

Protagonist Corner

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Call this the “Antagonist Corner.” In the midst of an edition of the *JP* that is rich in Easter wisdom, I’m going to push us back to a focus on Lent—and do so, paradoxically, as a way of saying that that we shouldn’t ever focus on Lent. I’m going to argue that at least those of us in the Reformed tradition should do away with Ash Wednesday, giving things up, a season of penitence, and the whole Lenten smorgasbord. At the end of the day, I doubt I’ll have convinced anyone not already convicted by my (decidedly minority) position. Maybe, though, I’ll have at least encouraged some folks toward further thought on the matter.

Though the purposes of Lent are varied through time and across denominational lines, they mostly boil down to some combination of the following emphases:

1. Lent is a time in which the church celebrates its ecumenical ties across the world and through time by participating in a shared season.
2. Lent is a time for education prior to full participation in the church. In the early church, catechumens spent the weeks prior to Easter being taught in the mysteries of the church in preparation for their Easter baptisms.
3. Lent is a time of penitence in which we reflect on our own mortality (“Remember: you are dust and to dust you shall return.”), thereby gaining further clarity about Jesus’ mortality, our own limits, and our dependence on the grace of God.
4. Lent is a time during which we prepare ourselves for the grace-explosion of resurrection by learning to discipline our bodies and our lives.
5. Lent helps us order and live in time by creating the space to focus on one aspect of the faith because it is difficult to focus on all the parts all the time.

Before making my larger case against Lent, let me try to orient us with regard to those five purposes. Some of them make sense at first blush but become more problematic upon reflection. Why, for instance, do we think that the way to celebrate our ecumenical ties with other communions (as per reason #1 above) is by behaving like those other communions? To highlight the obvious, Christians in the Reformed tradition don’t believe we should think or act just like Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Orthodox, Baptists, or any other of the hundreds of communions in the world. For instance, unlike some communions, reformed churches don’t recognize or celebrate saints’ days. Does that make us less ecumenical? I think not; after all, ecumenical relations become most meaningful not when we insist that we all must be alike, but when we create space for our differences and yet learn to love each other in the process. In the Reformed tradition, the only criteria for being church are that the Word of God is preached and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are rightly administered. Nothing in there about Lent or any other of the many systems of ordering (time, space, ecclesial power, etc.) to which we should find ourselves beholden. It could even be that a witness of not observing Lent—when done thoughtfully and openly—may help those communions for whom it is more basic to the faith clarify why they practice it. So an emphasis on ecumenism, at least by itself, won’t supply us with reasons adequate to perpetuate the practices of Lent.

Others of the purposes of Lent (#2, #3) are rather straightforwardly non-problematic. Who would argue against education? I'm all for it—provided we think that we should be involved in “being transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Romans 12:2) in a year-round way. Likewise, what kind of Reformed theologian would I be if I didn't recognize the full humanity of Jesus, the reality of human failings, and our absolute dependence on the grace of God—again, though, provided we think that we should do this throughout the year. So in these two instances, my problem isn't with a purpose so much as a willingness to connect it to a particular season. Moreover, since I think we're supposed to give special attention to these things on the Lord's day, if these are our Lenten emphases, then we should include Sundays in Lent. But we don't include Sundays in the forty days of Lent because each Sunday is a “little Easter” on which we celebrate the Resurrection—a point to which I wish to return momentarily.

Still other reasons for Lent are more troubling to my Reformed mind. Believing that grace is always a surprise, that apart from God's grace we can do nothing, and that resurrection is the deepest, most mysterious expression of God's grace, I simply can't make theological sense of the claim that any of us can do anything to prepare ourselves for the arrival of such grace on Easter Sunday (as per reason #4). Easter is a shock of divine goodness that reveals not the evidence of our worth or the magnitude of our efforts, but God's astounding power, to which we can but whisper “Thank you,” not “Okay: now I'm ready.” Whatever work we do at learning to discipline our bodies and our lives, we do in response to God's grace, not in preparation for it. But there, again, this response—this disciplining—isn't a *seasonal* exercise; it's a lifelong one.

That leaves purpose #5 (Lent helps us order and live in time), my discomfort with which goes to the heart of my argument against Lent. Simply put, I don't think Lent helps us *order* time; I think it is the most visible manifestation of just how disordered our sense of time is. It is confusion sacralized; willful error baptized; a covert expression of our disease, not the cure. It maliciously perpetrates the very error it claims to correct. Do I overstate? You decide.

