The Meaning of Lent to This Unchurched Christian

Feb. 28, 2022



Margaret Renkle

New York Times

NASHVILLE — On Wednesday, in Catholic parishes across the world, a priest will dip his thumb into a pot of ashes — the burned remains of blessed palms from last year's Palm Sunday Mass — and smudge the sign of the cross on each congregant's forehead. Performing this ancient ritual, he will murmur, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

The priest will say these words on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, but he will not be saying these words to me.

I have had a troubled relationship with the church of my childhood since childhood itself, when I learned in Catholic school that I would never be allowed to become a priest. For decades, nevertheless, the gifts of my faith outweighed the pronouncements of the institutional church that I found alienating or enraging. Human institutions are inherently flawed, and I have always loved the rituals that linked me across time to so many others facing fear and loneliness and pain, to so many others finding solace in their faith.

Then the pandemic quarantines left me unchurched through no choice of my own, and the death of our last parent, for whom there would only ever be one Church, left my husband and me free to make our own choices about where to worship. I came to understand that my growing feeling of spiritual alienation wasn't temporary. I loved my parish, and I loved our brilliant, compassionate pastor, but I was done with the institutional church.

Still, I miss the community. I miss the singing. I miss serving in social justice ministries. I even miss the ashes.

Ash Wednesday isn't a day for rebellion. It's a day for fasting, reflection and prayer, a somber reminder that our lives are brief, our days running out. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The longer this pandemic drags on, the clearer those words become.

At 60, I am making peace with the dust to which I will return. For myself, at least — and *only* for myself — I don't even mind the idea of mortality, for I have thrown in my lot

with immortality. And isn't the promise of immortality what Lent prepares us for? How will I make ready, now that I am without a church? What rituals will I observe, now that the stations of the cross no longer belong to me?

In the old days, my Lenten resolution almost always meant giving up something whose absence I would feel acutely: coffee, perhaps, or cussing. In that way I would be reminded, again and again, of what this season is for. But the practice of imposed sacrifice feels as alien to me now as anything else from my decades as a practicing Catholic. Haven't we all had enough sacrifice in these last years? Every day I grieve two beloved family members lost during this pandemic. Every day I bear the grief of a burning world. I don't need to give up cussing at Vladimir Putin, too.

During their midlife years of creeping weight gain, my mother and father would announce that they were losing 10 pounds for Lent, a goal I always found hilarious. As a Lenten resolution, it did bear some resemblance to the fasting and sackcloth of the early days of Christianity, if not for an entirely spiritual reason. I'm no theologian, but I feel sure that Jesus did not spend 40 days and 40 nights in the desert so he could fit into his old jeans.

It's not that I disapprove of the secular expressions of the Lenten observation that have sprung up during this century of steeply declining church membership. If someone wants to lose 10 pounds, or jump start their new novel, or give veganism a try, I say more power to them. And God knows I'm all for a social media fast.

Life is hard for all living things. To make it harder — knowingly and willingly, for even a contained period of time — is a uniquely human exercise. We want to be better than we are. We want living to mean more than surviving. There is something truly beautiful about that impulse, whatever form it takes.

But as a new member of the unchurched Christian faithful, what am I supposed to do with Lent? Surely there must be some spiritual practice that falls between a church-ordained ritual and a secular perfectibility project. Something that would help me use this time of prayer and reflection to move away from the fears I cannot shake — for my country, for my planet — and toward a stronger faith in the possibility of redemption, a more certain conviction that all is not yet lost in this deeply troubled world.

My maternal forebears, all Protestants, were great believers in starting the day with a prayer and an entry from that season's devotional. But my idea of a daily spiritual practice is less a prayer written by someone else than a walk in the woods alone. A devotional isn't what I'm looking for, and neither is another church's Lenten program. Not yet, anyway.

Honestly, I don't know what I'm looking for.

Forty years ago, I took a college course in the philosophy of religion. I still have the textbook, and I've been looking at what I underlined in that book, at which passages I

carefully marked with a star. Why did the girl I was 40 years ago decide certain passages should be marked with a star?

I signed up for the class because I was having my first crisis of faith. The class itself did nothing to clarify my confusion, and continually thinking about the questions that plagued me wasn't helping either. Still, I fretted. Still, I tried to figure out what I believed and why.

