

Introduction to Lenten Texts

First Sunday in Lent, Luke 4:1-13

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Alongside his cousin John, Jesus is born, named, and circumcised. Before the birth announcements can even be mailed, the shepherds and angels are having a field day. Simeon decides he has seen the Lord. And Anna belts out an anthem confirming what everyone else has been saying—this child is the one.

In no time flat, the celebrated infant morphs into an impulsive tween who decides to hang back at the temple without so much as a nod to his parents. A few years later, on the slippery banks of the Jordan River, he joins the crowd getting dunked. As he rises from the chilly waters, the heavens croon their confirmation. No paternity test needed. This guy belongs to God.

As he glides into his third decade, Jesus rapidly gets down to business. But before he even exegetes his first text, the Spirit whisks him off for six harrowing weeks of Clinical Pastoral Education. Day after day, he is coaxed into all kinds of distressing scenarios, challenged to articulate and defend his faith, and depleted of any moral certitude that had been accumulated over the years.

With the days and nights not his own, there was zero time to think about food. Slimmed down and ravenous, Jesus staggers out, ready to gnaw on the first thing he sees. Assuming the verbatims and gut-wrenching analysis are safely behind him, Jesus begins to let his guard down. He dreams of a real meal, one with robust wine and warm, crusty loaves of bread. He pictures the familiar faces of his family and friends gathered around the table and the toasts that will be made in honor of sticking it out and making it through.

A rock skids to a stop a few feet in front of his dusty feet, shattering all such lovely thoughts. “Since you are God’s Son and all,” the Devil sneers, “why not turn this stone into something edible?” In one fell swoop, however, Jesus quiets the rumblings of his stomach and the heckling of his jealous colleague. “It takes more than bread to really live,” he shoots back, unleashing a little Deuteronomy on the world.

Unwilling to back down, the Devil switches tactics. This time, he pilots Jesus to the moon and seduces him with a beautiful blue view of the earth and all her continents. “They’re all yours to do with what you please,” charms the Devil. “I can turn these worlds over to whomever I wish. Follow me and it will all be yours.” Despite his bedraggled body and near empty soul, Jesus refuses to take the bait. “In case you didn’t hear me the first time, let me say it again—worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God.”

Unused to his sweet deals being met with such fierce resistance, the Devil tries one more time. He hauls Jesus up the dizzying steps of the bell tower at the Washington National Cathedral. Three hundred feet above the ground, the Devil dares, “Jump. If you really are who you say you are, the angels will swoop down to save you.” Without missing a beat, Jesus gazes out at the city and snaps, “For one last time, let me remind you what Deuteronomy says—don’t mess around with God. If you want to play games, you best find somebody else.”

Perhaps the Devil had reached his saturation point—he'd had enough of the Deuteronomy quotes for one day. Or perhaps he was taking time to regroup—holed up with his debate prep team and an array of biblical scholars, refining his strategy for getting underneath Jesus' skin. We haven't heard the last from him. Throwing in the towel today does not mean that he won't be back tomorrow.

As the season of Lent begins, do we know who we stand for? Who we pledge our allegiance to? When attractive enticements are floated in front of our noses, do we take the bait, or do we push more Deuteronomy into our hearts?

Second Sunday in Lent, Luke 13:31-35

No wonder the Pharisees are about to have a panic attack. Jesus has just elaborated on his eschatology, and it doesn't seem to include the spiritual but not religious. "Many of you," Jesus explains, "will assume that an invitation to the heavenly banquet is already in the mail. But God's guest list has no mention of the ones who prefer to dabble around the edges." Busting apart their views on who is in and who is out, Jesus creates a cauldron of anxiety that bubbles over into this week's Gospel lesson.

Dripping with angst, the Pharisees race over to warn Jesus that Herod is hot on his tail. "Red alert. Run for your life," they caution. Like the fretful church member who has a tendency to raise the temperature in whatever room he or she occupies, these Pharisees reek of worry. In order to escape Herod's clutches, Jesus must start moving now.

Rather than disarming them with his best non-anxious presence, Jesus ups the ante by dismissing the agitated envoy with a message of his own. "Tell that fox I've no time for him right now. Today and tomorrow I'm busy chasing away demons and healing the sick. And even if I weren't completely booked for the next three days, nothing bad ever comes to a prophet outside the gates of Jerusalem." Scoffing at their angst, Jesus proclaimed that no one outside the city gates would care enough to lift a finger. But inside Jerusalem, the mouthpieces of God had better watch their backs. Murdering prophets was what Jerusalem did best.

