

# HOW TO LOVE LENT WHEN LENT TERRIFIES YOU

It boggled my mind when I came across someone who actually loved Lent -- now I think understand.

By Anna O'Neil



“I love Lent,” a good friend once told me. “It’s my favorite liturgical season.” I think I must have looked at him like he had two heads. Who on earth actually loves Lent? For me, for as long as I can remember, Lent has been a season of heightened guilt and anxiety, with undertones of panic.

I struggle with scrupulosity. For me, this means that I have a strong propensity to fear — fear that I’m not doing God’s will, fear that I’m not going to be saved, fear that whatever I do, I’m doing it wrong, and fear that even my intentions are wrong, wrong, wrong. So unfortunately Lent, a time of repentance and penance, really tends to exacerbate these patterns.

I make extreme resolutions, which I fail to keep. When I do manage to stick with some easier commitment, I spend all my time worrying about whether the sacrifice was made with the right spirit. And could I be doing better? And aren’t my sins such that I ought to be practicing severe asceticism?

Well they are, but I know just as well as you do that those thought patterns aren’t leading me toward God. You can see, though, why it boggled my mind when I came across a person who professed to actually loving Lent. I was curious, and as I mulled it over, I realized it was because his approach to Lent was completely opposite to mine.

To me, Lent has been all about my own evil, my own deficiencies, my own total inability to live up to my own spiritual standards. To him, Lent was about God’s compassion, God’s irrepressible fatherhood, in a word, mercy.

I ran across kind of a silly comic the other day, which made a point that stuck with me. Don't say, "Sorry I'm always late," it said. Instead, say, "Thanks for your patience." Don't say, "Sorry I'm such a disappointment," say, "Thank you for having hope in me." There's nothing wrong with acknowledging your failures, and repentance is unquestionably necessary. But this approach chooses to change the focus on the goodness of the other person, rather than the badness of the self, while at the same time, not excusing the wrong done.

It's my key to being able to love Lent. I do have to see my sins, and I do have to repent of them. That's non-negotiable. It's just that I don't have to focus on those sins. If I turn my gaze away from my own rotten, disappointing self (as I so often seem to myself) and focus on God's compassion, his forgiveness, and the abyss of his mercy, I will be living Lent to the fullest.

Lent is not about our sinfulness. If it were, we might as well all just despair. It's about God's merciful response to our sinfulness, when we repent. We repent because we have been told to hope in God's mercy. And the thing about mercy is that you can't use the word outside of the context of sin. Mercy is God's response to sin. So focusing on God's mercy will actually lead us to more perfect repentance, but without that too-heavy burden of fear. We have nothing to fear from our merciful Father. I'm grateful for the season of Lent, and for the opportunity to bring God's mercy to the forefront of my mind.

## **HOW A LUMP IN MY BREAST GAVE ME A VERY MEMENTO MORI LENT**

By Haley Stewart @carrotsformichaelmas.com



While the kids were putting their shoes on for Ash Wednesday Mass, my husband and I had a moment alone in the kitchen. I took a deep breath and said the words I'd been dreading to say out loud:

*"I found a lump in my breast."*

I had known for a few days. How many days, I'm not sure. Something powerful inside me wanted to believe "*this isn't happening, this isn't real. Everything's fine. Just ignore this.*" I didn't want it to be true. I could barely say it out loud.

"*Can you feel that?*"

I showed him where the lump was.

"*Yes. I can feel it, too.*"

I tried to keep the tears from coming. I had been hoping that he would say. "*No, it's all in your head. Nothing's there.*" But that's not what he said. *He could feel it, too.* I tried not to cry.

He pulled me in for a hug and then the kids ran back into the room and we loaded them up for Mass.

Mass was packed. Nowhere to park. Standing room only. We found a spot in an aisle. It surprises me every year that Ash Wednesday is so popular. It's not a Holy Day of Obligation. You don't *have* to go to Mass. But everybody does. All the Easter and Christmas Catholic show up, too. We want to be there.

We need the tangible reminder of the ashes on our foreheads and words, "*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*" Culturally we ignore death to such a degree that we're hungry for the reminder that we are mortal. That someday, we will die—*memento mori*, "Remember that you have to die."

For me, this year's experience of ashes traced in a cross on my head was poignant and even comforting. I was processing the idea that I might have breast cancer like my mom did. And I was terrified. Because I mostly live in a dream world in which suffering and death cannot touch me. But it's a fantasy. We are all dust and to dust we shall return.

