

In the Midst: An Invitation to Stay with Lent by Janise Matyas Smith

These are strange times, these days of living with COVID-19, where life has been altered so drastically, so quickly. Though so much has changed about our day-to-day lives, one thing still remains the same, we are still in the season of Lent. Even if most everything else has been put on hold, Lent, it continues on. As I've been reflecting on this, I'm realizing, that's the beauty of the church year, regardless of what is going on in life, these cycles and seasons of the church year that move us through and into truth, they keep going. They remind us of the greater realities of God and His work in our lives when we can become consumed by what is right in front of us.

Perhaps Lent feels far from your radar right now. The one word that keeps coming to mind as I sit with my heart and soul a little over two weeks into the shutdown this COVID-19 epidemic has brought on is I feel **disoriented**. It feels like so many things and rhythms in my life are out of whack right now in light of this stay-at-home place we find ourselves. I imagine I am not the only one who feels this way. As a mom of four children spanning preschool to middle school, I didn't plan to be homeschooling them this Spring and put much of my other work on hold. As social beings, we didn't plan to keep at a distance from almost everyone but our nuclear family. I've never in my life have had the experience of churches not gathering together on Sundays for worship.

Even as I feel my own disorientation, I wonder about others who are unable to work or who are now unemployed and wonder how they will make their rent or buy food. I wonder about those who are single and live alone in this stay-at-home existence. I wonder about those who are in the at-risk population, as I hold the reality of my own kids not being able to see their grandparents. This COVID-19 existence has affected so much and so many in countless, hard ways. And the end to these unusual days of social distancing, of schools and businesses remaining closed, of life being disrupted is unclear. It has left me feeling pretty disoriented and scrambling to figure out a rhythm and flow to our days and a way to function under this new "normal" where we all aren't losing it by the end of the day.

Is it worth staying with Lent in the midst of COVID-19 and social distancing and life being altered so suddenly? As I've been trying to keep at least the rhythm of Lent going in the midst of what is right now, the thought suddenly occurred to me: Lent itself might be a guide offering us a way through these days. **Lent itself is a season of**

reorientation, and if we ever needed a guide for reorienting, it is now. So perhaps Lent itself can help show us a way through these unusual times.

Lent comes from the Old English word *lencten*, which means springtime, or the lengthening of days. As the days grow longer and the sun increases in warmth, the cold and dead ground starts to show signs of life: buds begin to form and burst on trees, green returns to the barren landscape as plants begin forcing their way through the ground, and flowers surprise us once again with their beauty, variety and color.

Even if we are keeping to our homes these days, we see the truth of this all around us right now: longer days, more light, and the beauty of God's Springtime creation making its presence known. That feels like one consolation and place of gratitude in all this, if quarantine and social distancing must be done, thank you Lord that it's happening during Springtime (when my four kids can be outside playing 😊)!

These two seasons, Spring and Lent mirror each other. As the buds open, so in the season of Lent we also open ourselves up to God through practices of prayer, fasting and examination in order to grow closer to God and prepare our hearts for Easter. As the days grow longer and brighter, we face the darkness within us, examining our hearts in the light of God's love and opening ourselves up to the light of God's truth.

This global pandemic feels dark. We are literally engaging in the practice of closing ourselves off from each other, at least physically. Our world feels smaller, more guarded, more closed. But how can we, with Lent as our guide, stay with the practice of **opening** ourselves up to God and his light in the midst of what is happening right now in our lives and world?

Over the last two weeks, with every event, appointment and activity deleted from my calendar, and with my kids outside playing, I have been spending a great deal of time gardening. I am a hardcore gardner, so truth be told this garden lover is quite delighted with all this opened up time to be in the dirt! Do you know the first thing I have had to do in my gardening madness? It's one of my least favorite tasks: weeding. My garden has required quite a bit of weeding, as various weeds took over my flower beds during the winter. But weeding must come first to make way for the plants that I want to grow. And so as I sift the soil and remove the rocks and weeds and debris so that only the good dirt remains to plant in, I am reminded, we do the same thing in Lent to the soil of our own souls.

Lent is a season of examination and confession. It is a season of opening up to God and taking an honest look at ourselves. It is a time to become attentive to the things that have come between us and God. It is a penitential season where we come more closely to the truth of our human condition, the ways we have strayed from God

and we are reminded of our need for a Savior. It is a time to look at the ways we have become lost, the ways we have gotten distracted by this thing and that thing and in the process have wandered away from God.

The well-known spiritual writer Henri Nouwen put it this way in my Lenten devotional I've been going through this year...

“Lent is a time of returning to God. It is a time to confess how we keep looking for joy, peace, and satisfaction in many people and things surrounding us, without really finding what we desire. Only God can give us what we want...Lent is a time of refocusing, of reentering the place of truth, of reclaiming our true identity.”

Only God can give us what we want. It is not more food or toilet paper or the assurance of our safety and the safety of those we love, that will ultimately give us what we need or want, but God Himself.

