

Lessons for Lent from Dante

"In the middle of our journey in life I found myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost."

This is the first sentence of Dante's [Divine Comedy](#), and it seems to be a helpful sentence for the beginning of Lent. Let's explore how it might apply to our Lenten journey.

We are always in "**the middle**" because there is something before and after, we sense that we don't have time for the real work we are called to do. The work is looking at our failings and sins and then climbing up the Seven Story Mountain to Paradise.

It's "**our journey**" because men and women have gone before us and because we don't get to Hell or Purgatory or Heaven by ourselves. We grow together; we die together; we are always together. Part of the work of Lent is to recognize our connectiveness and to invest in the wellbeing of our brothers and sisters -- all of whom are on the path. Dorothy Day once said if we tried to get to heaven by ourselves the question St. Peter would ask at heaven's gates is, "Where are the others? You didn't think could come by yourself, did you?" We cannot hate our neighbors -- which means everyone -- and love God. So, to walk into Lent is to walk with others -- asking their help for our journey and offering our help for theirs.

"We find ourselves," which means we remember who we are. Just as the Prodigal Son "came to himself," so Lent is a time for us to remember who we are and why we are here. It's a time to let go of our distractions as well as our addiction to division and move our feet towards Paradise. When I would mess up as a teenager, which was often, part of my father's lecture was to ask me, "What's important?" I think of St. Teresa's words: "Remember that you have only one soul; that you have only one death to die; that you have only one life, which is short and must be lived by you alone; and that there is only one glory which is eternal. If you do this, there will be many things about which you care nothing." When we find ourselves, we remember who we are and recall the "one glory which is eternal." Then we can move our feet toward home even though it takes us into the Inferno and up the Mountain of Purgatory.

"We are in **a dark wood**." Jesus begins his ministry in the wilderness because it's not enough to know about people that have come before us; we must learn who we are and why we are here for ourselves. Lent is a time of introspection: a kind of internal garage sale. What should we let go of and what should we embrace? What indeed is food for the journey and what is simply baggage? The dark wood means the old ways are cut off and we must walk beyond the "straight road" to face our sins and embrace our image of God.

Thus, "**the straight way was lost.**" Resurrection requires surrender. Lent is not some spiritual Olympics where we give up chocolate to deserve Easter. It's to enter the Cloud of Unknowing. It's to let go of our way of understanding the world so that we might be given a new vision of the world. As Cynthia Bourgeault says, we let go of our "operating system" which is our way of filtering reality into a meaning we can comprehend. Instead, we go the way of unknowing because losing ourselves is finding ourselves.

So practically, what does all that mean? Here are a few guesses but only guesses because we all must find our own way.

- Change your schedule. Our routines can put us on automatic while a change might increase our awareness.
- Carve out one part of the day for Holy Listening. The wise saying is, "Pray as you can, not as you can't." God doesn't care if you practice yoga or Centering Prayer or fast for forty days. What matters is our intention to open up to God and our actions based on that intention. We are to carve out a time for that openness.
- If it's "our journey" in life, then we pray for those we care for and those we don't. We must pray for our enemies or simply the people that drive us crazy, and we pray for our capacity to see them as children of God, just like us.
- Remember those who suffer and connect with them -- write, call, or pray. Again, it's "our journey."
- Admit what you don't know and don't feel. Place those before God and ask for your heart's desire. Once I had to pray for three months for the capacity to pray for someone because I was so angry at this person, I couldn't pray for him. Ninety days later I could.
- Embrace the truth that you are God's beloved and that it's God's love for you that will pull you through the Inferno and up the Seven Story Mountain into Paradise.
- Love. Love yourself; your neighbor; this fragile earth our island home; your enemies, and God.
- We walk step by step. We have the whole season of Lent on this path, and we get to the heavenly city one day, one step at a time. That means find the manna for this day and let it nourish you.

Finally, let us remember lines from the Ash Wednesday service: "that those things may please God which we do on this day, and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy, so that at the last we may come to God's eternal joy through Jesus Christ our Lord."