In one breath, Jesus is bad-mouthing Jerusalem, but in the next he's bemoaning the ancient metropolis. The city has a long litany of shortcomings, including the abuse of God's messengers and the well-known assassination of prophets. But Jesus saves his deepest grief for Jerusalem's cold shoulder. When God tries to shelter them under her wings, the city casually shrugs off the advance. "No thanks," says Jerusalem. "We don't need a mother hen who constantly pecks."

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus cries. "The place where prophets meet their end and those sent to speak their minds are silenced." "It's not the way I wanted things," he continues like a burdened parent who cannot save a sinking child. "I have wanted to embrace you, but you chose to stiffen your backs and resist my grip."

How often do we resist that divine grip, turning away from the everlasting arms that stand ready to embrace? How often do we have to be dragged kicking and screaming into the kingdom of God?

Third Sunday in Lent, Luke 13:1-9

Jesus isn't letting anyone off the hook this week. He hasn't come to bring polite smiles and lukewarm handshakes. He's not doing what he's doing to make those dressed in their Sunday best feel like it was worth putting on their pantyhose and neck

ties. Make no mistake. If you're looking for a savior who will exchange pleasantries with your 86-year-old grandmother without mentioning healthcare, immigration, or the economy, then Jesus is not your man. Immediately prior to this week's gospel lesson, Jesus is on fire—jamming a finger in the face of anyone nearby. He's not ready to make nice. Jesus has come to upset the apple cart and force a decision.

It's this decision that continues to baffle his followers. They long for a checklist, and Jesus keeps giving them a life plan. They crave ten straightforward steps to heaven, and instead Jesus hands them a sketch for extensive cardiac rehab. People want a real time GPS to guide them along, and Jesus says stop being best friends with Siri and start becoming best friends with me.

A grieving group of people arrive, shoving the newspaper under Jesus' nose, wailing over the headline "Six Worshippers Gunned down in Sikh Temple." "How could someone do this?" they howl. "Why would anyone do this?" Roiling with emotion, the group marches up to Jesus and demands a response. Like any boiling-over parishioner who storms into the pastor's office, they want Jesus to be as distraught as they are. They want him to blow his top just as they have blown theirs. But rather than add fuel to their already roaring fire, Jesus tries to put it out by sticking them with a question: "Do you think those murdered Wisconsin Sikh's had sinned more than all the other American worshippers on that Sunday morning? Do you think that they somehow had ticked off God and deserved what was coming to them?"

Donning his teacher hat, Jesus is attempting to do a little remedial tutoring in theology here. Too often, his followers believed in a very simple equation when it came to salvation. Do the right thing and blessings will come your way, but do the wrong thing and you're guaranteed a curse. Unfortunately, Harold Kushner had not yet penned his infamous book. If a person was struggling, they must have somehow screwed up. Jesus meets this misguided thinking with an unequivocal no. "No, no, no!" Jesus says, shooting down their twisted theology. "The Sikhs in Oak Creek had not offended God. The six worshippers did not deserve to be killed. The loss of life that morning was not orchestrated by an irate God who was hungry for revenge."

As their emotions cooled, Jesus decided to take advantage of the teachable moment. Besides rearranging their theodicy, Jesus throws in a lesson about turning around. "Unless you turn to God, unless you spin yourself around and come face to face with the Lord, then you, too, will die." Rather than get caught up in the evil of white supremacy or the lack of adequate gun laws, Jesus listens to their angst and then challenges it. "We can't control ticked off white men who fear turbans. We can't even begin to understand the rage of a tattooed Neo-Nazi. Yet what we can cultivate, what we can manage—is ourselves. Rather than picking apart Wade Michael Page, what do *our* insides look like? Are we pointed towards the holy?"

Lest his listeners still need some convincing, Jesus rips through the scar tissue of another gaping wound. "What about the 2,900 people in New York City, the ones crushed and killed when the twin towers collapsed and fell on them; do you think they were worse citizens than all the other New Yorker's that morning?" "No, no, no," Jesus drives home. "From the executives at Cantor Fitzgerald to the line cooks at Windows on the World, God did not have it out for them. There's no ecclesiastical spread sheet of the worst offenders." Jesus strongly disputes, "Not at all."

