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LENTEN REFLECTIONS

2018



For those engaged in theologically reflective ministry

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From Lent through Easter is both an important and an especially busy time for pastors and Christian leaders. In these pages, some of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's faculty and program directors offer fresh insights and practical ideas to foster the spiritual nourishment of your congregation—and yourself. The informal remarks of these pastor-theologians have been excerpted from "Conversations with the Dean" on a variety of topics relevant to Christian ministry and witness at this reflective and celebratory time in the church year. May they enrich your ministry and your soul.

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ON YOUTH AND ASH WEDNESDAY





Erin Davenport

Director of the Miller
Summer Youth Institute

When I was a teenager and a Southern Baptist, I moved from Florida to Pennsylvania, where I became a Methodist. I had never heard this word “Lent” before, and the first time I encountered it was actually in school. My friends were giving things up in this small, conservative western Pennsylvania town. They had given up chocolate or movies, and it caused me to wonder, “What am I missing if I am not giving something up, if I’m not encountering this same practice?” I think that in a lot of our congregations and churches that’s a common way of talking to youth about Lent—just to say, “We’re going to spend extra time with God these next seven weeks and the way we’re going to do that is to take something out.” That’s certainly something you see with the 30-hour famine this time of year. There’s value in that, and there’s nothing wrong with it. But I think there’s something that we can add to it to go deeper with our teenagers as far as what these practices are.

Teenagers sit in this wonderful space. Think back to undergraduate psychology class, and you might recall the stages of psychosocial development and that teenagers are sitting in a space where they are asking the question, Who am I? If we’re lucky, they’re just coming out of the questions, What can I do? and What do I have to offer? And Lent is the perfect time to address their new question, Who am I? and help them address that question by adding, Who are you in the eyes of God? and What can you do with yourself to glorify God and to be a part of the church family?

One of the best ways to engage that question is by looking with them at different spiritual disciplines. A great book to help do that is Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. Using it, adults can say to teenagers, "Here are these disciplines. Let's look at a different one each week." Don't be afraid to say you're not an expert in all the disciplines! Instead, say, "We're going to explore together." They need that space to explore and in doing so to find better ways of finding out who they are—to look for those answers, to ask questions of spiritual disciplines instead of being prescribed disciplines that might, in some ways, be easier for adults to understand. We adults are more about getting things done. But allowing space for exploration for and with our teenagers in Lent also allows space for us grown-ups to encounter the disciplines again by coming alongside out teens who are experiencing certain disciplines for the first time. That community is important.

Speaking of community, though now I work primarily with young people, earlier I spent a number of years working in a continuing care community—nursing home care, assisted living. Death is a very real thing when you are living and working in a nursing home. But the joy and the "realness" that comes from saying on Ash Wednesday, "From ashes you came and from ashes you return," brought life and spoke peace into those moments of darkness and death. A good death gives a person that moment of great peace, and saying those words means a lot to the staff who care for the residents in life and in death, and for the residents who have lost their spouses and roommates.

When I first started in that ministry, I thought I was there for the residents. And I was to some extent, but I was also there for the staff. How valuable Ash Wednesday became for the entire community over the years. I would spend five or six hours



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walking around with ashes on Ash Wednesday, and the staff's response was always, "I never have time to go to church on this day." A lot of them worked at least two jobs and after working at the nursing home for 12 hours would go to work somewhere else for another four or five. They just didn't have time to get to church. So the opportunity to enter into Lent and this time of reflection, even if only for 30 seconds of prayer, meant so much to them. So I think Ash Wednesday was one of my favorite days in that time of my life. There's something about that mark of ashes that's a reminder of being part of a larger story of being knit into God's creation and a community of the body of Christ.

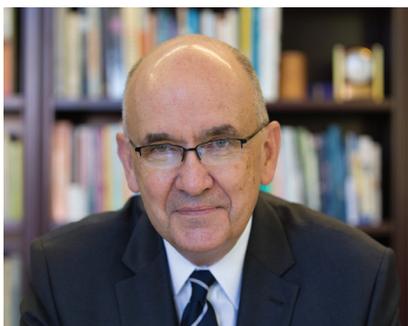
Think about it: On Ash Wednesday, there will be people walking through the grocery store with ashes on, going to work with ashes on. We see it as just a normal part of life. That's fascinating, because we don't let our faith intersect with "normal" life so much anymore. So that's a great day.

