

I Know Everything And I Know Nothing – Courtney Bailey Parker

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

I suspect I differ from most of the Holy Catholic Church when I say that I LOVE LENT. I **love** Lent. It is my favorite part of the church calendar, and, even though I do enjoy Advent, Christmastide, and Epiphany, there is something about Lent that makes me feel a keen moment of recognition.

I like to think that the drama of the liturgical calendar has something for everyone. For me, it is Lent. And here's why.

I am human being who loves habit, order, and rules. I get an unnaturally satisfying kick out of making plans of improvement for not just my life, but for the lives of everyone around me, much to their frustration. I love the challenge of cultivating a new habit. I love rules. If someone makes a rule, then you just ask my husband how willing I am to break that rule.

My parents noticed this love of habit, order, and rules in me when I was very young. At some point between age 6 and 8, I got it in my head that I would only have a "good day" if I awoke at exactly 6am and then followed what I believed to be the ideal order of the morning: I turn on my lamp, I make my bed as soon as I get up, I sit down at my desk and write out a plan for the day, I change into the clothes that I have neatly laid out the night before, and then I go to the kitchen for a breakfast of cereal and chocolate milk. If even the slightest thing was out of order, then I was convinced that it would be a BAD DAY. My parents couldn't understand why their child was inconsolable if she happened to sleep through her alarm and wake up 15 minutes later.

Even at age 30, I still, to the slightest degree, think this same way. Habit, order, and rules **do** something to me. I am vigilant about setting the timer on my coffee pot so that it is finished brewing by exactly 5:45am the next morning. I still make my bed every day. I still have to write out a plan for the day in my Filofax as soon as I wake up in the morning. Once I find a hairstyle or an outfit that I like, I will wear it as much as I possibly can, mostly for the sake of not having to give extra thought to my appearance. When I was in graduate school and writing my dissertation, I spent 5 months wearing the same outfit of black boots, black bottoms, and a white top. Every day for 5 months I wore that, and I attribute the fact that the dissertation got written to that daily uniform. Habit, order, and rules just **do** something to me. At their best, they set me up to be creative, to be productive, and to be thorough. At their worst, they make me resentful of the people and things that upset my order, or they paralyze me in my tracks when the plan goes awry.

I am working on this part of myself.

So the season of Lent, which serves a period of soul-searching reflection and repentance, resonates with me. Lent is a time of reformation, so that we can prepare ourselves to be

worthy of the celebration of Easter. It often includes fasting, so that we can marginally withdraw into the wilderness with Jesus for 40 days. And it's also a time for breaking oneself of habits that distract from discipleship and cultivating new habits that serve the needs of the soul.

Now, don't let my habit-loving attraction toward Lent deceive you about the true nature of Lent. As I believe we've come to understand about Lent as a church community, Lent is NOT all about fasting; it is not about rule-following; and it is not about neglecting those deep parts of ourselves that cry out for beauty. **It is a season of reorientation.** And whereas the season of Advent seems to orient us OUTWARD toward the birth of God incarnate and what this means for our world, the season of Lent orients us INWARD, asking us to consider what holiness looks like for our own inward being. Father Richard Rohr describes the season of Lent as "the wondrous loop." He says, and I quote,

"There are two moments that matter. One is when you know that your one and only life is absolutely valuable and alive. The other is when you know your life, as presently lived, is entirely pointless and empty. You need both of them to keep you going in the right direction. Lent is about both. The first such moment gives you energy and joy by connecting you with your ultimate source and ground. The second gives you limits and boundaries, and a proper humility, so you keep seeking the Source and Ground and not just your small self." (Richard Rohr, *Wondrous Encounters*)

This wondrous loop—of simultaneously seeing your smallness and your significance—seems essential to Lent's orientation toward the INWARD. We get the opportunity to reflect on the power of the ego—our sense that our lives matter—and the power of our human reality—"I am just one human, living in the tiniest possible spec of time in the largest universe my mind can conceive."

One of the ways this paradox is so helpful during Lent is the way it allows us to enter into the mind of Jesus of Nazareth. He must have felt the smallness of his humanness in deep contrast to his inward calling. Part of humanness, of "incarnation," after all, is feeling like you don't matter. To imagine Jesus feeling this way is terrifying, but I believe it is accurate. If I know anything, I know the great smallness one feels as a human being. I think you know it, too. I wonder if part of Jesus' meditation while he fasted in the wilderness for 40 days was on this sense of smallness. It had to have been something he wrestled with, especially since, at the end of those 40 days, we are told that he began his public ministry.

