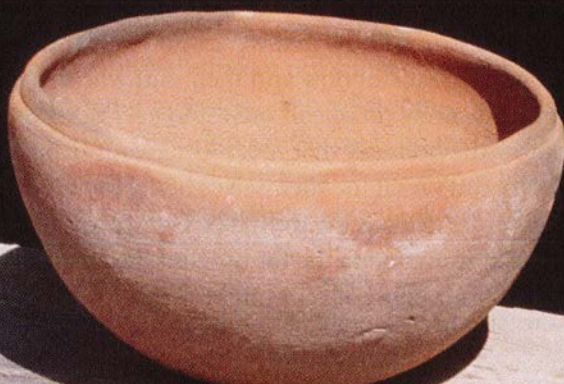


Admitting Our Inadequacy

Although we rarely pay attention to it, a great paradox haunts our practices of Lent. We go through these six weeks every year fairly easily; yet if we stopped to reflect seriously on what's going on, it would be a shock. To our liberated American souls, it might even seem like an earthquake.

Just look at the imagery and themes of the period. Lent starts with ashes and a warning: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." It prods to repentance: There is something wrong with us and the world. I am not O.K.; neither are you. We are insufficient. This life is

*What is Lent trying to rub in our faces
with all the talk of mercy, forgiveness,
reform, and repentance?*



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ASH WEDNESDAY

not enough. Each of the six weeks brings a profound admission of our inadequacy.

This is not easy stuff for a world given to excuses and plea-bargaining. The most we admit to is making a mistake or perhaps behavioral problems. But to admit that we are in profound trouble? Why? We all know there is nothing so terribly wrong with us.

Even some of our hymnals have rewritten an old song here and there to mollify our tender egos. I've caught myself doing the same, balking before the admissions of "Amazing Grace." I've thought of rephrasing it: something like "...how sweet the sound that saved a nice fellow like me." Come to think of it, singing that I was once "lost" and "blind" seems to be overdoing it a bit.

Lent ends with an equally unpalatable celebration of cataclysmic failure: betrayal, brutality, cowardice, and degradation. True, it is reversed in a triumph of joy and glory, but in a way that defies all the laws of common sense. The dead, crucified one rises, his wounds glorious.

What is Lent trying to rub in our faces with all the talk of mercy, forgiveness, reform, and repentance?

We here in the real world know that we are all really rather nice guys and gals. Sure, we make mistakes now and then. But who's to blame us for our fumbling? And surely no one of us would ever deserve such a thing as hell. (I know the polls say that most Americans believe in hell, but the vast majority can't imagine themselves being there.) Surely we are not in such desperate need as the drama of Lent seems to suggest. Surely we do not need someone to die for our sins. Some of us do not even know what such a strange concept might mean. Or do we?

Vigilance Over Our Souls



We delude ourselves dangerously if we think our major task in reading Scripture is to examine the historical period in which it was written. Admittedly, such study is a valuable tool for critical distance from and understanding of revelation's context. But we need more. What is not said can be as important as what is said.

In recent political campaigns precious few words were spent appealing to our generosity, our discipline, or our spirit of sacrifice. If there is talk of discipline and sacrifice, these will be prescribed for the poor. If there is language of compassion, it will ring of self-righteous narcissism.

The shroud of death haunting hospitals and refugee camps will not be mentioned. The deceptions of our official instruments of war and governance will not be uncovered. The voracious economy, which demands full-time work from both parents hoping to raise children, will not be addressed. The extravagant mountains of money for jaded entertainers and corporate merchants will not be brought up to embarrass us. We will only hear of what matters most: the products of our hands and the imaginings of our minds to which we supposedly turn for comfort and meaning, even salvation.

Isaiah's God was heard to say, "there is no god beside me." The Spirit that St. Paul preached led not to fatuous words but to active power. And Jesus knew what ought to be rendered to God: not lip-service, but heart and mind.

If we go to that polling place and vote for one of those who would lead us, let us do so well and judiciously. Give to Caesar.

But let us keep vigilance over our souls.

What is it that needs to be said?

Waters of Death, Life



Death by water. Or death for lack of it.

Whichever, they may well symbolize our deepest dreads. The biblical story of the Great Flood, with its harrowing destruction, is generally believed to include early Mesopotamian accounts of wide disaster. But the Hebrew and Christian traditions interpret it in the context of history made intelligible by God. It has moral and spiritual import, not only for the people but for the person.

Floods strip us of everything, even the land to stand on. We can only wait or go under. If we sink, we suffocate. We disappear. Water is one of those great impersonal forces of the earth, before which we, even in our technological abundance, can find ourselves abandoned and helpless.

Water, despite its chaos, is also the promise of life. Water is sustenance and cleansing. It is refreshment, purification, and promise. Thus Noah, as the embodiment of Israel, the Church, and perhaps all humankind, is given a regenerating covenant in the midst of utter loss. "Never again shall there be another flood to destroy the earth." Later, Isaiah will remind Israel of God's eternal love and pity—the only anchor in existence for Noah and for all of us to depend on.

Jesus, too, knew the flood, the waters of death and life. And his going under in baptism became the first sign of his own death, his own passing through the chaos, his new covenant. His people would come to see the Church, born of the water from his side, as the realization of Noah's promise.

