

First Sunday in Lent; Year A; Matthew
The Rev. Devon Anderson
March 1, 2020

At start of spring I open a trench
In the ground. I put into it
The winter's accumulation of paper,
Pages I do not want to read
Again, useless words, fragments,
errors. And I put into it
the contents of the outhouse:
light of the suns, growth of the ground,
Finished with one of their journeys.
To the sky, to the wind, then,
and to the faithful trees, I confess
my sins: that I have not been happy
enough, considering my good luck;
have listened to too much noise,
have been inattentive to wonders,
have lusted after praise.
And then upon the gathered refuse,
of mind and body, I close the trench
folding shut again the dark,
the deathless earth. Beneath that seal
the old escapes into the new.

In this poem Wendell Berry vividly illustrates the very essence of the season of Lent. Lent is a cycle, a pattern, a yearly ritual, an opportunity to rid ourselves of what is dead or no longer useful, purge ourselves of what has ceased to bring us life or has served its purpose. We confess. Over and over until we arrive, at long last, to Easter – the once-and-for-all do-over, the clean slate, that early morning when love itself bursts forth from the dark, cold earth and all things are new and alive and hopeful.

For those of you that need a little refresher: the word *Lent* is a shortened form of the old English word *lencten* which means *spring season*. In the Christian Church, Lent is the forty days that lead up to Holy Week and Easter, patterned after Jesus' forty days fasting in the wilderness, about which we read this morning. Lent is often observed as a solemn season in which Christians prepare themselves for Easter through fasting and prayer, or inward exploration. Some people prepare by giving up something – sugar or fast food or alcohol or Facebook. Others take on something new that will bring life, like a new spiritual practice or theological inquiry, or service to the community.

But this year I'm going to go a little rogue by proposing that, this time around, we DO NOTHING for Lent. Rather than optimizing our Lent with a waistline conscious diet or a bold test of willpower I wonder – what would it look like if, instead, we resisted the attention economy and did nothing? In lives where every last minute ends up captured, optimized, or appropriated, where we work and function and give and out-put to the very edges of our capacity day in and day out – I wonder – what would it look like if we stopped? Or, at least, created little spaces where we stopped, however fleeting?

“Do not try to save the whole world or do anything grandiose,” writes Buddhist Tara Brach, “Instead, create a clearing in the dense forest of your life. We all get lost in the dense forest of our lives,

entangled in incessant worry and planning, in judgments of others, and in our busy striving to meet demands and solve problems. When we're caught in that thicket, it's easy to lose sight of what matters most. We forget how much we long to be kind and open-hearted. We forget our ties to this sacred earth and to all living beings. And, in a deep way, we forget who we are, [and *whose* we are...]. . . [When we're caught in that thicket] our minds are narrowed, fixated... Our hearts are often defended, anxious, or numb... [We're caught in that thicket] when we are living on autopilot, when we feel walled off and separate from those around us, when we are caught up in feeling fearful, angry, victimized, or deficient." When we're caught in that thicket what is broken inside of us, what needs healing, comfort, and renewal languishes and festers, persists and many times worsens.

The scriptures tell us that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness – and man, Jesus' forty days was "doing nothing" on steroids. Immediately after his baptism, fresh from the throngs of people gawking and pressing in around him, Jesus claims his own space and embarks into the desert to do nothing. While there he doesn't eat, converse, plan, strategize, worry, teach, talk, or work. Jesus is there to do nothing. For forty days. And that is hard core. When I was in seminary I spent a summer at St. George's College in Jerusalem. We traveled everywhere. One day we drove deep into the Judean desert. The bus stopped and we were told to take only our hats and water bottles to sit, by ourselves, in the desert for 30 minutes. "I'm an introvert," I thought. "Piece of cake." It took about 10 minutes for me to go out-of-my-mind. For those of you who have been there – you know – that desert is silent. No wind. No animals. No airplanes. No cars. No people. Just sand and rocks and sky. Sitting there I literally could hear my own heartbeat. I can't imagine what it was like for Jesus – but in so many ways, doing nothing saved him. In that void of silence there was nothing else for Jesus to do but to think and pray and come to terms with who he was. There, Jesus had to wrestle with *his* temptations, *his* call, *his* mission, *his* relationship with God. Ultimately, he came to refuse who the throngs of people wanted him to be and remained maddeningly himself. After forty days, from the clearing, he emerged – centered, grounded, whole, connected, full, ready.