I think we see some of this wrestling—with the paradox of smallness and greatness—in our Gospel reading for today. The passage reads this way: *And Jesus began to teach them that the son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke this word openly. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when he had turned around and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."*

In this passage, Jesus predicts his death. It's one of the most human things we can reflect on, isn't it?

Imagining our own deaths... remembering our mortality is the ritual in which we partake when Lent begins—from dust we came and to dust we shall return.

Imagining our own deaths... It's not something we like to think about, but sometimes we can't help it. And almost always when we do this imagining out loud, the impulse exists in others to rebuke us. "Don't talk of such things," they say in reply.

My grandmother used to do this. When she got very old, she used to say, only half in jest, "Now, don't let the next time I see you be my funeral." My dad would often say, "Mom, don't talk like that," but I think my grandmother, who died within a year from the last time I remember her saying that, knew that death was coming. She acknowledged it, and it made others uncomfortable. Jesus acknowledges it, and it makes everyone so uncomfortable that Peter takes Jesus aside and *rebukes* him. But Jesus snaps back and rebukes him strongly, *Get behind me, Satan!* And then he says, *For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.* I find Jesus to be a little unfair right here—you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men. In Peter's defense, it's really difficult to be mindful of those two things at once, which seems to be what Jesus wants him to understand. To only be mindful of the things of God would be to deny Jesus' humanness. To only be mindful of the things of humankind would be to deny the mark of divinity in Jesus—and in Peter. And in us.

The section that immediately follows in Mark 8 seems to uphold Richard Rohr's "wondrous loop" of smallness and significance, especially in a rhetorical sense. The semantics of these sentences, I would argue, encourage us to see the loop in action. I'll use my hands to show you.

When he had called the people to himself, with his disciples also, he said to them, *Whoever desires to come after me, let him deny himself (DOWN), and take up his cross, and follow me (UP). For whoever desires to save (UP) his life will lose it (DOWN), but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it (UP). For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses (DOWN) his own soul?*

It's just a series of propositions and questions, without much resolution. Instead, the momentum of the phrases takes us as readers round and round a visual wheel—a loop, perhaps. In the Book of Mark's ancient context, this account would have been conveyed orally, since most of the middle and lower classes were illiterate. But they could listen. And I think they hear the lilt of the loop in this series of sentences.

Smallness to significance to smallness and then back to significance.

A terrifying, wondrous loop.

This wondrous loop of significance and smallness manifests primarily for me as a gatherer of knowledge. I love knowing things. When I was younger, one of my stranger hobbies was copying out encyclopedia entries on whales and dolphins, so that it would be easier for me to memorize them and then recite them to others. When I started acting in plays, I found power in memorizing lines. One of the ways I survived completing my PhD in Renaissance Drama was in part because of the reams of Shakespeare I have committed to memory. And now, as a theatre artist balancing the work of being a college professor with acting professionally in St. Louis, you would not believe the number of audition monologues I have stored away in my head. At an auditor's request, I can give you any number of characters, each neatly performed in less than 2 minutes. I can be a discontented farmer's wife, the mother of Judas Iscariot, a young Russian woman who marries a man too old for her, the wife of a murderer, and, oh, the Shakespeare heroines—Isabella, Viola, Rosalind, Hermione, and the list goes on. I have them memorized word perfect, and I would be lying if I didn't admit that there is great power bound up in carrying those texts around with me.

I feel in touch with that sense of **significance** in the wondrous loop when I think about all the things I **know**.

But what this means is that, for me, the other end of the wondrous loop is **knowing nothing**. I know everything and I know nothing.

There are many academics in our church community, so I have a feeling I'm not alone in expressing this sentiment. At my workplace, I am considered an expert on certain things. That absolutely endorses the feeling of knowing everything. But then there are the things that I don't know, and those things are much greater in number.

I find that this awareness of knowing and not knowing hits me hardest when I consider my understanding of the Bible. And I experience this doubly when I examine the Bible through the structure of the lectionary. Thomas Cranmer, the Renaissance man responsible for our lectionary, does his best to organize our holy book into a intelligible sequence. And using the lectionary makes me feel confidence in order—it's the top end of the loop for me, perhaps. It makes me feel closer to the high of knowing everything simply because I understand the organizing principle.

