

An involuntary fast

Here in Minnesota, Lent is an almost unbearably slow wait.

by [Debbie Blue](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue



[Some rights reserved](#) by [Vicki's Nature](#)

Easter is celebrated on the Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. I like the sound of “after the first full moon.” I like how it ties the liturgical calendar to the rhythms of the planet, the migration of birds, the mating of frogs, the amount of light in our days. I realize that the Council of Nicaea established this method of dating in an effort to make Easter distinct from Passover. “We ought not,” said Constantine, “to have anything in common with the Jews.” What was he thinking? As if by some anti-Semitic decree Christians might have nothing in common with the very ground that birthed them.

Thank God we are transformed in spite of ourselves. This is a crucial element of the Lent-Easter cycle: whether or not we orchestrate our transformation properly, death will be defeated. But we would do well to pay attention. Christian or not, we humans are united in the deprivation of winter and the longing for spring. It cannot hurt the Christian cause to consider how deeply our faith connects us to the cycles of creation. “From dust you came and to dust you shall return.” These words of Ash Wednesday remind us not just of our mortality but also of our lives as earthly creatures. According to Genesis, we are made of dirt and of God’s breath blown into our fleshy lungs, not holy sparkles and some disembodied spirit.

Lent is intimately connected to the coming of spring. The word *means* “spring” in Middle English, from the same origin as “lengthen”: a lengthening of days. The Latin prefix “lent-” simply means “slow,” and this is how we experience Lent in Minnesota. Spring comes so damn slowly here. We are so deprived in winter—of color, light, sound, smell, vitamin D. We hardly have to make a decision to fast; we’ve been thrust into a sensory deprivation chamber. Lent is an almost unbearably slow wait.

Easter is coming, and boy, do we need it. Seriously, I don’t know any people here—Christian or otherwise—who are not waiting with all their body and mind, their joints and their serotonin-depleted brains, for the resurrection. We may not all be striving to practice church discipline, but we are observing Lent in the depth of our beings.

In the church, we tend to emphasize that these seasons are holy. This is good and true, I think, as long as we open the doors when we consider what *holy* means. It is not confined to our sanctuaries and liturgies. God’s work in the world is everywhere apparent—if we are paying attention. Faith is less about striving than about being awake. I am convinced that it would be good for the life of our faith if we would go outside and be attentive to how Easter comes outside the walls humans have made.

Twenty-eight years ago, I made some friends at the Oregon Extension, an alternative college semester in the mountains of southern Oregon. We read a lot of books and lived in community. We chopped wood, learned to procure our own heat and deal with our compost. We thought this was a good way to live, so we determined to buy land together and continue the experiment in community.

We looked for land in southeast Minnesota, where there are hills. We looked farther north, where there is still a little wild left. We ended up at one of the only decent properties we could afford: an old farm on 80 acres of mixed flood plain, hay fields, and woods an hour north of Minneapolis–Saint Paul. We built straw bale houses, bought a tractor and chickens, and started saving seeds.

The beauty of the Oregon community that inspired us was striking and diverse—an hour from the coast, a half hour to virgin forest, a brief hike to a stunning view of Mount Shasta. Our farm is subtler. You have to look a little harder for the beauty, or in a different way. There is a lot of waiting involved—waiting for the ground to thaw, for the birds to come back, for the river to freeze or flood. You have to be patient, and the beauty may escape you entirely if you are having a bad day. But it is good

practice.

Before trucks hauled vegetables up from Mexico, before Walmart and 24-hour minimarts and the grocery store just 15 minutes away, Lent would have been especially difficult here. Everything around us is so blatantly *dead*. The root cellars are nearly empty. The salsa and pickles we canned are almost gone. It's a place where the Lenten fast doesn't seem as theoretical or self-imposed. If Easter doesn't come, if Christ doesn't rise from the dead, it almost seems like we could actually starve to death. Cyndy, the best gardener among us, recently gave me the last of her summer carrots. She'd been storing them in their dirt and a plastic bag in the bottom of her fridge. I kept putting the carrots up to my nose to smell the dirt. It will be months before we can grow anything again.

