we need an embodied spirituality—to understand being the *Eikon* of God in the world entails our whole beings—an "*organic unity* of heart and mind and soul and spirit and body" (p. 4). Until we understand this unity, it will be difficult for us to practice fasting rightly. A "unified perception of body, soul, spirit and mind creates a spirituality that includes the body. For this kind of body image, fasting is natural" (p. 11). Fasting, then, is the body expressing what the entire person yearns for: healing, wisdom, courage.

McKnight is inviting us to rethink fasting in the same way that other writers have urged us to rethink prayer: these practices are less about getting God to do things for us, and more about aligning ourselves fully with what God is doing in the world. Fasting, in particular, is not a display to God of how serious we are in requesting something from God or doing something for God, but rather is a natural response to grieving over what God grieves for. An example is the prophetic call to fasting in Isaiah 58:6-7, where fasting is a response to the presence of injustice and the condition of the poor. When we fast in response to grave issues of injustice, we suffer in solidarity with those who suffer—note that God desired the people to "share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your house" (Isaiah 58:7a)—and we enter more fully into God's perspective on their suffering.

Fasting in the primary sense, according to McKnight, is abstention from all foods. That is, it is not just refraining from certain foods (as in certain

liturgical fasting), nor is it abstaining from other goods, such as television, books, or movies. The church year, of course, contains periods of feasting as well as fasting. This alternating pattern expresses our dual attention, McKnight suggests, as we live between Jesus' time on earth and in expectation of the full realization of Christ's kingdom. We move back and forth between feasting in celebration of Christ's birth, ministry, death, and resurrection, and fasting in solemn hope for God's kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven."

Lynne M. Baab points out in *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom beyond Our Appetites* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006, 152 pp., $15.00) that fasting from food can be problematic in a "diet culture," especially for women. As a woman who has struggled with an eating disorder and from obsession with a diet mentality, I can report that fasting from food inevitably triggers thoughts of weight loss. Furthermore, years of extreme dieting have rendered my stomach delicate and easily upset if I go too long without eating. So, to use Baab's words, "fasting from all food [draws] me into 'a diet place' rather than 'a God place'" (p. 27). That is why I appreciate her expanding the meaning of fasting to encompass more than just abstention from food; fasting involves "remov[ing] something habitual to experience something new," such as taking a break from listening to music in the car so as to make a space for prayer (p. 16).

This expanded definition of fasting opens the practice to those (such as pregnant or nursing women, diabetics, the elderly, and individuals with a history of eating disorders) who would be excluded from it by McKnight's narrower definition. It also reflects the changing significance of food in Western consumer culture. Food is no longer the only or even the primary thing we recognize as necessary to our existence (as it was in the Bible and through much of the Church's history, and as it still is for many people today). Babb writes, "Today we can 'feast' in ways that involve so much more than food—an all-day movie extravaganza, a TV 'feat' during the Olympics, a big shopping trip—so it makes sense to build a fasting-feasting rhythm into many more areas of life" (p. 28). For example, Lauren Winner has described in *Girl Meets God: On the Path to a Spiritual Life* being challenged to 'fast' from reading during Lent; since the consumption of books filled her lonely and bored moments, removing that source of pleasure and distraction helped her turn to God in prayer with a new sense of urgency. The emptiness we might experience during such a television or music fast, Babb suggests, can lead us to "experience fullness and hope in Jesus Christ" (p. 32). Not incidentally, fasting also "gives us the freedom to feast" (p. 141).

A major strength of Baab's book is its stories relating the experiences of Christians today who fast in varied ways. But Baab does not focus inordinately on contemporary practice; her chapters on fasting in history and in the Bible are remarkably comprehensive and accessible. She notes that early in the life of the Church, fasting "connected Christians with God's heart of compassion for those in need" (p. 57). Furthermore, early Christians did not

fast in isolation; her chapter "Fasting in Community" offers a welcome corrective to the clichéd image of solitary "super-fasters."