But back to thinking about young people and how to engage them in Lent. Our reading for this week is the temptation of Christ from Matthew. Jesus has just spent 40 days in the wilderness. He has been alone, for all intents and purposes, in that time of self-reflection and preparation before he is called to go find his disciples and preach. I think it's interesting that in this context we have Jesus kind of facing the same questions our teenagers are facing, for lack of better terms. Who is he, who is he going to be, and what is he going to do? How does he live into being fully human and fully divine, and how does he enter into his public ministry?

So Jesus has these conversations, these temptations to power and to feed himself and to take care of himself and not to rely on the Father. And he responds—because of the relationship that he's already a part of—the right way. He says, "Get behind me." I'm going. I know who I am. I know what I have to do. I think that it's in right relationship to Jesus, and *through* Jesus to God the Father, that we find ourselves able to say, "This is who I am: I am God's child, and this is what God has called me to be," and to move forward without succumbing to temptation to move off of that path. And that relationship allows God to talk to us directly—which is an exciting and wonderful way to live.

ON DISCIPLESHIP AND GOD'S GRACE





David Esterline

President and Professor of Cross-cultural Theological Education

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The first part of a recent publication by Rowen Williams, a little book called *Being Disciples*, begins with the “being” word—it notes discipleship’s having to do with abiding, being who we are. It goes on to talk about the resources we have for being disciples. And of course it talks about Scripture and the life of the church. Then Williams goes on to say that every time we meet another disciple we should first of all ask, “What is Jesus giving to me in that person?” Or if we meet a group of disciples, “What is Jesus giving to me in them?” That should be the first thing.

Williams says this is not easy, because we’re going to disagree about things. We’re going to disagree about worship style, prayer style, theology. About ethics. About politics. He has a little note saying that of course it’s going to be harder for that person to see Jesus in me than for me to see Jesus in that person, but then he also emphasizes this reality: even though the workings of the church vary in different ways, in fact we should be ready always to recognize God’s gift to us in everyone we see. So there’s something to walk into Lent with—something that many of us try to do always, but also to be very specific about during Lent. What am I being offered in this person I’m meeting right now? Set aside the political things, set aside the hidden agendas, set aside all those other things that we usually use as excuses why we’re not ready to engage with someone we maybe don’t care for so much. So that’s a really, really good recommendation for Lent, and maybe for life as well.



At Pittsburgh Seminary, what might it mean to prepare disciples—women and men—for ministry in this “way of Jesus”? I have had the really good opportunity and experience of working, living, and serving as a dean in several locations in different cultures and different denominational “locations.” And the themes consistent across all those very different locations are, first of all, vocation. Students are in theological education, seminary, or theological college because it’s a call from God to be with God in God’s work and God’s world. Faculty also have this sense of vocation, and we’re there because it’s where we believe God has called us to be. What we’re offering at Pittsburgh Seminary are ways to respond to the location of calling that students have when they come here. The second consistent theme across all these locations is prayer—prayer in all its forms, personal and corporate, morning and evening, prayer as the Spirit leads, prayer in tongues—as varied as we find prayer in the Bible. Prayer is at the center of preparation. And the third consistent theme in all those different locations is scholarship in service of the Church, which involves studying Scripture, of course.

We “do” theological education because we believe in the presence among us of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the power of Jesus. So doing theological education in the “way of Jesus” would be following his example. There are many, many references in Scripture to “the way”—the way of peace, the way of justice, Christians’ being called people of “the Way” before they were called “Christians,” and of course Jesus’ saying “I am the Way.” So by saying we’re committed to preparation for ministry in “the way of Jesus” is making sure that we’re clear about what it means to be Christian—and then to add a little edge to that: Do we really have the gumption to walk with Jesus and to follow his example, in finding everyone acceptable, for instance?

