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LENTEN REFLECTIONS 2020

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 pastors and scholars 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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BACK TO BASICS





Andy Greenhow

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Lent gives us a chance to go back to basics, to remember what we love about this faith of ours. A person could spend 40 days and 40 nights just thinking about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But there is so much more. Take Creation, for example—you could spend 40 days and 40 nights before you even get to pondering the third chapter of Genesis. You could spend the same amount of time just thinking about the communion of saints, and so on. So for me, Lent is a time to stop thinking so hard about advanced-level theology and focus on really remembering what this was all about in the first place.

I used to live in New Orleans. During my first year there—my first Carnival season, leading up to Mardi Gras—I went to all the parades. I went to all the barbecues. I played with all the kids. I was doing Carnival very well, and then I showed up on Ash Wednesday, bleary-eyed and exhausted. I was the only one in the office who hadn't had ashes imposed by 8:30 in the morning. That New-Orleans approach to Carnival as a liturgical season has led me to a richer, deeper understanding and practice of Ash Wednesday as a day that we, in the hinterlands outside New Orleans, think of as merely the beginning of this introspective season in which we are reminded that we are dust and that to dust we shall return. But for most people, Ash Wednesday doesn't function as a fulcrum in the same way that I think it could—in the same way that it does in New Orleans, where people have been celebrating life in this place that is disappearing and

that is very vulnerable, and where they have essentially been declaring that against all odds there is generosity, reconciliation, joy, and fun.

In New Orleans, Carnival season is not what people see on television. It's not what the tourists do. It is a season of "Your cup runneth over," and then Ash Wednesday shifts your gears very quickly. The shift reminds you that the human experience is as much about joy as it is about death. So between Epiphany and Mardi Gras, I try to celebrate Carnival in my own small ways here in Pittsburgh; then first thing on the morning of Ash Wednesday, at 6:00 a.m., I have ashes imposed, because it marks the end of one season—the season of cultivated joy and jubilee—as much as it is the beginning of Lent—the season of reflection. I need the two.

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Then, to observe Holy Week, I love reading from the Gospel of Mark those six chapters that actually go day by day, when God's *kairos* time and our *chronos* time actually overlay one another very nicely. Mark's account gives us this incredible opportunity to read about Jesus' Palm Sunday on our Palm Sunday, about Jesus' Monday of Holy Week on our Monday of Holy Week, and so on, right on through. So what I try to do during Holy Week is to live each day as though I'm really experiencing the 24 hours that Jesus experienced during the week leading up to his Passion. That means that on Saturday, I live as though the incarnate God has been crucified and is not yet alive, is not yet resurrected. It makes Easter that much more meaningful.



LENT IS A TIME TO . . .
FOCUS ON REALLY
REMEMBERING WHAT THIS
WAS ALL ABOUT IN THE
FIRST PLACE.

LENT AS FAMILY PRACTICE





Tracy Riggle Young

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Traditionally, people think about Lent in a very individualistic way—What am I going to give up? What am I going to commit to? For many folks, these can be meaningful questions, and having 40 days to commit to something can be very valuable. But actually, I think the church calls us to something more collective, more communal. At my own church, we as a community of faith are intentionally and collaboratively thinking about what we as a church can do to be more mindful about our actions and living in ways that are true to God's will in the world.

For example, we are reflecting together about sustainability and how our own practices as God's body are affirming God's world. So we're giving up our paper and plastic products at coffee hour and using reusable mugs and composting. Though this change may seem a small one, it is something we're doing collectively, not as individuals in isolation, so that we're engaging in this practice as a community for 40 days.

We're also reflecting intentionally on how to be present to our neighbors—something we've done for longer than the 40 days of Lent. We've joined with another congregation in worship and welcomed them to use our worship space—a congregation from a church that was displaced during the floods over the summer.



We've learned from them and prayed with them. I think our calling to collective work as a church combined with the commitments we take on during Lent challenge us also as individuals to be more fully connected to our community.