Amidst the emotions that are running high, Jesus says, "Let me tell you a story." As if they were a classroom full of rowdy kindergartners, Jesus quiets them down by

spinning a narrative about a fruitless fig tree. When the story was finished, one person left wondering about his estranged family and what part he played in cutting loved ones off. A father left deep in thought about his second son who collected a “late bloomer” label whenever evaluated. One person left untangling the reasons she was stuck in one place, simply taking up space. And yet another person departed from the story circle in awe—believing that this Jesus guy was really onto something.

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

It didn’t take Jesus long to establish a following. There wasn’t anyone in the temple telling it like Jesus did. As his entourage swelled, so did the disagreements. The sheep herders who barely knew the definition of a bath always offended the more well-to-do. The garish make-up and provocative clothing of the prostitutes compelled the married women to cling tightly to their children as well as their husbands. Associates concerned for Jesus’ safety engaged in heated arguments with followers who believed the more the merrier. Important officials grumbled about having to wait in line. Why couldn’t they set up a VIP area in order to avoid all the riff-raff?

However, it was the rectors and the vicars, the reverends and the ministers, the preachers and the pastors who were especially displeased by the quality of the company. “He greets sinners—the same ones we’ve been trying to whip into shape for years. Not only does he talk to them, but he approves of them!” they growl. “We’ve studied Greek and Hebrew, endured ordination exams, and given our entire lives over to God’s work. If he’s going to be best buds with anyone, it should be us—not the people who can’t pass a criminal background check.”

It was the griping clergy who inspired what Jesus said next. There was once a family with two children. The younger child was restless and hungry for adventure. She felt stifled living underneath her brother’s shadow and was eager to explore the world. “Mom and Dad, I’ve decided that I don’t want to go to college. Instead of sending me off for four years of a liberal arts education, I would like you to simply give me the \$200,000 right now.”

Interestingly enough, the parents agreed to her proposal. Perhaps they didn’t want to hold their daughter back. Or maybe they knew that any counter argument, no matter how well thought out, would be wasted breath. Who knows how many nights they stayed up weighing the pros and cons of letting their daughter go. In the end, they gave their second child what she asked for—2,000 crisp one hundred dollar bills.

And off she went. For awhile, she was frolicking through Europe, falling in love with French Burgandy’s and then eating her way through Italy. Fifteen pounds later and tired of waking up hung over, she traipsed over to Africa, climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, befriending a few Maasai warriors, tracking down lions, elephants, and black rhinos on a private safari. After devouring the African continent, she explored the Galapagos Islands and geared up for a short expedition to the Arctic. Along the way, she invested in some jewels to bedazzle her fingers and earlobes. And of course, when a private jet could not be arranged, she insisted on flying first class.

The young woman found herself in Bali, sipping a fruity cocktail and soaking up the sun, when a stern looking waiter shattered her bliss. Her credit card was no longer working, and her hotel tab needed settling. After swallowing her panic, she convinced the hotelier to not call the cops. Rather than involve the local authorities, she volunteered her services as a hotel maid until her expenses could be paid off.

After a few days of scrubbing vomit out of trashed hotel rooms, she broke down in tears, remembering her simple bedroom at home, her decent parents, and even her annoying brother. What was she doing scraping bodily fluids off bedspreads when half a world away, she had a family who loved her?

Hopping on the next flight out, the daughter nervously rehearsed the script in her head. “Mom and Dad, I’ve screwed up. Royally. I don’t even deserve to be called your daughter anymore. I’ll do anything if I can come home again.” When the taxi pulled down the driveway, her parents looked at one another and knew. Their second child had returned. With their hearts beating a mile a minute, they raced out the door and embraced their head-strong daughter. With her tail between her legs, the daughter started into her pitch, shamefully admitting that she was less than scum.

But her parents would have none of it. Before she even began begging for forgiveness, they started calling all the neighbors and in-town relatives. Quick—she needs a change of clothes. A new pair of shoes. Her hair and nails done. In a few hours, we’ll have a feast. There will even be an open bar. Everyone is invited. We’re going to have a wonderful time. Our daughter is home. Our daughter is home!

Meanwhile, the son had been out getting the oil changed and picking up the dry cleaning during the spectacular homecoming. When he returned to the house, there wasn’t a single space to park. Cars lined both sides of the driveway and even the lane leading up to their house. Music blared as people he had never seen before swarmed both the front yard and the back. “What the hell is going on?” he demanded to the first sober person he could find. “Your sister came home,” they laughed. “Your parents invited everyone in town to a barbeque to celebrate. But hey, isn’t she the one who pissed away a bunch of money rather than getting a degree?”

