

Lent 1 A  
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*The Season of Truth-Telling*

This week there was one non-political story that stood out even amid the speeches, recusals and protests. The shocking mix up of the Best Picture Award at the Oscars. What was more remarkable than the mix up itself, was how the *La La Land* producer announced it. In a world where it's increasingly challenging to distinguish fact from fiction, his unpretentious honesty was refreshing. "What Mr. Horowitz did wasn't exactly revolutionary," writes journalists Stephanie Merry and Lindsey Bever from the Washington Post. "He told the truth even though it was difficult and awkward and embarrassing, because he had just stood in front of the world and thanked his friends and family for an award that wasn't his. But that didn't stop him from admitting that he was wrong, even though he was a victim of circumstance. He could have slunk offstage and let Jimmy Kimmel and Warren Beatty continue to fumble through an explanation. Instead he did the dirty work with what looked like pride, sticking around to hug his friends from 'Moonlight.'"

In the season of Lent, we Christians are invited to journey into those honest and terribly uncomfortable places in our lives where we come face to face with our mortality, our failure to do the right thing, and our acknowledgement that we stand in need of mercy. "The purest definition of 'holy' is its cognate, 'whole'", says the Rev. Sam Portaro. "A *holy* Lent, then, is a season devoted to integrity, truth, honest wholeness. At least one way to observe these forty days is to embrace a commitment to challenge any denial and dissembling that cloaks truth, that delays or denies the hard work of repentance and reconciliation." It is a time for us to get real. To get real with ourselves and with God.

Every year on this first Sunday in Lent we hear about Jesus' own forty day journey into the wilderness to get real. On the heels of his baptism, Jesus must confront the constraints of his own humanity. The Jesus we encounter is a thirty-year-old carpenter who has hardly the strength left to stand, famished after forty days of fasting and testing. He's at the end of his rope, alone and friendless and struggling to understand his identity as the glow of his baptism fades into a fuzzy, pre-wilderness past. In a barren, desert landscape there's nowhere for him to hide.

Enter the devil. Not some guy in red tights with pointy horns, but an exploiter of weakness and a brilliant inquisitor. Can you relinquish power," he interrogates the Son

of God? "Can you exercise restraint? Work in obscurity? Can you truly bear the marks of what it means to be a human being?" Jesus could have reached for popularity, power and certainty; but instead chose vulnerability, humility and insecurity—all signs of his future willingness to bear the cross. At its root, all temptation is to forget who one is. In his honest to God truth-telling Jesus is set free to embrace fully his identity as God's own beloved Son. And I believe it is in our honest to God truth-telling that sets us free.

Sara Miles was one of the first people to take to the streets on Ash Wednesday and participate in Ashes to Go. Here's a brief reflection on her first experience. "I walked with a dozen people in black cassocks around the busy, crowded center of the Mission District in San Francisco. Carrying little jars of ashes made from the burned-up palms of last year's Palm Sunday, we went into dollar stores, alleys, bakeries, bars, the parking lot where gang members deal dope, offering ashes to everyone we saw. I touched hundreds and hundreds of faces: a guy in a pickup truck at the light, a girl on a tricycle, an elderly woman getting her hair done. A mother unwrapped her tiny baby, a week and a half old, and held him up. I crossed his forehead with ashes, and took a deep breath, and told the newborn he was going to die. And then his mother, like every single person who leaned forward to receive ashes that day, said: *thank you*. Why would you say, "thank you" when a stranger tells you you're going to die? Because it's the truth. And ashes on skin show that, despite all the lies of our culture, nothing is hidden, or pretend, or made-up anymore. We are walking, the Gospel tells us, in the light."

We go from ashen foreheads to the desert wilderness and finally to a lowly hill on Calvary. And it is through these experience that all the lies are finally shattered, the lies we tell ourselves, the lies we pretend to believe, those we propagate and those we know are harmful. To be on this journey with Jesus is to surrender to God with our whole heart, to cry out from those places within us and our world that need healing. Walter Brueggeman writes in his book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, "People can only dare to envision a new reality when they've been able to scream out, to let loose the cry that has been stuck in their throats so long. That cry," he says, "is the most visceral announcement that things are not right. Only then can we begin to nurture, nourish and evoke a new consciousness." This is what occurred on Thursday when people took to the streets of Philadelphia once again to cry out against the desecration of graves at a Jewish cemetery and the bomb threats at local Jewish schools, opposing the bigotry and hatred that caused such vile acts.

This is not easy work, friends. After all it is the way of the cross. Through the call to repentance, we are invited into the practice of truth-telling, proclaiming what is not right in our lives and in our world so that we can imagine a new way forward. Lent dares us to give up the foolish notion that our own salvation lies within ourselves, that

our own power and privilege and self-reliance can redeem us. It dares us to believe that when we stop pretending we can be changed by the One who loved us into being and loves us even still. For, the God who breathed life into our dust will not rest until we are transformed. And that's the honest to God truth. Amen.