I was raised in a very Christian household, but one which did not have any connection to the liturgical year or the church calendar. So Lent was not something that was part



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of our household. I was raised in a Pentecostal household, and I remember asking my dad, “What about this season as we get ready for Easter?” He said, “We celebrate Easter every Sunday—every Sunday is the Lord’s day.” A lovely answer. But I remember my school friends and kids around the playground asking what I was going to give up for Lent, and I didn’t know what Lent was. I didn’t know why I should give up anything for something I didn’t know about, but I also remember being kind of puzzled and intrigued that there were Christians around whom I didn’t know and who understood Christianity in a different way than I did.

And then, when as an adult I was living in Fiji, an important mentor there named Winston Halapool, dean of a cathedral, said to a group of us one Lent, “As you go into Lent, think about what you might add to your life. What’s missing? What will help you be a better disciple? What will help you be a better follower of Jesus that you could add to your life?” So that’s been something I’ve thought about a lot, and of course making sure that I’m especially prepared to find and see Jesus in everyone I meet.

Romans 4 tells us that it’s because of the grace in which we stand that we can then boast or rejoice, first in hope; and we can even rejoice in the suffering that leads to endurance, which leads to character, which leads to hope. I think of the story in Luke 15 usually called The Prodigal Son, which displays the grace of the father, who is always waiting, always ready to accept both sons back. The one son is quite offensive to his father, goes away, and suffers. Something happens through that suffering and some character is developed through it so that he comes home and doesn’t really expect to be accepted, but expects maybe just to have a place as a hired hand. Through that process comes hope, and of course the point of the story is the father’s grace. The father runs to meet him. The father’s been waiting all this time and throws him a big party.



**AS YOU GO INTO LENT,
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But of course part of my enjoyment of the story is the other, goody-two-shoes son, who's just hanging around and crabby. "A brother of mine has gone away and wasted everything. You give him a break. What about me?" And that's the end of the story. We don't have anything to finish it. Lent offers us a good time to ponder, "How does the story end?" But then there's also this other question: "Which son am I—the son who's ready to accept the Father's grace, or the son who said, 'I'm going to hang around and be happy with things as they are'?" So I think there's something there to bring us back to God's grace and really to ask, "Are we ready to accept it?" Trial and contention. Do we think about the Spirit ever working in our lives in that way? And what does this tell us about the triune life of God, about the interior relationships in triune life?

And then there's the remarkable exchange that goes on between Jesus and the Devil in this story, with the Devil even quoting Scripture. And that's not just a matter of Satan's citing chapter and verse. In that story, we see Jesus engaging in a kind of rabbinical conversation with Satan, the tempter, and they have an argument about the interpretation of Scripture. What I think is really interesting about that, and what I would want to think through for a sermon, is the way in which, in this adversarial situation, Jesus doesn't withdraw, stay silent, or push away, but instead he actually engages in the discussion about Scripture's interpretation and debates about its meaning. I think that would be a good model for Christian communities in thinking about their relationships with others relative to the things they disagree about.



**LENT OFFERS US A GOOD
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DOES THE STORY END?"**

ON SUFFERING AND VULNERABILITY





Leanna Fuller

Associate Professor of Pastoral Care

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Congregations can address suffering and vulnerability throughout Lent through liturgy, where those things can be lifted up and named very specifically, including in the Prayers for the People, for example, and also in preaching and Bible studies, and even through simple reflection on Scripture and book studies. Richard Lischer's *Stations of the Heart* is a really powerful reflection on grief, for example, and one that could be very useful for a congregation to engage together. For people who are experiencing some form of suffering, the congregation can offer various ways of support—even support groups.

When we participate in the observation of a season like Lent, we are reinforcing our group identity as Christians, because we are thinking about our common story, our common traditions through these observances that we do together. So that observance is making our identities as Christians more prominent in the moment—that's the identity we're really emphasizing, as opposed to some other group identity we might bring with us, such as political affiliation, for example. So seasons like Lent aren't just about tradition and longing for something from the past—they're also about what knits us into a community.

There are a lot of practices that can contribute to congregational health, and I would say those practices can go on all year long. But they might be great places to emphasize



during Lent. In my work on conflict, I discovered that congregations which provide a lot of opportunities for different members and different subgroups of a church to get together seem to handle conflict a little better when it comes along.

