



Practicing Joy and Gratitude

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn on the First Sunday in Lent

Luke 4:1-13, March 6, 2022

Today is the first Sunday in Lent in case you hadn't noticed. I'm curious, what do you associate with Lent?

Lent is traditionally the forty days before Easter in which people learned about faith, fasted, and prayed like Jesus did in today's gospel reading. And the reason Lent lasts for forty days is because in the Hebrew imagination, the number forty represents transformation. Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness in today's gospel text. The heavens opened and poured rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights in the time of the Flood, when Noah built the ark. The people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty full years after leaving slavery before they were ready to enter the promised land. In all these stories, there is something ending, and something else beginning. I think it's no coincidence that it takes forty weeks for a baby to grow in a mother's womb.

Lent is the one time in the Christian liturgical year we are explicitly asked to be introspective. It is a time to align our values and identity and purpose. We "repent"—but this is just the practice we call "turn" in Jesus' Way of Love. It means to change direction, whether it's a one degree course correction or a full 180. We are turning away from something, and toward something.

Interestingly, Lent in the Old English just means spring. It turns out that the rhythms of the natural world are deeply intertwined in the timing of our Christian liturgical year. I've already said lent the forty days before Easter, but do you know how Easter is calculated? It's always the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. Pentecost, fifty days later, is based on the Jewish festival Shavuot, which honors that which nourishes us—the wheat harvest and the gift of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, and for Christians, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So the natural world is woven inseparably into our tradition. Even in today's gospel reading, Jesus goes into the wilderness—which in scripture is always the place people go to hear the voice of God. Any of us who go to the Boundary Waters or the North Shore or Yellowstone can relate. And it's interesting that in today's gospel reading, the devil tempts Jesus with the glory of all the kingdoms of the world, but Jesus knows that even King Solomon in all his glory could not compare with the beauty of a single lily in the field.

So why am I focusing on all this, the emphasis on the natural world in our stories? I believe we are in the middle of a great crossroads in history. For perhaps the first time in 1700 years, since the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion, the Western Christian mainstream has the collective chance to wake up, to see and follow the original Jesus, and to decolonize our theology and our practices.

John Scotus Eriugena, a 9th century Irish philosopher, said that there are two books through which God is speaking: the little book of scripture, and the big book of the cosmos, the natural world, which also reveals the nature of God. Both are needed to help us distinguish between truth and empire. Eriugena spoke of the divine Light that pervades all things. He said that the devil who tempted Jesus was living from his false self and tempting us to do the same. But Eriugena believed that even the devil

would eventually return to his true self, the being made by God of light. Eriugena believed that sin, such a traditional focus in lent, is like a leprosy of the soul—that which both deforms us and numbs us. Sin cloaks us with an insensitivity and a loss of feeling, an apathy to the impact of our choices. But sin is not who we are.¹

As I expressed in my Rector's Reflection in the e-news this past Thursday, this lent, perhaps our spiritual practice might be to focus on joy and gratitude, and to give up anxiety and numbness. We all know lots of ways to numb ourselves—whether it's Netflix or bourbon or Minecraft. But to focus on joy and gratitude, to cultivate a sensitivity to beauty that is right under our noses, can awaken our souls. If sin is being numb to the goodness and suffering of others, a sensitivity to joy and gratitude can help us repent—can help us feel again.

It may seem tone-deaf, or counterintuitive, or even wrong to focus on joy right now, given all that is happening in our community and world, in Ukraine and Afghanistan and elsewhere. Yesterday many of us were grieving at the funeral of 20-year old Claudia, daughter of Shelly and Brian Murray who died last weekend. The pastor in his homily spoke about Claudia as a gift; and the natural response to any gift is gratitude. Even in the midst of our overwhelming grief yesterday, we could feel gratitude for Claudia. Because our hearts were split open, we could feel the love everywhere. In his eulogy, Claudia's father Brian said that Claudia is love. And we all felt it.

There is a risk associated with becoming sensitive to joy and gratitude again. We become able to feel not just joy, but everything. I have been doing this practice, every evening looking back on the day and seeing where the goodness was, noticing it and soaking it in, becoming more sensitive to joy, giving thanks to God for it and asking myself how that

¹ See John Philip Newell, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2021) at 71-96.

will impact my choices the next day. It has been wonderful. But on Ash Wednesday this week, which was the new moon, I woke with a terrible dream about Emmet Till. For those who don't know, he was the 14-year-old Black teenager who was brutally lynched in 1955 by white men. Forgive me, I will share just a little bit about this dream. I dreamed Emmet was still alive, but barely, and I was in his presence and the presence of the man who had been so violent to him. I could see the full weight of Emmet's suffering, and I could also see the numbness of the man who brutalized him. This was so awful it woke me up and I could not get back to sleep. I didn't know that the night before, in Philadelphia, the police had shot and killed another 12-year-old boy, Thomas Siderio.

In my dream I saw the human being Emmet—not the civil rights story or a statistic or a fact of history. I believe that as we become more sensitive to joy and gratitude, we also become more sensitive to suffering. But isn't this what it means to really be alive? And isn't it what we need to motivate us to change? In order to truly follow Jesus we need open hearts. We must see the consequences of the evil we are turning away from, and we must also see the good we are turning toward. In fact, we cannot fully even see and comprehend the violence and evil we are complicit in unless we are not numb.

What will give us the courage and stamina to risk feeling both joy and suffering? I believe it is hope. Hope comes from seeing the goodness of God that is right under our noses all the time. Hope comes from knowing that things can be better because of who God made us to be; because of the light that shines in all people and in all creation. As Julian of Norwich says, we are not so much made *by* God as *of* God. John Scotus Eriugena said that nature is the "gift of being," and grace is the "gift of well-being."

So this lent, let us open our eyes and bodies and minds and hearts to grace—to goodness and joy and gratitude. Let us practice recognizing it all around us and within us. There will be endless temptations, like Jesus in today's scripture, to deny that we and others are beloved children of God, and to settle for seeking power and control instead. But we have forty days to practice letting this go, and to let God create a new life in us, with Jesus as our midwife, the natural world our teacher.

Here is the prayer I am using each morning of lent. Perhaps you might write a prayer in your own words, expressing your intent to practice joy and gratitude:

Gracious God, lover of all people and all beings, today I state my intention to be aware of the manifold goodness all around me and within me. I will notice the beauty of each face and the natural world, and each and every tiny cause of hope and of joy. Tonight, I will remember and reflect on this goodness and beauty. I will give thanks to God for the many sources of joy I encountered today and ask what difference that will naturally inspire in the way I behave tomorrow, with God's help.

Amen.