Given Baab's enthusiasm for moderated forms of fasting that do not entail complete abstention from food, it is unsurprising that she admires the Orthodox fasting practices. The intricate patterns of Orthodox fasting provide the backdrop for Catherine Mandell's excellent cookbook *When You Fast... Recipes for Lenten Seasons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005, 256 pp., $24.00). Fr. Thomas Hopko, Dean Emeritus of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, introduces the book with reflections that place Mandell's recipes in theological context. "Orthodox Christians, like many others, believe that their spiritual lives start with their stomach," he notes. "They believe that when peoples' eating is right their spirits can be more open to God and more attentive to all that is good, true, and beautiful in life" (p. 9). Fasting in the Orthodox tradition involves selective abstention from meat, oil, dairy, eggs, and so forth, rather than complete abstinence from eating. A cookbook for "when you fast" is not, in this tradition, oxymoronic.

Mandell's recipes are nicely illuminated by well-chosen quotes from the Bible and from Orthodox saints. They are clearly marked for the kind of fast days—e.g., a no-oil fast day, or a day that allows shellfish—for which they would be appropriate. The baked tofu with soy and ginger is good enough to convert tofu skeptics into tofu believers; less appealing is some recipes' reliance on commercial products like "lenten" (that is, dairy-free) margarine and textured vegetable protein (TVP). But Mandell's overall goal in this cookbook—to render the experience of the fast as delicious as possible—opens an interesting possibility: what if fasting itself can be a pleasurable and joyful experience? As Amy Frykholm has suggested in her essay "Fasting toward Home," the Orthodox manner of fasting may well be a "form of nourishment."[†]

Catherine Mandell's overall goal in her cookbook *When You Fast*—to render the experience of the fast as delicious as possible—opens an interesting possibility: what if fasting itself can be a pleasurable and joyful experience?

In the same essay Frykholm points out that attempting a fast (as she did) in the absence of a community that fasts is all but impossible. Thus Mandell's brother, Fr. John Hopko, who is the Rector of Saints Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Church in Terryville, CT, writes in the Afterword to *When You Fast*, "Each and every person, usually together with the other members of his or her family and, if necessary, in consultation with his or

her parish priest, needs to make an honest and prayerful decision about how he or she is going to keep the fast" (p. 248). Mandell's abundant, appealing recipes for breads and soups are, therefore, appropriate: these simple foods are essentially communal.

The community of the fast is not limited to those who participate in it, for when we fast "we must also redouble our efforts in prayer and charity," writes Fr. John Hopko (p. 249). The ultimate goal in keeping the fast is to "love your neighbor." These remarks remind me of a note I received in response to an article on *orthorexia*—a pathological obsession with "correct" eating:

> I've sat at more than one table where folk's intense predilection for certain foods destroyed whatever fellowship remained after Grace was said. A fond and lasting memory: In my tradition (Eastern Orthodox) we strive to fast from meat and other items during Lent. At a potluck following a service, a visitor brought in a huge pile of homemade fried chicken. As a newcomer myself, I was wondering how folks would react to the visitor's gift. I was impressed when the pastor helped himself to a thigh and, after smacking his lips, thanked the young man for participating in such a meaningful way.

Likewise, Fr. Hopko writes: "if we are presented with a situation where love requires us to break the fast, then we must do so" (p. 249). While fasting is a winding and varied journey, its destination is, across traditions, a greater love of God and neighbors.

NOTE

† Amy Frykholm, "Fasting toward Home," in Leslie Leyland Fields, *The Spirit of Food: Thirty-Four Writers on Feasting and Fasting toward God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 160-166, here citing 163.

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Adding In, Not Giving Up

BY ELIZABETH SANDS WISE

Many are familiar with "giving up" something for Lent. We should ask a more pertinent question: "What are we *adding in* for Lent this year?" These books help us add practices of reading, cultivating humility, praying ancient texts, and digging into Scripture to encounter Christ anew.

