

LIMPING THROUGH LENT

Lent is a special time for Christians. It serves as preparation for Easter and as a way to help us more fully understand the sufferings of Jesus. We confess, we reflect, we dig deep. And sometimes we come out limping.

REST STOP #1: Limping through Lent

Ever watch how people walk? The way people walk says a lot about them. When I'm feeling right with God and the world, I walk with confidence. I have an easy stride. I don't saunter or have some arrogant, I've-got-the-world-by-the-tail gait. But I walk, tall and straight. My walking is almost effortless. I am comfortable with who I am and who I am with God.

A couple weeks ago a friend of mine hurt herself. She sprained her ankle. The doctor told her to walk with the pain and not fight against it. "Let yourself limp," he told her. (Please don't take this as advice for every sprained ankle!) She was tempted, however, to try to walk normally and hide the limp. If the injury isn't too bad, she reasoned, one can grimace, walk straight as an arrow and no one is the wiser.

But that would impede healing. That's what the doctor said.

It is now the season of Lent. This is a time in the Christian calendar where we acknowledge our sins and our shortcomings, a time when we sometimes deny ourselves of physical pleasures or we add a special habit of prayer. It is the season for spiritual hurts.

And I have hurts. I think I sprained my soul. I suffer a sprain, yet I can still "walk" confidently if I'm careful. I can pray publicly, teach Bible, I can give correct answers to deep questions. I can pretend I'm in good shape. I can walk tall spiritually, stride into a room with a comfortable gait. But I'm wincing with pain.

And the Doctor says I'm slowing down the healing. I need to limp.

I need to answer honestly that I have some questions too. I need to admit that I'm angry and scared and that I'm holding a grudge against so-and-so. I wear my worries like a second layer of clothing, hidden from others but something that keeps me nice and warm. I live as though I have no faith sometimes. I need to be honest about all of these things.

I need to let myself limp.

That doesn't mean I need a wheelchair. I don't have to tell everyone my problems. I don't have to spill my guts to people who are depending on me for spiritual nurture. I don't need to abdicate my role as teacher, mom or friend. There's a time and place for everything. But, as Henri Nouwen helps me see, I am a wounded healer. Not so wounded that I can't be a channel of God's healing. But not so proud that I try to hide the wounds that are part of me.

I limp. Lent helps me see that. And for that I'm grateful.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." II Cor. 12:9

REST STOP #2: Crawling toward the Cross A prayer station for Lent

Materials needed:

- A bowl or tub of coarse or unsifted flour
- A flour sifter
- Empty bowls to put the sifted flour in
- Meditation (see below)

Prayer meditation for Lent

“Simon, Simon, listen!

Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,
but I have prayed for you
that your own faith may not fail;
and you, once you have turned back,
strengthen your brothers.

And he said to him,

“Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!”

Jesus said,

“I tell you, Peter,
the cock will not crow this day,
until you have denied three times that you know me.”

Has Jesus ever said this to you?

How is Satan demanding to sift you?

What life situation is just grinding you down?

Take a handful of the coarse, unsifted flour in front of you.

Let the flour run through your fingers.

Now take a cupful and pour it into the sifter.

Sift the flour into an empty bowl.

As you turn the handle on the sifter, think about those things that grind you down.

Let yourself feel the hurt and the pain.
Sifting hurts.

“Simon, Simon, listen!
Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,
but I have prayed for you
that your own faith may not fail;
and you, once you have turned back,
strengthen your brothers.”

Now put the sifted flour in your hands.
How does it feel different?
Or is there any difference?

The sifting isn't necessarily a good thing.
Peter denied Jesus three times.
The sifting isn't necessarily God's will.
Satan may be the one insisting upon it.
But can God take the tough times and bring good out of them?

It's OK if you can't feel any difference in the flour.
It's OK if you can't see any good in your time of testing right now.
But know this.
Know this.
“I have prayed for you ...”

Can you feel his prayers for you?
Can you let that love wash over you?

Sifted flour is a finer flour, a flour that is finally ready to be used.
Are you ready to be used?
Your faith will not fail.
Your faith will not fail.

Strengthen the others.

REST STOP #3: Stumbling through the Garden

A prayer exercise

Read Mark 14:32-42. Then think about these questions.

- 1 What would it be like to have a walk with Jesus through the garden of Gethsemene?
- 2 What would it be like to be Peter, James or John, one of the chosen three? How do you think they felt when they saw Jesus ...agitated? Sorrowful even to death?
- 3 Is it OK for Jesus to cry? To throw himself down on the ground? What does that say about what is going on and what just lies ahead? What does that say about God?
- 4 Can you imagine Jesus calling God "Daddy?"
- 5 Why do you think they slept?
- 6 "They did not know what to say to him." Have you ever felt like this?
- 7 Did Jesus have to go through with the agony of the cross?
- 8 What looms over your head right now? In what way can you say, "not my will but yours?"

