



LENT

REMEMBERING OUR BAPTISM

Something parents often find themselves doing with small children is helping them to anticipate and enter big events—like birthdays, or taking the time to bury dead birds, or making the emotional journey toward the first day of school.

I was faced with this preparatory responsibility a decade ago when I needed to help our four children get ready for a trans-Atlantic move. We had raised them in Scotland, eating shepherd's pie, surrounded by sheep, and now they were supposed to become Americans overnight?

We couldn't figure out how to make the transition one which would help our children with the massive change – one which would honor the emotional and psychological distances they would be crossing to change culture, friends, continents. We needed some way for them to cross this distance. We could have taken a plane and been in Seattle in 13 hours! But we knew we needed time to cover the distance. So instead, we settled on going by boat ... for 7 days.

When the Statue of Liberty finally came into view, we felt ready. We felt like pilgrims (although our accommodation wasn't exactly like the Mayflower). Something inside us had had time to catch up to the immensity of the journey. We were now Americans.

Lent is very much like this.

We know Easter is coming, but how do we avoid just rushing right through the mystery? The early church knew that Christians would have a hard time getting ready for Easter on our own. Lent is a period of time set aside to help people prepare for Easter. It is choosing to get on a boat for 40 days when we could just get there in 13 hours by plane.

Lent is a gift: A grace given through trial and error by past spiritual giants in the church who acted like good parents, trying to help their children get ready for, and be able to

take in, the big events in their lives.

In the early days of Christianity, getting baptized was like a death-warrant. Not everyone was cut out for persecution, and so they didn't automatically baptize people who were interested in Jesus. Instead, they trained baptismal candidates in a "spiritual gymnasium" (called a catechumenate) for three years to make sure that these people were tough enough to endure the persecution that was most certainly ahead. Imagine waiting three years for your baptism!

These three years of training were like a prolonged spiritual high – gathering in catacombs, secret passwords, intimacy with God, growing knowledge of Scriptures. And if your life reflected a growing Christ-likeness and trust in Jesus, you would be considered ready for baptism. You would fast and pray and finish preparations in the 40 days leading up to this day. Some things were so classified that you weren't taught them until the week of your baptism—the Lord's Prayer and the Creed were never written down, but passed on orally.

And then, at long last, at midnight as Holy Saturday was rolling into Easter Sunday, you declared something very unusual: you declared your death. As Colossians 2 says, "for you were buried with Christ when you were baptized, and with him you were raised to new life." In baptism, you get to die before you die.

Some early baptismal fonts help us, through their architecture, understand how the early Christians thought about baptism:

EARLY CHRISTIAN BAPTISTRIES proclaimed this message loud and clear, as they were in the shape of mausoleums: Roman burial chambers. To go inside what was normally a funerary building for one's baptism declareds: "you are going here to die. We are burying a deceased person. Sin killed you. You are just reenacting your death. You will rise to a new identity – of being

in Christ, and in his body of other people."

ONCE INSIDE THE MAUSOLEUM, the architecture shouted to you about new life. One ancient baptismal font is in the shape of an Octagon, which for the early Christians was all about the New Creation. If creation happened in seven days, and Jesus rose on the "eighth day," then God has inaugurated a new creation in the life-death-resurrection of Jesus ... otherwise known as the 8th day. You would enter the mausoleum, where normally there would be a dead body, but instead of a corpse on a platform, there was a font where one "went to die." The fact that this font was octagonal helped these early Christians understand that they were not just stepping into the waters of baptism, they were stepping into the 8th day of creation. They had been re-created. Anything could happen now.

ANOTHER FONT WITH EQUALLY STRONG IMAGERY was in the shape of a womb. You must be born again, said Jesus – and how direct was this imagery of female anatomy! And just in case you think this is a bit odd, did you know that people were baptized completely naked? The early church was clear: you are dying with Christ, and being raised with Christ. You are reversing the shame that Adam and Eve experienced in the garden, and being born anew, into the 8th day of creation.



So what does all this have to do with Lent?

After the persecutions were over, after Christianity became an empire religion, Christianity faced a different kind of crisis. What was once dangerous (to be a Christian), suddenly became fashionable. What once could get you killed now got you a tax-break.