Many Christians, even those from less liturgical traditions, are familiar with the notion of "giving up" something for Lent. Similar to the litany of New Year's resolutions we hear recited every January—lose weight, exercise more, quit smoking—the Lenten "fast" lists often include avoiding chocolate, alcohol, cigarettes, or, for the overly zealous, all three. But we miss an opportunity during this penitential season if our Lenten practice only involves subtraction from our lives, only involves cutting out that which is bad for us. We should be asking one another come Ash Wednesday a more pertinent question: "What are you *adding in* for Lent this year?"

As the four books reviewed here demonstrate, observing Lent can take on a variety of forms—adding in practices that free us from false cares, setting time aside for reading, cultivating humility, praying through ancient texts alone or in a community, or digging into Scripture to encounter Christ anew. Lenten practices have the potential to add vitality to Christian living, deepening our awareness of Christ's journey to the cross as we follow behind him on the path.

PRACTICING HUMILITY

Benedictine oblate Paula Huston knows well the importance of *practice* on the journey of faith. In *Simplifying the Soul: Lenten Practices to Renew Your Spirit* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2011, 192 pp., $14.95), she helps readers explore how the busyness of everyday life stifles the spirit and hinders the humble heart.

Because "growth in humility…doesn't come naturally" (p. xiii), simplifying the soul requires deliberate action. Lent offers us this opportunity,

and Huston outlines daily practices to guide readers along the Lenten path toward humility.

Each daily reading opens with a quotation, the vast majority from the desert Christians, and incorporates an essay-like meditation. Huston follows with an explanation of the day's assigned practice and closes with a brief Scripture passage.

As suggested in Huston's subtitle—"Lenten practices to renew your spirit"—the book focuses on nitty-gritty practices rather than Scripture, as some readers might expect. And while the practices certainly require prayerful contemplation if they are to be helpful in 'simplifying the soul'—and indeed, the paragraph explaining each practice usually includes instruction regarding reflection as well—this is not a devotional book, nor a Bible study. It is a guide to cultivating new practices.

Huston's emphasis is on doing the hard, often inconvenient, work of nurturing humility. The practices range from sleeping on the floor to praying the daily office, from forgiving an old hurt to cutting up a credit card, from walking to the grocery store to inviting a lonely person to tea. These practices have the potential to "twitch back the curtain on sin," Huston writes, and also "give us a way to counteract life-complicating temptations" (pp. xiv-xv). At the outset, Huston encourages readers to not enter this journey lightly but rather to begin the book committed to adopting each day's practice in a thoughtful and deliberate manner. *Simplifying the Soul* invites the reader on an intentional individual retreat—a time of discipline, reflection, action, and growth in humility.

Divided into chapters based on the weeks of Lent, *Simplifying the Soul* offers six readings each week, Monday through Saturday. Walking through Lent, readers spend each week "simplifying" a different aspect of their lives, symbolically working from the outer world to the inner life. In the days between Ash Wednesday and the first Sunday of Lent, for example, Huston's practices encourage readers to simplify their living space by cleaning out a junk drawer, scrubbing out a rarely cleaned spot, giving something away, and creating a special place of prayer. In later weeks, they will simplify the use of money, the care of the body, the mind, the schedule, and relationships. During Holy Week, leading up to the Easter Triduum, Huston guides readers to simplify their prayer lives.

Though Huston ends her final chapter on Holy Thursday, in her conclusion she offers readers ideas for further meditation heading into the Easter season: "Now that we have simplified our space, our marketplace interactions, the care of our bodies, our minds, our schedules, our relationships with other people, and our prayer lives, we must finally ask ourselves about the nature of our relationship with God" (p. 157). Huston briefly outlines ongoing practices to reflect on the image of God—practicing the presence of God, for example, or spending time in nature, reading poetry, listening to music, and seeking out a spiritual director.