*What is my anchor to depend on
when chaos abounds?*

Radical Dependency



Just as the Hebrew people spend forty reluctant years learning of the desert's hardship and wisdom, learning that only God can be their security and guide, learning that God alone can be their final food and water, so

Jesus spends forty days in the desert of radical dependency. His bread not the result of his own power but of his feeding on the will of the one who sent him. He in turn will become our food, not only multiplying loaves in the desert, but offering his body as our nurture and drink.

Lent has a long history. By the end of the fourth century, its duration had fairly well been settled as the days between Quadragesima Monday and Holy Thursday. Eventually it was launched with the observance of Ash Wednesday, so that Jesus' own forty days in the desert could be re-enacted in Christian practice.

Earliest liturgical celebrations in Lent were framed in the context of baptism and penitence. We plunge into the covenant of Jesus and ratify our own symbolic admission of frailty before the forces of nature. By the tenth century, ashes became a dash of death's remembrance.

What pulls this all together is the bleak fate of death. We return to the dust from which we came, a terrible sentence. Capital punishment for us all: the fruit of sin, the rejection of our creatureliness, the refusal to be limited, even though loved.

Do I depend on Jesus in life and in death?

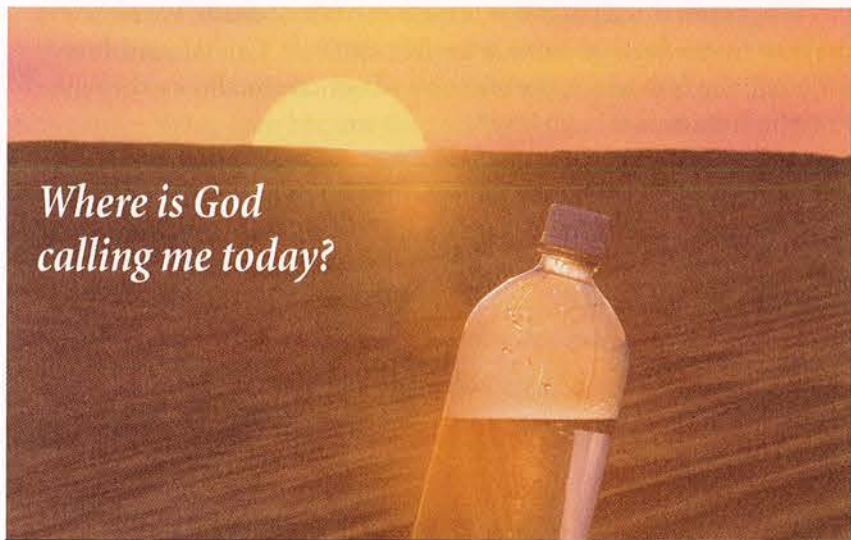
Always a Further Call

Abraham and Sarah, our parents in faith, remind us that it is not so much a matter of when this life's journey ends, as it is a matter of where the great hike of hope takes us.

When I was thirty-five, I foolishly imagined that I had seen it all. Thinking it was a sign of spiritual freedom and openness to God's will, I even told my spiritual director in India that I was willing and ready to die. "Don't say that," he said. "You can never say you've had enough."

Right he was. By the time I was forty-five, I realized that I had not dreamed, ten years earlier, of the pains that humans could suffer, the joys we might endure, the sheer exultation in life that is available to us. There is always more. There is always a further call as long as we tread this earthly road.

A ninety-two-year-old nun goes more deeply into love, forgiveness, and trust than any novice could dare explore. A couple married fifty years thanks Marriage Encounter for helping them finally understand each other. Just think how many centuries it will take for us to delve into the mystery of God.



*Where is God
calling me today?*

DESIGN PICS

Lent is a time of prayer, renewal, a time to refocus our relationship with God. Noted author and lecturer Father John Kavanaugh offers a provocative message of love in a world weary of materialism. In this edition of Liguori's best-selling *Daybreaks* series, Father Kavanaugh takes the reader on a Lenten journey that opens a door to understanding the mystery of Christ's redemptive mission. His themes are contemporary, sensitive, and deftly honest, offering a powerfully clear counterpoint in a culture marked by uncertainty and confusion. They hold out the promise of a faith-filled, spiritually rejuvenated Lent and Easter. Be open to the possibilities of the cross.

Begin your day with a *Daybreaks* meditation by finding a quiet place where you can be open to the peaceful presence of God. These reflections take only a few moments, but allow time for the words to sink in, for the message to unfold. Consider how these ideas might change your life, challenge your attitudes and beliefs, inform your heart. That is the process of conversion. This is the journey of Lent and Easter.

FATHER JOHN KAVANAUGH, SJ, teaches philosophy at Saint Louis University. He has lectured widely on topics of consumerism, spirituality, and the ethics of intrinsic human dignity. His most recent books are *Who Count as Persons: Human Identity and the Ethics of Killing* (Georgetown University Press) and a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Following Christ in a Consumer Society* (Orbis Books). His award-winning "Ethics Notebook" column for *America* magazine along with his three-volume set, *The Word* (Orbis Books), provide the material for these *Daybreaks* reflections.

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