To be honest, this isn't too far from a crisis we ourselves are facing. What do we do when our Christianity is easy, doesn't require too much of us, makes us complacent and inward-focused? Do we read more books? Look for the next radical thing to do? Join an extreme ministry team? This is a crisis for us on both a national and a personal level.

The early church came up with a

solution which might be helpful for us today. These early Christians remembered the three years of intense training to get to their baptism; they remembered the 40 days of fasting up until Easter Eve—the night of their baptism; and they remembered all this with fondness and even nostalgia. And they said “Let’s go back to our origins. Let’s do our 40 days of baptismal preparations again.” They wanted to look forward to Easter with newness, with joy and rekindled gratitude. They didn’t want their faith to become routine and old. This is how Lent originated.

So Lent is for those of us who have caught ourselves wanting to feel again what we felt at that Young Life Camp when we first met Jesus. *The Early Church knew that.* Lent is for those of us who have caught ourselves longing for that discipline

that came naturally in our early relationship with God. *The Early Church knew that.* Lent is for those of us who have wanted to just get baptized—to start over—again. *The Early Church knew that, too.*

Lent is not about renunciation. It is about remembering our baptism.

Lent did not begin out of a desire to self-punish or to focus on our sinfulness. It’s even more black and white than that: Lent is about death. But the crazy Christian message is that it is only through death that we taste life. Lent is when the whole church remembers our origins—origins that began in our baptism, and Jesus’ baptism, where he heard the words that we can hardly believe: “you are my beloved.”

Only when this has settled into our depths can we, like Jesus, go into the desert of Lent for 40 days. Jesus was able to endure tremendous temptation in the desert not because he was “divine” but because he was loved. His baptism prepared him for the desert of temptation. In fact, after he was baptized, it says the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. This was his armor against temptation, not divine self-mastery. He knew he was the Father’s son. This and this only should have our attention as we head into our own wilderness this Lent.

Most of us dwell on our flaws before we dwell on God’s love. But this Lent, reverse that trend, and follow Jesus, who first heard God’s word of “beloved” before he headed into the desert. And then, in the strength of that love, enter into Lent. You don’t need something more radical. You don’t need something more punitive. You need to clear the ground so that you can hear God’s word of love over you, and then—yes, you might need to sort through some things that are disordered in your life.

What our baptism gives us is a completely different ground for our identity. What if we took Lent as a 40 day period to remember what

happened to us (possibly when we were babies and hadn’t a clue what was going on): that our baptism is a gift! That we have been “laid-off” or fired from our constant 80-hour work week of maintaining our fragile identities.

Funnily enough, I’ve heard people say that Lent “isn’t in the Bible” or it is just a “man-made routine.” Lent originated out of the early Christians’ desire to not let their faith become routine. It was an annual routine to keep them from the routine. Of course it has been abused – what in our Christian life has not? But that fact shouldn’t keep us from the good parenting techniques that the early church has to offer. Let this be 40 days of remembering your baptism, and the identity it offers you, free of charge.



On Ash Wednesday in the ancient church, everyone came to church to be marked by Jesus’ cruciform way, and declare that they are beloved dust. They were marked with a cross and told “you are but dust.” It marked the beginning of 40 days (not counting Sundays) when you don’t just give up something but you turn towards Jesus and your baptismal identity, leaving behind anything that is making you sluggish.

Of course we should be turning from sin all the time, the way we should be flossing our teeth all the time, but our wise parent The Church has set aside time for us all to remember our baptism. Together. To step down into our true identity. To be plunged into Christ, and leave behind anything that keeps us from knowing we are loved by God, and allowing us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Lent is not an endurance stunt. It is reclaiming that we are loved long before we enter the wilderness.



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The article included here is a written adaptation of a lecture Dr. Canlis gave at Westmont College on March 2 of this year and can be found on Youtube. Church of the Redeemer had the privilege of hosting Dr. Canlis as a speaker at Convocation in 2021. There, she offered a lecture that is an enriching exploration of Paul’s theology as an extended meditation on his baptism, and the church calendar as the embodiment of our own. We highly commend this presentation: it can be viewed by searching for “Convocation 2021 Plenary 3 - Dr. Julie Canlis” on the Diocese of Christ Our Hope Youtube channel.