So we all show up on Ash Wednesday. We long for Lent because in death we find new life. We acknowledge this *memento mori* and what it means is we must *convert*. We must turn toward life—real life. This conversion—we need it every Lent. When we push through life without a thought of our inevitable death, are we living well? Are we living at all?

It took weeks to be referred for diagnostic tests and receive the results. Weeks of waiting, anxiety, and no sleep. And during those weeks life looked different than before. I couldn't fool myself into thinking I had an infinite number of days with my family. I didn't have the false sense of control anymore.

*What if I have cancer? Is Gwen my last baby? And what if I only had one more year with my kids? What would I want them to know if I have to leave them? What does it feel like to die?*

I had fears and questions, but I also felt like I was awaking to life. The feel of my toddler's head on my shoulder when she falls asleep. My son's dark eyelashes and tender smile. My oldest daughter's hand in mine. *This. I want more of this. This is what's truly precious.*

What didn't cross my mind? *I really wish I'd spent more time on social media and trying to lose that extra five pounds that showed up after weaning my youngest.* Nope. All the shallow things didn't matter anymore.

I started looking my kids in the eye more often when they told their rambling stories. Giving more hugs and telling them how proud I was of them each day. Trying to be patient when my temper was rising. Pulling them in for more hugs. Reading that extra chapter at bedtime. Every second became more precious.

I didn't want to have a lump in my breast and didn't want to think about the fact that it was there, so I didn't really share with friends and family save Daniel and of course, I didn't want to worry my kids. So I tried to keep things business as usual, which is incredibly difficult for someone who wears her heart on her sleeve. The blog got quiet as I focused all my energy in keeping life moving for my family.

I waited for my diagnostic tests in the clean, spa-like waiting room in a bathrobe to find out if I needed a biopsy. I got a mammogram and then an ultrasound. I've had many ultrasounds during my three pregnancies and it's always been a joyful, wondrous experience. Seeing the life growing inside me. But this time I watched the screen just wondering whether I had cancer growing inside me.

The tech left to discuss the results with the radiologist and then breezed in to say that I didn't have anything to worry about. It was likely just a harmless cyst and I should come back in six months to confirm there's no change. I put my clothes back on and turned in my soft, white bathrobe. Then made it to my van before crying tears of relief. I texted Daniel the good news and told him I wanted to get a new tattoo and have another baby because YOLO.

It's been a very lenty Lent. I've thought about death a lot. And although it doesn't seem like I'm leaving this world anytime soon, someday I am going to die. Someday you are going to die. We will become dust and the world will keep spinning. But death is always the beginning of life. Like a baptism. Like the Cross.

I recently heard someone say, "*Death is the performance for which all of life is the rehearsal.*" I want nothing more than the grace of a happy death. Not a death without suffering, mind you, but a good death. I want to live my life well so that death is not a terror, but a door to walk through with Jesus and Mary at my side.

Living with *memento mori* written on our hearts isn't a morbid thought. The knowledge that our earthly life has an expiration date makes it all the more precious. It directs our temporal lives to be lived for what is eternal like the souls of men and the love of God. It makes the joy of being with those we love more piercing. Like Joy Davidman's character in *Shadowlands* says, "*The pain then is part of the happiness now.*"

Staring our mortality in the face changes the way we live. This whole ordeal has gifted me with something I didn't embrace before: my future death. *Remember that you have to die.* Live each day well in that knowledge. And I just might get *memento mori* tattooed on my arm so that I can never forget it again.



## CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, look upon me and hear my prayer during this holy Season of Lent. By the good works You inspire, help me to discipline my body and to be renewed in spirit.

Without You I can do nothing. By Your Spirit help me to know what is right and to be eager in doing Your will. Teach me to find new life through penance. Keep me from sin, and help me live by Your commandment of love. God of love, bring me back to You. Send Your Spirit to make me strong in faith and active in good works. May my acts of penance bring me Your forgiveness, open my heart to Your love, and prepare me for the coming feast of the Resurrection of Jesus.

Lord, during this Lenten Season, nourish me with Your Word of life and make me one with You in love and prayer. Fill my heart with Your love and keep me faithful to the Gospel of Christ. Give me the grace to rise above my human weakness. Give me new life by Your Sacraments, especially the Mass.

Father, our source of life, I reach out with joy to grasp Your hand; let me walk more readily in Your ways. Guide me in Your gentle mercy, for left to myself I cannot do Your Will.

Father of love, source of all blessings, help me to pass from my old life of sin to the new life of grace. Prepare me for the glory of Your Kingdom. I ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever.

Amen.