Then one summer afternoon, months later, I was sitting in my parents' backyard, listening to a mockingbird sing. Suddenly, inexplicably, a feeling of peace came over me. A feeling of perfect, absolute peace. No voice of reassurance came with it, and no words formed in my own mind to explain it. But if there had been words, they would've sounded something like: "It's OK. Don't worry. It's OK."

I didn't need to understand. I didn't need to decide.

It was the closest thing I have ever known to the sort of moment William James described in "The Varieties of Religious Experience" — a work that is heavily highlighted and marked with stars in my old textbook. And maybe that memory is enough for me now, too. I can continue to ponder, to be puzzled. I will almost certainly continue to feel just a little bit lost. I'll look for a new church someday, a new place to put all this sorrow and a new community with whom to share it, but I'm not obliged to find that place just now. Ash Wednesday tells me only to keep trying: to believe, to be better, not to give up hope. And that's faith enough for any season.

Fellowship for All

Brian McLaren invites readers to ***imagine that they are among the disciples in John's Gospel, gathering together in Jerusalem after Jesus' death****:*

We were afraid that first Sunday night, just three days after Jesus died. Really afraid. We were afraid to go outside in case someone might recognize us as Jesus' friends and notify the authorities. . .

So, there we remained, tense, jumpy, simmering with anxiety. What happened Friday had been ugly, and we didn't want it to happen to the rest of us. Every sound startled us. Suddenly, we all felt something, a presence, familiar yet . . . impossible. How could Jesus be among us? . . .

And from that night, we learned something essential about what this uprising is going to be about.

[This uprising of the gospel] isn't just for brave people, but for scared folks like us who are willing to become brave. It isn't just for believers, but for doubting folks like Thomas who want to believe in spite of their skepticism. It isn't just for good people, but for normal, flawed people like you and me and Thomas and Peter.

And I should add that it isn't just for men, either. It's no secret that men in our culture often treat women as inferior. Even on resurrection morning, when Mary Magdalene breathlessly claimed that the Lord was risen, the men among us didn't offer her much in the way of respect. There were all sorts of ignorant comments about "the way women are." Now we realize the Lord was telling us something by bypassing all of the male disciples and appearing first to a woman. As we look back, we realize he's been treating women with more respect than the rest of us have right from the start.

We have a term for what we began to experience that night: *fellowship*. Fellowship is a kind of belonging that isn't based on status, achievement, or gender, but instead is based on a deep belief that everyone matters, everyone is welcome, and everyone is loved, no conditions, no exceptions. It's not the kind of belonging you find at the top of the ladder among those who think they are the best, but at the bottom among all the rest, with all the other failures and losers who have either climbed the ladder and fallen, or never gotten up enough gumption to climb in the first place.

Whatever else this uprising will become, from that night we've known it is an uprising of fellowship, a community where anyone who wants to be part of us will be welcome. Jesus showed us his scars, and we're starting to realize we don't have to hide ours.

So, fellowship is for scarred people, and for scared people, and for people who want to believe but aren't sure what or how to believe. When we come together just as we are, we begin to rise again, to believe again, to hope again, to live again.

Blessed, in the season of bright sorrow

'Blessed' has become part of a slick and pervasive trend of forced, optimistic gratitude, says a young Christian writer. The season of Lent helps us return the word to its most authentic expression and meaning.



By Allison Backous Troy - February 23, 2016

This Lent, a charged word rings in my ear. It's a word that is fundamental to the Christian lexicon, one passed around easily and often with the best of intentions. While its synonyms abound -- "grateful," "fortunate," "thankful" -- the word "blessed," with its ubiquitous hashtag, has morphed into a phenomenon that makes both Christians and non-Christians uneasy.

In these first days and weeks of Lent, I find myself resisting the word, hesitant to use it. Why? What about being "blessed" is so emotionally charged? Why does it stand out to me in this Lenten season?

You've seen it, too, I'm sure -- the push for public gratitude that has become slick and pervasive. Kevin Stevens notices it at the HomeGoods store, where he feels "bombarded" by "the wall decals, the geometric cubes, the tablecloths, the hand towels -- all imploring you to be grateful, feel thankful or display your gratitude."

Barbara Ehrenreich describes the trend as "hoopla," a self-help movement focused on making you feel good about all the things you have (or imagine yourself having). From daily gratitude journals to NPR podcasts on the "science of gratitude," the phenomenon of being "blessed" is a form of self-help that focuses on improving attitude rather than circumstance, Ehrenreich writes. In other words, mind over matter.

