

Washing Away the Past
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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I have a friend who's on the periphery of Christianity—that's me trying to say nicely that he's someone who had grown up in the church, fallen away in his twenties, and thought about stepping back in but wasn't really sure how or if he even really wanted to deep down. We spoke one Ash Wednesday about the ritual and the beginning of Lent, and he commented that he wanted to come see me preach sometime, but not during Lent he said, because Lent is too depressing.

He may honestly think it's depressing, and he's allowed, but I think he was voicing a deeper realization that a shift in mood happens during Lent. I wouldn't necessarily categorize it as depressing, but it is more subdued. We are preparing ourselves to go through some trials with Jesus and we're trying to set the mood. We dim the lights so to speak, the music goes into minor keys, in some churches "Alleluia" is not sung or even said aloud during these 40 days, the liturgical colors are now purple, the scriptures will start to show Jesus preparing the disciples for when he'll be gone—he knows it's coming.

Many of us "give something up" for Lent. I've personally been doing the Lenten Carbon Fast, and I'll admit that when I read the tip that I should remove one light bulb from my house as a reminder of the carbon fast (and of course, it saves energy) part of me felt a little sad inside. I removed my light bulb and I held it in my hand for awhile and in a moment of reflection (or being sleep deprived and loopy, either way), I considered that Lent really is a dimming of the lights because pretty soon the light of Christ will go out completely for a couple of days only to burst forth victoriously on Easter morning. And then, I'll get my light bulb back too. Light will come back into the world, what a glorious moment that will be!

But we're not there yet. We're not even close. We're just beginning this trip. That's why the scriptures today have ritual cleansing in common. We see Jesus get baptized, get tempted in the wilderness, and then come out of that trial calling people to "repent and believe in the good news."^[1]

And in 1 Peter we see the author talk about Jesus' suffering bringing us to God and God waiting patiently for humanity to turn away from sin only to save Noah and his family in the Ark. The point of all of this for our Lenten purposes is the concept of ritual cleansing, the cleansing of our souls before God, of setting things right, of turning back to life-giving practices in our everyday existence.

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister, says it like this, "Lent enables us to face ourselves, to see the weak places, to touch the wounds in our own soul, and to determine to try once more to live beyond our lowest aspirations."^[2] For me, it's never been about beating yourself up and listing all of the ways you are a horrible human being, but it is about saying here are some areas in my life where I want to do better, where I can do better with the help of God and by being honest with myself.

I've told you before I have a nerdy side, and I happen to adore The Lord of the Rings. And I have to talk about these fantastic movies today since the Oscars are tonight and The Return of the King shares the record of most Oscars ever won with Ben-Hur and Titanic. These movies won 11 Oscars each at their respective Academy Awards, as if you needed any proof that Lord of the Rings is awesome.^[3]

In The Lord of the Rings, one of the most disappointing story lines for me is that of the wizard Sauraman. He gets corrupted by power and greed and the evil lord Sauron. He turns the land entrusted to him into a trash heap. He breeds an army and unnaturally alters the creatures in the land. He cuts down trees from a sacred forest and then all of the Ents, who are peace-loving tree herders in Middle Earth (basically walking, talking tree beings) finally get fed up and attack his fortress. By the way, I am really summarizing this, to see all of these events unfold; please watch The Fellowship of the Ring and The Two Towers.

Anyway, to destroy his operations a few of the Ents go to a river that Sauraman has dammed up and they tear down the dam and release the water. The water comes rushing down the hillside and washes away the remnant of his evil plans. And this is where I get disappointed. I want this wizard so badly to come to his senses. I want him to realize that if these peaceful tree-herders, who have made it a habit of not involving themselves at all in the affairs of the outside world, destroy your dam and attack your fortress, you must be doing some offensive things here. Maybe you've been wrong, maybe you should change your ways.

