

Feb 17, 2013

The First Sunday in Lent

Luke 4:1-13

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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I'd like to share with you a letter I wrote to an old friend.

Dear Lent,

Oh look. It's you again. Goody.

I'm sorry, you're right, that wasn't nice. But you have to understand, you are a challenge for me. I try hard to be an optimist, bright and shiny, an Easter person. And then here you come, slinking in all grey and ashen, with your penitence and your tough hymns and you steal all my Alleluias. You are simply no fun. You are the liturgical season that no one wants to invite to her party.

Lent, my friend, you are a downer. There. I said it. I'm an educated Anglican and I usually find you tedious. That's hard to admit. I wish I could be pious and holy and self-flagellating but I'm not really built like that and I look really awkward when I try.

But I am not ready to break up with you just yet. I am, after all, an Anglican, and to go from Christmas to Easter without pausing is just a little too Baptist for my taste. So I'll give you another shot.

Our reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning reminds us of one of the reasons for you, Lent. Jesus heads out into the wilderness into an exile of sorts for 40 days. It is a familiar story to me, the fasting and the testing, Jesus, the devil, the good, the evil. It is after such that the church modeled a season of penitence.

But I read something new in the story this time. That simple first line: "After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness..." Jesus, after being publicly confirmed as the Son of God, full of joy and promise and spirit, plunges himself into this time of darkness and doubt. His exile is self-imposed and it is on the heels of a spiritual high. Jesus, it seems, recognizes that life is a series of peaks and valleys, that sometimes our best moments must by necessity be followed by periods of introspection, thanksgiving, quietness, testing.

Nowhere in our Gospels does Jesus try to cling to the mountaintop or leap from one peak to the next. Jesus uses the powerful experiences of boundless grace in his own experience to power him through those times when it seems like the

darkness just might overcome him. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, plunges into the shadows assured that the shadows won't win, no matter how much the tempt, test and try.

And try they do. The devil shows up personally—this is the Son of God after all—and offers relief, riches, glory. The devil offers an end to suffering, an end to hunger. And Jesus declines, knowing that to rely on the devil is a cheap and inauthentic way to rise to the kind of glory Jesus is heading for.

Which brings me back to you, old friend. Lent, the truth is, it is unlikely that anyone will ever provide a worthy argument to get me excited about your approach. But I also know I can't live mountaintop to mountaintop either. Lent, you are more than just good for me, you are a necessary to my development as a faithfully mature person.

Without the mountaintops, the Christmases and Easters, I might forget to experience joy and wonder. I could forget that I am filled with and surrounded by grace and the power of the Holy Spirit. I might neglect to remember that I am made for love and that goodness reigns supreme.

But without the lows, without the Lents of my life, I might forget that filled with that same Spirit, I am incredibly strong. Without Lent, I could neglect that part of me that sustains through darkness, that outlasts evil. Without Lent, I forget that I am forgiven, loved and free, and that the devil has no hold over me.

But also, Lent, without you, I might forget that my power and strength, while incredible, are not limitless. I am mortal. Time, for me is finite. I still have to overcome my fears to live and love fully. While you raise me up, Lent, you also push my nose into the dust from which I come and into which I go. I am not God.

It is cheap to believe in a god who assures us that everything is easy. That kind of belief is a quick road to disappointment and faith crisis. It is an empty bible that has only happy stories with easy endings. It is a lame life of faith that never risks or hurts or rails against injustice. The easy god doesn't allow us to think or feel or choose or mess up.

We do not believe in an easy god or cheap faith. We believe in a God who never promised ease, but did promise strength when things seem impossible. We believe in a God who never promised unending happiness but did promise forgiveness and comfort. We believe in a God who never promised us limitless power but did eternal life.

Our annual journey through Lent—when we take it seriously—reminds us of these things, that the nature of God is not to rescue, but to sustain, forgive, and comfort.

So I guess what I'm saying is thanks, Lent, for being so... well, you know, all those things I mentioned earlier. You not only help me appreciate the Christmases and Easters, but you help me reaffirm that I am not God, but forgiven, loved and freed by God. You are uniquely useful on the liturgical calendar in that way. I am grateful.

I don't really want to hang out with you for any longer than I really have to. No offense. But while you are here, I will do my level best to honor your presence in my life.

Sincerely,
Noelle

P.S. No, you can't have any of my chocolate.