

## Lent 2021 Passing Privations or Passion for a Lifetime?

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*“Behold, I am sending you as lambs among wolves.”— Jesus of Nazareth*

*“The lion and the calf shall lie down together,  
But the calf won’t get much sleep.”— Woody Allen*

Many things may well be said about the observance of Lent. I’d suggest the gift of a troubled night’s sleep as good a place as any to start. Calves and lions – and all that.

It’s that time of year when those of us in the Roman Catholic tradition reacquaint ourselves with the taste of tuna fish, haul out the family recipe for macaroni and cheese or spread a couple of slices of bread with some good old-fashioned peanut-butter and jelly. Perhaps we have made yet another commitment to trim back our eating habits or to dig a bit more deeply into our pockets to offer aid to another. Some of us have probably shown up for Mass more often, if not daily.

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving – why do we do these things? Why now? Why Lent?

Shrieking screens – laptops, phones, televisions – lure us to scenes of incredible mistrust, incredulous beliefs, indelible scorn. Community quenched. Community confounded. Discord dominant. Yes, perceiving threats on every side, we instinctively seek to shore up our defenses. We engage in an endless sifting of friends and foes alike, defining our loyalties, cementing our boundaries. Lambs among wolves, indeed! Growing a pair of fangs sounds awfully tempting, doesn't it?

Woody Allen's humorous swipe at the audacity of the ancient vision of Isaiah captures our nagging suspicion that embracing the vision and message of the prophets is at best unwise, and at worst fatal. Everyone knows that lions and calves, wolves and lambs simply don't mix. Such visions of peace may be the stuff of soaring poetry and riveting metaphor, but real life? We know better. Or do we?

Perhaps you're familiar with this question: "*What are you giving up for Lent?*"

This year, after the serial shocks of 2020, let's shed our *world-weary cynicism*?

Our well-worn Lenten practices include many classic expressions drawn from the heritage of Catholic spirituality – each of them designed to expose us to privations: *Meatless Fridays, Days of Abstinence and Days of Fast, Mite boxes, Stations of the Cross, swearing off sweets or chocolate or alcohol, avoiding television or movies, and so much more*. Just why is it that we do these things? . . . To lose weight? . . . To temporarily become more healthy and sober? . . . Appear less parsimonious and even somewhat munificent? . . . Shake a little guilt from our psyche? . . . Prove something to G-D . . . to ourselves?

*Just what in G-D's name are we doing here? Literally!*

Here in the year 2021, many of these practices appear to be rather quaint, even dangerous distractions given the vast challenges and deep fissures that mark our time: an insidious, relentless biological siege; societal splintering and domestic terror; personal financial insecurity and business bankruptcies; run-away unemployment; rampant resort to conspiracy theories; nuclear-fueled tensions among nations; the scourge of racial hostilities and mounting awareness of a planet in ecological peril. Are these not truly urgent privations of grave consequence?

*"What are you giving up this Lent?"*

Forget our customary chosen Lenten privations, this year how about giving up enmity, suspicion and rivalry? But if you really must have a preferred privation for your Lenten experience, how about embracing a troubled night's sleep?

Our scriptural tradition is filled with folks having a troubled night's sleep only to emerge not with blurry eyes, but with a fresh and bold vision of life's purpose and a deepened experience of the mystery of G-D. Each of them, in their distinctive way, calves lying next to lions, lambs walking among wolves.

Think of Jacob – a sleepless night of anguished wrestling left him with a bum hip, a limp he carried the rest of his life and a new identity as well: Israel – G-D's new community dared to live the costly life of divine justice.

Jacob's son, Joseph, is among scripture's most celebrated dreamers. His comfortable nights' sleep veered into the nightmare of being sold into slavery by his own envious brothers. Estranged in Egypt amid cycles of famine and feast, Joseph emerges as the generous provider of nurture and nourishment – even for his treacherous brothers.

Samuel lived in times when a “word from the Lord was rare” – until of course he had a fitful night's sleep disrupted by a voice beyond his capacity of recognition. Come the dawn, Samuel's voice became a source of renewal and healing for all of Israel – the Word of the Lord had returned to a people who had grown deaf to its sound.