SEEKING A GENTLER, LESS HEROIC LENT

In contrast to Huston's Lenten focus on "doing," Emilie Griffin invites readers to embrace a thoughtful and quieter Lent. In *Small Surrenders: A Lenten Journey* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007, 249 pp., $16.99), Griffin's Lent is a season of prayer and Scripture reading, a season of reflection. "In earlier centuries, many Christians took on severe penances and forms of self-denial," she notes; "Today's Lent is gentler and less heroic in style" (p. xii).

While Griffin's introduction, "A Word about Lent," helpfully welcomes newcomers into the journey of Lent by offering important background information about the season, it also encourages even the old-timers among us to turn, once again, to the wilderness. We turn, Griffin says, in order to open ourselves to repentance and transformation: "We spend an intentional time with Jesus, entering his wilderness, walking with him, and finally, sharing his Passion. Lent is a time when we deepen our faith in a journey not of grand gestures but of small surrenders" (p. vii). Indeed, the title of the collection, *Small Surrenders*, captures Griffin's recurring theme that Lent is an opportunity for us to "gently open ourselves up to the grace of God" (p. xii).

Though each day's devotional is not assigned a particular Scripture passage, Griffin urges readers to meditate on the daily liturgical passages appointed by the Revised Common Lectionary as part of their daily practice. (These readings are available at *www.commontexts.org*.) Griffin's four-to-five page reflections work through Scriptural themes as well as contemporary applications of Lenten ideas. When discussing the "small surrender" of practicing mercy during Lent, for example, Griffin begins her reflection with a quote by a Hurricane Katrina survivor. Griffin recounts being invited to participate in a prayer service for Gulf Coast residents and the way her own life was blessed as a result of her calling to practice mercy: "I went to comfort them; but they also comforted me. I shared with them what they already knew: what Jesus says about founding our house upon the power and grace of God" (p. 145).

Each of Griffin's essays begins with a short quotation, most from recent spiritual writers like Thomas Merton, Kathleen Norris, Brennan Manning, Henri Nouwen, and C. S. Lewis, or from voices of the Old and New Testaments such as Jeremiah, Joel, Isaiah, Matthew, Luke, John, and Paul. During the Second week of Lent, readers might be surprised to be welcomed into their Lenten devotion by J. D. Salinger writing about psychoanalysis. Griffin, however, creatively—and successfully—uses character sketches in Salinger's book *Franny and Zooey* "to provide insight into the path of surrender," which is a life of prayer. "The yearning to pray is human and fundamental. Prayer is the life's blood of our religion. It refreshes and sustains us" (p. 77).

Even when Griffin offers a technical explanation for a Lenten observance she is instructive in a devotional sense. For instance, the collection includes readings for Sundays throughout Lent, and on the fourth Sunday, Griffin explains the significance of Laetare Sunday. The Latin word "laetare"

means "to be happy" and on this particular day, liturgical vestments incorporate the color rose alongside the traditional penitential color purple. "Such intertwining of death and life, sorrow and rejoicing, is always part of the Christian message," Griffin explains. "Ours is a religion of heartbreak and of celebration, a message of God's deep love for his wounded world" (p. 123).

Small Surrenders is a lovely companion piece to the biblical and liturgical themes offered in the Revised Common Lectionary and common worship services during the Lenten season. The Ash Wednesday meditation opens with a Thomas Merton quote about how Christians are converted many times in our lives—"this endless series of large and small conversions, inner revolutions, leads to our transformation in Christ" (p. 3)—which allows Griffin to discuss the opportunity Lent affords for a starting anew, Christ's temptation in the wilderness, and how the mini-wilderness we embark upon during Lent leads us to transformation. During Holy Week, Griffin travels through familiar territory but brings it to life in new and thoughtful ways: Jesus walking to Jerusalem and our own journey, the Transfiguration and our own imaginative faith, following Christ by picking up a cross and our friends who have died, the Last Supper and our inner transformation, Christ's death and our need to forgive our enemies, and the resurrection on Easter morning and our own struggle to accept ourselves as new creations.

It is here on the last page that Griffin comes full circle: "However inadequate we may feel to this amazing destiny, it is ours; it is the promise that Jesus has made to us and lived out for us. Our task is to accept the grace, to make our small surrenders" (p. 231).

