

The Cross Ahead | SPLINTERS | March 1, 2020

*He personally carried our sins
in his body on the cross
so that we can be dead to sin
and live for what is right.*

*By his wounds
you are healed.*

1 Peter 2.24

Missing Out

We don't all grow up going to church, but I did, and it was one of those churches that put on big plays at Christmas and Easter. At Christmas there were wise men, and a Mary and Joseph, and shepherds with live goats which always seemed more trouble than they were worth. There was always a supposedly newborn baby Jesus who looked to weigh about eighteen pounds, and I imagine now that all the mothers in the audience must have been squirming in their seats at the sight of him. At Easter there was a John the Baptist, a Judas, a Pontius Pilate with muscles, and Roman soldiers with dust brushes glued to the tops of their helmets. To top it off there was always a Jesus, usually about six feet tall, with shoulder-length chestnut brown hair, and a dashing smile, because the director must have been sure that Jesus should be easy on the eyes. I was fascinated by all of it; the drama and the spectacle and seeing what animal might relieve itself on stage each year. But one year was special because I was going to be in the play myself. I was cast as an extra in the crowd and was more than ready to dazzle the audience. I probably stood out because as a child I had bright, white-blond hair, and must have looked like some strange Scandinavian boy who'd turned up in ancient Judea just in time for Holy Week. In my little burlap tunic, I was ready to join in and shine, but it wasn't to be. A few days before opening night I began to feel itchy and before long red bumps had popped up all over my body. "Scandinavian boy in the crowd" had the chickenpox. On opening night I sat disappointingly in an oatmeal bath. No

Judas, no muscly Pontius Pilate, or handsome Jesus, or animal droppings for me.
I missed out on the whole thing.

Unsettled

Missing out on Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter has become increasingly common for many of us. We don't usually miss out on Christmas because Christmas has been adopted by the advertisers. It may be commercialized, but the messages of joy and peace still sneak in under the radar, a little like the Child snuck in under Herod's nose on that first Christmas. But Holy Week hasn't had the same success, unless you count Easter egg hunts and a long weekend people use to do the same kinds of things they do on other weekends. For whatever reason, Holy Week just isn't on the radar until it's on top of us.

I confess that I've always liked Christmas more than Easter weekend for a number of reasons. One of them is that I think I'm far more comfortable with Christmas Eve than I am with Good Friday. "Silent night, Holy night, all is calm, all is bright" is easier to sing than "To the old rugged cross, I will ever be true, it's shame and reproach gladly bear". I'm okay with picking up the baby in the straw; I'm less interested in helping to carry a splintery cross. I like the idea of an infant gently cooing in a cradle; I'm unsettled by the sound of a man groaning in agony under a whip. So I think part of my unease with Good Friday and Easter Sunday is the story itself, a story that upends my usually quiet, sanitized word. What am I supposed to do with a cross and a vacant tomb in a society that avoids conversations about mortality and grief like the plague? When everyone's telling me I should be "living my best life", what do I do with Christ's challenge to *let go of my life* in order to truly find it? Jesus forgave the very men nailing him to his cross. How open am I to excavating the unforgiveness I've buried six feet down or maybe just below the surface? Good Friday and Easter Sunday is a story that often goes against our grains.

I'm sure I'll never be entirely at ease with Holy Week - which is probably not the point anyway - but in recent years I've tried paying more attention, or at the very least not turning away. Unsightly as it is, I've tried really looking at the cross, sticking my nose into the tomb. It's not been easy, but it has been healing. And by sitting in the story, I've found that Good Friday and Easter Sunday is growing on me, and *growing* me.

Holy Week is the where the rubber really meets the road for Christians.

Comfortable with it or not, this is our story. It's a story about passionate love and sorrow, anguish and sacrifice, bewilderment, shock and joy. It's a story which flipped the world upside down, so why would *we* expect to be unmoved by it today? Stories are told to be heard and to *change us*, and the story of Good Friday and Easter *changes us* deeply when we listen. *But how do we listen?* How do we hear this unsettling story and let God change us when there are so many other stories competing for our attention, so much noise pollution and clutter? I think one answer to that question can be found in the season of Lent.

