

Near to the Color of Lent

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The Office of Presidential Correspondence is the place where any letter or email you send to the President of the United States lands. It was founded under President McKinley in 1897 to help his administration address the 100 or so letters arriving for him every day. By the time Herbert Hoover was president three decades later, the office got about 800 letters daily. Today, the President gets tens of thousands of correspondences daily. People who write in have something they are looking for, something they are seeking, and even though they know it is unlikely that the president himself will see their message, they send it anyway. Because they need to be heard. Because they have nowhere else to go.

Many of their letters start with phrases like “I know no one will read this” or “this is probably a waste of time.” The President reads almost none of them. But someone does.

A group of staff members from this office was interviewed during President Obama’s final year in office. At that time, 45 staffers, 35 interns, and 300 rotating volunteers read the thousands of letters sent daily to President Barack Obama. The staff shared how incredibly personal so many of the letters were. People would write things like “I’m staying up late at night because I can’t stop thinking about this,” or they would share something about their current life circumstances. Some of the letters were filled with hope. Some with fear. Some were funny, some angry. Many were written by people feeling trapped in their personal situations, while others were lamenting the state of the world. One nine-year-old girl asked in her letter if the President could tell her how to make friends. In 2016, many began letters with “I’ve been meaning to write this for seven years,” knowing that this was their last chance to possibly get a word to the sitting president.¹

I serve in a community that has recently suffered an immense amount of grief, and it keeps piling on. My people are sad. Together we have buried children and teenagers. We have seen tragic accidents and listened to one another asking “why” over and over again. Of course there are joyful moments and reasons to celebrate, and we take every chance we can to do just that. But our grief has been extraordinarily heavy.

As a pastor in this community, I think about the letters to the president every time I sit in our sanctuary to pray for the people who will show up there. And the people who will never show up there. In addition to the grief that I know about, I think about the quiet pain people hold as they lie awake at night. I think about their anguish over the injustice of our world. These letters represent the people who attend church as well as those who never come through the doors. They are the written cries of people who need an outlet to work through pain as they hold onto the hope that there might be something good on the other side of that pain. Every day there are tens of thousands of people writing letters, sitting up late at night, all alone, most of them knowing that they will never be read. I see this as a modern form of prayer, a way that people today are trying to wrestle with the fact that the world is not as it

should be, that our lives are not as they should be. And so, letter by letter, they write, hoping for an answer from the most powerful office in the human world.

I thought about these thousands of daily letters as I read Peter Marty's article in *The Christian Century* this summer entitled "Can clergy earn back the trust they've lost?" Marty writes,

Pastors may not yet feel as irrelevant as travel agents, parking lot attendants, or necktie sales clerks, but the influence of clergy has shrunk notably in the last two decades. Only 13 percent of regular churchgoers regularly seek advice from their clergy on ethical dilemmas or big decisions. Eighty-eight percent of people who infrequently attend church "rarely" or "never" seek clergy input.²

While clergy are not the only good option for people seeking advice in their lives, I do believe that what the church offers can meet a critical need in a world of growing isolation. The church is the place where, in community, we name the pain of the world and remind one another of the hope we know in Jesus.

Curt and Nancy were two people for whom church meant a great deal. Deep into Lent one year, when they had just begun life as empty nesters, Nancy became unexpectedly ill. Her health worsened and, within two days, she died. Her death shook the whole community. The following Sunday Curt came to church by himself. It was Easter.

He shared later,

I went to church because it was what I knew to do. I sat in our regular pew on Easter Day. I was surprised to find the whole morning unsettling. The sanctuary was filled with lilies and daffodils. The choir was twice its usual size and the sound of brass instruments filled the air. All around me the congregation was singing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today!"

The Easter hymn got stuck in my throat. It turned out that I couldn't believe in the resurrection. Not after what had just happened to me. My world was spinning. I could not believe in any of it. I closed the hymn book, but I did not leave. As I listened to that congregation singing all around me all those Easter hymns that day, I realized that I didn't have to believe in the resurrection right then. All around me were people who were believing in the resurrection *for* me, until I could believe it for myself again.

The fact that fewer people are affiliating with the church does not mean that they no longer need what the church offers. The institutional church simply isn't the vehicle that people are choosing to meet that need. All of us who work in the church know that people are more and more isolated. They are looking for something that is missing. This is a deep need that was once met in the local church.

I see Lent as a very invitational time, one that meets people in every walk of their lives. Lent, if nothing else, tells the truth about what people are thinking and feeling. And we are desperate for people to tell the truth in the world, especially truths that speak to our greatest vulnerabilities.

