

Living the Story through Lent

Sharing the Story With and Through Our Youth

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The Potter and the Clay

Did you know that before a potter begins her work she must first centre the clay on the wheel or the forces acting on it as it spins will pull and distort it? I learned this one Sunday morning—the first Sunday in Lent—in worship at Beaches Presbyterian Church in Toronto. In the centre of the sanctuary a potter sat at her wheel, working with clay and reflecting aloud on what this art form has taught her about God and about life and growth and transformation.

Sometimes, she explained, there is a flaw in the emerging form. When this happens, the potter needs to begin again, re-centering and re-forming the clay, until it takes the shape it is meant to have. The work of the potter is to make space, to create an opening which she then stretches and enlarges until there is room enough inside to contain what needs to be held.

As we learned about clay that Sunday morning, we also learned about Lent. The biblical image of God as Potter became a new way into this difficult season, a time of emptying out and letting go, of grappling with suffering and confronting death. We listened to

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Scripture readings which envision God as the One who shapes and moulds us; we sang hymns like *The Clay-Stained Hands of Love* (Book of Praise, 296); with our own hands we softened and shaped small balls of clay that had been distributed in baskets to everyone in the congregation. All the while we meditated on what it means to be centered in God, to be continually transformed, and to allow God to create in us an inner spaciousness that makes room not only for friends and loved ones, but even for strangers and outsiders.

Dying to Be Born Again: The Story of Lent

More than any other season of the church year, Lent invites us not only to hear the Christian Story, but to live it, allowing our own lives to be re-shaped to conform to its pattern. The Story we tell and live during Lent is a story of dying and rising, a story of letting go and emptying out. It is the story of Christ himself and the mystery at the heart of the gospel: before we can be born again, we must first die (cf. Jn 12:24; Mt 16:25).

Extending the Invitation: Creative Liturgy

Every year during Lent the Church has another chance to tell this Story and to invite everyone to join this journey of transformation. Creative liturgy—worship infused with creativity and imagination - can be an excellent vehicle for educating worshipers on about the power and purpose of Lent. If the purpose of Lent is to open the whole person to the transforming power of God, what better place to begin than with images and symbols, words and rituals which engage the whole person—not only the intellect, but also the senses, imagination and heart.

Physical space is important. At Beaches P.C. the sanctuary is always dressed in traditional Lenten purple. An enormous wreath of twisted grape-vines—resembling a large crown of thorns—is suspended from the ceiling. On Easter morning, this wreath is filled with lilies, white tulips, and fresh greenery. Banners, a large bowl of earth, a bare tree branch, or purple drapery on a sanctuary cross can also provide a focal point in the worship space throughout the Lenten season.

The Big Picture: A Congregational Painting

Although Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, the first Sunday in Lent can also be a good time to plan a special time of worship to orient the congregation to the coming season.

One year at Beaches our Lenten project was a communal painting. An artist in the congregation built a large canvas and used black electrical tape to divide it into small geometric sections. This canvas was set up at the front of the sanctuary, flanked by tables filled with jars of acrylic paint, brushes, cleaner, plenty of drop-cloths, and a basket of smocks for the children.





During worship, after a brief explanation, everyone in the congregation was invited forward to fill in one section of the canvas with an image that expressed their prayer or hope or intention for the coming weeks. Some of the images were very concrete, others more abstract.

The canvas was left in place throughout Lent. Each week (before and after worship and during the offering) people continued to add to it until every inch was covered with the prayers of the community.

On Easter Sunday, the congregation was invited to ponder how the painting had become a symbol of our interconnectedness. After a time of silent prayer, several people came forward and began to peel away the electrical tape. There were audible gasps at how different the whole picture appeared. Once the lines dividing the individual prayers were removed, the whole canvas seemed unified by a web of light.

The congregational painting began as a way of encouraging people to pray together without words and to see themselves as part of a community. In its completion it gave us a glimpse of the truth that beneath the things that separate us we are all connected to one another and held within the love of God.