As the gospel writers Luke and Matthew tell it, both Joseph and Mary each had quite the awful night's sleep. Betrothed and quietly planning a future together, their plans were shattered by a troubled night filled with rumors of angels and an unexpected and inexplicable pregnancy. Their embrace of G-D's mystery brought forth Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ – who has literally made all the difference in the world.

Think also of Peter, Jesus' friend and follower. As narrated by Luke in the Book of Acts, this fledgling leader of the community dedicated to living in the Spirit of Jesus went to bed one night confident of the various inherited dietary laws and disciplines essential for believers to be faithful to the gospel. Strange and vivid images flashed though his sporadic sleep and he awoke shorn of his certainties, altered in conviction, deepened in the freedom of the gospel of Jesus.

Lent 2021 – a time when a “a word from the Lord” might seem rare indeed, as our various conflicting certainties collide with perilous intensity, our best-laid plans for the future seem bankrupt and we sense betrayals all around us. Perhaps now is the time for a troubled night's sleep of our own. Such a Lenten privation has the power to save us – from our deep and deadening sleep. And our exhaustion.

The classical three-fold disciples of Lent – *almsgiving, prayer and fasting* – can become for us either mere passing privations or portals to a passion for life. It's wholly up to us. By divine grace, if we engage these disciplines with a clear-eyed view of the world around us, they can serve to interrupt our dull sleep.

*Fasting:* We interrupt the way we eat in order to re-discover important truths about the incredibly fragile and dependent nature of our being. Without healthy food and water, we perish. And without an eco-system that can sustain them, we also shall perish. Similarly, we disrupt our eating to recall the chain of supply and distribution that determines who shall gain access to these indispensable goods, the structures that determine who eats and who goes hungry. Jesus' simple command to give "a cup of cold water to one of these little ones" begs a further question: "*What goes wrong between G-D's gift of water and G-D's people?*" And so, we ought to confront international arrangements as well as the workings of city water commissions and water works, pricing structures, decisions on location of piping, tax policy to pay for it all, etc. Now that's a kind of fasting that just might keep you awake at night – and potentially renewed, nourished and enlightened in the morning.

*Almsgiving:* Yes, we reach a bit more deeply into our pockets and donate with a tad more largesse. "Deep pockets, alligator arms" is the colloquialism most apt for the stingy among us. Yet, we also have a precious opportunity to take stock of our wealth and possessions so as to reflect upon the deeper matters of our lives and world: Just what counts for value in our society and in our lives? What are the loyalties in our lives that determine whose claims upon us we recognize and whose claims we decline? In whom do we invest and from whom do we withhold investment? Why do we invest here in this neighborhood and among these folks while withholding investment in those areas and those folks? We discover that budgets are theological statements about who and what we deem worthy of our wealth and talent. That could make for a restless night or two, don't you think?

*Prayer.* Sure, we can intensify our efforts at and amplify our prayer – but consider Jesus' warning about the ineffectual nature of the multiplication of prayerful words. The bona fide potential of this discipline lies in creating a *privation of the noise that surrounds us* – and that masquerades as a coherent vision of life. We resort to the realm of spirit to recoup the basic truth that our lives are grounded in, hemmed about, sustained by profound mystery. We recover the faith that this mystery is fiercely dedicated to our well-being and wholeness. By engaging the mystery of G-D, we begin to sort through the cacophony all about us – as well as the racket within us. In this encounter, we just might discover the healing mercy that lies at the very heart of a world ensnared in brutish energies spawned from fear and loathing. Spend just a single restless night with such mystery and all is sure to be changed.

So, this Lent, the next time you find yourself savoring the taste of that tuna fish or reaching deep down for a few bucks for the destitute, perhaps you might remember this question: *What in G-D's name am I doing?* Is this a passing privation in my lifestyle or the kindling of a passion for a transformed life – the kindling of a passion for a lifetime? For those of us who believe ourselves to be sent by Jesus as lambs among wolves for the healing of the world, our answer to that question is crucial.

And what of Jesus' lambs and Isaiah's calves? Most likely Woody Allen has it right – theirs is a future filled with more than a few troubled nights' sleep. The season of Lent affords the opportunity to discover just how profound a gift that can be. Now, if you'll excuse me, it's time for me to lie down and attempt to fall asleep.