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Diving Lessons

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of my eighth year, I learned to swim at the YMCA in Camden, Maine.

I don't remember my instructor's name, but she taught me to float, tread and crawl. Those lessons not only helped me avoid death by drowning, they also allowed me to have fun in the water, assured I would live another day.

In the ancient Church, adults seeking baptism on Holy Saturday or Easter Sunday spent the season of Lent in study and prayer, learning the Christian way of navigating the waters of life. Working with experienced coaches, they prepared to be submerged in water, conquering death and rising joyfully with Christ.

In either case, finding an experienced friend is key.

This book offers a series of Lenten lessons for diving deeper into the Christian life, written by caring friends. By the end of it, you might desire to be baptized for the first time or to have your baptism renewed at your church. Or you might simply read and be refreshed, growing in the confidence of faith.

I never advanced from the YMCA to the NCAA as a champion swimmer. And, thankfully, there are no experts or champions of Christian living, just friends passing on the life-saving good news of Jesus Christ.

Turn the page and dive in with us.

-Matt Laney, for the Stillspeaking Writers' Group

Showered with Stars

M a r y L u t i

“For dust you are and to dust you will return.” Genesis 3:19

Halfway through the line I almost lost it. Until that moment I’d been in a ritual groove, looking my parishioners in the eye, dusting them with ashes, calmly delivering the ancient admonition: “Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return.” One by one they came, listened, received. But halfway through, I faltered.

It wasn’t that I suddenly realized the gravity of what I was telling them, that they were breathtakingly fragile, that at any moment they could dissolve into elemental bits, that someday they would. I’d been feeling the heft of that truth all evening.

So no, it wasn’t that I was giving them fatal news. It was that they wanted to hear it. It was that they’d lined up to hear it of their own free will.

Holy One, may I live this Lent in bare truth, total trust, and knowing joy; for in life and in death I belong to you.

They knew exactly what the message was going to be, and still they inched their way towards the messenger.

My knees went wobbly as water. I wanted to wave them off, to tell them they didn’t have to come, they could go sit down. But I knew no one would. That was the most stunning thing: even if I’d said it, I knew no one would.

So I regrouped, kept tracing charred crosses, kept saying the old words. And they kept coming, one after another, offering me their foreheads with the trust of a child.

And when I told them they would die, some nodded. Some said amen. Some even smiled; they said thank you, as if instead of sentencing them to death, I’d showered them with stars.

Both/And

J o h n E d g e r t o n

“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my parents conceived me. Yet You desired faithfulness even in the womb; You taught me wisdom in that secret place.” Psalms 51

So my wife and I are having a baby.

Sometime between now and Easter—likely—our first child will be born. There is something deeply appropriate about the forty days of Lent concluding the forty weeks of waiting that is this great journey through the wilderness of welcoming new life.

Every doctor’s appointment and milestone and test bring a complex mixture of joy and fear. Joy that at the end of the wilderness there may be waiting for us a child we will meet and be forever changed. Fear that at the end of the wilderness there may be waiting for us a child we will meet and be forever changed.

It is not simple, it is both/and. Both joy and fear. Gain and loss. Prayer and silence. New life and the approach of death. It is already both/and.

So thank God for the Psalms. They are too honest to depict children as if they were angels, heavenly

visitors who are different and better than we who have been tainted by living too long in God’s creation.

I believe it’s true, what the Psalm has to say of this child I’ve never met. I believe it’s true that the child is already sinful. Sinfulness, which is to be tied up with and implicated in the heartbreaks of the world. But if the Psalm is true, it’s also true that God has already implanted wisdom in this child. Wisdom, which is the capacity to reorder both self and world to more closely resemble God’s hope.

Both/and. Life is already both/and. I believe it always will be.

Beating heart yet lacking breath. Helpless yet powerful. Mortal yet clothed in immortality. Sinful as any, wise as any, good as any, flawed as any. This is the person I long to welcome to the waters of baptism.

O God, bless the living, and those yet to be alive.

Asking for Help

Tony Robinson

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith.” Romans 1:16

Once asked Jim Forbes, a professor of mine at Union Seminary, to help me understand the difference between predominately white and predominately black churches. I asked because I experienced a power in the worship of the black church that I didn’t often find elsewhere.

Jim, whose background was in an African-American Pentecostal church, pondered my question, then said, “In predominately Caucasian congregations people believe God needs them; in predominately African-American churches, people understand that they need God.”

Of course, that’s a generalization, but so was my question. And there’s a truth in those words real in my own life in this way: for much of my life I have found it easier to offer help than to ask for help. Admitting “I need help,” can be a tough thing to do. Even, in a way, shameful.

Holy One, grant me the courage to ask for your help and the confidence to know that even before I ask, you have already said “yes.” Amen.

The Greatest

Emily C. Heath

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Then he called a little child over to sit among the disciples, and said, “I assure you that if you don’t turn your lives around and become like this little child, you will definitely not enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who humble themselves like this little child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” Matthew 18:1-7

Humility isn’t in vogue in our culture. Even more than competence, outright hubris can now win the day. Humility is for losers with low self-esteem, and we love winners.