ENCOUNTERING JESUS TODAY

John Indermark's *Gospeled Lives: Encounters with Jesus, A Lenten Study* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2008, 144 pp., $15.00) thoughtfully incorporates Scripture and reflection as it challenges readers to "encounter Jesus today." Each week's readings are grouped around a Lenten-themed type of encounter with Christ from the Gospels, building on the week before. The first week's theme, for example, is "Called," the second follows with "Challenged," the third "Rejected," and so on. The final week of Lent, "Open-Ended," offers to readers the opportunity to place themselves in the story.

The daily readings—five per week—begin with a Scripture reference of a particular encounter with Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels. Those who encounter Christ take center stage in the daily reflection. Some of these individuals are well-known names from Sunday school lessons, like Mary and Jesus' family, John the Baptizer, Pilate, and Simon the Pharisee; others are the unnamed from the pages of Scripture: the woman with the hemorrhage, a leper, or a scribe.

Gospeled Lives is more directly based on Scripture than the other books reviewed here. In his introduction, former pastor Indermark encourages

readers to begin each day's devotional time by thoughtfully considering the Bible passage of each character's encounter with Jesus prior to reading Indermark's short sermon-like essays. The daily reflections, typically two to three pages in length, bring the Scripture passage to life in a thoughtful and accessible way, sometimes incorporating personal vignettes, popular culture references, or other Scripture passages.

Each reading concludes with a brief prayer followed by an "Encountering Jesus Today" section, a paragraph or two that serve as a prompt for further reflection and life application. For example, during week five, "Empowered," one daily reading highlights the story of "Mary Magdalene and 'Many Others'" from Luke 8:1-3. In his meditation, Indermark reflects on his own church experience and the role women played in ministry there as a way to consider the significance of women providing for Jesus and his disciples. Indermark's closing remarks lead readers to consider, "Who are the ones whose presence and ministry in your community goes neglected or unrecognized? Hold that individual or group in prayer. Commit to taking some personal action that will convey support and recognition of them and of their ministry" (p. 92).

This book would make wonderful study for a small group committed to deepening their faith through daily reflection. Indermark's in-depth leader's guide at the end of the book is sure to ease any lay leader's concerns about leading a group discussion based on *Gospeled Lives*. Despite the book's subtitle, "A Lenten Study," Indermark's six-week study could be used at any time of the Church Year, but especially during Ordinary Time when believers are called to live out their faith in Christ's resurrection. Lent, being six weeks long, is particularly conducive to a short-term study, but the challenge of *Gospeled Lives*—to encounter Christ—is a message believers need to hear year-round.

WELCOMING RIGOROUS SELF-EXAMINATION

Another Lenten devotional that need not be limited to use in the Lenten season is Frederica Mathewes-Green's *First Fruits of Prayer: A Forty-Day Journey through the Canon of St. Andrew* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006, 195 pp., $14.95). Mathewes-Green adapts the nine-canticle prayer-infused hymn composed by St. Andrew, Bishop of Crete (d. 740), for a more individual, forty-day "journey" of repentance and reflection appropriate for Lent.

The Great Canon of St. Andrew is a lengthy prayer of "rigorous self-examination" (p. ix) firmly rooted in Scripture and church history. The Canon's underlying scaffolding is the nine great canticles or songs of Scripture, including the songs of Moses, Hannah, Habakkuk, and Jonah. The prayer is petitionary and responsive in its repentance-seeking; often "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me" is the penitential refrain, though worshipers also find themselves reciting the Beatitudes and the Magnificat, among other familiar Scripture passages. Infusing the prayer with Bible passages,

especially well-known prayers and songs from Scripture, brings those passages to life and draws worshipers into a vibrant place of both personal and public confession.