But he doesn't change, in fact, in the books he goes on to wreak more havoc in Middle Earth which they don't even show in the movies. The cleansing water to wash away his sins came rolling down that hill and nothing changed. And Tolkien knew what he was doing with this one, not only was he a brilliant professor at Oxford, he was also a devout Roman Catholic and he hated industrialization—thought it was ruining the English countryside. So it makes sense that the holy water, the pure power of nature, washes away this industrialized complex.

Because the thing about any symbolic cleansing, any washing away of a past life to come into a brighter future is that you have to do something about it afterwards if it's going to change your life. The act in and of itself is not necessarily going to magically save you, there has to be some conscious effort made if you want or need to change your ways. You can get symbolically cleansed, you can be symbolically forgiven, you can be symbolically claimed—the grace of God extends to us all in these ways. It's a grace freely given because we are loved, but the rest is up to us.

That's why when the Church baptizes a child or adult, we are saying that we affirm this person as a child of God, we claim them as a disciple of Christ, and as a member of the church, but the rest is up to them. They may never set foot in a church again. If they desire to live out this affirmation, both made by themselves or their parents, by the church and by God, there's some actions they need to take once that water dries.

We are cradled and comforted by the mercy of God in all things. There's the great story told that a man dies and goes to meet Peter at the pearly gates of heaven. Peter says that the man needs some clearance before he can be admitted. The man asks what it takes and Peter says, "You need at least five hundred points to get in."

The man starts listing off some things that could get him those five hundred points, "I was a dedicated husband, father, and employee. I never cheated on my wife, my boss, or the IRS." Peter calculates these things and says that the man is up to 100 points. "That's all? Let's see, I gave money to United Way, volunteered weekly at a soup kitchen, rang the Salvation Army bell every winter, and spent a week's vacation every summer building houses for the poor in Central America." Alright, Peter taps away on his calculator and announces that the man is up to 350 points.

"The man panics. He can't think of any other great deeds or sacrifices he did to make up for the deficit. He'll never get into heaven. 'That's it,' he says sadly. 'I throw myself on the mercy of God.'"

"You're in!" Peter says and throws open the gate. "Welcome home." [4]

God's mercy is the thing on which we need to rely. God's compassion for us, symbolized in baptism or anointing with oil or ashes placed on our foreheads transcends any actions we can do in our lives. However, we have to push ourselves to live into this mercy, to not just take it for granted that we'll be forgiven and purified so we can do whatever we want whenever we want to no matter who it hurts in the process.

The story doesn't end with Jesus getting baptized. He goes out into the Wilderness and then he starts up his ministry in full force. It would be a pretty short and insignificant Gospel if it ended with his baptism. The heavens part, God says, "I love you Jesus," and then Jesus says "Wonderful, thanks God" and then goes on with his life.

Or even the story of Noah's Ark alluded to in First Peter, "Hey thanks for saving me and my family and these animals from the flood, God." And then God says, "You're welcome Noah," and then he sails off into the sunset with the rainbow above him guiding his way. No, after both of these cleansings, these men of God allow themselves to be transformed not just outwardly and publically but inwardly and personally. They take the mercy and grace of God to heart and they allow it to alter the way they relate to the world around them.

Maybe you're thinking that none of us need cleansed in the first place, and maybe we don't need it for our salvation, but we may deeply desire to be freed from the shackles of the past to enter into a bright, new future. These acts can hold us up to a higher standard and they can free us to live our lives anew. As Joan Chittister says, Lent is the time "to try once more to live beyond our lowest aspirations." [5] And so whether you are giving something up for Lent or taking something on, I hope this season will be a time for us to be transformed, sustained by the always seeking, never ending mercy of God. May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Mark 1:15.

[2] Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year*, 112-113.

[3] http://www.stltoday.com/entertainment/movies/oscar-looks-backward-with-fun-facts/article_6b4e8639-077a-52f6-86b3-4b91027e12da.html

[4] Regina Brett, *God Never Blinks: 50 Lessons for Life's Little Detours*, 156.

[5] Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year*, 112-113.