“Unbelievable,” sputtered the older brother. He climbed back into his car and sped away from the festivities. He called his mother’s cell phone and started screaming, “How many years have I stayed home, taking care of you and Dad, never giving you one moment of grief. How many years?” Before his mother had a chance to respond, the irate brother continued his tirade. “You’ve never thrown a party for me and my friends. Yet the daughter who throws away your money on safaris and sex shows up and you go all out with a feast?!”

His parents tried to reason with their disgruntled son. They tried to explain that he could have any of their assets at any time. They assured him of their love for him. But now was the time to celebrate. His sister had returned. Just yesterday she was lost, so very lost. But today, she’d found her way home.

Fifth Sunday in Lent, John 12:1-8

For four straight days, Mary had been wringing out tears. They had tried everything—even calling on Jesus to see if he could disrupt the looming powers of death. Unwilling to rearrange his schedule, however, Jesus never made it in time. Lazarus succumbed to his illness, leaving behind two exceedingly bereft sisters. When Jesus finally does arrive for a pastoral visit, Martha comes out swinging. “My dear brother has been dead for 96 hours. And now you show up? Really?”

Jesus redeems himself by practicing the resurrection arts on their brother. When called, a wrapped cadaver stumbles out of the tomb. Underneath the enveloped corpse is a living, breathing Lazarus. Tears of sorrow are rapidly replaced with sobs of disbelief and joy. By the end of it all, Mary and Martha have done triple loops on the

emotional roller coaster. With red-ringed eyes and a drippy nose, Mary greets Jesus at the front door and welcomes him home. Now that her brother is alive and well, all is right with the world. Once someone has stared death in the eye and defeated it, nothing else really matters. Mary pecks him on the cheek, takes his coat, and ushers him into the kitchen where their dinner awaits. With exquisite care, Martha dishes out steaming bowls of broth. She slices the roast and saves the choice pieces for their guest. She never misses an opportunity to top off their wine glasses or heap more potatoes on their plates. Whenever someone rises from the table, she dutifully folds their napkin or replaces it with a fresh one. Butter, salt and pepper, and dessert spoons are all where they're supposed to be. Perhaps the modern day Martha Stewart took her cues from this Martha of Bethany.

Between the third and fourth course, however, Mary interrupts the meal with a surprising bottle of Channel No. 5. This was no knock-off bottle she had acquired at some half priced market. This was two ounces of the most classic fragrance in the world. Looking intensely at their guest of honor, Mary lowers herself onto the floor and slips off Jesus' sandals. By now, no one is lifting a fork. All eyes are on Mary and the bare feet before her.

Twisting off the cap, she slowly and deliberately daubs each of his toes. She slides her fingers underneath his arches, pressing her palms into each one of his calluses. She lingers over each metatarsal bone, kneading her pricey perfume across the top of each foot. Her massage becomes more vigorous as she douses his creaky ankles.

In awe of what's unfolding before them and uncertain of a proper response, no one says anything. Perhaps the other dinner guests were hoping that Mary would continue around the table—that perhaps they, too, could substitute dessert for a little reflexology. But Judas can't stand the silence. "That perfume could have fed a ton of hungry people. Aren't we in the business of helping others before helping ourselves?" His question snaps the room back to reality. A few eyebrows are raised. Some nod their heads in agreement. The world doesn't need another massage parlor. What the world needs is food for hungry bellies and safe places for people to spend the night. Posh perfume means nothing to a poor person—unless he or she can sell it for profit.

But Jesus doesn't buy into this austerity plan. "Leave her alone," he warns. "One of these days, I won't be around. One of these days, I will be gone." Mary poured out everything she had for Jesus while Judas secretly hoarded what could have been shared. Mary did not hesitate or glance at Jesus for approval before she tipped over her fragrant gift, bathing his feet in pure luxury. All the while, Judas was crunching numbers in his head, advocating for what was practical and cost-effective. Every once in awhile, we throw our cares to the wind and our entire selves into something like Mary did that night. But just as often, we channel Judas, cringing at excess and righteously clucking our tongues at waste.

Somewhere along the line, we've come to believe the myth that says we must be one or the other—Mary, the extravagant donor, or Judas, the conniving investor. Many of us walk around with bottles of Chanel No 5 weighing down our vestments, searching for feet to massage while remembering the mouths that need to be fed. We fear being labeled excessive, and yet we loathe appearing stingy.