I have to admit that I'm actually not really good at Lenten practice. I struggle with it mostly because of where I am in my life right now. I have two small children. I am also a working mom and a commuting mom and running from place to place. So it sometimes feels as though if I've gotten all the required things done, then I'm being successful. Often there's not a lot of time left for me to be spiritually reflective. But a recent conversation helped me begin integrating Lenten practice into our family structure in a more thoughtful way. For example, in our house we put up a paper chain with links for every day of Lent. It serves as a helpful reminder as I move through my busy day, "Here's where we are."

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A valuable Lenten commitment for me is, in partnership with my husband, being more intentionally present in the moments I do have with my family to talk about our values and what we are called to do. So on Monday through Thursday we commit to eating dinner as a family. We are always there, present at the table. We reflect with our children about why we value being a good neighbor, what it looks like to be a good neighbor, and how Jesus was a good neighbor, inclusive of those who have less than we do. I think being present and inserting those questions into our dinner conversation are great ways to be mindful of what Lent calls us to do.



**A LENTEN COMMITMENT
IS BEING MORE
INTENTIONALLY PRESENT
IN THE MOMENTS I DO
HAVE WITH MY FAMILY.**

I am a doer. I am not a very patient person. So when I hear verses such as Psalm 27:14 encouraging me to “wait for the Lord,” I cling to what comes next: “Be strong and have courage”—which to me says that waiting is not passive. Waiting is very much active. In this period of 40 days, as we prepare for Easter, our waiting is always active. So I ask myself what I can be doing now and what I can be mindful of committing my time to—courageously. In my practice with my family, how can I make the most of these 40 days to dig more fully into what we’re called to do as part of preparing for what lies ahead?



**IN THIS PERIOD OF 40
DAYS, AS WE PREPARE FOR
EASTER, OUR WAITING IS
ALWAYS ACTIVE.**

LENT AS LIVED EXPERIENCE

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R. Drew Smith

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Lent is a season of assessment, an opportunity for us, as Christians individually and corporately, to reflect on core priorities, essentials of the faith. It's a season that places the cross at the center of our walk with God. It's a season that draws us more deeply into our sense of calling toward sacrifice. So during this season of assessment, it's important that we reflect on how we are situated in our faith walks, in our ministries, in our institutional life in ways that bring those priorities to the surface. It's important to look at the ways our context may influence and inform our understanding of our faith, the ways we prioritize aspects of our ministry and personal development.

This approach to Lent moves us toward conversation around gospel and culture, the tensions that exist between the aspects of our lives that flow more directly from our life experience as opposed to aspects that speak to us out of the scriptural text and our theological understandings. We move between those tensions. During Lent, we can be intentional about trimming or at least moving away from those aspects of our experience that may be distracting to our walk of faith, and move closer to the things that center us around essentials, around core priorities.

I am a Baptist, and Baptists are a diverse bunch of folks who tend to be less tied to formal ritual than to personal experience. And the way the Easter season has usually



been lived in my upbringing and in many of the Baptist circles in which I move has less to do with the kind of formal practices we associate with Lent than with the telling and retelling of the story in ways which personalize that story, which place in the individual a deep sense of the importance of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection—crucifixion understood in both spiritual and social terms in a way that can be personalized. For example, how has a person in his or her own walk of faith wrestled with issues of his/her own need for repentance, but also wrestled in a larger social way with how society needs to account for collective and corporate sin? How do we move from crucifixion to resurrection individually and collectively? So in the Baptist tradition there's a greater emphasis on the experiential than on the symbolic, and it's had real power for me and for many I've shared that journey with over the years.

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From the very first time I left U.S. borders to go to Africa, immediately upon arrival in Africa I was brought deeper into the experience of people different from those I ordinarily interact with. The experience deepened my understanding not only of other people's realities and experiences but also of my own. To some extent, we hold a mirror up to ourselves when we enter into the space of other people. So in that sort of exchange, that interaction at the intersection of the world of others and the world we carry with us wherever we go, there can be a transformative effect which gives us a greater sense of accountability for who we are, what we inhabit, what we embody, and how those things affect the lives of others.

As a season of assessment, Lent prompts us to figure out ways to do a better job of loving one another, not simply in word but also in deed. It reminds us that there's a timestamp on our ability to live into our calling. We don't have forever to get it right.