As I find myself knee-deep in the dirt and it moves between my fingers, I am reminded of the place where we began Lent, in the place of dust and ashes, the place where human life began... “for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). This truth feels especially pressed upon our hearts and minds right now as we come face-to-face with our own vulnerability and frailty as humans, as we see the effects that a virus can have upon our lives, not just physically but socially and economically. We are much more vulnerable than we realize. We are not as in control of our lives as we think. It is true, we are utterly dependent on God for every breath we take for “He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:25).

This feeling of being exposed to our frailty and vulnerability, it can be a terrifying place. Fear is a feeling I have had to hold before the Lord and confess to him in new ways over the last 2 weeks as the spread of COVID-19's impact has become more and more weighty. **But I wonder, could this occasion of COVID-19, this experience of life being altered so drastically from the norm, be an invitation to see ourselves more clearly? Might it be an opportunity to realize and name the ways we function like our lives aren't actually that dependent on God for our every breath?**

Sit for a moment in the quiet and listen, listen to your heart. Are there any new awarenesses you've had about yourself in light of life in the midst of COVID-19? What has staying at home, the unprecedented altering of the rhythms of family and life and work, a narrowing of your face-to-face community brought to the surface in you?

What is coming up for you in the quiet? Maybe Loneliness? Fear? Lack of Control? Anger? Uncertainty? Frustration at the discomfort of this time?

These are the very things that Lent has always invited us to explore with the Lord. Life with COVID-19 maybe has given us the unexpected gift of bringing these things to the surface and heightening them for us in new and deeper ways. Could this strange and unusual place we find ourselves, this Middle Place of COVID-19 as Mary shared in her reflection last week, where life has been altered so drastically from all that is normal, be an opportunity to reveal the deeper things we look to for security, satisfaction, consolation? Friends, this has always been the invitation of Lent. To name, confess and offer to the Lord what has gotten between us and Him. To reorient us to the truth of who God is and who we are. Perhaps more than ever, now is the time we need the space to fill the quiet center of our souls, a space to reorient ourselves in the midst of such radical disorientation.

Like the prodigal son of Luke 15, could this Middle Place of COVID-19 be a profound "coming to ourselves" moment, like the prodigal son had in Luke 15:17, where we see more deeply the ways we have wandered away from God and need to come home?

Lent is always at its core a coming home to the heart of God. When we come to God with these realizations about ourselves, when we come to him with our confessions, our brokenness, the ways we have strayed from trusting and relying on Him as the sole source of life, security and love, **we find one thing waiting for us: the open arms of our loving Father who embraces us.**

That is the image of the Father in the Prodigal Son story, open arms welcoming his wayward son home with the embrace of love. God is our Good Father who welcomes us home and reminds us of who we truly are: safe, loved, and having a place of belonging. Right before the Prodigal Son story, is the parable of the Shepherd who seeks out his lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7). I sat with this story at a JourneyMates retreat at the very beginning of Lent, and that image of the Good Shepherd has been so comforting to me as I've journeyed through this Lent and this Middle Place of COVID-19. Our God is the Good Father who welcomes us home, and He is also the Good Shepherd who has been by our side all along, seeking us out, guiding us, restoring us, securing our lives from all that would harm us, filling us full to overflowing with his goodness.

We are still on the journey of Lent friends, at least for a little while longer. Soon we will move into Holy Week and Easter, where we will most likely move through this most sacred and holy week of remembering the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in a way we never have before, without gathering together in the flesh for Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Easter services. It actually hurts in deep places in me to even speak this reality out loud. It is something I have never experienced before.

Can we journey through the rest of Lent, into Holy Week, and through Easter in this Middle Place, holding the desolations while looking for the consolations, feeling our longings and yearnings more acutely than perhaps ever before and holding those before the Lord, living into death, yes, but also holding to the truth of the resurrection as we wait expectantly for the “He has risen! He has risen indeed! Hallelujah!” of Easter?

We will most likely experience Easter morning homebound, and what a reminder that we are indeed people bound for home... a home that is not of this earth. We can often forget this truth, the truth that we are sojourners and exiles in a land that is not our home. It is also true that while we sojourn in this land, we are held safe and secure in the loving arms of our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ.

The truth we proclaim as people of faith, on uneventful days and in the midst of a global pandemic, is that no matter what happens:

In Christ, we are safe.

In Christ, we are loved.

In Christ, we belong.

In Christ, we have all we could want or need.

Perhaps, more than ever before, we need to be reminded of this truth.

Though we cannot gather together physically as a JourneyMates community to engage in practices of listening and attentiveness to God, we invite you to stay with what God is doing in your heart, mind and soul this Lent into Holy Week and Easter and beyond, for as long as this Middle Place of COVID-19 continues. Perhaps this pause in our normal routine can be an opportunity to enter into a deeper awareness of ourselves and God. We offer this modified Lenten retreat to you with the invitation to take some time away with the Lord and listen for the ways that God is calling you to return home to His heart, to remember yet again, that only our Shepherding God can truly give us what we need, what our hearts truly long for, his love.

Hear these words from Psalm 62 in closing...

*Truly my soul finds rest in God;
my salvation comes from him.
Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.
Trust in him at all times, you people;
pour out your hearts to him,
for God is our refuge.
Psalm 62:1-2, 8*