By subgroups, I mean that every congregation tends to split into smaller groups, whether they are groups that just naturally work together on different projects, or form according to age—in many of our churches things split up generationally. And there's nothing wrong with that, *per se*, but in my work I found that congregations which do a good job of helping those subgroups interact, helping those members interact across those lines, are sometimes called “cross-cutting” congregations, because they show networks between all their groups. They get to know each other better, so when conflict comes along there's more trust, more relationship capital that's been built up. It doesn't make conflict easy, but I think it makes it possible for those congregations to engage conflict in healthier ways.

Not becoming familiar with Lent till I was an adult, for a number of years I tried giving things up for this church season. But it just never quite felt natural to me as a practice. So this year I decided to add something. And the main thing I added one was volunteering my time with an organization for a cause I care about. Most of the time I find it easier to give financial assistance than to volunteer my time, but this year I really wanted to make an effort to be present physically in this work. So I volunteered with the Produce to People program run through the food bank here in Pittsburgh that takes produce to communities all over Pittsburgh for people who wouldn't normally have access to fresh food. It's been a great experience, and I'm sure I'll keep doing it after Lent, but Lent seemed like a good time to start.

For me one of the real themes of Lent is simply our human fortitude and frailty. We began on Ash Wednesday with having ashes imposed on our foreheads and hearing words like, “Remember, you too were dust, and to dust you shall return.” So we began the whole season with a very powerful reminder of our mortality and finitude. And



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that's not under our control. Our reading, Psalm 1:21, says, "I will look to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord"—a recognition that I need help, that I can't do everything by myself. And the Lord who created heaven and earth is the one who will help. That sort of solace is a way of saying, "I'm dependent on God. I can't do all this myself. It's beyond me. I have to rely on God."

I think that for many congregations this acknowledgment could be very helpful to explore together. My sense is that in our culture we don't so much emphasize dependence. We tend to emphasize self-reliance and being in control. So in a way I think it's really a counter-cultural message to say that, actually, all of us are dependent, we all come from God, we all come back to God.

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Where are the places in our lives where we sense that vulnerability? And where are the places we could use that vulnerability as a way to connect with other people? I think the real danger of this sort of cultural insistence on independence and self-reliance is—well, first of all, I don't think it's possible. I think we all depend on each other in really profound ways, but if we try to insist that we don't need those connections, then we end up isolated and we rob ourselves of intimacy, which is one of the greatest gifts of human life. It could be really interesting for a group to engage this text—Psalm 1:21—that way during Lent just to think about who we are as human beings and how we can help each other.



**THE LORD WHO CREATED
HEAVEN AND EARTH IS
THE ONE WHO WILL HELP.**

ON REPACKAGING THE GOSPEL





Brian Wells

Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program

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Easter is the time of year that really represents the core of our faith. I am particularly fond of Easter sunrise. I can sense the dewy grass on my shoes and being surrounded by people I love, marking that celebration, when times of reenacting the Easter story bring the reality in very forcefully as an experience. That experience is an opportunity for practitioners to be a part of the story, because as they play a role in the Easter story they are reminded that they should always play that role, as being part of a faith community, as being engaged with the faith tradition.

But as we know, the statistics are not encouraging concerning the decline of the Christian tradition in the West with regard to the institutional church. But it doesn't have to be story of your church. It's so vital that churches learn the importance of innovation. In 1934 Lou Gehrig was on the front of the Wheaties cereal box—the breakfast of champions. And Wheaties continues to be a well-selling cereal, but by 1988 Michael Jordan was on the front of the Wheaties box. It's important, I think, for churches to understand that we don't need to change the recipe—the gospel is still good! There's not a problem with the recipe, but we certainly need to change the packaging. We need to have the type of innovation that's not afraid to experiment and explore and change the packaging of the gospel so that it can be more engaging to modern people.