For the second Sunday of Lent, the lectionary gives us the story of Abraham's covenant with God in Genesis 17: *When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God; walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him saying: "As for me, behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations."* And then the lectionary gives us a New Testament reading from Romans 4, which glosses the passage from Genesis. *And not being weak in faith, [Abraham] did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about 100 years old), and the deadness of Sarah's*

womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God.

There's a sense of neatness in this lectionary selection. We get a covenant and, later, a commentary on that covenant. And the argument seems to be that we must be attentive to the faith of Abraham, a man with a 99-year old body that the text not so subtly calls *already dead*. We feel confidence in Thomas Cranmer's organization.

But there are questions.

This is not the first covenant that God has made with Abraham. He's made one before: Abraham shall have a son and he shall be the father of many nations. But God wasn't exactly speedy in fulfilling it, so much so that Abraham, who doesn't seem to hesitate much at Sarai's suggestion, takes Hagar, a maidservant, as his wife, and births Ishmael, a son. And then he sends Hagar and Ishmael out of the camp, also at Sarai's demand. The passage from Romans says that Abraham *did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief*, but the story I read in Genesis tells me that he wavered very much indeed.

I know everything and I know nothing. I know everything in the sense that the lectionary gives me confidence through what seems to be a thorough and methodical organization of my holy book. I know nothing in the sense that there are interpretive holes all around me.

I know everything and I know nothing.

I feel this again when I look at the psalm selected for today. The lectionary only includes the second half of the psalm, the joyful part of the psalm. And if the lectionary could speak, I would demand to know why, of all weeks, with yet another school shooting from yet another AR-15, we are prevented from praying as a congregation the lament of Psalm 22: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, and from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not hear.*

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I feel that I know everything because of the advantages I've enjoyed as an American citizen, but then stories from afar, like one from my friend Lisa Amundson remind me of how little I know. After the news broke of the Parkland shooting, she wrote on her blog a story about an interview one of her daughters did with a Swedish man while walking the Camino. Here's what she writes:

While we were on the Camino in Spain, as a part of her homeschool Charlotte interviewed people from around the world. The Camino is filled with individuals from all over the world, it was a fantastic opportunity to learn from different perspectives. One of those interviews was with Liam, a VERY good looking 20 something blond haired, blue eyed dream-boat from Sweden. I stuck around to hear this interview because ~~he was gorgeous~~ I was interested in Sweden. After Charlotte asked him some of her questions about food and local resources in his

country. He had a question for her. He got kind of quiet, looked her in the eye and said, “Is it true that in America you actually practice in case a gunman comes into your school?” Yes, she said. He went on, “Is it true, that schools have metal detectors and locks?” Yes, she said. “Do you ever go to school worried you are going to be shot?” Yes, she said. He got teary eyed. And then I saw it, I saw the pity. He looked at her exactly how we Americans look at a poor third world child ... He took her hand, looked her in the eye and said, “That is not normal. You don’t have to live like that. No one else lives like that.”

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This is my own personal refrain for Lent. I don’t know what yours is, but I do know that it likely follows that loop through significance and smallness.

I think that I am well established as an assistant professor at GU, after just a year and half, and I’m happy with my personal library that has grown from the gift of colleagues before me. I find myself engrossed in one of my new-to-me old books and out of the leaves falls a notecard with “From the Desk of Harriette Whiteman” printed on it.

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I feel like I’m doing a good job as a teacher, introducing my students to all sorts of texts that they may not have read otherwise. I pride myself on making it through MOBY DICK with a group of upper-level English majors, and they do not cry mutiny at the text’s difficulty. But then a student asks me what we should do if GU experiences an active shooter threat. And I don’t know the answer.

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I’ve been in this church most Sundays since BJ and I moved here in 2016, and I **thought** I knew the music that this room could produce. But then, last week, I attended a memorial service in this same room for a man I barely knew. And I hear the harmony of simple, old hymns with a **power** and a **fullness** that I did not believe was possible in this space. Everyone singing the songs knew all the vocal parts, and all the verses, point for point. I look around and see that, save for maybe a one-year-old baby, the grandniece of the deceased, I am likely the **youngest** person in the room.

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Amen.