

Did Lent Fail? For the Extraordinary Among Us, It Seems So

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I surely hope Eastertide works out better than Lent this year.

As far as I can tell, Lent failed utterly.

Well, yes, that's spreading the evaluation too broadly, isn't it? I'm sure lots of ordinary folks used the 40 days of penance to do penance. After all, ordinary folks have a pretty good idea that they need to do this in order to get things right with God and each other.

But especially this year, one would have thought that some extraordinary people who violated sacred and secular trusts over the past number of years would have gotten into Lent big time. I mean those who raked in huge amounts of money on financial devices that, in the end, caused a worldwide economic collapse. I mean those who blatantly violated people's constitutional and human rights with clandestine operations and torture. I mean those who used their political positions and associations for personal gain.

As far as I can tell, however, they took a pass on the opportunity Lent presented.

As far as I can tell, no one who thrived underhandedly on Wall Street said something like, "I really sinned against God and my fellow human beings with my out-of-control greed. I contritely ask: please forgive me."

As far as I can tell, no one formerly living in the White House or at Number One Observatory Circle said something like, "I genuinely marred the image of God and scarred the image of a democratic society by approving the brutal torturing of people and by distorting the clear meaning of the Constitution and Bill of Rights. I humble myself before you and seek your forgiveness."

As far as I can tell, no former governor of Illinois said something like, "I thoroughly screwed up by engaging in pay-to-play politics in my state. I am truly sorry and plead for both divine and human forgiveness."

Not a peep of such Lenten language from these extraordinary people.

In fact, as far as I can tell, the extraordinary folks on Wall Street are asking for more of the people's money to get back on track in their money-making ways rather than reforming themselves and their modes of doing business. The extraordinary folks from the former administration are smugly defending their actions and accusing the new president and vice president for their naivete in foreign policy and for endangering the

American people by rejecting torture. Our extraordinary former governors of Illinois keep proclaiming their innocence.

Again, I hope Eastertide is more effective than Lent this year.

But as far as I can tell, from reading the Gospel of John, if Eastertide will accomplish more than Lent this time around, it will be because a different set of people – ordinary, not extraordinary people – will exercise their resurrection power.

Just read what it says in John's resurrection narrative in Chapter 20. Mary Magdalene and then the disciples witness the empty tomb and think the dead body of Jesus has been taken away to some unknown place. When the disciples go back home but Mary stays at the tomb, Jesus appears to her and tells her to announce the news of his resurrection to the disciples. Finally, Jesus appears to the disciples as they gathered behind locked doors, greeting them with the word of peace and proceeding to show them his crucifixion wounds.

He tells them, "Peace be with you. As God has sent me, so I send you." He then breathed on them. "Receive the Holy Spirit (or "Holy Power"). If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Jesus is telling these ordinary people that they now have the power themselves to bring about change that forgiving and not forgiving can bring about.

We can legitimately ask what the "change" is that forgiving and not forgiving accomplishes. But the Gospel writer isn't slippery about this at all: the power to forgive and not forgive clearly is for the purpose of bringing new life to the world – new life for individuals and new life for communities.

And, according to the biblical testimony in the Gospel of John, the defining characteristic, the absolute imperative, of that new life for individuals and communities is one thing. It's love. It's mutual love. It's the love that goes beyond concern only for the self as expressed in greed. It goes beyond the control and violation of others and the manipulation of economic, social and political systems for self-gain. It's a love made real by care extended for others and received by others.

That's what the power – the resurrection power – to forgive and not forgive is working to achieve.

The question, of course, is whether the ordinary people who receive this resurrection power during the current period of Eastertide – when the reforms of economic, social and political orders are being hotly debated – will exercise their resurrection power effectively or if they will waste it like those extraordinary people blew their opportunity during Lent.

Will ordinary citizens feel the breath of a holy power upon them and become agents of new life for loved individuals and beloved communities?