Changing the packaging of the gospel is a difficult path to walk, and leadership is critical in helping people navigate through change. No change is comfortable, but it's essential. So what we try to communicate to people is that the journey of life is



all about change. If you were to look at your photograph at six months old, and at 10 years old, and at 21 and 40, you would think you were looking at different people because so many changes in you have taken place over the years. If people can understand that life is a series of changes, that it's very natural to change, and that what's abnormal is lack of change, they can begin to see the normalcy of change and navigating it. But it's important that leaders don't overwhelm their faith community with too much change too quickly. Introduce it in a gradual way so that people can own the change and participate in an affirmative way.

And for their own health and ministry, leaders need to remember the Sabbath. We often feel like ceaseless activity is always ministry, but rest practices are also critical throughout the year, because without proper rest and renewal, we burn out in this very intensive work. It takes a lot out of you. And it's so important that, even when we come to these very busy times of the year, we remember that we're human too and that we need to have healthy Sabbath practices to ensure the longevity of our ministry. We have to pace ourselves. This is not a 100-yard dash, it's a marathon.

I think the simplest approach to pacing ourselves involves our scheduling—we're so schedule oriented. So make sure that you block out two days a week for self and rest and renewal. I think one personal day is important, a day when you just do the things that bring you joy, because Sabbath isn't always about sleeping and resting—it's also about engaging ourselves with things that renew us personally and recharge our batteries. And then, second, there should be a day for Sabbath with family, so that you maintain healthy relationships there.

During Lent, one quite ancient practice—the Lenten fast—is, I think, still quite important. It's especially important for us in the Western world because we are constantly surrounded by excess—too much of this and not enough of that. Fasting reminds us that there are other things, beyond the appetite, that are important as well. Remembering God and spending time with God—it's very important that



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those practices be maintained, and the fast is one way to connect dynamically to that. Fasting is one of those disciplines that takes us out of the everyday, normal routine because we know that the cycle, the consumption of food, is so important for us on a daily basis. But when we break that cycle, we know that something significant is happening that has taken our attention away from things that normally dominate our attention.

There's something about the power of the Easter story that has freshness to it every year. It never gets old. It is good news in a world that's dominated by bad news. It's been said that we have an Easter faith but we live in a Good Friday world. I think that's very true. The experience of Good Friday, the suffering, the misery of the cross reminds us of the kind of world we live in. But Easter faith is the source or core of our hope. It helps us to rise above and transcend the Good Friday world. I think the themes of Easter are constantly fresh to us for those very reasons of our need to experience freedom and liberation, salvation and redemption, collectively and personally.



**THERE'S SOMETHING
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ON CREATIVE PRACTICES FOR LENT AND EASTER





Karen Rohrer

Director of the Church Planting Initiative

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In Lent we are engaging the ways in which we are “ashed,” the ways in which we are mortal and human and limited and finite. There are windows in each piece of Lenten liturgy that you can play with in that way. One of my favorite ways is to engage at the Communion table in a conversation about actual hunger. We’re limited—we actually get hungry. We forget week after week that this meal is still needed in our lives, not just because we are spiritually hungry but also because we are people who get physically hungry. So the gathering of the saints and the power of that meal reminds us of that need. And Lent is a great time to highlight that.

In our offering, we often talk about remembering that we have enough to give, but we’re not in it alone. And we all know, as people who give to the offering plate little or much, that when we give by ourselves it’s not enough, but the Holy Spirit gathers it in community and provides what is needed in the offering moment. Lent is a great time to remember that though we are not enough in ourselves, the Holy Spirit calls us together to make the wholeness of God’s church manifest every Sunday in different ways. Each week.

Then there is the experience of singing a hymn. When you sing, you’re joining your voice with a powerful crowd, and if you stop singing for a moment you can hear that the song goes on even when you don’t have a voice to sing. But that is dependent on everyone in the room being ready to sing. Talking about that during Lent reminds us of the power of community in the midst of our own limitations. So experiencing worship not only as an individual but also as a community is maybe even more essential in the



season of Lent than regularly throughout the year, since in Lent we take it to heart that we're recognizing our own limitations.

A poignant Ash Wednesday practice I've seen in several different contexts involves being invited to write down something that you really want to let go of and turn over to what God is transforming it into, and then bring your piece of paper forward and put it into a bowl or container of fire. The imagery is that you're letting this thing go and waiting for it to be transformed. Then you wear the mark of it, because the burned paper becomes the ash that is put on your forehead. You're wearing the mark of that thing being transformed, reminding you of what you can and can't do and what God is doing in you. That's powerful.

