

For the past year Kendyll & I have experienced a crisis in our lives; also called: welcoming a newborn. Of course “crisis” isn’t the most important description of welcoming a newborn — but it's not irrelevant. Welcoming a newborn introduces all sorts of crises into life; taking those things which seemed so reliable, so familiar, or so necessary and turning them completely on their heads.

Sleep deprivation has probably been the most familiar crises. For the past year we've experienced cries & screams in the middle of the night, at both regular and seemingly random intervals. Kendyll, of course, has sacrificed more sleep than I have. And then, suddenly, a few days ago Penny's wake-up time became magically *reasonable*. Suddenly, for the first time in a year, she's been waking up at 6AM. It feels magical. No one is pretending that our parenting schedule is all smooth sailing from here. But it's energizing to be at a stage where we actually have to start using alarms again to make sure that we're waking up on time. We're actually able to re-engage those reliable and familiar resources that help to shape our lives. At least, for now.

There's something similar about Lent. In fact, if we're using the image of a crisis, then we could say that Lent *is* the newborn crisis in our liturgical lives. Lent introduces a kind of liturgical crisis into the patterns & rhythms of our lives. Lent confronts us with a crisis. Of course “crisis” isn’t the most important description of Lent — but it's not irrelevant. Because Lent introduces crises by taking those elements of our faith which

seem so reliable, so familiar, or so necessary and turning them completely on their heads.

Our faith celebrates the **Resurrection** of Jesus and the victory of life over death.

Yet, Lent confronts us with the crisis of our own mortality.

Our faith celebrates the **reconciliation** of humanity with God. Yet, Lent confronts us with the crisis of our brokenness.

Our faith celebrates the **redemption** of humanity from any forces, powers, or temptations that threaten to enslave us. Yet, Lent confronts us with the crisis of our slavery to patterns of waywardness, laziness, and sin.

Just as surprising as the crisis of Lent is our surprising comfort when it comes to sharing it with other people. An increasingly familiar form of cultural "outreach" in recent years has been the phenomenon of *Ashes to Go*, where Christian ministers station themselves at public locations and offer ashes to people as they rush off to work on Ash Wednesday.<sup>1</sup> Maybe you've heard of it, or seen it, or participated yourself. It's a fascinating way to share our faith.

At one level, it's great for churches to be so public with one of our rituals. But it's odd that we feel so happy to confront strangers with the crisis of their own mortality as they rush off to work: *remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return*. There are some great things about *Ashes to Go*, but it's fascinating that we seem more comfortable announcing the crisis of our mortality with complete strangers than showing up on Easter morning to announce the victory of life over death.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. *All Things Rite & Musical*, Episode 16.

I wonder if it's because the crisis of our mortality seems more real. I wonder if it's because, despite our culture's endless efforts to look younger, to act stronger, and to experience more peace; I wonder if despite all that we still can't escape the deep-down reality of our own mortality. We're confronted with it every day. I wonder if that's part of the appeal of *Ashes to Go*; that despite how odd and obscure this ritual is (especially if you don't have a church background) it offers a kind of solidarity for our human condition. It's a fresh & frank confession of our mortality, our limits, our brokenness, our waywardness, our laziness, our sin.

The surprising truth seems to be that real peace & happiness are actually harder to find if we never have a fresh & frank confession about our mortality and our brokenness. Of course, it would be just as unhealthy to wallow in our brokenness as to ignore it. Confronting our mortality should produce guilt, control, or poor self-esteem. Lent is never about any of those things.

Then what's it about? Maybe we can find our focus from two little words repeated in our Gospel Lesson: *so that*. There's a pattern in our Gospel reading, not about the benefit of our spiritual practices themselves; the practices of almsgiving, prayer, & fasting. The contrast is setup by the phrase, *so that*. Do we engage in spiritual practices, *so that* we can be seen by others, or *so that* we can be seen by God?

The reminder of Lent is that whenever we engage in spiritual practices it's so easy

to drift from being seen by God, to being seen by others. Because the payoff of being seen by others always seems more attractive. And Lent calls our attention back to God by introducing a crisis that upends our expectations. You see, any of our spiritual practices can easily become measures of achievement. It's almost like being so proud of using our alarm clock that we forget why we've gotten out of bed in the first place. That would just be silly. Lent works the same way, by reminding us that all of our spiritual practices are pointless without the loving & life-giving God who provides the focus of our spiritual practice. Once we understand that, and once we experience the crisis of our own waywardness, frailty & brokenness, then we're able to re-engage all of our reliable and familiar spiritual practices with renewed focus.

This about like this. We don't welcome children into our lives *because* we want a crisis. We welcome children because our flourishing and our humanity are bound up with the child's flourishing and the child's humanity. Lent is also about human flourishing. We don't confront ourselves with mortality, frailty & brokenness because we want a crisis. We welcome that confrontation because it becomes a pathway of flourishing with God and our neighbor. And the message of our faith is that, in some deeply meaningful and mysterious way: "We need to live in this tension, because this is what being a Christian is all about."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, *Small Faith, Great God*, 97