**LENT PROMPTS US TO
FIGURE OUT WAYS TO DO
A BETTER JOB OF LOVING
ONE ANOTHER.**

Our actions and inactions have implications, so we should think very clearly and with conviction about our need to move more deeply into action, behavior, principles, and practices that exemplify our calling as Christians to love one another as Christ has loved the world.

But taking the time really to think about what it meant for Jesus to have to go to the cross—the pain he endured so we could have eternal life and our sins could be forgiven—is a really wonderfully meaningful practice.

First Corinthians 1:24 talks about God’s foolishness as being wiser than human wisdom. There are a lot of ways to approach that text, but what I love is all the irony in it. Paul is talking to wise people—who are not unified: unhappy Greek scholars and philosophers, as well as wise Jewish leaders. To talk to them, Paul is using the cross as Christ crucified. They look at the cross as a horrible symbol signifying a horrid person—a member of an insurrection, for example, deserving of humiliating capital punishment. So the fact that God, in his divine wisdom, uses such a symbol to show his power is truly amazing. And I think it points out that God is in control, no matter how brilliant we think we may become, how many degrees we may get, and how much we may study.

God’s wisdom is always going to surpass ours, and there’s nothing we can do that will outshine anything God can do for us. We are not God, and I’m grateful for that every single day. Lent brings that truth to the fore. Thanks be to God.



**WE ARE NOT GOD, AND
I’M GRATEFUL FOR THAT
EVERY SINGLE DAY. LENT
BRINGS THAT TRUTH TO
THE FORE.**

CHAPTER FOUR

LIVING IN LENT WITH SIGHTS SET ON EASTER

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John Welch

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As we think deeply about the time Christ persevered and suffered on the way to the cross, and how he suffered on the cross, we should realize that even though the “season” of Lent has a beginning and a terminus, we ought always to be ready to accept the sufferings that will come upon us throughout our life’s journey, even throughout our life of ministry. We can find encouragement in Scripture’s telling us that the suffering of this present time is not worthy to be compared with the glory that will one day be revealed. But let’s not get locked into the beginning and ending of seasons, including the “season” of Lent.

Yet Lent can teach us the value of discipline. My wife now pastors the church I used to pastor, and she has for a while now led the congregation into the Daniel Fast. Quite honestly, I have never looked forward to it. I still don’t look forward to it. I’m in the midst of it. I can’t wait to get out of it. It means no meats—basically, just beans, rice, and vegetables. No added sugar—but much prayer! Otherwise, it’s just a diet. This is a practice we’ve gone through for the past eight years, and the congregation loves it—and all of us look forward to reflecting on how things have been *after* 40 days!



Discipline—whether in the Daniel Fast or in these other practices—can be difficult. Lent reminds us not only that difficulty and suffering are present realities but also that, rather than running away from them, we are called to embrace them.

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul says that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. Everything old has passed away. Everything has become new. One of the things that strikes me in this passage is that it starts off with a condition. “If” any person be in Christ, he or she is a new creature, a new creation. Meeting the condition *effects* the change and *affects* the consequences. And there are consequences for not meeting the condition.

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But the change effected by *meeting* the condition does not necessarily mean that things in your life will be different. It doesn’t mean that now that I’m a new person in Christ, my life is going to be a rose garden. It doesn’t mean that I’m going to be flying above life’s challenges and escaping suffering. Those things will still be there, but I’ll be looking at them from a different perspective. The newness of being in Christ means my eyes are new, my hearing is new, how I walk should be new, but it doesn’t mean that the things I faced before I met the condition will have gone away. We new creations in Christ won’t escape them until we get to glory. So as we experience Lent, we can, in divine assurance, set our sights on Easter.



LENT REMINDS US THAT
DIFFICULTY & SUFFERING
ARE PRESENT REALITIES,
& WE ARE CALLED TO
EMBRACE THEM.

CHAPTER FIVE

COMMUNITY IS KEY

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Barbara Blodgett

Associate Dean of Academic Programs and Assessment

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A few years ago I learned that a group of pastors who were also friends of mine were part of an intentional peer group of pastors, and they had set aside Easter Monday to be together as peers in ministry. I thought how smart that was. Pastors really do need one another, and the practice of getting together as peers can really help them stay happy and healthy in their ministry.