Another practice involves looking at how you live each week of Lent and looking at it as a cohesive season, not just at its beginning or end. Everybody in the congregation is invited to identify one thing that after 40 days he or she wants to let go of. And the refrain over the course of Lent is that we're practicing—so in week 2 you don't have to let that go yet. You don't have to say, "I'm totally done with that." You can cycle it over in your brain for 40 days, pray about it, and talk about your practice every Sunday over Lent, so that by the end, by Good Friday, you're really in place where you are ready to raise your hands up and say, "Now is the time that I really say goodbye to this thing that I wanted to let go of at the beginning. I'm ready to let it go."

Then on Easter, you can do something creative and surprising with Communion, like substitute pound cake for bread without telling anyone beforehand. So people come up for Communion, and the meal that remembers Christ's death is totally transformed into a feast of pound cake. It can be a very powerful mirror of the story of people's being surprised to encounter the living Christ.



**IN LENT WE TAKE IT
TO HEART THAT WE'RE
RECOGNIZING OUR OWN
LIMITATIONS.**

Thinking about the Lenten reading of Psalm 23, what is surprising there? We know that God looks after us, we know that God is with us through pain. But I latch on to “prepares a table for me in the presence of my enemies,” because a table is this home-like thing, this safe space. So where in life am I at a table set before me in the presence of my enemies? Frankly it’s in Communion, right? These people that I do life with—with some of them I have healthy relationships, and with some of them I don’t. So Psalm 23 presents me with this moment that has a clear call in it, because when you think about being given a table in the presence of your enemies. If you look at the whole of Scripture, the call of God is not to rejoice and gloat but to pull up a chair and reconcile and figure out how to make things right, which I think the Communion table can be a powerful vehicle of.

So looking at that Psalm and remembering that being given a table in the presence of your enemies is actually not just a sign of God’s love and protection and favor toward you, but also a rigorous call for you to care for the people you hadn’t wanted to eat with before—what are you going to do?



**THE CALL OF GOD IS . . .
TO PULL UP A CHAIR AND
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ON LENTEN TRADITIONS IN NON-WESTERN CULTURES

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Hunter Farrell

Director of the World Mission Initiative

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I was recently in Peru and Columbia—the Lenten traditions are pretty strong in Latin America, where Catholicism is prominent. I think we Protestants are a little reticent about ritual and don't quite know what to do with it in our minds. But Catholics don't have those encumbrances, so lots of Catholic spirituality comes forward there. It's a beautiful thing. In Peru, the thing that stands out to me, particularly in Holy Week, is the custom of procession. For the 10 days before Easter Sunday, in Lima, a city of 10 million people, you'll have a million people in a procession. Everyone's dressed in purple and white, and they sway together as one body. There's a lot of power to that. It brings the processional, which is typical in Spanish Catholic Christianity, together with a sense of community, which is strong in Andean spirituality. It's a beautiful marriage—you step into that processional and you feel like you're part of the body of Christ.

You can reflect on that theologically by considering the references that Paul makes to our lives as completing the sufferings of Christ. I have never heard a Protestant pastor preach on that. It's difficult for us to get our heads around, but the million people in that processional in Lima, moving with our Lord of miracles, is one of the largest processions—about a mile and a half—that happens on Good Friday. As the people sway together, they believe that they are complete the sufferings of Christ, that they become one with Christ's sufferings, that they embody the fact that Christ died for us and took our sufferings to the cross. It brings out a lot of emotion, and people can spontaneously confess sin. Sometimes there's reconciliation as people reach over and embrace a family member and forgive each other. So you get a sense of deep spirituality throughout that ritual. Not only Lima, but also every major city in Peru will be filled with



folks coming out of from surrounding villages and towns to be physically present with the body of Christ as it processes.