Lent

The story goes that a young doctor had just opened office and felt really excited. His secretary told him a man was here to see him. The young doctor told the secretary to send the man in. Pretending to be a very *busy* doctor, he picked up the phone just as the man came in. "Yes, that's right. The fee is \$200. Yes, I'll expect you ten past two. Alright. No later. I'm very busy you know." He hung up and turned to the man waiting. "May I help you?" "No," said the man, "I just came in to install the phone."

At Lent we stop pretending that we're too busy for God. Roughly translated Lent means "forty". It's the season leading up to Easter, based on Jesus' forty days of prayer and preparation in the wilderness. As we prepare for Christmas with the season of Advent, we prepare for Easter with the season of Lent. At Lent we're

given the chance of turning our attention to God as we anticipate the story we're going to hear at Holy Week.

But more than anticipation, Lent is about heart-work. Not hard work, but *heart-work*. In Lent we're asking to be lovingly refined, making room for God to work out the splinters in our hearts. We're giving God the time and space to mend, restore, to speak. Lent is about facing what is true and unsettling about a life of faith. It's about admitting our failures and struggles, and taking off our masks which are often "eating into our faces". Lent is about hearing and owning that when we are weak, God's strength comes through. Like Jesus in the wilderness, at Lent we go into desolate spaces, spaces free from noise and distraction, spaces that evoke dependence on God.

It's been said that at Lent we put something down in order to pick something up. Perhaps putting down our phones in order to read scripture, or missing a meal in order to pray. The choices are ours. Of course, when we think of putting something down in order to pick something up, we might also think of Jesus' words, "Take up your cross and follow me". So Lent is also a time of recommitment. If we've somehow loosened our grip on the cross, let some distance grow between ourselves and Jesus, Lent is a time of devoting ourselves again to Christ.

Joining In

This year, we've put together a kind of Lent resource, to help us connect with the season and the story. In the middle you'll find four simple ways to join in. They're not complicated, and they're not rules, just ideas, and we're inviting you to take them and make them your own.

- First, put something down and to pick something up. Choose something to fast, like a kind of food or activity, in order to turn your attention to God. Use that time or energy to pray, read the Bible or otherwise connect with God.
- Pray in Community. Add or adapt prayer in daily life with your people. Create space around meals, or as the day begins or ends to pray (even briefly) with those

around you. Examples: prayer with your family, spouse, friends, co-workers or Life Group. It doesn't have to be complicated or take an hour. It can be simple and take a few moments and make a real difference.

- Read the Story. Choose to read one of the Gospels during Lent, immersing yourself in Jesus' story. For example, Mark could be read over 16 days by a chapter a day, John over 21 days, Luke over 24, or Matthew over 28. Where is Jesus in this story? Where are we?
- Finally, don't forget to party. If you're fasting, consider breaking the fast on Sundays. For example, if you're not eating chocolate for Lent, enjoy some on a Sunday! This helps to remind us that even in a time of refining, the gospel is good news and always leads us into celebration. Through this we also remember that what we're fasting in Lent isn't "bad", simply put in its place in relation to God.

Those are some ideas. Try them all, try one or two. Try them over the whole season, try them over a week or two. You can also go online and find all kinds of resources, especially for families, that we've put together in order to walk through the season together. At its core Lent is about giving God the even slightest chance to work in us. And on Sundays we'll be looking at a number of themes traditionally connected to Lent and to the cross: prayer, failure, grief & loss, and forgiveness. Unsettling discussions perhaps, but discussions of depth and healing none-the-less.

I didn't get the chance to join in with that Easter play as a child when I got the chickenpox. I missed out. But a number of years later, as a teenager, I got to join in and played a Roman soldier, crimson skirt and all. My job was to hold back the crowds at the crucifixion. I finally got up close and personal with the story. Lent is the season which ensures we don't miss out on Jesus' story, but instead find ourselves up close and personal with God. So as we head toward Easter - and that splintery cross comes increasingly into view - what can we expect to happen if we join in? What happens when we get up close and personal with the God of Good Friday and Easter Sunday? Spoiler alert: I think we'll find our feet being

washed, our wounds being healed, our prayers heard, our failures being forgotten. I think we'll *find our lives* by letting go of control of them. I think we'll find ourselves being loved.

Discussion Questions:

- What does the Holy Week story mean to you?
- What has Lent meant to you, if anything?
- Does God need to use Lent to work in us? This is an old tradition. Why is this season valuable today?
- How will you engage with the season, or with Holy Week as it approaches?