

Lent: An Invitation to Return to God  
Ruth Haley Barton

*“Yet even now, says the Lord, repent and return to me with all your heart.”*  
Joel 2:13

Today is Ash Wednesday—the beginning of the Church’s observance of the Lenten season. It is a space in time in which we are called to stop whatever we are doing, no matter how important it might be, and enter more intentionally into the disciplines of prayer, self-examination and repentance. But these disciplines—as significant as they are—are not ends in themselves. They are *a means to an end* and that end is that we would return to God with all our hearts.

Unfortunately, the practice of entering into the Lenten season has often been reduced to the question: “What are you giving up for Lent?” This is a fine question, but it can only take us so far. The *real* question of the Lenten season is: How will I find ways to return to God with all my heart? This begs an even deeper question: Where in my life have I gotten away from God and what are the disciplines that will enable me to find my way back?

How many and how subtle are the ways that we as Christian leaders can “leave” God and the true spiritual journey in favor of other pursuits—even those that seem very noble and even necessary. The cares and concerns of life in this world and even the dreams and visions that God has given us can eventually become distractions from the relationship itself. One day we wake up and realize we have tolerated that which is intolerable and compromised that which is of greatest value. *Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart.*

What a poignant and compelling invitation! Who among us does not want to return to God with all our heart?

## **Repentance**

Returning to God begins with repentance—a willingness to be very honest about the ways in which we have moved away from God and to tell as much truth about it as we are able. *You desire truth in the inward being*, the Psalm reading for today points out. *Therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells the story of working as an artist-in-residence at a parochial school, teaching children how to write poetry using the Psalms as a model. One little boy wrote a poem entitled “The Monster Who Was Sorry.” He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him: his response (in the poem) is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: “Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, ‘I shouldn’t have done all that.’”<sup>1</sup>

“My messy house” says it all, Norris observes. “With more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out...he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?”

Telling the truth about our messy house is the essence of repentance. It is truth in that deepest-down place, the secret heart that is so hard for us to access and listen to and eventually tell the truth about. This is the place of our deepest and most gut-level

response to God and the world around us, and it is oftentimes outside of our conscious awareness. But God desires truth at this level—the level where we are able to acknowledge the deeply patterned responses that shape our decisions every day and may or may not have anything to do with true faith. These inner dynamics are so subtle that they are not easy for us to know or to acknowledge, but they “wreck our room” nonetheless.

### **Clearing Away the Distraction**

We have so many ways of distracting ourselves from *knowing* truth in the inward being and Lent is a time for clearing away distraction so we can know what we need to know. During Lent we are willing to sit in our messy house and get a little more honest about the fact that we are in disarray. We are willing (to the best of our ability) to simply acknowledge what got us into the mess we are in, to feel our remorse and to say, “I wish I hadn’t done that.” This is the kind of truth that Jesus is talking about when he says *You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.*

The disciplines of Lent have to do with abstaining from the ways we normally distract ourselves from spiritual reality—the reality of our sin and the deeply patterned behaviors that keep us from our calling to follow Christ. It has to do with allowing some of the external trappings and internal compulsions of our lives to be stripped away so that we can return to a truer sense of ourselves in God’s presence. It has to do with acknowledging the subtle temptations to which we are prone, rather than pretending we are beyond temptation.

The disciplines of fasting and other kinds of abstinence help us to abstain from that which distracts us and numbs our awareness so that we can become more finely attuned to what is really going on in our lives spiritually and the invitations that are there for us. Allowing ourselves to experience the necessary grief or remorse (not shame or morbidity) about what we are seeing and knowing in ourselves helps us to get in touch with some sort of willingness to be led in a new and everlasting way.

### **Entering In**

Today many of us will receive the symbolic gesture of the imposition of ashes on our foreheads as a way of acknowledging our human finiteness and mortality. No matter who we think we are, the traditions of Ash Wednesday remind us that “you are dust and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:19) This is not meant to be morbid, it is just meant to limit our grandiosity and help us to stay in touch with the real human condition that we all share. This is a wonderful discipline for us as leaders who often have such a hard time staying in touch with our humanity.

Ash Wednesday also initiates a season of deeper self-knowledge about all the ways in which we hold ourselves back from life in God. Today we welcome God’s presence more deeply into our secret heart—including the messiest rooms of the house. We invite God to search us, to help us to know ourselves as he already knows us and to lead us into resurrection life. The ashes marking our foreheads carry the same meaning contained in the Old Testament practice of covering oneself with ashes: they are an outward sign of an inward repentance and the mourning we experience as we become aware of our sin. This is good for us because we live in so much denial. Facing our sin in

the shadow of Christ's cross and impending resurrection is the healthiest way to deal with the knowledge of our sin.

The disciplines of fasting and other kinds of abstinence help us to face the hold our sin patterns have on us and to somehow let go of these lesser satisfactions so we can receive the deeper and more lasting gifts of the Spirit.

### **A Season of Hope**

I don't know about you, but there is something about the season of Lent that causes me to feel strangely hopeful about the fact that there is a path for returning to God no matter how distracted I have been. *Even now*, God says, *even now, no matter how long it has been or how far away you feel you have gotten...Even now I am longing for you to return your heart to me.* Lent is the season to look for the path of returning and walk it in ways that our souls desperately need.

What if Lent became for us a season that was not so much about "giving something up" but was more about finding our way back to the one we love and long for the most? What would it take for Lent to become *for us* as leaders a season of returning to that which is of greatest value and claiming the nearness of God as our deepest good?

#### A Prayer for Entering into Lent

*"O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in trust shall be our strength: by the power of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Book of Common Prayer, page 832

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: RiverHead Books, 1999).