Lent is the place where our needs, in all their depth, encounter the holy texts,

songs, and practices of the church. Consider what a gift it could be for all the people who are up late at night, contemplating how the world is falling apart and their lives no longer make sense, to have a close encounter with the season of Lent in community, to seek hopeful meaning in the midst of the hard questions.

This fall, at the church I am serving, we held a new member class for the whole congregation, inviting the whole church to join alongside those interested in membership. During this time, a teacher from the Children's Sunday school team led a lesson called "The Circle of the Church Year," from the Godly Play curriculum. Some of our long-time members said that it was the first time they'd understood the different seasons of the church. Like every Godly Play lesson, the time ended with a time of questions focused on wondering:

I wonder why the Church tells time with colors?

I wonder how the colors make you feel?

I wonder where the colors go when you do not see them?

I wonder if you have ever come close to these colors in the church?

I love these questions. We should wonder where the colors go, where these seasons go, when people stop coming to church. We should ask our congregations what happens to them when they come close to the colors in community.

The color of Lent is a color of repentance. The color of Lent is serious, solemn, prayerful, and penitent. The color of Lent is active as it pries our fingers loose from the presumed securities that we grasp so tightly. The color of Lent moves us toward the cross. The color of Lent puts us smack dab into the middle of holy week. And the color of Lent moves us all the way to the promise of Easter. That is what the church offers. Lent takes us by the hand when the world around us is spinning and centers us. As church leaders and preachers, we get to help people encounter meaning in Lent.

Candice Benbow is a theologian and writer who situates her work at the intersections of beauty, faith, feminism, and culture. After the death of her mother and a season of incredible grief, she wrote about her experience with church and Lent. She writes,

Last year, a friend asked what I would be giving up for Lent. I told him that because I'd already lost so much, I wasn't intentionally giving up anything else. Mama had only been gone a few months and I was embarking on my first Easter without her. I didn't have the energy to fast from anything because it was taking every ounce of strength to make it through each day. Churchy and unconvinced that Lent wouldn't be helpful, my friend told me that was why I needed to fast. He said I needed to be in a space where God could see my pain and honor my sacrifice....I called BS on that and ate Talenti and Haribo gummy bears for 40 days and 40 nights....I refused to believe that, in a season of great personal loss and confusion, God would require me to give up more.

Benbow writes about how rather than fasting, she intentionally added joy to her life throughout Lent. Quiet trips to the beach, dancing, cooking classes, all of it culminating by hosting an Easter dinner. "Ultimately," she reflected, "we need pastors

and leaders to help us construct new understandings of who God is to us: that God is one who cares about our mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health. We need people who will remind us that God is big enough to hold the times when we are not okay and loves us enough to want us well.”³

What Candice Benbow asked from friends and family was to be reminded of her identity. She needed to know that she was beloved by God. *That God was with her.* That the Kingdom of God was at hand. And that nothing—not life nor death nor any wilderness you can walk through—could take that away.

I wonder if you have ever *come close to these colors in church?* I know church leaders who feel, every year, as if they need to take their congregations by the hand to try to force the experience of Lent into the lives of people. I’m not sure that is necessary. So many people are already living Lent. At times, our role could be to shape Lent and focus it, providing the community with a common language. The texts of Lent are an invitation into various deep and rich places in our lives. This year in Lent, my congregation needs to be ministered to by the Gospel and the promise of Easter that Lent walks us toward. They are already reminded, daily, that from dust they come and to dust they shall return.

For those of us who are holding the weight of this world, the richness of Exodus 17 (Lent 3) and John 11 (Lent 5) is incredibly pastoral. They both give permission to question God, to grieve out loud, to sit in the pain of life’s fragility. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in John 11 are more than props for a spiritual story, people trapped in death and grief. They are people whom Jesus sees, cries with, and to whom he brings comfort.

The people of Israel in Exodus 17 are suffering because they don’t have enough water. They cry out to Moses and question the presence of God. “Is the Lord among us or not?” they ask. Is the Lord among us...or not? That is a question in the back of the minds of many people sitting in the pews of my congregation. And it is the question of so many people beyond our churches’ walls, wondering whether God has anything to do with this world.

After the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, the poem “What They Did Yesterday Afternoon” went viral. It was written by poet and activist Warsan Shire and speaks to the complexity of personal and global pain people are experiencing.

they set my aunts house on fire
i cried the way women on tv do
folding at the middle
like a five pound note.
i called the boy who use to love me
tried to ‘okay’ my voice
i said hello
he said warsan, what’s wrong, what’s happened?

i’ve been praying,
and these are what my prayers look like;

dear god
i come from two countries

one is thirsty
the other is on fire
both need water.

later that night
i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?

it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere.⁴

Is the Lord among us...or not? Our people wonder if they can ask that in church, if there is permission to speak the questions aloud. They are already asking these questions at home. They are asking them by themselves. They are asking them in desperation. What happens when this question can be asked in a community of faith, in a season where we journey toward Easter?

