Facing the Void

A Liturgy for Lent

2016
Lent is the forty day-season which culminates in Easter. By beginning in the cold of winter from which spring emerges, it displays how life can emerge from death. The words which begin this season, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return,” on Ash Wednesday remind us of the presence of death in our world. This season is one in which we face the void of death and darkness, drawing us onto the path toward the cross.

Culminating in the hope for resurrection during Holy Week, Lent evokes a deep relationship between affirmation and negation. Practices of grieving, fasting, and repentance, which traditionally accompany Lent, are acts of negation. Yet, these very acts also affirm something else—life that sprouts and flourishes in the midst of death; courage to face our inner voids; desire for transformation and renewal; strength to mourn what needs mourning and joy to celebrate what needs celebrating.

May this six-week liturgy of prayer, song, poetry, and art serve as a guide for us as a community along our journey. May we find life in facing the void.
Fool’s Gold
A poem by Adrian Patenaude

Everything we resort to –
from the best-selling-memoir clichés
of drugs and drinking and sex with strangers,
to the “harmless” habits of
just a few more Oreos or
one more double tap ‘til 11 likes or
perfecting a playlist to fill the stillness
of a five-minute commute –
everything we resort to
is a distraction.

We chase the headrush of emotions
from party to concert to indie-vibe drive,
windows down through downtown,
hair blowing, bass blasting —
and when we have lost the scent,
we distract ourselves with cheaply won laughter,
typing lol with barely a twitch to our lips.

We could be sleeping, but
instead we watch through eyelid slits
as Netflix rolls over to the next episode.
We could be sleeping, but
we know the slow moments before dreamlessness
are the death of our façade.

We are terrified of boredom,
for that is when our mind finally wanders
to the black hole of our existence.

If we ever dare to stop and stare,
we know we will encounter
an excruciating silence.

And in that silence, everything
making life worthwhile,
everyone we claim to love –
is swallowed up in chaos.

Food will dissolve in our mouths like cotton candy,
leaving us sticky and thirsty and craving for more.
Favorite films tired and predictable,
cherished cities commonplace,
beloved bands finally failing to move us,
leaving us numb to all the wonders we’ve clung to.
So instead we amuse ourselves with kaleidoscopic beauty, disoriented by candy store color until we’ve learned to ignore the creeping blindness at the edges of our vision.

Few are brave enough to confront the black. Even fewer have met its gaze and found the strength to go on breathing.

As for me, I tremble in the void, overtaken by the hush of a paralyzing eternity.

Perhaps I can’t bear the truth. Perhaps I’m a coward, another weak mind reaching for a crutch.

Or maybe the only thing stopping me from shooting myself in the face right now is my childish hope in that one great

VOICE

breaking the silence, brightening the darkness.

I look up or in or around to that mysterious GOD

who promises an end to all my fears, light and singing and an inheritance of stars, who has gone to prepare a home for me, warm and real though I cannot see it.

Am I a fool to cling to this, some illusion of gold in an unlit cave? I stare into the empty air and find I do. not. care.

For his voice is kind, far too good to be false.
Untitled, Ryan Chambers
“I prefer winter and fall, when you can feel the bone structure in the landscape---the loneliness of it---the dead feeling of winter. Something waits beneath it---the whole story doesn’t show.” -Andrew Wyeth

Ezekiel 37:1-3
The Lord’s power overcame me, and while I was in the Lord’s spirit, he led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry.

He asked me, “Human one, can these bones live again?”

I said, “Lord God, only you know.”
Untitled II, Jeanette Habash
“We must first peer into the darkness, feel strangled and entombed in the hopelessness of living without God, before we are ready to feel the presence of His living light.”

-Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man

Psalm 77:1-3, 7-9
I cry out loud to God—
  out loud to God so that he can hear me!
During the day when I’m in trouble I look for my Lord.
  At night my hands are still outstretched and don’t grow numb;
  my whole being refuses to be comforted.
I remember God and I moan.
  I complain, and my spirit grows tired.

“Will my Lord reject me forever?
  Will he never be pleased again?
Has his faithful love come to a complete end?
  Is his promise over for future generations?
Has God forgotten how to be gracious?
  Has he angrily stopped up his compassion?”
“Before we enter the Lenten fast, we are reminded that there can be no true fast, no genuine repentance, no reconciliation with God, unless we are at the same time reconciled with one another. A fast without mutual love is the fast of demons… we do not travel the road of Lent as isolated individuals but as members of a family. Our asceticism and fasting should not separate us from our fellow men but link us to them with even stronger bonds. The Lenten ascetic is called to be a man for others.”
— Met. Kallistos Ware, Inner Unity of the Triodion; The Lenten Triodion, p. 47

Isaiah 58:6-7
Isn’t this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke?
Isn’t it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family?
Guernica, Pablo Picasso
“In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power of evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.”

-Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk

Joel 2:12-14
Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your hearts,
with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow;
tear your hearts
and not your clothing.
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is merciful and compassionate,
very patient, full of faithful love,
and ready to forgive.
Who knows whether he will have a change of heart
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the Lord your God?
Roseanne Pearson
“You have been wounded in many ways. The more you open yourself to being healed, the more you will discover how deep your wounds are. You will be tempted to become discouraged, because under every wound you uncover you will find others. Your search for true healing will be a suffering search. Many tears still need to be shed. But do not be afraid. The simple fact that you are more aware of your wounds shows that you have sufficient strength to face them. The great challenge is living your wounds through instead of thinking them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds deeply than to understand them, better to let them enter into your silence than to talk about them. The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your hurts to your head or to your heart. In your head you can analyze them, find their causes and consequences, and coin words to speak and write about them. But no final healing is likely to come from that source. You need to let your wounds go down into your heart. Then you can live through and discover that they will not destroy you. Your heart is greater than your wounds.”

-Henri Nouwen, The Inner Voice of Love

Psalm 91:1-6
Living in the Most High’s shelter,
camping in the Almighty’s shade,
I say to the Lord, “You are my refuge, my stronghold!
You are my God—the one I trust!”
God will save you from the hunter’s trap
and from deadly sickness.
God will protect you with his pinions;
you’ll find refuge under his wings.
His faithfulness is a protective shield.
Don’t be afraid of terrors at night,
arrows that fly in daylight,
or sickness that prowls in the dark,
destruction that ravages at noontime.
Naked, Aaron Maurer
John 11:31-37
When the Jews who were comforting Mary in the house saw her get up quickly and leave, they followed her. They assumed she was going to mourn at the tomb.

When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.”

When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. He asked, “Where have you laid him?”

They replied, “Lord, come and see.”

Jesus began to cry. The Jews said, “See how much he loved him!” But some of them said, “He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?”