

Open Prairie
February 17, 2008
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Lent!

When Katie's folks were here visiting over the Christmas holiday, we took them to the canal for a walk. It was a balmy 33 degrees, and we have learned to take advantage of those rare moments in winter when one can actually go outside without suffering frostbite. We bundled up the senior Morrison's and forced them into the snow.

The canal has become a place of particular importance to me this past year. I can't believe it took me three years to discover it, but I walk it a couple of times a week now and it has taught me much about the seasons. There are of course the obvious changes like the leaves turning and falling, the water changing to ice and then snow, but when we were there with Katie's folks I saw something I had never seen before. The eagles were soaring high above and that of course is a thrill, the sky was also full of seagulls. Which as someone who was raised near the sea and associates seagulls with the ocean has thrown me a bit in Illinois. They were circling in the sky just below the eagles and would dive down onto the ice. As we got closer to where a flock of gulls had gathered we noticed that every single one had a plump fish in their beaks.

As I looked at the surface of the water I saw little fish, hundreds of them, drifting on the surface- not dead but also not moving very quickly. Where there was a break in the ice, the seagulls would wait for fish and pluck them up into their beaks.

The catch was so plentiful that there were even fish that had been caught but left behind. I have never known seagulls to leave food behind. We stopped along the edge of the water to marvel at this whole scene, which looked like something off of the nature channel. I had to laugh at the thought that nature was actually reminding me of a television show rather than the other way around. From what we could reason this was a cyclical turning of events. The fish having laid their eggs had reached the end of their lives and were offering themselves up as food for the birds. The cycle of life was unfolding right there before our very eyes.

You all know the song...*to every thing turn, turn, turn. There is a season turn, turn, turn, and a time to every purpose under heaven.* The lyrics are taken almost verbatim from the King James version of the Bible (Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1–8). The Biblical text posits there being a time and place for all things and as a Christian, my concept of the life cycle is rooted in the liturgical cycle. The cycle of the church. I know that every year there will be a season of Advent- a time of transition from dark to light, from conception to birth. I know also that there is a season of Lent- a time of wilderness wandering, of death to resurrection.

And I know that this might not be comforting to hear coming from your pastor, but I always...always struggle with Lent! You know when you are talking with a friend and they are sharing something that is really hard for them- they are going through a divorce or a death in the family or trying to work through a painful memory.

The best advice you can give is that they will get through it, the only way through it is through it, it will be painful, but they will grow and they will be stonger for having had the expereince. I am sure you have given that advice. I have given it to many times to count, but when you are the one receiving it...it sucks. Why would any one want to walk knowingly and willingly into their own pain?

Well that is how Lent always feels to me. Every year I think this sucks. Why would I want to wander in the desert for fourty days and nights- and I start bargaining with God to get out of it. I like this conversation Niccodemus is having with Jesus because it sounds a lot like conversations I have with God. They go something like this *but, but, but... and what if I, and how about instead of this, I do that?* And God's answer is always the same. *To every thing turn, turn, turn. Curran, I love you, but you do not get to skip this part.*

This year my car was the metaphor that helped me transition into Lent. On Ash Wednesday, my car stopped working. It was showing signs before that, but on Ash Wednesday it refused to budge. Fortunately, Kelly and Adam were kind enough to loan me their car and there was a big snowstorm that day so I did what need done be done and got back home. I was still avoiding Lent, reasoning that there was a lot going on in my life and I could do just as well to skip to resurrection this year.

On Friday of last week having finished what I hope (minus some minor revisions) will be the last draft of my D.Min., to celebrate I went to the canal in Kelly and Adam's car...the little brown one. The driveway I normally park in had not been well plowed but I didn't give it much thought and off I went on a wonderful ponder-some walk. I talked with God about how I was really certain that Lent was just not necessary for me this year and that while I really valued the invitation to slow down and spend time contemplating my faith, I couldn't afford to slow down right now. I assured God that I had it under control and I would do Lent extra well next year.

As you might have guessed, when I got back to the car I realized I had made an unwise decision to come this far into an unplowed path. There was a hill leading up to the main road and the little brown car refused to climb the ice. Sorry Kelly, Adam, I know you are hearing this for the first time. There I was, two days into avoiding Lent- stuck in the snow. I climbed up to the side of the highway and a very kind man in a big black truck turned around to help. After a great deal of effort, he pushed the car up onto the road. We never exchanged names; I just gave him a big hug and went on my way.

I can be a little stubborn sometimes and when God really wants to get my attention it often take three major tries. The third one came last Sunday- my final day of Lenten avoidance. Barb Ollila was all set to preach here at OPUCC and I was to attend Katie's last service at Naperville. The Subaru still wouldn't start. So off I went in Kelly and Adam's little brown car.

I left plenty of time to get there, because you may remember it was nine below and I thought it best to leave some extra time just in case. Along the way I needed to use the restroom, so I pulled into the rest stop in Minooka. I pulled into the rest stop, pulled on my gloves and gathered up my wallet. Kelly and Adam don't have a key ring for the little brown car, just a single brass colored key, which I thought I had in my hand. I locked the door and went inside. The key had slipped out of my hand and into the passengers seat. I had no phone and no idea how to get the key out of the car. I pushed the button on the wall that read 911. The voice on the other end said he would *call locksmith but that this early on a Sunday morning it could take over an hour for someone to arrive.*

It was time to talk to God again- time was something I had plenty of. I sat inside at the rest stop for almost two hours. I thought about Lent and the invitation to slow down, to take stock of the wilderness and come to terms with my faith. I reasoned that there was great kindness in the world, that I experienced through Kelly and Adam's lending me the little brown car, the man in the big black truck who stopped to get me out of the snow and the fella who loaned me his cell phone to call Katie and tell her I'd be late to the service. I watched people come and go from the rest stop, I watched the wind whip around the trees and although it was not ideal, I found myself grateful for the opportunity to be still.

To every thing turn, turn, turn. There is a season turn, turn, turn..

This is the season of Lent, the moment in the cycle that invites, sometimes demands we offer ourselves to the wilderness. And there are gifts out there along the desolate path that we would not know if we did not travel that way, gifts we need- that somehow uniquely prepare us for the coming of the resurrection. In this my fortieth year perhaps I will figure out there is no skipping from one end of the cycle to other. Perhaps I will do a better job of embracing every stage of the turning. Perhaps I will learn to enjoy Lent, instead of working so hard to avoid it. We'll see.

Amen