

Let These Bruised Bones Dance

Death that leads to new life, grief that leads to joy are some of the themes of Lent.

There is a paradoxical quality to Lent. It's a time of fasting and self-denial, yes — but it's also a time of hope and optimism, waiting for the arrival of spring and longer days.

Lent is not about the absence of joy; on the contrary, through silence and simplicity and emptiness, Lent invites us to reconnect with a joy that often is hidden by the fullness and busyness of ordinary life.

Some believe Lent is a time to beat up on ourselves, for reflecting on how sorry we humans should feel for our sins. But let's consider another approach.

A still more excellent way to enter Lent is to place our focus on God's compassion and mercy.

The light of God's compassion and mercy might come to us as soft, comforting and healing.

Or it might set our hearts ablaze with a desire to be more present to God's hope for our lives, to put away old baggage or self-centered desires and look outward at others with a greater care.

I believe Lent is best encountered by staying centered on God's mercy rather than on our sinfulness. This way we can see that God's unconditional love and forgiveness is not something we have to earn—it is ours already.

In this way, we begin to understand that Lent is not something we do to appease God. The spirituality of Lent, and our reflection and attention on what separates us from being whole and joyful is something we do in response to God's love to bring about change within ourselves.

As Annie Dillard says, "God needs nothing, asks nothing, and demands nothing, like the stars. It is life with God that demands these things... You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it."

I believe she describes beautifully what it means to claim a full life with God. God does not require us to be a certain way to receive God's love, but to claim the life God designed for us, we must first encounter our own darkness. This is how we can then fully embrace the light of God.

Lent began with the cross of ash placed on our foreheads. This dark, carbon, temporary tattoo is sitting precisely on top of the cross that is placed upon our foreheads at baptism.

This ashen cross is a reminder of our mortality; it reminds us that between the beginning of our life with Christ and the end of our life in God, there is just a short span in which we can love, laugh, grow, forgive, learn, fail, get back up and start over again, and again, and again.

These 40 days are a time to rejoice in the light of God's love, but also to remember that length of days is only a promise we imagine, but not one that God actually made.

What God does promise us and what the spirituality of Lent invites us to claim, is that life is best lived when we live in the freedom of mercy, compassion and forgiveness—both for ourselves and for others *each and every day*. The mortality reminder of Lent reminds us that putting off our joy, wholeness or forgiveness is a dangerous practice.

Just after we received our ashes yesterday, we knelt and prayed the 51st Psalm, commonly called the Psalm of repentance. We used a beautiful paraphrase that says, "Fill me with happy songs; let my bruised bones dance."

That is the most beautiful description of repentance (which simply means a change of heart or mind) I have ever heard. Letting go of fear, anger, un-forgiveness, damaging forms of grief or whatever keeps us feeling bruised to the bone in this world, is the only way to freedom.

Lent can be a time of silence, simplicity, meditation, humility, and attentiveness. It is a time of waiting with quiet joy for the blessings to come at Easter. It is trusting that the necessary darkness we are invited to encounter during this time is preparing us for full bloom.

In his poem, *Four Quartets*, T. S. Elliot says, "At the still point, there the dance is." Lent invites us into that still point; that time to be still and know that God is God and our best life lies in surrendering to God's hope for us.

Lent is how we remember that all that we love and care for is mortal and transitory, but our mortality is the inspiration to ever-present celebration and love. Mortality is the invitation to let our bruised bones dance through the darkness of winter and burst forth renewed and alive in the eternal Spring of God's love.

These 40 days offer us another chance to turn our hearts and minds toward a deeper relationship with our God.

Whether we fast, intensify our prayer life, repent (change our mind about something that has us trapped us in the dark), or take on a specific spiritual practice — it is all in the service of letting go of what distracts us from drawing closer to the source of Love and the Lord of the Dance of life. May the truth of God's love, mercy, grace and compassion guide us all into a joy filled Lent. Grace and Peace, Stephanie+