When I first arrived in my current congregation, the pastoral and worship team was trying to determine what services to hold during the season of Lent. Formal Good Friday services had been dropped years earlier in favor of putting more effort into the Maundy Thursday service. Ash Wednesday had such low attendance that it begged the question of whether we should keep going. (There had been only seven people in attendance the previous year). I was surprised by the low attendance, wondering if the church was full of people who viewed Lent as something that Presbyterians don't do. (I had encountered that sentiment in my previous congregation). That wasn't the case. People in the congregation were not against Lent and special Lenten services. They just didn't have a context for it. Lent wasn't on their radar.

We found inspiration in Joel 2:1-2,12-17 for a revived push on Ash Wednesday. In this text the trumpet calls out twice to alert the people. The first call sounds an alarm; the second calls together the assembly. Joel calls to all who typically gather in community, and he puts out a call to those who are regularly exempt—the youngest children, the oldest adults, and the newly married. The call is one to go deep, to rend hearts and not clothing. And it comes in the midst of a world that is spinning, where God calls for the people to repent, to turn around, to live more faithfully.

Today the world is spinning. And there is so much that we need to repent of as a society. One does not need to attend church to see this truth. Our youth are calling for repentance over the ways we have not taken care of this incredible planet. We grapple with racial and social injustices, in our history and in our current practices. People are desperate for a place to talk honestly about this in community. The church is our spiritual outlet. Lent calls us to repent of the ways we have been unfaithful as a community, not simply as individuals. To work together as God's people. The best way the church knows how to do that is to call people together in worship.

As we thought about all of this in light of our Lenten services, we knew we wanted to provide a way for people in the church to come close to the color of Lent in church

even though attendance patterns weren't all that encouraging. And we wanted to make it a call for all people, from youngest to oldest. Instead of canceling Ash Wednesday altogether, we doubled our services that day. We changed what had been one evening service on Ash Wednesday to two identical services during the day, one at 7:30am and one 12:00, planning around school schedules and retirement home shuttle schedules. We offered food for breakfast and lunch after each service. The accessibility made a huge difference. So did the promise of a meal where we took care of people's bodily needs as well as their spiritual needs. That year nearly 100 people came close to the color of Lent in community.

Ash Wednesday reminds us that despite what we think, Lent is not a private enterprise. We are called to do it in community, with everyone. And in community, the texts of Lent will meet us in personal ways. The whole point of Lent is to help prepare people to hold onto the promises of Easter. Lent gives us everything we need to do just that.

Last year, on the first Sunday of Lent, I walked into the sanctuary before the sun had come up in order to run through my sermon. I turned the lights on and was *overwhelmed*...with flowers, *oodles* of flowers. It seemed as though someone had maxed out their credit card at Mercer Island Florist. I have never seen *so many* flowers in the sanctuary as I saw this year on the first Sunday of Lent. Easter lilies, roses, sunflowers, you name the flower, and they were there. Cut flowers and potted plants. It seriously felt as if someone was pranking me in the nerdiest, most liturgical way imaginable.

There was nothing I could do to change the sanctuary to the stark feel that we plan on for the Lenten season. I just moved a few pansies to one side and some Gerber daisies to the other so I could walk up to the pulpit. Just prior to worship, I learned that the flowers had been set up the night before for a memorial service to be held later that day for a parishioner at First Taiwanese Presbyterian Church, a congregation with whom we share space. It was a reminder that even though the ashes on our foreheads were barely washed off, we were able to turn aside to celebrate the resurrection, to celebrate the life of a loved one. There *had to be* flowers that morning. There *had to be* beauty and rejoicing.

While this is not the typical way to observe Lent, I found this surprise, this sanctuary of life on the first Sunday of Lent, to be a gift for the people in my congregation who have indeed come very close to the color of Lent. This year, once again, my congregation is holding a great amount of grief and sadness. But we are going to hold on during Lent with the help of the holy text and holy space, and we are going to make it to Easter. And we will be surprised by hope the whole way.

Notes

1 "Ten Letters for the President," November 7, 2016, <http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/ten-letters-president/>.

2 Peter Marty, "Can clergy earn back the trust they've lost?" *The Christian Century*, August 2, 2019, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/publisher/can-clergy-earn-back-public-trust-they-ve-lost>.

3 Candice Benbow, "For Sisters with Nothing Left to Give up for Lent," *CandiceBenbow.com*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.candicebenbow.com/post/for-sisters-with-nothing-left-to-give-up-for-lent>.

4 Warshan Shire, "What they did yesterday afternoon," 2015, found at <https://verse.press/poem/what-they-did-yesterday-afternoon-6524900794187889060>.