

Embrace

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Driving to the Sunday-night mission at her parish, Sara had high hopes for the Lent that had just begun. It was her sophomore year in college, and she had celebrated Ash Wednesday at her university's Newman Center just days before spring break. Now she was home for a week, and as her car wound along the familiar roads from her parents' house to church, Sara mused about her three Lenten resolutions:

911, who quickly dispatched an ambulance. Sara's mother met her at the scene of the accident and brought her home with no injuries, she thought, except a few aithguburns.

But the human body does not take kindly to being tossed around and caught upside down by a seatbelt. The next morning Sara woke up in agony, barely able to walk, and the long road to recovery began. To put it mildly, this was not the Lent she'd chosen! She had planned to give up cutting class and sleeping in on Sunday mornings; instead she gave up flexibility and comfort. She had planned to take up a charitable weekly outing and daily meditation; instead she took up thrice-weekly physical therapy and torturous daily stretching exercises. Sara was flat-out miserable.

The first had been suggested by her straight-A roommate: no cutting classes! Sara was not looking forward to ending her love affair with the snooze button, but her grades would probably appreciate the effort. Plus she could tell people she was giving up laziness for Lent, which had the advantage of being funny. To do something positive for Lent, Sara planned to drive her homebound grandmother to Mass every Sunday morning. So now she had fasting (from skipping class) and almsgiving (with her time, which she had more of than money). All that was left for the perfect Lenten recipe was prayer, and Sara was very excited about her resolution in this category: the Newman Center students had selected a daily meditation book for the season and planned to share their reflections online each day. She couldn't wait to log on, weigh in, and read what everyone else was thinking.

She was miserable because she was in constant pain and maddeningly limited in her range of motion. But on a deeper level she was miserable because she was terribly disappointed. For once in her life she'd been looking forward to Lent, and now she was unable to enter that great season as she'd planned. Her careful resolutions fell apart, since she was often in too much pain to sit through class, didn't have a vehicle to drive her grandmother to Mass, and was even too depressed to care much about the prayer book. She wondered why God would allow such a thing to happen to her when she was at a high point in her spiritual life. Didn't God want her to grow? What had she done to deserve this?



Our challenge is to enter Lent with eyes wide open.

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Black ice was nowhere in Sara's Lenten plans. In fact, that afternoon's sunshine had seemed to announce winter's defeat, melting the last resistant patches of snow. But melting snow has to go somewhere, and as the temperature dropped, a thin layer of invisible ice had formed on less-traveled roads. One moment Sara was musing, and the next she was hanging upside down from her seatbelt after her car had skidded off the road and flipped over on an embankment.

Many things went right that night. Although her car was totaled, Sara did not break a single bone in the accident. An approaching motorist swerved to avoid her and then stopped to call

She met God in the kindness of those who came to her assistance, who endured her complaining, and who told

Lent YOU GET

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her when enough was enough. She discovered God in the compassion she developed for people who had never possessed the abundance of energy and health she'd always taken for granted and in the way her pride shrank as her compassion grew.

Most important, she came to know God more intimately as she struggled to let go of the illusion of control that she had harbored for so long and learned to cast herself into God's arms each day, no matter what the day held.

Now let me be clear: **God didn't flip Sara's car.** Not for one minute do I believe God caused Sara's accident to teach her these wonderful things. But when the accident happened, Sara sought God in her pain and struggle. And her seeking—and finding—was much more meaningful and lasting than any three-point Lenten plan she had worked out on Ash Wednesday.

Sara's story may be more dramatic than yours or mine, but I have come to believe the Lent we get is often harder than the Lent we choose. And if, like Sara, we can embrace the Lent we get, we may find the spiritual rewards greater than when we manage to hold on to our illusion of control.

Consider how we go about making our Lenten resolutions. Even when we take Lent seriously, we tend to choose things that are challenging yet manageable. We make our resolutions with one eye on the finish line and come up with things we believe we can accomplish, albeit with a bit of struggle. Like a good do-it-yourself project, we select give-ups and take-ups that will be achievable and meaningful and spiritually helpful—or at least useful for taking off those stubborn ten pounds.

No wonder the Lent we get is often harder than the Lent we choose! We choose something manageable, but life has a habit of throwing things our way that feel quite **unmanageable**. The list of life's U-turns is all too familiar: our own accidents and illnesses, the suffering and death of loved ones, fights and breakups, failures and frustrations, crises and aggravations of all sorts. Of course these can strike at any time of year, but Lent gives these circumstances a special poignancy—and a special power to draw us closer to God.

+ During the Ash Wednesday service each year, the prophet Joel announces, "Even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart" (2:12). I love Sara's use of the phrase **even now**, signaling the extreme situation his hearers found themselves in. If I were to put words in Joel's mouth for the people of his day, I

might say, "Even now, says the LORD—when locusts have ravaged the land and your crops have failed and people are dying in the streets." But to Sara I might say, "Even now—when you've been in pain for so long and you can't do anything you want and you're afraid you're never going to feel well again." To someone who's gotten a pink slip on Ash Wednesday I might say, "Even now—when you have to go home and tell your family you've lost your job and you don't know how you're going to pay the bills." Even now represents any circumstance that makes us feel

distanced from God and from our own spiritual journey. On a lighter note, thinking of the service trip I took with a group of college students in the first week of Lent last year, I might say to my own introverted self, "Even now—when you're sleeping on a deflated air mattress in a cold classroom hundreds of miles from home, and you don't know where your next moment of solitude or decent cup of coffee is coming from." (It doesn't take much to get us off track; put my morning coffee in jeopardy, and I will think of nothing else until I have mg in hand!) But even now means that the trials of life, large or small, that afflict us during Lent are not obstacles but **actual pathways** to God—if only we can learn to live the Lent we get.

