

Getting the Steps Right

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I wasn't raised in a church that really "did" Lent. My first experience of Lent was somewhere near what we called Pancake Day (Shrove Tuesday/Mardi Gras) when a new friend from another church asked me what I'm giving up. I picked up from him that Lent was a time to give things up, to fast (metaphorically). I joined in, because I thought it must be the right thing to do. Each year I tried to think of a bad habit to avoid for forty days. Some years I tried to turn things upside down and choose something positive to do each day, like reading all the way through the Hebrew Bible in forty days (forty-four pages a day in the translation I chose, if you are interested). Another year I sent a hand-written letter of appreciation to someone from my past every day in Lent. I think that went down well. I'm not sure how that relates to the idea of fasting, but it made me feel good.

After a while I fell out of the habit of observing that kind of Lent. I no longer joined in. I do have a lazy streak. I thought, hey, I don't need a random date or season to come round every year to make me feel bad. I can feel bad and try to stop doing bad things all year round (and no, I don't do New Year's resolutions either). Something in me rebelled against the idea of an angry God who wants me to feel bad and stop being naughty; a God who might calm down if I go without, and maybe, if I get enough things right, I might even earn a prize. That's not the God I find in the scriptures, in my experience of creation, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, in the community of people I get to journey with, or in the whisperings of the Spirit.

Lent, I learned, is associated with reflection and repentance. As I grew up in church it seemed to me that the word "repent" meant feeling bad and behaving better. Wiser heads than mine tell me that the Hebrew word for repentance, "teshuva," has layers that we don't always get in translation. The Hebrew word carries the sense of changing direction, turning round, coming back, coming home. That's intriguing. That's inviting. That's a call that moves me, despite my lazy streak. That's more in tune with my experience of God, the God who calls me back, to be more who I was made to be.

Speaking of invitations. I love getting to conduct weddings. Weddings tend not to be about feeling bad, but about celebration, about bringing families together, about love. And weddings involve food, music, and dancing. In Scotland that means something called a *Ceilidh*. I get to be minister in a town called Banchory, a small community that draws people from all over the world for reasons like the nearby ancient university or the fact that the city of Aberdeen is the oil and gas capital of Europe. Wedding guests tend to be nervous about Ceilidhs. They worry that they won't know

the rules, they will get the steps wrong. I let them into a wee secret. Most of us Scots don't know the steps either.

I often tell those gathered that I could have learned the steps. As a young boy of primary school age (5-12 years old) my parents decided it would be good for their son to go to something called Scottish Country Dancing. I did not share their enthusiasm. Attending meant that I had to go back to school in the evening, which was bad. (I hated every minute of school). More than that, this class meant I was required to dance with girls, which was the most embarrassing thing in all the world. I was expected to try to learn complex and embarrassing patterns of steps, postures, and routines, with cryptic names such as "Pas de Basque" or the mysterious "setting" to your partner. I could not get my awkward limbs around any of it. My many mistakes were pounced upon and pointed out by the scary Scottish Country Dancing lady. I spent the class in terror, my bright red cheeks burning with shame. After a week or two of this, a mysterious coincidence meant I would be afflicted with a "sore tummy" at exactly the same time each week. I would then get to sit on a bench at the side of the gym hall, cheeks still burning, and learn nothing about Scottish Country Dancing. I avoided all forms of dancing for years. Dancing was about showing off, knowing all the right moves, and being judged on every level.

Then I was invited to be the youth worker for a church in Banchory. The first event they arranged for me to meet people was—a Ceilidh. I had no choice. I took my awkward limbs and ready to be burning red cheeks along to that first Ceilidh. In that dusty church hall, I found nothing like the Scottish Country Dancing I had been subjected to. Oh, the teenagers were dancing to the same traditional music, and they would stick to a rough outline of those traditional dances, but you were just as likely to see them bouncing like kangaroos, flapping their arms like chickens, pulling shapes like John Travolta, or pumping out a set of press ups as you were of seeing a "Pas de Basque" or a formal set. Everyone was being gently coaxed into the controlled chaos—no matter their size, shape or ability. It was sweaty and wild and glorious. No one was getting the steps right, but somehow everything felt right. I ended that evening with burning red cheeks of joy and exertion, instead of shame and embarrassment, and I have savoured every minute of every Ceilidh since that night.

