

**Fifth Sunday in Lent**  
**March 21, 2010**

The back upstairs room in the house I grew up in was intended to be a sunroom, as it had windows all along both sides, but it was my brother's and my bedroom. When I was five, my older brother Steven, who was eight, had just read *Mary Poppins*. It was the winter of 1959, and there were several feet of snow, which, as you know, is quite unusual for Portland. It must have been close to Christmas time. I especially remember one night when the sky cleared, the moon was out and the whole world seem to be illuminated in silver and white. It was that night my brother had the scathingly brilliant idea that we should take hold of an umbrella and jump out of the window. It worked for *Mary Poppins* and it would work for us, as long as we believed. It certainly looked like a magic night. At that time, at that age, I would have done most anything Steven told me to do, and if he said we could fly, well then we could fly. We opened one of the windows, grabbed hold of the enchanted umbrella and away we went.

Our bedroom was situated directly above the kitchen in that house. My mother just happened to be doing the dishes at that moment, and there was a window above the sink. My mother usually sang while she did the dishes. I don't know if she was singing that night, but suddenly her two sons went shooting past the window as they plummeted to earth. I imagine her eyes wide as saucers. And I couldn't actually hear her shout "*what the hell?*," but that would have been her standard response. She ran out the back door to find her sons buried three feet deep in a snow bank that swept up to the house from the yard. We were laughing the kind of laugh you do when something is really, really scary and really, really funny at the same time. As soon as she realized we were okay, she got steaming mad of course, and started yelling at us. What in name of heaven did we think we were doing, didn't we know we could have been killed, were we trying to give her a heart attack, that sort of thing. As if, at ages five and eight, we possessed the kind of critical thought that had added up the pros and cons and had decided on a prudent course of action. Although we knew we were in trouble we couldn't stop laughing, which, quite naturally, made her even madder. She jostled us around a bit, then made us go and get in the bath, and told us we had to go to bed. I don't know if it was intended as such, but the bath usually seemed like punishment.

Later, when were in bed, my mom did her final walk through, with her summation of how stupid we were, how lucky we were not to be in the hospital, that stuff like this was going to make her old before her time, etcetera. She said good night and switched off the light. As soon as she was safely back downstairs in the kitchen, Steven said in a whisper, "*let's do it again,*" and we laughed ourselves silly. We wouldn't have done it again for all the money in the world.

(By the way, when the movie came out a year or so later, my mom wouldn't let us go.) I still believe almost everything my brother tells me, although I probably wouldn't jump out of a window with him these days. Maybe I would, he's very persuasive. But I do remember that unwavering faith, however childlike and misplaced

it may have been. I'm also quite aware that if it had been any other year, or even if our house faced another direction, we would have indeed been seriously injured. You can believe whatever you want, but I'm chalking that safe landing up to God.

The rest of this sermon wasn't really written by me. It was written by you. In conversations, emails, and passages you directed me to.

I want to talk about faith and the end of Lent. If this Lenten season has been wonderful and reflective for you, and you did everything you set out to do this year, Mazel Tov. This sermon is not really for you, feel free to space out, think about your grocery list, or the weather on Maui.

But if you, like me, are standing at the edge of Lent, feeling like you came up a little short this year, then this is for you. I am not discounting the importance of Lent. Perhaps the problem is how we see Lent. Is it 40 days of guilt every time we eat chocolate? Or is it something more? A discipline, in and of itself, won't bring us closer to God. Only God can bring us closer to God. The discipline is meant to get us, or more precisely our egos, out of the way so that we are open to God's Grace. I think any path that leads us to God, that reminds us of our need for God, is good, whether it involves jamoca almond fudge or not. (Show of hands: how many people gave up watching basketball for Lent? [no one raised their hands] I thought so.)

I sent you an email, one recent Lent, that read:

*Dear Friends — Another Lenten season is rapidly drawing to a close, and the only thing I've done that seems even remotely related to this time is that I ate up all the Cocoa Krispies the night before Ash Wednesday. I haven't fasted as I intended, haven't taken on some new ministry, haven't been a better, more reflective Christian. In fact I'm not sure there would be enough evidence this last six weeks to convict me of being a Christian. So, how do I enter into Holy Week with any sense of victory? How do I stand with you all, wipe my metaphoric brow and say "Thank God that darkness has been overcome" – your thoughts would be appreciated.*

Here's how you responded:

"Isn't it astounding that our God is a god of limitless mercy, none of which we earn? What luck that we get to just go with whatever/whoever we are, remembering our thank-yous and living in grace. I'm thinking grateful and grace must have the same root. The former is the most I can achieve and the latter is the most anyone can receive. I'll be standing with you when our candles catch the flame and we cannot escape the brightness that envelops even us."

And another of you said:

"I wrestle with these issues myself. I often wonder, "What would a 'perfect' Lent look like, anyway?" For me it's a matter of doing the best I can, knowing that

I'm never going to live up to the expectations that I have for myself or that other people have for me. I hope you can attend the Holy Week liturgies. Sometimes just being there helps us to be re-oriented toward the light, the love, and the hope."

And another said this:

"Maybe our Lenten expectations are being challenged this year and you, too, are experiencing some darkness, confusion and pain. So, how do you, how do I, how does anyone enter Holy Week with a sense of victory? Through our Lord Jesus Christ who overcame darkness with life, and we rejoice in the living Christ who lifts us up whenever we ask."

This piece sums it all up nicely:

"Though you may have failed to do what you had committed to do and hoped to do during Lent does not mean that the conviction and victory of Easter has been lessened. On the contrary, I think it magnifies the victory that Easter represents. Easter is the supreme revelation of God's victory over death, darkness, and sin, and those in Christ share in that victory.

Our failure to follow through on our Lenten resolutions makes Easter all the more meaningful. We have seen that despite our best intentions we are still unable to obtain righteousness by our own efforts. Now we stand at the closing of Lent doing precisely what Lent is all about: reflecting on our own sin and repenting of our failure to follow through on our commitments. This gives us all the motivation in the world to say, "*Thank God that darkness has been overcome.*" Because we know firsthand how desperately we need the victory of God and how helpless we are without it. And isn't that what Lent is all about?"

You guys are really good writers. — I have found that whatever my Lent has been like, when I enter fully into Holy Week, when I avail myself of every opportunity to walk that path with Christ and this community, the celebration of Easter is overpowering, beyond what words can convey. The hope of Palm Sunday, the profoundly bittersweet experience of Maundy Thursday, the desolation of Good Friday, the quiet expectancy of Holy Saturday, leading up to the Great Vigil, when it seems the A-word will blow the roof off this place. The beautiful extravagance of Easter morning. We are Easter people, and I need that whole week to feel the whole experience. We need to walk that path together.

So, just as in the story my brother and I landed safely after our leap of faith, I think you and I land safely in Holy Week. We land safely in God's love, whatever our Lenten journey has or hasn't been, because God isn't keeping score. Jesus settled that score for us once and for all. We just need to keep moving, together, toward the Light, the Love, and the Hope.

– Phillip Blomberg