Ministry is many things. On the negative side, it's often lonely, difficult, prone to fostering feelings of inauthenticity. And there are ways in which Holy Week and Easter bring out all those things. Ministry is lonely, not in the sense that as a pastor you aren't with other people, but sometimes you're the only one in your particular role, so you're lonely in the role. It's difficult just because you're spread so thin, you're busy with so many different responsibilities toward so many people—and often during Holy Week you have a lot of extra worship responsibilities on top of everything else. And as to fostering feelings of inauthenticity, how hard it is to convey the meaning of the cross and the resurrection! When you as a pastor feel as though you're offering glib responses because people want to hear something from the person they look to as the expert—and you know you're not!—you can feel false.

So what better way to debrief all those experiences than to get together with other people who've been through it too, and who can remind you that you're not alone. Yes, this is difficult. No, you're not a fake. Those friends of mine said the best thing they'd

ever done was to designate Easter Monday as the day they would spend together as peers in ministry. One of the things our doctor of ministry students say is so valuable for them in their program here is the pairing of learning with a cohort of peers in ministry with whom they can learn and process. The same thing happens in our Church Planting and Revitalization Certificate Program.

The best voices on evaluation in the pastoral context remind us that ministry has to be a communal effort. Contrary to what's often said, it's not all the pastor's fault when things don't go well—or all to the pastor's credit when they do go well. The outcome of ministry depends on the whole community. And for our church communities as a whole, to be curious about where the future may be calling them is really important.

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A Lenten practice I've come to love is foot-washing, often done during a Maundy Thursday service. It's incredibly humbling both to have your feet washed and to wash someone else's feet. It's a little scary. You have to take your socks and shoes off and have someone kneel at your feet. It is surprisingly intimate. It's very relational. And ecumenically, it brings people together. I've been in contexts where Protestants and Roman Catholics can't gather together around the communion table, but they can gather to wash each other's feet. So practicing foot washing during Holy Week can be a wonderful way to bring together communities of Christ-followers who are theologically diverse.

Isaiah 43 reads, "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." During Lent, join together in a new hope.



**THE OUTCOME OF
MINISTRY DEPENDS ON THE
WHOLE COMMUNITY.**

MUSIC—THERE'S NOTHING LIKE IT

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Director of the Worship Program

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Music has the power to pull us into the pathos and drama of the Lenten-Easter season in a way that spoken words can't always do. Oftentimes during Lent we think sad or soft music in a minor key is most appropriate. But actually there's a very wide variety of music that welcomes us into the drama culminating in Holy Week—music that points us to repentance, to life in Christ, to his sacrifice.

Lent also offers us a sense of assurance, of growth and deepening relationship and discipleship as we engage in self-examination. And that's something to celebrate, to acknowledge with joy. So our music can point not only to repentance but also to the mercy we receive, not only to Christ's death but also to Christ's life and the profound love demonstrated in his self-giving on the cross.

Further, Lent challenges us to look forward to the fullness of the kingdom, and in so doing to look outward, to conceive of Christ's sacrifice, resurrection, and mercy not only for "me personally" but also for the whole world. So when we sing "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? . . . sometimes it causes me to tremble," we tremble not just at the thought of Jesus on the cross but also in recognition of the pain and brokenness of the world around us. It is there that we find our calling. So Lent can be a particular time to draw on the songs of the global church, to join our voices with the languages and musical expressions of "the other."



With these thoughts in mind, let me note a few of my favorite hymns and songs for Lent and Easter. Some of them come from the contemporary Christian music genre, such as Stuart Townend's *How Deep the Father's Love for Us*. It points me to a profound sense of my own sin, which put Jesus on the cross. But the song also gives me assurance of God's deep love, as conveyed in the title.

Bill Wallace's *Why Has God Forsaken Me* (in the PCUSA's hymnal, *Glory to God*) emphasizes Christ's sharing in our humanity, our loneliness, grief, and loss, and even our tears. This song calls us to recognize the suffering of the world as we remember the suffering of Christ.

Another one of my favorites is by John Bell—*Heaven Shall Not Wait*—with its reminder of the truth, repeated in the third line of each stanza, that Jesus is Lord. In that assurance and in the soaring melody line at that point, this song catches up all kinds of experiences and sweeps you up into that truth, while at the same time emphasizing that heaven is not a distant place. In fact, the kingdom of God has already come into our midst in Christ.