I like to think that the scary Scottish Country Dancing lady of my childhood nightmares might have frowned at these young people and their antics, but then smiled in private delight that these young people had grasped the real point of a dance. It wasn't to get the steps right. They somehow sensed deep in their bones that they were invited there that night to dance themselves dizzy, to laugh themselves hoarse, to squeeze every drop of flavour from the occasion.

I often tell wedding guests that in the first century, in the ancient near east, the equivalent of the scary Scottish Country Dancing lady could have come from a group known as the Pharisees. Some of them, it seems, became focused on the commands that their God had given them in their scriptures, the Torah. They wanted people to

feel bad and behave better. They did not approve of the words and actions of the man known as Jesus of Nazareth. In one of the accounts of Jesus's life called Mark, the author writes about when some Pharisees confronted Jesus (Chapter 2:18) and basically said, "Hey Jesus, John the Baptist's followers obey our Torah rules. They fast when they are supposed to fast, and (of course) Pharisees like us follow the rules and we fast. So, why don't your disciples obey our Jewish food rules?"

Jesus's answer was fascinating, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast when he is with them?"

What was he getting at? It seems to me that they were missing the point. When you are at a wedding, you don't act like it's a funeral. You don't look sad and ignore the food and the music. You eat and dance and throw yourself into the occasion. It's not about getting the steps right. The commands have their place. When Jesus was asked about commands, he made it clear he wasn't interested in getting rid of them. He suggested that they were part of a bigger story and at the end of the day that love is the only command, and love is the only test. We are made to love God, and to love the people around us. In a dance, in a piece of music, in a team sport, there is a shape, a structure, lines to play within. Any musician, any dancer, any sports player knows that the rules, the grid lines, the keys, the chord patterns are not there to stop us having fun. They are designed to give a shape, a space, a beat, a rhythm for us to play within, so that everyone can play their part to their full potential.

The collection of books we call the Bible are sometimes described to me as the "maker's manual," or the Christian's rule book. If so, it seems a badly put together instruction book to me. There's no index. It's hard to look up and find the specific rule I need. Instead, I find the commands are mixed up with hundreds of stories, and these stories seem to be part of a bigger story, a story that is still playing out. I don't think that's an accident. Stories have power. For example, there is no specific command in the Torah that forbids having more than one wife. However, it seems the practice of having more than one wife was rarely taken up in ancient times. Why? I wonder if it's because every story in the scriptures where a man takes more than one wife ends up in total disaster. Our local library has a window display that says, "We are all made of stories." I know I am. Stories have power. The best stories draw me in and invite a response. I believe my role is to tell a better story.

I like to remind the guests at a wedding that while they may have assumed they had been invited to watch a couple get married, I can't let them off the hook. In the big story that shapes my life, the story I believe that we are all made to be part of, none of us are made to be spectators. A dance works if everyone joins in, if everyone plays their part. The success of a marriage, a dance, a movement, is not about getting the steps right. It is about each one of us hearing and accepting the invitation to join in and playing our part. When that wedding Ceilidh band strikes up the first song, I will be one of the first out of my seat, and I pray that they won't be far behind me.

It seems to me that the Torah, the commands, the creation, the people I get to journey with, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Spirit, are gifts. Perhaps I could tell a better story about the season of Lent—a story about a gift, an opportunity to pause and clear out some of the clutter and noise—and perhaps to hear again a familiar tune that has always been playing, music that is ancient and deep, that invites me to respond, to turn, to come home, to join in once again.