If the goal of Lent is to draw us closer to God—to return to God with all our heart—then the real invitation of the season is to allow life to become its own Lenten discipline...to learn to seek God not only in the things we choose, but especially in the things we do not choose. Lent is not an endurance test to be won or lost; it is preparation for the joy of Easter and for the other forty-six weeks of the year. Lent is meant to open us to God, to soften us where we are rigid and strengthen us where we are weak, to leave us better than it found us. Perfectly executed Lenten resolutions don't effect this marvelous change; we need the grace of God working in our own struggling, protesting, cooperating souls.

Lent is meant to open us to God, to leave us better than it found us.

In *The Principle and Foundation of his Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius Loyola wrote, "Everything has the potential of calling forth in us a deeper response to our life in God." **Everything:** the locusts, the accident, the pink slip, the deflated air mattress, the deflated spirit, the tragic loss, the lost wallet, the broken dream, the broken arm. Everything and anything can be the conduit to a deeper relationship with God if only we open ourselves to that possibility. It is by leaning into life—our **specific** life with all its wonder and tragedy—that we encounter Life itself. Everything has the potential of calling forth in us a deeper response to our life in God no matter what our **even now**

looks like. Our challenge is to enter Lent with eyes wide open and to let whatever comes our way—whatever Lent we get—call forth that deeper response.

+ For most of us, this Lent will be marked by the simple, irritating, and frustrating challenges and annoyances of everyday life. In such a Lent, we can have opposite temptations: either to push

these aggravations aside in a determined effort to stay focused on our "real" Lenten goals or to be so harassed and distracted by them that we drift away from our resolutions like droppings from the school of spiritual life. But what if we regarded the ordinary difficulties of each day not as distractions but as invitations? Could we see what each moment is asking of us? How might God be speaking to us through the colicky baby, the lost keys, the strained tendon? What can we learn, how might we grow, even now, through the things that catch us by surprise?

Let me return, for a moment, to that service trip I took with students near the beginning of Lent last year. I'm not particularly proud of my big resolution, but it's true: I was determined to give up high-fructose corn syrup. It was something I'd wanted to do for a long time, and so I "used" Lent to add some spiritual discipline to my weight-loss goal. (Remember, I said I wasn't proud of this!) But on the first Saturday of Lent, when I headed to the supermarket with twelve students to buy our groceries for the week, I quickly realized the impossibility of keeping that particular resolution. We were a large family on a small budget, and like poor people everywhere, we were not in a position to be picky about our food. I could not, in good conscience, stand there lobbying for the small bottle of organic ketchup over the big one that cost a third of the price. The same was true for bread, salad dressing, cookies—the king-sized store brand won every time.

Under those circumstances, I realized the only real choice I had was my attitude. I could become the annoying broken record on the trip, obsessively reading nutritional labels and complaining about the content of our food until the students started avoiding me. I could also seize the excuse to abandon my resolution with glee,

scarfing down Pop-Tarts and tortilla chips like the high-metabolism teenagers I was travelling with. Or I could seek God in the experience—which is the road I chose, however imperfectly.

I tried to focus on the people we were serving, people who were suffering from both poverty and chronic illness. I thought about the luxury of choice—how guests at a soup kitchen are expected to eat what's handed them and appear grateful, no matter how it tastes, and how elderly women raising grandchildren on food stamps can't afford to consider much more than how to stretch a dollar when planning meals for their family. I thought about how privileged I was at home to have easy access to fresh local produce and a little back yard in which to grow my own—and how people landlocked by urban poverty often lack both. The very inability to keep my Lenten resolution that week gave me the opportunity to pry open my heart a bit in solidarity with God's other children.

Lean into life this Lent

- +** Choose your sacrifices, but draw close to God in the sacrifices life chooses for you.
- +** Select your charities, but be on the lookout for God's invitation to be generous with your time, attention, or money in unexpected places.
- +** Pray not only as you plan but as a whole-hearted response to those things you have not planned, and be alert to the possibility that the clamor drawing you away from your prayer may actually be your God, present in the most unlikely voices.

I will remember the insights I gained much longer than I will remember the fifteen pounds I lost over the next five weeks (or the five I've found since then). It sounds as though I'm advising against Lenten resolutions, and that is not true—at least, not quite true. It's good to have a goal—and easy to drift in the absence of one. But I believe that the more seriously we take Lent, the more likely our plans are to be overturned by the unexpected.

+ Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart. The Lent we get may indeed be harder than the Lent we choose, but as long as we choose for God, even now, our journey through Lent will bring us to the joy of Easter, in God's own time. May that be the choice we make, this Lent and all our days. ■

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