

Forty Days

LEAVING THE ALTER

Lent Four Video

There is heartbreak in the letting go
Turning our face from the place of our birth
But not wanting to forsake life in Eden
For a land stained with blood
Haunted by the cries from a field
Where we've done violence to ourselves and to another
We wandered so far from that country of origin
Marking ourselves with a burden
Yet protected and provided
Repeating in a mantra:
*Even though I walk through the deepest, darkest valley,
I fear no evil*

When we cannot look any deeper
When there is none who can peer into the inner parts
The depths where we dare not go
Our hearts are anointed,
And preserved
To not be of want
To eat from the fruit of light
And not from darkness
But to walk again on paths of righteousness

I have brought sacrifices to the altar
And often I have held on to the very things I desired to give up
Clutching even to pain
Because I have nothing else to hold
Giving up is a giving up of my image
Something too great to ask
Keeping my feet stuck to this ground
Blinding me from what is ahead

When I thought my eyes were opened
Claiming to see

My blindness returned
Another taste of the fruit of good and evil—
a veil of darkness fell over me

But there is an invitation to receive vision
From the dirt and mud,
the blind eyes made open
The pools of Siloam wash over us
Allowing us to move forward
from the ashes of the altar
to the place of our promise
seeing ourselves for the first time
learning our own faces
in the waters that saved us
as though we were remade in another's image

When we run away
goodness and mercy pursue us
with tenacious love
the kind that travels across distant lands
over the entire length of our lives
to be where we sit now
piecing together the shards of life
making it again,
to be one.

Questions for Reflection

1. The poem starts by talking about the “heartbreak in the letting go.” What are some things that we must give up in order to receive something better? Why might these things be painful to us?
2. Reflect on the verses that say, “I have held on to the very things I desired to give up/Clutching even to pain.” How have you held on to those things that might even be painful for you?
3. How does “giving up” sometimes feel like a sacrifice of who we are and “something too great to ask”?

4. We often think that we are seeing world with our “eyes opened,” but we were actually in the dark. How have you mistaken nearsightedness for clarity of vision?
5. The last stanza is to illustrate God’s tenacious love that is always pursuing us, despite and even through our mistakes and actions. How is God piecing the parts of our lives together? How is God restoring your broken identity?

Practices of Lent

Who am I? More and more, people are coming to question their identity. At one time identity was defined through family, church, country, and tribe, but as those ties have slowly dissolved, many people face a world without knowledge of who they are. Recently, the 2014 Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to the French novelist, Jean Patrick Modiano. His book, *Missing Person*, tells a story of a detective who suffers from amnesia and is on a path to solve the mystery of his own identity. Highly appropriate for our time, this book reflects our perpetual search for who we are.

This quest, like many, can become an all-consuming pursuit for some people. It is to reclaim the core of who we are as daughters and sons of the Creator. This is played out in a child’s rebellion against their parents. They don’t want to be like their parents, but without their parents they have no one to shape who they are *not* to be like. In the same way, the search for identity is the search to come back into community with the One who made us in that One’s same image and likeness. Whether we realize it or not, our identities are deeply tied to our community, families, and Creator. Our quest is often a quest to return home.

Paradoxically, to lose ourselves is to gain ourselves. When we place ourselves on the altar, we are not making the ultimate sacrifice, but only making room to receive fully who we are created to become. What experiences of the past might you need to place on the altar? Who might you need to forgive? What things might you need to let go of? What might it mean to be settled in our own skin, to fully accept who you are? For many people, this might require help from another: a counselor, spiritual mentor, or just a friend who can be patient and listen. In Christ, we see the vision of one who was fully human, and in pursuit of this image, we come to pursue ourselves.

Phuc Luu

Further Reading

Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (Jossey-Bass, 2013).