Lent is a time for preparation, and if we can look with clearer eyes onto what Christ did for us we can experience it and be changed by it. One of the things that cross-cultural experiences help us to do is to see more clearly. I think all of us have smudged lenses as we look at the world—smudged by our culture, our sin, or old habits that we just don't seem to get rid of. Lent is a time to look at those practices again. What's helping us to follow Jesus? What's not? And so as I think of my own cross-cultural immersion experiences, I also think that maybe we all can cross the tracks in our own city and have a cross-cultural experience, or go for a short-term mission experience, a week or two in some other part of the globe. That can be good. But then it's really important that we reflect on that experience in community, because oftentimes a short-term mission experience can lead us toward greater ethnocentricity. You can think that your way is the right way—"Aren't we glad we're not like those people?"

But I'm impressed with the way Christians around the world take so seriously that time of preparation in Lent. In my tradition in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, I grew up oftentimes thinking, "Lent is coming—what do I need to do without?" And it was a very negative question that I asked of Lent, rather than, "How can I prepare to follow Jesus?"

My wife Ruth and I worked in the Congo for five years, and for Christians in that context the preparation of land, oftentimes done in community, is a very important part of their Protestant tradition. I tend to think of Lenten practice as a solo act involving what I will give up. Sometimes I tell someone else, sometimes I don't. Mine is not a group practice, but in the Congo, a very communal culture, that's how people live it out.



**[WE] HAVE SMUDGED
LENSES AS WE LOOK AT
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CULTURE, SIN, AND OLD
HABITS.**

And it's a positive practice rather than a negative one—how can we confess to each other each day? Well, that's something that would take us deep pretty quickly in our individualized culture. So I think that a lot of times cross-cultural experience just kind of cleans the lenses with which we view the experience, and I think it can strengthen our Christian devotion.

In Central Africa and in the Andes of South America, the ancestors, the Christian “cloud of witnesses,” are very present. But among us Western Protestants there's almost an awkwardness about that. What do we do with this cloud of witnesses? We don't pray to them, we don't acknowledge them, and yet there is real power as we process through Lent together in being aware that it's not just us that we see but also the history of so many faithful Christians who surround us.

On Palm Sunday, my mind goes to the roof in my home church in Louisville, Kentucky—Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church. They do something that I haven't experienced in another church: all the congregation waits outside before we process in together. So literally everyone in the congregation processes in with a palm branch. But the cheers and the adulation change. It's usually the kids who lead us in, and it's the children who lead us into the calls, “Crucify him!” And suddenly we're standing on both sides of the sanctuary facing each other and screaming, “Crucify him!” and sort of embodying this rage and thinking, “Where does it come from?” And we're all literally faced with the reality of the human crowd. We end each Palm Sunday in silence, and that immediately leads us into confession. That practice captures well the transition from the adulation of Jesus to the almost circus-like atmosphere of the crowd as it is transformed into something very ugly. And from that, we need to be redeemed.



**CROSS-CULTURAL
EXPERIENCE CAN
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ON CONTEXTUALIZING LENTEN PRACTICES





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Lent is a time of intensified spiritual practice when we are typically stripping away certain elements of our lives, whether through fasting or intensified Scripture reading or things like that. It's a time when we're allowing space in our lives to hear from God, perhaps in new ways or perhaps recovering old practices. So there's an element to Lent that is about learning to listen to God or creating space in our lives to listen to God.

But usually when I talk with congregations about listening, I'm not only talking about spiritual practices, but also about how these spiritual practices prepare us, equip us, enable us also to learn how to listen to one another and to listen to our neighbors. And I don't see these as opposed to each other but as interrelated. Learning to listen to God enables us to listen to one another. Learning to listen to one another, I think, also enables us to listen to God.

So besides creating space in our lives for listening, I would encourage communities of Christians to create opportunities for simple story telling throughout the season of Lent as a way of contextualizing our observance of the season. Maybe during worship or at a small-group gathering or on a church website, tell a story about when you've encountered a person of peace in the last week. Have people think through their everyday lives and where the spirit of God has entered, say, in passing conversation with a stranger or in the hospitality of another. Or describe when you have felt close to God this last week.



Another simple contextualizing practice that can be powerful through Lent can be the classic Ignatian practice of examining—ending the day, for example, reflecting on what it's been like to give, what it's been like to take, where you've encountered God, where you've perhaps sensed God's absence or wished you'd encountered God. These kinds of reflective questions can also help us narrate our lives theologically and attentively in our absence from each other.