It's important to remember that Jesus in the desert is not about us – it's a story about Jesus. We are not at liberty to pull from it moral exhortation or spiritual instruction. But it's a story about clearing some space and doing nothing, and what happened for Jesus when he dared do it. For us, I can think of a million reasons why we might want to consider doing nothing for Lent, though maybe at our own pace amidst the rhythm of our own lives. For starters, when we're able to create a clearing simply by pausing and turning from the clamoring we open ourselves to noticing what's around us.

This past week I came upon what I think might be one of the loveliest pieces I've ever read in the New York Times. Entitled "One Tiny Beautiful Thing," in it Margaret Rankl recites her list of misery – the persistent rain, flooding and darkness that has dominated winter in her hometown of Nashville, for starters, and then the woe that is our national political scene. "One day when the relentless rains let up for a bit," she writes, "I went to the park an hour before sunset to walk on the muddy trails and take a break from the bad news. The woods were as lovely as they ever are after a rain: the creeks full of rushing water, the gray bark of the fallen trees slick with moss... As darkness began to gather in earnest, I turned to head back the way I'd come. A few hundred yards on, my eyes caught on a tree I hadn't noticed when I was walking in the other direction. About seven feet up the trunk was a knothole, a place where a limb had long ago broken off and let water in to rot the wood... What caught my eye was a cluster of tiny seedlings colored the bright new green of springtime, so bright it seemed to glow in the gloaming. The tender plants were growing in the loam inside the knothole. Far above the ground, a hole

made by decay in a living tree had become a cold frame, a natural greenhouse that lets in light and keeps out frost. Life in death in life...

“Instead of giving up something for Lent, I’m planning to make a heartfelt offering. In times like these, it makes more sense to seek out daily causes for praise than daily reminders of lack. So here is my resolution: to find as many ordinary miracles as a waterlogged winter can put forth, as many resurrections as an eerily early springtime will allow. Tiny beautiful things are bursting forth in the darkest places, in the smallest nooks and deepest cracks of the hidden world, and I am going to keep looking every single day until I find one.”

We create a clearing in the dense forest of our life to *zoom in* so we can notice, observe, and accept the tiny beautiful things that come our way. And, we do it, too, in order to *zoom out* – to get some perspective. “Few practical ideas,” writes leadership guru Ron Heifetz, “are more critical than the need to get perspective in the midst of [chaos or] action [or over-programming]. Great athletes can at once play the game and observe it as a whole – as Walt Whitman described it, ‘being both in and out of the game.’ Jesuits call it ‘contemplation in action.’ Hindus and Buddhists call it ‘karma yoga,’ or mindfulness. We call it ‘getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony,’ an image that captures the mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, ‘What’s really going on here?’” I really like this image of the balcony as a metaphor for stepping back, clearing some space, and simply observing. It evokes a kind of doing nothing that is wakeful and attentive, perceptive and conscious – just taking a step back, and looking at what is going on around us – how our body feels, what feelings are flying through the room – just observing, almost dispassionately, looking down on the moment from a higher vantage point – not to fix, strategize, judge, or debrief. Just to observe and breathe.

So, for Lent, consider doing nothing. When you catch yourself at your desk staring into the ether, don’t stop, allow yourself to continue. If a passenger on a bus or in the car, just look out the window. Watch. Notice. Adore. Look for one tiny beautiful thing. Get some distance and observe your surroundings. Remember: God can do amazing things with open spaces. Week before last I was visiting with a mentor and a coach of sorts who was helping me muck through some challenges in my ministry in the wider church. Toward the end of the conversation she asked me, “So, what is your goal?” “What do you mean?” I asked, “Like lifetime goals?” “No,” she said, “your goal for the next month.” To which I replied, “Well, I’d like to break in my new hiking boots.” She sat back and a huge smile spread across her face. “My work here is done,” she said, glowing. It just may be that the most impactful work, the most meaningful spiritual offering we can make this Lent is to do nothing, to simply open some space in the dense forests of our lives and hold it open – stopping from time to time to visit the clearing and look around. I wonder. I wonder what we will see there? AMEN.

Resources:

“At the start of spring I open a trench,” *A Part, Collected Poems*, Wendell Berry.

“A Not-So-Radical Proposal for Your Lenten Season”; from *The Jesuit Post*, February 19, 2020.

“Meditations,” www.tarabrach.com/guided-meditations (RAIN)

“One Tiny Beautiful Thing,” *New York Times Op Ed*, February 23, 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/23/opinion/lent-spring.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Leadership On the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading, Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, pp. 51-2.