The Spirituality Centre

Another year, again on the first Sunday in Lent, the sanctuary and adjoining rooms were transformed into a Spirituality Centre. Stations were set up around the church, each one set up with supplies and instructions for a particular spiritual discipline (e.g. *lectio divina*, Prayer of the Senses, praying the Psalms, creating visual prayers based on passages of scripture, making prayer beads representing the fruits of the spirit).

Following a brief sermon and an explanation of some of the choices, those present were invited to explore the stations at their own pace.

For the next hour the church fell silent, with the exception of gentle guitar music in the background, as people read, painted, meditated, drew, and sat in silence. Some of the forms of prayer which people first encountered that day became part of their own practice throughout the rest of Lent and beyond.

Movies to Move You: A Lenten Film Festival

Another project Beaches has undertaken in recent years is a Lenten Film Festival. Once a week the church opens its doors and offers popcorn and a movie which explores some Lenten theme (e.g. transformation, self-giving, death, suffering, repentance, reconciliation, healing). The roster for 2011 included: *Inception*, *The Reader*, *Shutter Island*, *Lean on Me*, *Dorian Gray*, *Brothers* and *Godspell*.

Called *Movies to Move You*, the Film Festival is far more than entertainment. It is an opportunity to hear and reflect on the stories of others, particularly when those stories involve suffering. As we intentionally engage the needs and experiences of others through art and story, we become more aware of these realities in our own world. As our awareness grows, we are moved to respond in creative and compassionate ways, as individuals, and as communities called to make known the love of God in the world.

Re-Interpreting the Tradition

I have described several ways one congregation has tried to tell and live the Christian Story at Lent in unique ways. There are also countless ways a community of faith could find new expressions of the traditional Lenten disciplines of *prayer, fasting* and *almsgiving*.

Lent is a good time to expand our understanding of prayer by learning about practices such as lectio divina or Ignatian Prayer. Imagine establishing small groups which meet once a week to pray with the scriptures, walk a labyrinth, or pray in colour (see the book by Sybil McBeth).

A contemporary form of *fasting* could involve cutting back on excess, or intentionally discerning between needs and wants. Consider hosting a simple pot-luck supper of soup and bread or rice and beans, followed by an intergenerational Lenten activity like making banners. Imagine holding a congregational rummage sale—a literal emptying out—and sending the proceeds to a human rights organization.

Almsgiving means sharing ourselves as well as our money. In our current congregation in Guildwood in Toronto, local yoga instructor Cathy Mines held a *Yoga for Food* class during Lent. The whole neighbourhood was invited to the church hall for a free evening of candle-lit yoga. The only cost was an item for the food bank or local school breakfast program. We have also hosted *Write for Rights* campaigns in support of *Amnesty International*, supplying all writing materials, stamps, and sample letters. Almsgiving could also take the form of intentional learning about groups of vulnerable people like refugees or migrant workers, then praying and thinking together about how to take action.

However we tell the story, what matters most is our intention: letting go of our customary self-absorption so that our eyes and minds and hearts may truly become open and we may be transformed into people whose lives reflect the love and compassion of God.

Laura Alary is a mother, teacher, writer, preacher and story-teller. She is presently enjoying life in Guildwood with her husband and three young children and is always looking for new and meaningful ways to tell The Story.

A Few Resources:

www.monsteriesoftheheart.org (website founded by Benedictine writer Joan Chittister)

Thelma Hall.

Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina.

New York: Paulist Press, 1988.

Sybil MacBeth.

Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God.

Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007.

Martin L. Smith.

The Word is Very Near You: A Guide to Praying With Scripture.

Cowley Publications, 1989.

Jane Vennard.

A Praying Congregation: The Art of Teaching Spiritual Practice.

The Alban Institute, 2010.

Gertrud Mueller Nelson.

To Dance With God: Family Ritual and Community

Celebration. New York: Paulist Press, 2002.

Stages on the Way: Worship Resources for Lent, Holy Week and Easter.

Wild Goose Resource Group, Gia Publications, 2002.

Ruth Burgess and Chris Polhill.

Eggs and Ashes: Practical and Liturgical Resources for Lent and Holy Week.

Wild Goose Resource Group, 2005.