Opinion
Spirituality



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February snow has not kept the signs of spring from coming. The daffodils are slowly pushing up through the hard ground outside my windows, glimmers of green despite cold winds and streaks of snow. It's hard to believe it's time for flowers, Ash Wednesday is around the corner and the dreariness of winter still seems to be holding court. This year, Lent is late — a conundrum of the calendar, perfectly suited to the times we're living in.

Seeming streams of scandal both in the church and the world desensitize our spirits. Like a long winter, days like these create grounds for despair and fodder for desolation. It would seem that the deep purple tones of the Lenten season, with its themes of repentance, abstinence and humility, would be the last thing we need right now. It would be easier to skim the surface or avoid it all together. So, why go deeper?

We go deeper because we must. This season is as much about repentance as it is about renewal. In fact, maybe Lent is more about light than darkness, about lightening our load and reprioritizing our lives. Lent is about being real. And perhaps, that is exactly where we need to be.

The seasons are changing; the days are getting longer. Light is returning. And in the midst of painful revelations in the church and ongoing scandal in the world, Lent invites us into a time of discovery and recovery. This is a time for renewal of faith.

These forty days of wandering, of being proved, of finding strength, and of bolstering faith are exactly what we need right now. From ashes and fasting to almsgiving and prayer, the spiritual deepening and awareness offered by the Lenten season invite us to a place of renewal, a place that, if we are honest, it wouldn't hurt to spend some time in, individually and collectively these days.

You are Dust.

The words we hear as we begin the season of Lent might easily be taken as a signal of the bleak landscape that awaits us: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

We are dust. We were born and we will die. The life we live in between these two moments is God's gift to us. Recognizing our humble beginnings and our mortality is part of embracing the Lenten call to renewal.

When we remember that we are beloved creations of God, we can embrace ourselves, others and all of creation with the wonder that befits such divine design. The same dust we are made of makes up the ones we look down upon, those we judge, and those who frustrate us, as well as those who bring us joy. We are united in our creation. Seeing the world this way, how could we ever tolerate or turn a blind eye to injustice? You are dust and I am dust and we are dust together.

From such dust comes new life. Like fields that lie fallow, the dust of our being is never wasted. The seeds of faith are planted in the dust of our humanity. Lent invites us to acknowledge our humanity, where we've fallen short and how reliant we are on God. When we can do this, faith has space to grow and blossom. By honestly embracing our humanity and using the days of Lent to recommit to following Christ, we are renewed, becoming ever more mindful of how God is working in our lives and calling us to repent and live lives that reflect a belief in the Good News.

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Full engagement in the renewal Lent calls forth is about examining and recommitting to the practices that ground our faith and remind us who we are and who we're called to be. Traditionally, this has led people to focus on prayer, fasting and almsgiving in an intentional way during Lent. Most often this entails giving something up or taking on a practice in each realm. This year, though, I wonder if we might not be better served by considering how these practices can not only focus us but can transform us if we lean into the truth that underpins our practice.

Our prayer, for instance, is an opportunity to grow closer to God; we might choose to prayerfully consider our shortcomings, to look at our role in racial inequality, or to share with God the wounds of our hearts. Wherever our prayer leads us and whatever we reflect on, we must remember the essential aim of our prayer: our relationship with God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

This is the God we journey with this season, the one who suffers with us, and ultimately, the one who we long to know (and who longs to know us) more deeply as we travel the way towards the cross.

In the words of St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson in Creation and the Cross:

> "To those who believe, the call from the depths of their relationship with God is to bend every effort to stand with God in solidarity with those who suffer; to right wrongs, counter injustice, relieve the pain, and create situations where life can flourish."

Indeed, it is our practice and our deepening relationship with God, especially during Lent, that directs us to such renewal in our lives and for the life of the world.

Bending our every effort, through practices such as fasting, we recognize our dependence on God. By going without, we discover the truth of where/who our strength comes from. We also come to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who have no choice but to live simply. Our fasting is voluntary, theirs is not. By recognizing that, we are renewed in our sense of mission to be one with all people and to work so all are provided for.

This renewed sense of unity and call to action is reflected in the giving called forth in us during Lent. We give freely and fully, modeling our sharing and sacrifice on Jesus' own. Doing this intentionally during Lent bolsters our relationship with God and neighbor far beyond this one season.

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In giving with intention, we renew and revitalize our call to compassion. Our giving may include material goods, but to deepen our sense of renewal this season it might serve us well to give of time and presence — to hear someone else's hurt, to relate deeply with another's confusion, or to provide loving presence that moves our giving beyond charity to true relationship.

When we're able to do this, Johnson points out, "Then a resurrecting word can gain a foothold in this fractured world."

The active choice to seek renewal in Lent is a choice to embrace the Good News of Christ and all that comes with it. As theologian David Tracy writes, "Cross and resurrection live together or not at all." The connection between these two is part of our journey to renewal in Lent. We know that the Lenten journey will lead us to the cross, and we are so compelled by the God who calls us to stand for the Good News that we can't avoid it. But the journey doesn't end at the cross. We must never forget that the cross is inextricably linked with the resurrection. This is the promise of faith, the promise of new life in and with God. On dark days, this is a good reminder.

The work of renewal is deeply personal and profoundly prophetic. New life is brimming but we must create conditions for it to spring forth. That process looks a lot like dying — to self, to shortcomings, to misguided intentions and to sinful institutional action.

By renewing our commitment to Christ this Lenten season, we offer ourselves to the mercy of the journey. By refining our actions and active love, we can be transformed. This is a season of renewal. We must trust God and be engaged. These next forty days offer us a beginning to that process. May we take advantage of this time and know that, sure as the flowers will bloom, God will work with us and through us to bring forth renewed life.

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