With the scripture and questions as your backdrop, have a garden conversation with Jesus right now. Take a clean sheet of paper and draw a line down the middle, making two columns. Write "Me" at the top of the left column and "Jesus" at the top of the right column. Now take some time alone, in silence, and write down a question for Jesus in the left column. Listen as he answers you and write down his response in the right column. Go back and forth, asking and listening. Trust what you hear inside you.

When you think your conversation is done, go back and read the two columns. Listen one more time and then say good-bye. And if appropriate, plan on another conversation in the future.

REST STOP #4: Dancing at the tomb

Sometimes I don't like Easter. It's scary to be this honest, but on some level it's true. I feel guilty for not being happy enough. Couple that with feeling guilty about not being grateful enough for the suffering Jesus did on the cross, and I'm a wreck by Holy Week. This is just the way I feel.

I want to dance with joy at Easter. I don't want to just be happy Lent is over or giddy over a new dress or relieved that spring is finally here. No. I want to dance with joy.

So I've been trying to figure out why I struggle. Several connected reasons come to mind. Is it a fascination, an unholy clinging to earthly possessions? Maybe I'm so pre-occupied with trivial things like curtains and cars and contracts that I block out the joyous dance. Is that it? Well—maybe. I think it goes deeper than that.

Maybe I believe, mistakenly, that this is as good as it gets. Living in this world of instant gratification, I falsely assume that this is it—a two-car garage, a house with a white picket fence, 2.5 kids and a dog. And I should be happy! The ever-present, low-lying stress, the continual grind, the accumulation of junk are just part of the deal. But ironically, the things

that make me happy, according to my society, are the very things that so many times enslave me! If this is as good as it gets, if this is what resurrection means ...well I'm not dancing.

Believing this is as good as it gets, I lose hope. I give up. And when I stop hoping, I stop limping. To limp, to grieve, is really to insist that there's got to be more. To cry out in anger or in pain to God is really an act of faith.

So no wonder I don't dance with joy, if I don't know how to limp. If I expect to feel numb and mediocre in my faith walk with God, I won't or maybe even can't notice my own spiritual limp. Not noticing it, I don't grieve it, or even worse, I don't bang on God's door with my complaints. I don't cry out to God about making things better.

I don't hit bottom. Well, I do, I just don't know it.

But maybe it's at rock bottom that I relinquish my attempts to heal myself. Maybe it's only at rock bottom that I stop doing things on my own strength and admit defeat and surrender—really surrender. When I finally let go, I find God doing what I couldn't do, that is raising me and my situation to new life.

Can I dance if I don't limp? Is the dance of the limpers more joyous, ultimately, than all the rest?

One of my favorite plays is the musical Amal and the Night Visitors. In this play, the main character, Amal, is permanently crippled. So of course, the actor who plays Amal works hard to portray a believable limp. But one Christmas when I saw the play, the person playing Amal in this production however, did not have to pretend. His own leg had fallen prey to a debilitating disease. His every step was pain.

In the play, Amal's lameness is cured by the loving Christ-child. Knowing the play, I held my breath as this particular scene drew close. What would happen? Would Jesus heal this man, just like the child healed Amal?

The moment came. Amal said, "Look Mother, I can walk!" The actor jumped up ... and limped across the stage, tossing his handmade crutch in the air.

And he danced! His leg was still bent, but he beamed as he did a two-step across the stage. He danced a beautiful, crooked, painful dance. And I cried. I cried with joy and pain. He was dancing the dance of my life.

Please don't hear me wrong. I believe Jesus could have healed that young actor that night and maybe will yet someday. And I believe that sometimes God does heal in miraculous, instantaneous, mind-boggling ways. I believe in the resurrection, both on Easter morning and the one to come at the close of the ages. I believe, despite all proof to the contrary, that all will be made well, that every tear will be dried, every wrong righted, every shattered hope restored.

Evil cannot finally defeat the good. Death has no real sting. God will be victorious.

But the actor wasn't healed. And I don't know why.

But I know why he smiled. I understand why he danced. If we are brave enough to really grieve, we will have hope enough to really yearn, and that yearning will be honored by God. And God will bring us resurrection. Resurrection in the future when we die, and now, in a figurative way, when we fail. And God will bring all things, all peoples, all societies back to his will, back to right relationships. We will all dance—someday.