

## The Joy of Lent 2

If you came here expecting a sermon about self-loathing and how best to be miserable this Lent, you came to the wrong place. As I said in my sermon on Ash Wednesday, treating Lent as a time to feel miserable, deprived and rotten misses the point of Lent. First, let's look at the word Lent for a clue. "Lent is derived from the Anglo-Saxon words *lencten*, meaning "Spring," and *lenctentid*, which literally means not only "Springtide" but also was the word for "March," the month in which the majority of Lent falls."<sup>1</sup> Second, Latin the name for this season is *ver sacrum* or Holy Spring. No one considers spring to be a season of misery, except maybe allergy sufferers. Lent is a time of new beginnings. It is a time when the earth wakes up after its long winter rest. We are already seeing the daffodils poking up through the earth and in particularly sunny corners I have seen a few in bloom. Yes, we still have cold temperatures and a bit of snow, but we can feel it in our bones that warmer weather, blossoms, and spring are just around the corner.

The season of Lent like the season of Spring is a time for healing. Our spiritual disciplines of study and prayer heal our rifts with God. We get closer to the Divine as we refresh our practices throughout Lent. It is a season for those who have been estranged from the Church to do penance and be readmitted to the community of the faithful. It is also a season of preparation for catechumens to prepare for baptism.

The season of Lent like the season of Spring is a season of joy. We rejoice in the natural world coming back to life as trees and flowers bud and bloom. We rejoice in Lent because as it is said in the Ash Wednesday liturgy "that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life." We use Lent to strengthen our connection with the divine in gratitude for all that has been given to us by God through the life, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Enough of your church history and theology lesson for one day. Now onto your lesson in critical interpretation of the Bible. First, I must confess that I am in love with the study of the Bible. That may seem to be an obvious confession for a priest, but it is the nuanced study of the Bible that so engages me. This type of study is called exegesis. I was warned by friends that exegesis would be the bane of my study in seminary. Yet, from my first encounter with exegesis I found I was captivated. The study of the ancient languages, the social and cultural settings, the genres, the historical settings, and so much more are fascinating. It is like parts of a puzzle or a detective story that have to be assembled in order to clearly read and understand the passage. Some poo-poo this as getting into the weeds. Others think that exegesis misses the point of the scriptures which they believe is to teach us how to live today. Yet for me it is like turning on the light in a dark room. Suddenly I can see clearly and I have the opportunity to understand more deeply.

This brings me to one of my favorite scripture passages in the Bible—Noah and the Flood. The portion we heard today is particularly dear to me. For years I had struggled with this passage and with the use of one word in it. That word is "bow." I could not figure out why in the world the translators of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) had used "bow" instead of "rainbow." After all, what God placed in the sky was a rainbow. Other translations like the New International Version (NIV) used rainbow. Why was the point of "bow" when rainbow is what was meant?

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Education Resource Center <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/history-of-lent.html>. Accessed February 16, 2024

Flash forward to my exegetical study of this passage in seminary. There I expressed my frustration with this translation to my Old Testament professor. While I had not studied ancient Hebrew at the time, he suggested methods and resources that I might use to sort this out. So, I headed off to the library to see what I could learn. Without getting into the particulars what I was able to determine was that the translation should be “bow.” The word used in the Noah passage is the same word that Hebrew uses for a bow as in bow and arrow. Suddenly the light went on and I realized what the ancient writer was telling us.

He used the word for the weapon to get across what God was doing. The writer wanted us to make the connection between the rainbow in the sky and a warrior’s bow. God had used the flood as a weapon as a warrior uses a bow and arrow. The writer wanted us to see the connection between the two bows. Additionally, the writer wanted us to make the connection of what a warrior does when he retires from doing battle. That is, the warrior hangs up his weapon not to be used again. Like you might see the musket over the mantle. It is a reminder of what the warrior used to do but does no more. A rifle or bow over the mantle is not a weapon ready for use, it is for display only. By putting the bow in the sky, God was reminding himself and us that he would not use flood as a weapon again no matter how perfidious humanity became. Additionally, a professor pointed out that bows of that time were made with layers of bone and wood. Thus, they would have layers of color as a rainbow does.

All of this made me realize that using the word rainbow in this passage would obscure the levels of meaning that the writer had intended us to get. Rainbow made the passage seem pretty like a greeting card. While bow as a weapon fit more closely with the horror of the passage where nearly all of the people and animals on earth (except the fish) are wiped out because of God’s anger at their sinful ways. It is not a pretty story and should not be prettied up with rainbows.

One aspect of the season of Lent as we learned on Ash Wednesday is that we are to study scripture. Study like can open up new vistas. We can find great joy in getting closer to what the authors of the scriptures intended to convey. By doing so we are also able to better discern what the scriptures mean for us in our lives this day. You do not have to go through what I did to get closer to scripture. But reading scripture with a good study Bible can help us get past the superficial reading and into a reading that is deeper and more illuminating.

If we are to move ourselves out of a season of misery and into a season of enrichment and joy deep study of scripture is one way to do so. It is one way that we can get closer to God, closer to the ancient texts, and closer to the people who were the first witnesses of God’s infinite love for us as expressed in the Bible.

I commend daily reading of scripture to you this Lent as a way to revive the dormant earth in your soul. As a way to loosen the crust of earth and allow the flowers to start poking through. As a way to give sunlight and warmth to the branches of the tree that it may bring forth buds of new life and hope in you for this season and for all the seasons of your life.