

Lent means spring

By [Diane Roth](#)

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Contrary to what you might have been told, Lent does not mean “40 days of beating yourself up.” It does not even mean “40 days of God beating you up and reminding you of what kind of a person you really are.”

Lent means spring.

Lent is short for “lengthen.” Someone, somewhere noticed that (at least in this hemisphere) the season of Lent was accompanied by the lengthening of the days.

It was a long, hard, cold, snowy winter here this year. Then one day I saw grass for the first time in a long time. It was at a committal service for a saint of the church, a woman who was known for (among other things) her unconditional love and acceptance of everyone she knew. She was also beautiful. Her youngest daughter was one of the speakers at the funeral, and she said that when she was a teenager, she was at church one Sunday, helping with worship. She looked over to the choir, where her mother was singing, and she thought, “My mom is beautiful.” (If you think that when you are a teenager, she said, you know it’s true.)

When we were at the cemetery, which was snowy and muddy, I saw some actual grass. Some of the great-grandchildren were getting their funeral clothes muddy and throwing snowballs at one another. There was one mother who was watching her three-year-old daughter closely. The girl was wandering in the grass and snow and mud, and was wearing a spring coat and an absolutely beautiful white knitted dress.

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Lent means that the days are getting longer, and the ground is getting softer, even if some of that ground is still hidden under snow. Lent means that something is changing, and our priorities will change too, sometimes whether we like it or not. Soon the tyranny of weather will begin for farmers: they will need to be ready to plant on the days when they can plant and willing to wait on the days when the weather does not cooperate.

Many of us think of Lent as a season of self-examination and self-denial. I didn't grow up with the idea of "giving things up" for Lent, but I have learned to appropriate the dreariness as an adult. In church, instead of singing "Alleluia," we sang, "Christ hath humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross." That has to have an effect.

Then again, there is the work of a pastor during Lent. Holy Week is immovable, even if, as it turns out, you have three funerals that same week. Somehow, when you have three funerals during Holy Week (for example) what Absolutely Has To Get Done, and what is simply Elective becomes crystal clear. Priorities change. So, you give things up in order to grieve and rejoice and speak a word of hope to people. You realize, again, that relationships are important, and that, all appearances to the contrary, there is an awful lot of life you have no control over.

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It means lengthening days, opening the windows, letting in life and death, the things we can't control. It means going to the cemetery and standing in the mud and snow and grass, where the pain and the hope are all mixed up together.

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