

**The Lenten Way:
Following Christ in Death and in Life**

Ruth Haley Barton

“Lent is a time of returning to God. It is a time to confess how we keep looking for joy, peace, and satisfaction in the many people and things surrounding us without really finding what we desire. Only God can give us what we want. So we must be reconciled with God ... The season of Lent, during which winter and spring struggle with each other for dominance, helps us in a special way to cry out for God’s mercy.”

Henri Nouwen

There comes a time in the spiritual life when one of the major things God is up to is to lovingly help us to see ourselves more clearly. There is a time when we wake up to face the darkness within and are invited to expose it to the light of God’s presence. Lent is the season for waking up—for seeing and naming and confessing our own darkness so that we can be ushered into God’s marvelous light.

Self-examination is the practice that facilitates this kind of spiritual awakening—awakening to the presence of God as God really is and awakening to ourselves as we really are. This kind of awakening initiates a stage in the spiritual life classically understood as *purgation* in which God gradually strips us of more and more layers of our own sinfulness. While God is always at work in our lives in this way, the Lenten season in particular invites us to greater levels of openness to God in every level of our being. It calls us to self-examination, repentance and renunciation of those things that prevent us from following Christ in his life and in his death.

Robert Mulholland, in his book *Invitation to a Journey*, helpfully points out the different levels of purgation that the soul passes through on its journey towards Christ-likeness. First of all there is the renunciation of all blatant inconsistencies with wholeness

in Christ—obvious sins like those that Paul lists in passages like Galatians 5:19-21 which even our culture eschews. Then purgation moves to other deliberate sins that may be “normal” and “acceptable” in our culture but are clearly not acceptable in God’s economy—like sexual promiscuity for instance. This might also include behaviors that are not inherently bad but would be unloving or unhelpful in our own context—like the eating of meat in Paul’s day.

Next, purgation causes us to become aware of unconscious sins and omissions—those things we might not have noticed earlier on but now we see them as being a hindrance to our growth. We might begin to see places where we are driven in subtle ways by our own ego or where we subtly manipulate others to get our own way or where we do not always tell the truth. It is painful to see and to name such twisted dynamics within us and perhaps we are even embarrassed that we did not see them before and yet it is necessary part of bringing our whole selves into God’s presence.

The final stage in the purgation process deals with deep-seated attitudes and inner orientations of our being out of which our behavior patterns flow. Here God is dealing primarily with our “trust structures,” especially those deep inner postures of our being that do not rely on God but on self for our well-being. Here we make the devastating discovery of all the ways in which we are captive to our own anxieties, driven by our need to control God and others and impose our own order on things. We begin to get a glimpse of the false self that functions primarily to keep us safe rather than helping us to know how to abandon ourselves to God. At this level, we must take a hard look at whether or not we really *are* trusting ourselves to God and to the flow of God’s spirit or

whether we are completely bound up by defensive, self-protective patterns that only serve to help us maintain our sense of security and well-being in the world.

As painful as it is to have these layers of the false self stripped away, it is really evidence of God's grace. God is at work leading us out of our bondage to sin into the freedom for love that is ours in Christ. At every level of the purgation process we are led to the final and most transforming aspect of the self-examination process which is confession, the discipline by which we abandon ourselves to God's mercy and are raised to new life and freedom in Christ.

Lenten Practices for Leaders

The Lenten season is a time of hidden-ness in which the grain of wheat which has fallen into the ground is still germinating under the earth far from sight. As yet, there is no sign of life. This presents a unique challenge to leaders who need to find some way to be hidden, allowing God to be at work in the deep recesses of our being, while we are also "out front" leading others at the same time. While we ourselves might be gasping for breath as we struggle with our own death and dying we are at the same time trying to hold out resurrection hope for others. This is never easy. Following are a couple of suggestions:

Hidden-ness. (Matthew 6:1-6) Incorporate a half an hour of "hidden-ness" into each day during the Lenten season. Craft this time in such a way that you can be with your own soul in complete privacy, paying attention to God's invitations to you on your Lenten journey. You might spend time in silence and reflection on different aspects of Christ's journey to the cross and find yourself in the story. You might slip into a church where

you are not known just to be quiet or to participate in some aspect of their prayer rhythm such as early morning prayer, praying the stations of the cross, following their lectionary reading schedule (if that is not a part of your tradition), etc. You might engage more intentionally in the process of self-examination and follow up on any guidance God gives regarding transformation in your own life. You might consider refusing additional requests for public ministry that would feed your ego's need to be "up front" rather than remaining hidden.

Fasting. (Matthew 6:16-21) Fasting or some form of abstinence is a key discipline for the Lenten season because, if it is well-chosen, it can be a concrete way of renouncing sin patterns and attachments that have us in their grip. The space created by doing without whatever it is we are attached to creates more space for God to be at work. To experience fasting most meaningfully, consider fasting or abstaining in a way that is connected with that place where God is revealing your need to die to some aspect of the false self. So for instance, if you are aware of places where you lack self-control or are self-indulgent (eating habits, shopping, media and technology) you might want to incorporate a plan for abstinence in that area. If you are aware of a tendency to gossip or indulge in ill-considered words, fasting from words (more time in silence) might be a life-transforming choice. If you are particularly aware of pride or ego-driven-ness in your ministry life, further consideration of what it might mean for you to remain more hidden would be tremendously important. If your pace of life is compromising your spiritual health and physical well-being, perhaps this might be a time to pull back to only the barest necessities of life and schedule.

A Leader's Prayer during Lent

It is not easy to talk about death or to live the dying process but there are times when it is what God calls us to. If we are entering into the rhythms of the Church year and seeking to live within the communion of the saints that exists far beyond ourselves, this is what we are called to at this time. Since the Transforming Center is communities of people who pray and seek God together, let us pray together that God will lead each one of us on our own Lenten journey. Perhaps this prayer from Henri Nouwen's *A Cry for Mercy* will teach us how to pray at this time.

“Yes, Lord, I have to die—with you, through you, and in you—and thus become ready to recognize you when you appear to me in your resurrection. There is so much in me that needs to die: false attachments, greed and anger, impatience and stinginess. O Lord, I am self-centered, concerned about myself, my career, my future, my name and fame. Often I even feel that I use you to my own advantage... Yes, Lord, I know it is true. I know that often I have spoken about you, written about you, and acted in your name for my own glory and success. Your name has not led me to persecution, oppression, or rejection. Your name has brought me rewards! I see clearly how little I have died with you, really gone your way and been faithful to it. O Lord, make this Lenten season different from the other ones. Let me find you again. Amen.

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