On a Barren Hilltop, also in *Glory to God*, is a hymn I frequently use as a call to confession. It starts with a profound image of Jesus on the cross, beyond the gates of the city, on a barren hilltop—a nameless figure crying out, “It is finished.” In this statement of victory we are invited to bring our sin and brokenness before the One who has already accomplished our forgiveness.

Finally, *There in God's Garden*, set by K. Lee Scott, tells the whole story. It begins with the tree of wisdom in the Garden of Eden and progresses through to the tree on which Jesus is crucified. It ends with an eschatological invitation to join our voices with all heaven in a joyful “Hallelujah!” song of resurrection.



MUSIC CAN POINT NOT
ONLY TO REPENTANCE
BUT ALSO TO THE MERCY
WE RECEIVE

TELLING THE OLD STORY FROM THE WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE

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Steven S. Tuell

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A very natural way to incorporate readings from the Prophets into your Holy Week celebration is through use of a lectionary and a companion to it, such as *Feasting on the Word*, which is a collection of articles from homiletical, theological, pastoral, and biblical studies perspectives on each of the lectionary readings for the whole year. During some years, the lectionary for Holy Week includes passages from the Hebrew Bible that run through Isaiah 53's four Servant Songs, read traditionally in the church as applying to Jesus. Certainly Jesus understood his own ministry in terms of that Servant, and the Servant Songs can invite us to think about what it means to live out the servant-life that Jesus modeled. Similarly in some years, the lectionary reading on Maundy Thursday is from Exodus 12, which relates the establishment of the Passover Pesach—a very natural entry into thinking about Jesus' last meal with his disciples and his invitation to us into that life of fellowship.

We have a whole playground—the whole of Scripture—with this depth and richness and breadth to draw from during Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. Yet too often we wind up piddling about with the same little hamster-wheel of favorite texts, mostly from the right-hand side of the Bible. Looking at the whole of Scripture is an empowering and liberating way to find new ways to tell the Old Story. But it can be done badly. For example, I've observed that on Maundy Thursday many churches have begun conducting a "Christian" Seder—a Jewish service commemorating Passover—as though Christians can co-opt someone else's story. What we can do instead, however, is to take the opportunity to enter into the whole of our story. How? Perhaps by partnering with a local synagogue and participating as guests with its congregation in a Seder led by



the rabbi. That can be a very positive and powerful recognition of the authenticity and legitimacy of the Seder tradition—a way to see what it can say to us, while letting the community rooted in that tradition and ritual provide the points of leadership.

For Christians, the Lord's Supper does something very similar to what Pesach does for Jews. The Christian experience is rooted in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and future coming of Jesus Christ. In sharing in the Table of the Lord we enter into that root experience, just as at Pesach every Jew symbolically stands on the shores of the Red Sea and enters into the root experience of the Hebrews' Exodus from Egypt. For Christians to understand the power of the Lord's Table, we need to understand the whole breadth, depth, and complexity of Scripture.

Another example comes from Ezekiel 37, the prophet's vision of the valley full of corpses. Ezekiel prophesies to them, God blows breath on them, and they come to life. The point of the vision is that even though we're as good as dead, as the Jewish exiles were saying, God can bring us up from our graves. And in both Judaism and Christianity that image of bodily resurrection becomes the root metaphor for thinking about life beyond this life. So if you're looking for a text on the left-hand side of the Bible that speaks to Easter, then it's hard to do better than Ezekiel 37.

Speaking of resurrection, there's a service still practiced in some traditions—Anglican, Episcopal, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic—that other Christian traditions might consider reviving: observing the Paschal Vigil beginning the night before Easter and extending after midnight, thus making it the first service of Easter. The Vigil walks us through the story told in the whole of Scripture. So at the point in the story when Jesus enters entirely into our human lives, even by sharing in death, we can see the events of Holy Week as part of God's salvation history extending all the way back to Adam and Eve, "in the beginning."



**LOOKING AT THE
WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE IS
AN EMPOWERING AND
LIBERATING WAY TO FIND
NEW WAYS TO TELL THE
OLD STORY.**

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