Despite its intensely personal and reflective tone—St. Andrew may even have intended the prayer for his own private devotion—the Canon is widely used in Eastern Orthodox churches during Lent. Modern-day Orthodox worshippers gather as a congregation during the fifth week of Lent to journey through a multi-hour responsive prayer service of petition and repentance. (The Canon also appears in Orthodox worship during the first week of Lent, spread out over four days in smaller increments.)

In addition to a translation of the Canon itself, Mathewes-Green provides an introduction that briefly touches on the different way Orthodox Christians understand concepts such as *theosis*, sin, sickness, and the evil one, differences that are key in a spiritual meditation on the Canon. Additionally, Mathewes-Green anticipates the difficulty that Western Protestants might have with the occasional exhortations to heroes of the faith who are no longer living. "How can we, and why should we, talk to them if they're dead?" (p. xxiv), she poses, and then addresses the concern satisfactorily: they are no longer dead in Christ, after all, and "we ask for their prayers, just as we ask for the prayers of a friend, a pastor, a prayer partner" (p. xxv). In a second introductory section on the historical background of the Canon, Mathewes-Green helps readers unfamiliar with the Canon to get their bearings before entering the prayer.

Dividing the nine-canticle Canon into forty daily readings, Mathewes-Green admits, occurs somewhat arbitrarily. Though each reading appears at first glance to be quite short, a mere two pages or less, readers expecting to speed through them should be forewarned. Taken slowly and prayerfully, St. Andrew's eighth-century words come to life. The responsive construction of the prayer forces readers to be reflective, deliberate, and patient; reading the Canon becomes similar to the practice of *lectio divina*, or sacred reading, in which Scripture read repetitively becomes prayer.

Alongside the daily readings, Mathewes-Green has included a running commentary on facing pages. The section captioned "Explore" offers readers St. Andrew's scriptural citations from the Septuagint for further study as well as commentary on the passages and notes for clarity. (When St. Andrew mentions "Holy Mother Mary" (p. 34), for example, Mathewes-Green points out that he is not referring to the Virgin Mary but St. Mary of Egypt, whose biography is read during the Orthodox Great Canon service and is included as an appendix here.) The "Consider" portion of the commentary allows readers, especially those new to the Canon, to think through the Canon as they digest it daily. Mathewes-Green asks early on, for example, "How do you feel about the companionship of St. Mary of Egypt, St. Andrew, and the Theotokos? Is their presence alongside us in prayer helpful, or intimidating, or frankly not believable?" (p. 14). Though not always posed as questions,

the "Consider" sections are helpful guides to reflection and prayer. In Canticle 7, Mathewes-Green compares modern responses to difficulty with that of the Israelites:

> The Israelites always knew to turn to God in repentance when disaster struck…. Their response, as we see in the Song of Azariah, was to admit that their own sins provoked this chastisement. We react in the opposite way today. When misfortune strikes we think, 'How dare God allow this to happen?'" (p. 120)

These reflections prompt readers to see their world differently as they digest the Canon prayerfully into their devotional lives.

"If you have wished you could pray like the Desert Fathers did, or read Scripture like the church fathers did, or know God like the early martyrs did," Mathewes-Green entices readers, "the Great Canon can be a doorway. It can take you back in time to the early centuries of Christian worship, and open the way to a prayerfulness that is not bound by time at all" (p. x).

CONCLUSION

As these four books reveal, there is no single correct way to "do" Lent, but it certainly involves more than avoiding caffeinated beverages. Huston offers practices that become a physical manifestation of our clearing out space for Christ, Griffin challenges us to a thoughtful and reflective "less heroic" season, Indermark brings encounters with Christ on the pages of Scripture to life, and Mathewes-Green accompanies us on a slow prayerful journey of self-examination.

Lucky for us, Lent comes around every Spring. If we endeavored to accomplish all of this in one Lenten season, our bodies and souls would be worn out long before Good Friday! Such fatigue can prohibit us from opening our hearts to hear the call of the season—calling us into the wilderness, onto the path, out to the world. But surely, this Lent we can all hear the challenge of these four books to do a little *adding in*, not just *giving up*.

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