Set aside the petty problems with time that have grown up around Lent (e.g., Fat Tuesday—*Mardi Gras*—as a last chance to act crazy or Easter Monday as the day we can give up our idiomatically wearying projects of giving things up). The detritus that Lent has accrued over time isn't really its fault. Set aside the quasi-sacramental reminder of our mortality that constitutes Ash Wednesday. (How privileged or sheltered a life must one lead that one needs a yearly ritualized reminder that our time on earth has an ending?) My principle argument against Lent is that it encourages us to think about living as if we are on the way to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection—to place ourselves in a “time before” both in order to more fully appreciate those events. I, on the other hand, think that we are called to think about living *after* crucifixion and resurrection—to place ourselves in the “time between” resurrections in order to more fully understand our own place in time as those who wait for the completion of the Kingdom of God which was inaugurated 2000 or so years ago.

Rather than saying, “Since I can't focus on everything all at once, I'll focus on this part of Jesus' life and death now and the resurrection part later” (which is the typical Lenten argument), I'm saying that we should be trying to make theological sense of Jesus' life and death through the lens of his resurrection. Conceding the point that we can't look at everything at once, my argument is that the Easter events constitute the lens through which we look at all those other discrete points. To say that more strongly,

after Jesus' resurrection, to try to look at those events—to try to look at *any* events, for that matter—in any other way is tantamount to forgetting when we are. Since that's what I see Lent doing, I say Lent distorts our understanding of time and our place in it.

One of the clearest expressions of this difference comes in the context of how we think about the relationship between death and resurrection. Liturgically separating the time we spend thinking about death and disciplining our lives from the time we celebrate resurrection has the effect of disconnecting sin and death from God's response to them. That is, Lent encourages us to separate death from Easter, to treat resurrection as a way of getting over—or, more accurately, getting past—death rather than as an answer to death. Lent creates an Easter aporia in which we no longer talk about death. Do you doubt me? Ask yourself: when was the last time you heard an Easter sermon about death and dying? For that matter, when was the last time you heard *any* sermon on the topic? But as William F. May has so insightfully put it:

To preach about death is absolutely essential if Christians are to preach with joy. Otherwise they speak with profound melancholy of men who have separated the church from the graveyard. They make the practical assumption that there are two Lords. First, there is the Lord of the Sabbath. . . . Then there is a second Lord, a Dark Power about whom one never speaks, the Lord of highway wrecks, hospitals, and graveyards who handles everything in the end. . . . The Christian faith, however, does not speak of two parallel Lords. The Lord of the church is not ruler of a surface kingdom. His dominion is nothing if it does not go at least six feet deep. . . . For this reason, the church must be unafraid to speak of death.¹

Resurrection doesn't separate us from death; nor should we separate our time for celebrating the former from our time for being aware of the latter. Easter (or any of the little Easters we celebrate each Sunday) is the time we most need to talk about death—to locate it within the purview of a single Lord whose dominion goes six feet deep; to relativize its location in our lives by connecting it to the gospel's witness that it will not be the end of things for us—not the time to stop talking about it. We more properly situate ourselves in time when we see ourselves as living between the first resurrection and the second, not when we live in a season of preparation for celebrating the first resurrection.

"But Mark," I already hear the reply, "that's why we connect Good Friday to Easter Sunday. And, by extension, why Lent leads up to holy week. Lent is our time to walk with Jesus to Jerusalem; to re-focus our attention so that we can recognize his (literally) life-giving work for us on the cross—and then God's even more literally life-giving work in resurrecting him." Again—and again setting aside our confusion about *who* or *where* we would be on that journey (not Jesus, but the ones who urged his death and for whom he died, thereby revealing that Lent only inverts the problem preachers face on Palm Sunday: how to connect the crowds singing hosanna to the mob shouting, "Crucify him!")—the problem is one of time. I'm not arguing against connecting Good Friday and Easter Sunday; I'm arguing *for* it, and therefore, against the project of separating the two, a project which Lent tacitly reinforces by giving us a convenient beginning and ending to our time of reflecting on those aspects of the faith that deal

with sin and death.² We live after the resurrection, not after death. And Lent hides that from us (or, perhaps more accurately, hides us from that). So let's stop observing it. We're better off observing Easter more fully and thoughtfully.³

See? There was a reason to put this "Protagonist Antagonist Corner" in this issue. Easter blessings!

Notes

1 William F. May, "The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience" in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, 2nd Ed., ed. Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998), 200-201.

2 It is for this reason, incidentally, that though our approaches and rhetoric seem utterly opposed to each other, I find myself in deep agreement with Alan Lewis's brilliant book, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2001).

3 For starters, we could all read Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1982).