

Living in a New Light

Our Lenten journey corresponds to the lengthening of days now that the rotation of the earth around the sun has given our planet a new orientation toward our mother star whose light and heat makes life possible. Our forebears knew well about increasing minutes of light as spring approaches. The very word “Lent” comes from an Old English term that means “lengthen.”

While our forebears would grasp the notion that springtime is an opportunity to live in a new light, they might not have grasped the idea of a “new orientation” that springtime brings. As Lent has matured it has become more about that new orientation, not so much between the Earth and the Sun, but between God’s Son and those who would follow.

Lent is a chance to live in a new light and to find a new orientation to the source of that light. As a practical matter Lent only “works” when the promise of newness outweighs the demand to conform to lenten rituals for the sake of the ritual. If Lent offers mere ritual, then it calls us to self-indulgence, a chance to congratulate ourselves for having met the minimum demands of adhering to the tradition. If Lent offers more than ritual, then it calls us forward into new light with the promise of developing a new orientation that changes life itself.

On the second Sunday in Lent we join our pilgrim ancestor, Abram, while his journey toward God’s promise still is rough to manage. “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless . . . ? You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir” (Gen 15.2-3). It is hard to miss the edge in his plea.

The divine response is understated and practical. A simple assurance and an object lesson: “No one but your very own issue shall be your heir” (15.4), God says, and then invites Abram to consider “the stars, if you are able to count them.... So shall your descendants be” (15.5).

Something about those stars allowed Abram to see God’s promise in a new light.

“He believed ... and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15.6).

The psalm is anything but understated and practical. With bombastic images the psalmist imagines all sorts of woe that could come his way: “evildoers” with the desire “to devour my flesh” (27.2), “an army encamp[ed] against me” (27.3), and “if my mother and father forsake me” (27.10). The woeful imagination is sandwiched between equally elevated confessions of faith: “The Lord is my light and my salvation.... The Lord is the stronghold of my life” (27.1) and “he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock” (27.5).

Something about the psalmist’s faith allowed the poet to see God’s promises in a new light. The concluding words of the poem challenge us to do the same: “Wait for the Lord; . . . let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord” (27.14).

What Abram and the psalmist have in common is their wisdom to wait. They also model ways for us to strive to see our circumstances as Lenten pilgrims in a new light. Look to heavens for assurance if that works for you. Rail against injustices, real or perceived, if that works for you. But keep your feet on the pilgrim path. Press on toward Jerusalem, and “let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord” (Ps 27.14).

On the second Sunday in Lent the epistle, too, invites a heavenward orientation. Paul reminds the Philippians that “our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (3.20). Reminiscent of the psalmist Paul, too, engages in bombastic language. He writes “even with tears” (3.18) and expresses his hope that the Savior “will transform the body of our humiliation that we may be conformed to the body of his glory” (3.21).

Some might flinch—even blanch—at Paul’s heavenward orientation. We could read his challenge as disengagement from life’s reality. Such a reading fails to appreciate the context of Philippians. It is one of Paul’s four “prison letters” in the New Testament. That alone tells us that the letter is not a denial of the trials of living in the path and shadow of Jesus. The Lenten path calls us to live in the light

of promise, but it also calls us to cultivate an orientation that gives us bearings through life's trials. As bombastic as they may be, both psalm and epistle help us with those bearings.

The Gospel is, perhaps, too familiar. The task is to come to Luke's account of the Transfiguration as if for the first time. We need to forget what we think we know about the scene, including the cliché of "seeing Jesus in a new light." We know-or think we know-too much about Jesus being in the company of the prophets, Moses and Elijah (Luke 9.30-33). We know-or think we know-too much about Peter's myopic desire to remain on the mountain instead of following Jesus to Jerusalem (9.33). We know-or think we know-too much about the voice of God that dumbfounds Peter and challenges him to "listen!" (9.35).

What we don't know about is finding Jesus alone and keeping silent (9.36). The challenge of the second Sunday in Lent is to stand with Abram beneath the stars and to stand with Jesus in the fading light of the visitation of Moses and Elijah. Their aloneness gives depth to the bombasts of the psalm and the epistle; the poet and the Apostle were alone, too. Living in a new light is at least about finding a new orientation; it is about risking to stand with Abram and Jesus and being eager to be transformed by the promises of the prophet, the psalm, the epistle, and the Gospel.

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