Usually when we think about being faithful to our context, we default into modes of strategy or modes of relevance. I remember a church in the Midwest that during Easter advertised they were giving away a car and some TVs at their Easter Sunday service. They saw this as a way of being contextual in a consumer-driven society that places high value on certain consumer items, and they used the consumer mentality to bring people into their biggest worship service of the year, to contextualize their Easter Sunday service.

Now, I think that's a terrible idea. When we talk about being faithful in context, it's important that we are clear by what we mean by "faithful," and then important that we are clear when we invite "context." So that means understanding at a deep level, in our bones, what it is that we mean when we talk about the hope of the resurrection. But then it also means being deeply embedded in the place where we are and understanding what being faithful to the Easter story looks like in a way that's plausible to our public and plausible in our current context. For example, people who haven't grown up in a church, even if they have been a part of a congregation for many years, may not feel the same kind of expectation around Holy Week and Easter Sunday that "churched" members do. For those people, Easter might feel like just one more Sunday among the rest, though a bit "bigger" than the others.



IN TALKING ABOUT BEING FAITHFUL IN CONTEXT, IT'S IMPORTANT TO BE CLEAR WHAT WE MEAN BY 'FAITHFUL.'

That was the case in our former church in Vancouver, B.C., so we recognized that part of being faithful and contextual there meant that we really had to walk people in our church in a very intentional way through the events of Holy Week, not just say, “Here’s a Maundy Thursday service,” or “Here’s a Good Friday service,” or “Here it is—Easter Sunday.” So in some years that intentionality took the form of fasting from Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday. In other years we had 36 hours of prayer from Good Friday to Easter Sunday sunrise service, or we found ways of adapting practices from the past and were very intentional about welcoming our people into these practices. Now that’s not necessarily making the big bridge into the context, but it is understanding the context, the assumptions people are working with in it, and the background people have.

Another example would be that of a local new-church development in Pittsburgh. They are working toward making a labyrinth available in their neighborhood park during Holy Week in recognition that this neighborhood is where lots of “nones and dones” live—the spiritual but not religious folks who are open to spiritual practice but don’t necessarily see how it maps on to the Christian story in “institutional” or “organized” religion. The church sees this labyrinth as a way of inviting people who are naturally oriented toward spiritual practice into the hospitality of Christian practice and how it connects with our confession of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I think both examples above aim to be faithful and also deeply contextual.

It’s important not just for congregations but also for clergy to see these practices as means by which Jesus through the Spirit is inviting us to listen and to allow our hearts to be shaped, allow new habits or practices to take root in our own lives, recognize the “personal faith journey” element of this season. For Lent, I myself have made attempts at cutting out coffee, but I just figure that’s cruel and unusual



**IT’S IMPORTANT FOR
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punishment. During the last couple of years, though, my wife and I have fasted from TV, which has been a really good practice. Another Lenten practice, one of “addition,” has been trying to establish mornings as a time for listening prayer.

In Ezekiel we read of the prophet’s vision of the valley of dry bones, and my sense is that today in the mainline Protestant churches the days of thinking, “If we just keep at it a little bit longer, things will turn around,” really seem to be over and done. There’s a recognition of numerical decline that seems irreversible—one of losing members, buildings, and a sense of a priority of place in the culture. And within that loss there is this cry that sounds a bit like, “Only God can help us now,” which actually gives me a lot of hope. Throughout church history there have been times when political identity and Christian identity get so interconnected that there seems to be a self-evident nature to what it means to be the church, and the church plays a significant role in the shaping of people’s lives. So there are good things that come from it, but it can also produce loss of dependence upon God, loss of the sense that we exist to participate in what God is doing in the world. I think this “Only God can help us now moment” has a kind of analogy to the valley of dry bones—a text where the prospect of the renewal of God’s people is placed completely in the work of the Spirit of God, and out of this death and dry emptiness, God’s Spirit can from these bones raise people up. I wouldn’t say that as the church we’re in this valley—we’re not dead yet! But our renewed sense of dependence upon God gives me hope, and it’s one we can draw strength from.



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