"All you have to do," Ehrenreich writes, "is to generate, within yourself, the good feelings associated with gratitude, and then bask in its warm, comforting glow."

Christian writers as well are critical of gratitude's comforting glow. Jessica Mesman Griffith writes that the gratitude movement should be met with suspicion. In her essay "Saying

No to Cheap Gratitude," Griffith describes the insidious feel of counting one's blessings as a motivational tool.

"Everything is a project now," she claims. "Gratitude, happiness, grace, faith -- all achievable in a few simple steps, documented with journal entries, status updates, and photographs."

In an extraordinary piece in The New York Times, Kate Bowler, facing a diagnosis of stage 4 cancer, takes that project a step further. The #blessed phenomenon, she says, is a distinctly American version of the prosperity gospel, one that blurs the difference between gift and reward.

But if the "blessed/gratitude" mindset is a gimmick, then it is one that countless people have fallen for. How many of us have posted about a family get-together, a wedding or some other celebratory event tagged with the word "blessed"? And how many can say we did it entirely out of thankfulness, with no desire to show everyone -- ourselves included -- how great our lives are?

Fortunately, the word "blessed," with or without the hashtag, has a history of usage that goes beyond the present day's conflation of gratitude with a personal prosperity gospel. And in Lent, I believe that we can find a way to return the word "blessed" to its most authentic expression and meaning.

In Marilynne Robinson's "Gilead," John Ames remembers his grandfather telling him that "being blessed meant being bloodied." And "that is true etymologically, in English -- but not in Greek or Hebrew," Ames says. So any understanding based on that derivation "has no scriptural authority behind it." Ames' grandfather had lost an eye in the Civil War, and ever since had insisted that he would "find great blessing" in any suffering. His determination to see blessing in pain had cast a dark shadow on the family, but for Ames, it also was integral to his grandfather's attempts to understand God's presence and plan in his life: "He did it in order to make an account of himself, I suppose, as most of us do."

This, I think, is the spiritual struggle behind the trend of forced, optimistic gratitude: it is an attempt to "make an account" of our own difficult lives and experiences. It's what I did as a

child to make sense of the addiction and emotional abuse that ruled my family's life. When I told church friends about my mom's abusive boyfriend or the empty beer bottles that overflowed from our kitchen garbage, I was told to "count my blessings." Stay positive. See them as God's way of strengthening me.

But trying to see my hardships as blessings and proclaiming myself "blessed" in spite of them did nothing but make me feel guilty, confused and angry about God and his presence in my life. In many ways, I still feel that anger. No matter how hard I try, I do not know how to reconcile my personal wounds with the warm, ethereal glow that gratitude is supposed to bring.

What does comfort me, however, is the fact that the etymology for "blessed" encompasses a host of other words that expand its definition:

"Hallowed."

"Made holy."

"Consecrated."

"Set apart."

Rather than signifying endowment with goods or pleasures, being "blessed" identifies us as belonging to God. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus said. "Blessed are those who mourn."

If I struggled as a child to understand how God was with me in the difficulties of my life, it was because I tried to understand the abuses I encountered as good things -- things meant to make me a better person or to somehow unfold God's unseen plan for my life. But what I am coming to know is that it is entirely possible to see the wounds of my life as they are -- painful instances of suffering -- and to know myself as someone known by God, even loved by God, and set apart as God's own.

It is a hard mystery, this trust that we are loved by God even as we carry a list of sorrows. Perhaps you feel this, too, as do the people who emphatically count their blessings in the midst of unemployment and illness and unending fear.

What Lent does is give us a season where we feel the weight of the cross in our own lives. It acknowledges our suffering through showing us the Christ, who truly knew what it meant to be bloodied and whose suffering on the cross somehow names and redeems the suffering that each of us faces.

This is also a mystery. For Lent is often referred to as a season of "bright sorrow," or *charmolypê*, which is Greek for "joyful suffering." It is a time for us to know that our grieving is not ignored but held. Acknowledged. And, at the end of all things, blessed and healed. Henri Nouwen wrote that "to give a blessing is to affirm, to say 'yes' to a person's Belovedness." In Lent, may each of us know how dearly beloved we are, even as we feel the weight of our suffering. May we flee the promises of gimmicky gratitude and walk as best we can toward the truth of God's love for us, which marks us and holds us, no matter where we find ourselves. May we know what blessing is, and may we feel it, believing.