But what might win elections and promotions is not what wins God’s heart. Jesus rejects those who are seeking to be “the greatest” and instead opens his arms up to those who “humble themselves” like children.

In certain circles I’ve traveled in, ones where power and privilege are not the norm, I’ve heard the concept of humility dismissed. I get why. When you are a part of a group that has been oppressed or treated as “less than,” someone telling you to be humble seems particularly unhelpful. Many groups have, rightfully, claimed the concept of “pride” as an antidote.

God, help me to love myself exactly as you made me, and help me to be humble enough that I may love others. Amen.

As the apostle Paul began his letter to the Romans he said a striking thing. “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” Why would he have been ashamed of the gospel?

Paul was a man who had worked hard to attain perfection and status by his own efforts. An unexpected encounter with Jesus led Paul to a sudden realization: the one thing he most needed was to accept the help, and the grace, of God. To embrace the gospel was to embrace help — and to not be ashamed that he needed it. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith.”

In the end, the two parts of Jim’s answer to my question are a both/ and. As we accept grace ourselves, we become gracious to others.

But being proud and being humble are not opposites. You can, and should, absolutely believe that you are a beloved child of God, created by God and profoundly gifted. No one is inherently more worthy than you.

But the problem comes when you begin to believe that you are more worthy than others.

True humility is not about thinking of yourself as less than others. True humility is knowing that you are equally worthy, and that every good gift you have been given is not for yourself but for others.

What we learned, and somehow better understood, about how to treat one another when we were children still applies. And even if it doesn’t win the day in the board room or on the ballot, that child-like virtue still wins God’s heart every time.

Did God Say?

Richard L. Floyd

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” *Genesis 3:1*

Our scripture lessons for Lent feature a wily bunch of tempters, the serpent, Satan, the devil, who pose questions that cast doubt on the truth of God’s Word. That’s their job.

Although they make for a colorful cast of characters, we don’t really need them since such questioning is more likely to come not from them but from deep within us.

We are all partisans in the perennial human rebellion against God. We revel in our personal sovereignty and unbridled freedom.

God made us for worship, but instead of worshiping God we “worship ourselves and the things we have made,” as one of our old UCC prayers of confession so wisely put it.

Some of what God says seems just too good to be true, and so we question the truth of it.

Did God say, “I will be your God and you will be my people”?

Did God say, “Look, I am doing a new thing, do you not see it?”

Did God say, “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand”?

Did God say, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope”?

Did God say these wonderful words, full of comfort and love, of promise and hope for the whole human family?

Yes! God said them.

A person in a blue jacket stands at the end of a long, narrow wooden pier that stretches from the bottom center towards the horizon. The pier is made of dark wooden planks and is set against a vast, misty, light blue sky. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

God of the future, let us put our full trust in you, and in the truth that is always breaking forth from your Holy Word.

Chicken Soup for the Soul

Kenneth L. Samuel

“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.” *Psalms 32:3-5*

As a prank, I, along with four of my college senior class colleagues conspired to steal the bell that was stationed at a corner of our college square. After we’d done the deed around 3 a.m. one morning, we delighted in hearing the utter befuddlement and bewilderment that characterized the responses of various students regarded the missing icon.

The plot was a great source of amusement until our senior class voted to contribute a sizable sum for the replacement of the bell. At that point I had to speak up, because I couldn’t rest well with the fact that my senior class mates were going to give good money to replace something that didn’t need replacement, but return.

I went to the class president and told her that the bell would be returned. Of course, I implicated

myself . . . but I was so ready to be free from the guilt that I was happy to sing like a bird.

And I was relieved to deal with the consequences of my actions (which amounted to a stern reprimand. As it turned out, we weren’t the first seniors to pull that prank).

As I look back on the incident, my cover-up was as bad as or even worse than my misdeed itself.

Sin is an enticer. But after it entices us . . . it entangles us.

There is nothing that can free us from our conscientious entanglements like open, honest, full-throated confession. The truth about who we are and what we’ve done—even when we believe that what we did was harmless—is tonic for our souls.

Lord, help us to realize that even though we can live with cover-up and denial . . . we cannot live well.

Some of it is Your Fault

Jennifer Garrison Brownell

“While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long . . . my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” *Psalms 32:3-5*

There is so much wrong with the world, and some of it is your fault.

The earth is collapsing under the weight of so many of us using up everything we want as fast as we want, and you just drank a cup of coffee from a disposable cup. People are really actually starving right in your town and you continue to buy groceries for your own family as if this were not happening. Governments are overtaken by thugs and you are too busy or cynical to vote.

There is so much wrong, and some of it really is your fault. The curse of being human is knowing this. The blessing of being human is having a choice about how to respond to this knowledge.

You can pull the covers over your head, groan softly and gradually waste away from the helpless, enervating guilt of it all. Or you can start here. Roll out of your bed and kneel beside it. Open your mouth not to groan, for once, but to speak out loud. Tell your fault to the Holy One so that it no longer weighs you down, no longer weakens your body and soul, no longer keeps you trapped in the prison of your own making. Remember that while some of it is your fault, not all of it is. Then stand up. There is so much wrong with the world, and you have work to do.

Oh Most High, Help me speak and then to move from confession to action.

C O N T R I B U T O R S

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