

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Lent 4 (C) ~ 30 March 2025
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Psalm 32
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

On the Lookout for Easter

Speaking just for myself – because I am the only one for whom I am authorized and able to speak – this has been an unusual Lent. As we were reminded a few weeks ago, on Ash Wednesday, in the early Church Lent was the time when

those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church.

As a result, down through the centuries the emphasis of Lent has been a period for

*self-examination and repentance and prayer, fasting, and self-denial.*¹

We know this. This is why many of us begin the season with the imposition of ashes on our foreheads, as a reminder of our human limitations and mortality.

Again, speaking just for myself, I usually approach Lent from the point of view of obligation and endurance, setting my heart on my most pious of intentions for forty days *so that* I might experience and appreciate the joy of Easter more fully.

There's nothing wrong with that, of course, and it's certainly in keeping with the ancient practices of the Church. Ritual and tradition are important

¹ BCP, 265.

elements of spiritual growth. *And*, at the same time, it must be said that there can be a performative element to Lent, a sense of “going through the motions” when, at the end of the day, we know that Jesus is raised – whether we keep a holy Lent or not.

We know the end of the story, a story that we did not write, and nothing that we do or don’t do during Lent can change that.

Thanks be to God.

I think that we often approach Lent as something *we* create, a season that *we* choose to observe – or don’t. That is to say, we tend to think of ourselves as the agents, the actors, the ones carving out this discrete time to curate an experience for ourselves. We veil our “Alleluias” (in case you’re wondering what’s beneath that shroud at the foot of the pulpit), we change our vestments and hangings to purple (the traditional color of repentance), and we swap out our shiny brass Altar appointments for wood.

Now, please don’t misunderstand me: It is good that we do these things as a way of setting this time apart. I just want to caution us against believing that Lent – or any of the liturgical seasons, for that matter – is something that *we* cause to happen. Instead, the rhythm of the Church cycle is grounded in the rhythm of the Gospel itself, which is to say in the reality of death and the mystery of resurrection that lies at the very heart of our faith.

It is bigger than we are.

In other words, Lent happens *to* us, without us needing to manufacture the experience artificially. And so does Easter – but I’m getting ahead of myself.

This is what I mean when I say that, for me, it has been an unusual Lent this year. Personally, I have not been able to muster the spiritual bandwidth to take on much in the way of new practices or to deny myself much that brings me joy. I just can’t. In light of the past two months and, truth be told, the

past several years, it has felt like we all have been mired in Lent for a long time. And we may be for some time to come – well past April 20th.

Or not. We don't know.

God's calendar and ours don't necessarily sync up. We can find ourselves in Lent – or Easter – at any time.

So instead of *observing* Lent, like a scientist collecting data from an objective outsider perspective, this year I have been *embedding*, or *immersing* myself in it, acknowledging where I am – where we all are – in the Gospel life cycle of death and resurrection.

Right now it feels as though death is everywhere. We are in the wilderness, wandering in an arid, infertile land. We don't see much in the way of new life on the horizon.

And our bodies and our souls know, instinctively, what to do at the time of death. We grieve. We mourn. No one has to tell us to do that. It is our hard-wired response to loss.

That said, we each grieve in our own particular way. Some of us need to withdraw, to cocoon, to sit with and in our pain. We pray. We contemplate. We sleep. We tend to our most basic needs – and maybe not much more than that.

For how long? we may wonder.

As long as it takes.

Others of us need to *do* something, to feel as though we have agency when it seems as though so much has been stripped away from us. So we protest. We rage. We fight back. We are agitated. We post. We are driven by the desire to bring about change.

Which of these grief responses is correct? we may wonder.

They both are.

And these are not the only ways to grieve, of course.

The point is that we are all deep in Lent right now, each mourning in our own way.

And we need to remember that, and tread lightly on each other's broken hearts.

It's easy to miss the fact that others are grieving – to assume that the quiet contemplatives are unaffected or apathetic, or that the active change-agent types have it all together.

The truth is, we are all hurting. Every one of us. Make no mistake about it.

So how then, as people of faith, are we to live? How are we to make our way through this time of mourning, this protracted Lent?

Today we hear one of the most familiar, if not the best known, of all of Jesus' parables. I make this distinction – between “familiar” and “best known” – because sometimes beloved biblical stories become like the old faded wallpaper in the house where we grew up: so familiar that we no longer “see” (or hear) them anymore. We may think we know them better than we actually do. I think this is especially true of this story, often called the Parable of the Prodigal, or Lost, Son.

The passage begins with the Pharisees and the scribes “grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” They are offended by His choice of dinner companions. They are concerned with righteousness and propriety, emphasizing differences among people, throwing shade and comparing themselves with “those others.”

(And before we get on our collective high-horses, self-righteously picking on those Pharisees and scribes, let's be real. We all do exactly the same thing.)

In response to this all-too-human grumbling, Jesus does what Jesus does so well. He tells a story, a parable. Listen to how He begins:

“There was a man who had two sons...”

Back when I was an English teacher, if I asked my students to identify the *subject* of this sentence, they would answer, rightly, the “man.” The man is the subject of the sentence; the story is about *him*.

So often we skip right over the father and focus instead on the sons.

So let's pay attention to *him*.

We know the parable well: Younger brother wants to cash in his inheritance early. Father capitulates. Younger brother goes off and squanders his wealth *and* his life (the Greek word, *bios*, means both) and, after hitting rock bottom, decides he needs to go home. Father rejoices, throws a party. Older brother sulks. Father tells him to get over it: They *had* to celebrate, because the one who was dead has come to life. The one who was lost has been found.

Everyone is hurting in this parable; the world of the story exudes pain.

The pain of a younger brother who is scared and filled with shame

The pain of a hurt older brother, who feels overlooked and unappreciated

The pain of a grieving father

And since Jesus' story is about the *father*, it is the father we are meant to emulate.

Watch what he does:

Even in the midst of his grief, the father looks to the horizon – which is how he is able to see his still-far-off son.

And he runs toward him. No questions asked. He showers his child with plenteous grace.

Recently a colleague gave me a book with a provocative, attention-getting title: *Unreasonable Hospitality: The Remarkable Power of Giving People More Than They Expect*. It's by Will Guidara, the owner of a world-famous restaurant in New York City. He shares how he developed his proven formula for success in the culinary industry. I haven't gotten very far in the book yet, but I was struck by one of the most important principles he has learned over the course of his career, a principle that guides everything he does: "Make the charitable assumption."

Guidara writes that this is "a reminder to assume the best of people, even when (or perhaps *especially* when) they [aren't] behaving particularly well." So, for example, "instead of immediately expressing disappointment with an employee who has shown up late," he has learned to ask first, "[I]s everything okay?"²

We might extrapolate to our own context.

Is this not exactly what the father in this parable does? He throws a party. He gives thanks. He praises. He probably even shouts an "Alleluia" or two. In the midst of his long Lent, still this father has had his eyes out, looking for Easter. Because Easter happens, usually when we least expect it. And we need to be prepared.

The great New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine summarizes today's parable this way:

² Will Guidara, *Unreasonable Hospitality: The Remarkable Power of Giving People More Than They Expect* (New York: Optimism Press, 2022), 29.

Don't wait until you receive an apology; you may never get one. Don't wait until you can muster the ability to forgive; you may never find it. Don't stew in your sense of being ignored, for there is nothing that can be done to retrieve the past.

Instead, go have lunch. Go celebrate, and invite others to join you. If the repenting and the forgiving come later, so much the better. And if not, you still will have done what is necessary. You will have begun a process that might lead to reconciliation. You will have opened a second chance for wholeness. Take advantage of resurrection.³

My friends, as your pastor I offer you this Gospel wisdom from Jesus, here in the midst of our long season of Lenten grief:

God's calendar and ours don't necessarily sync up. We can find ourselves in Lent – or Easter – at any time.

Always be on the lookout for Easter.

Shower one another with plenteous grace.

Practice unreasonable hospitality.

Make the charitable assumption.

Go have lunch.

Take advantage of resurrection when it happens.

May it be so, *Amen*.

³ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 75.