Some of the chickens froze to death. One of Brett's goats got into the grain, stuffed itself with feed (not up for the fast I guess), and died of enterotoxemia. Most days when I look out my home office window I see nothing that looks alive—it is all endless drifts of snow, like waves on a frozen lake. Leaving the house, I encounter almost no smell or sound. The stillness is stunning in December and January, but by the middle of March it seems barren and mean. When I step out onto the porch and smell the smoke from Cyndy and Dana's woodstove, I am overjoyed by the olfactory satisfaction. This is what fasting can do for you.

If Easter doesn't come, I'm sure we will eventually freeze to death. The Minnesota winter provides us with Extreme Lenten Practice. I am thinking we should invite people from Florida up here to intensify their Lenten experience.

But some nights, when it's warm enough to take a walk in the glistening snow, death doesn't seem so fearsome. It has its own undeniable beauty. If we could look it in the face and fear it not, it would change our lives. Buddhist monks spend weeks in burial grounds in order to sit with death and contemplate it. This sort of sitting with death is one of the blessings of the Lenten season.

At times I think we should move to a climate more conducive to human life. But there is something about these seasons that insists on our practice. We have no choice; we will contemplate death because everything around us is dead. I am grateful for this enforced observance, though I certainly complain. Sometimes I have to work at the gratitude. Sometimes it just hits me, like the smoke from the neighbors' chimney.

The 40 days of Lent come, of course, from various 40s in the Bible. Most have something to do with nature's elements, such as Noah's 40 days and 40 nights out in the floodwater. Just a couple of pages after calling the whole creation good, God sees things a little differently: "the Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually." The earth was filled with violence. So soon.

This is not entirely surprising, considering what we know of humankind after all these years. It does seem a touch dramatic, this sweeping condemnation. But God decides on a path forward, and it's interesting, to say the least: the redemption God devises for the seeming catastrophe the humans have made for creation is to have Noah build an ark and bring with him into it "every living thing, of all flesh . . . two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive."

Where I live, we have enough trouble keeping chickens, goats, horses, bunnies, dogs, and cats alive. I can only imagine Noah's journey and what he learned on it. According to midrashic scholar Avivah Zornberg, Noah becomes a new man on the ark—a good man—because he learns to keep the animals alive. God devises to reconceive the human not by spiriting him away to some high holy place but by putting him in an ark with every kind of animal and creeping thing, where Noah will have to deal with their appetites and their fur and shit and feathers. Being with the beasts for 40 days transforms Noah. I love this story.

According to Mark, when Jesus is driven by the spirit out into the wilderness, he spends his 40 days with wild beasts, too. We might think of the wilderness and the wild beasts as threatening, like Satan—part of what Jesus must overcome. I wonder if they are instead an essential part of Jesus' resistance to temptation, the formational experience itself. Adam and Eve wanted to be like God—but maybe they didn't really know what God was like. The new righteous person, the one who emerges from the ark, will be more grounded. Perhaps this is godlike after all.

We humans have often staked our lives, and the life of the planet, on the assumption that we alone are the crowning glory of creation. This anthropocentric notion has had an enormous influence in the history of civilization, one that could hardly be called benign. We have not always been very respectful of the creation that sustains us, though our need for it can hardly be overstated. We need gravity, sun, and water. We need worms to aerate the soil and bacteria to make our digestive systems work properly. Human self-sufficiency is a lie.

Our narcissistic grandiosity has hurt the material world. It's also hurt our personal psyches. We're afraid to know who we are: a species among species, mammals who are born and die and defecate. I think we would do well to spend what's left of our 40 days being attentive to the beasts. Lent doesn't need to be all about introspection. We need to look outside.

"Ask the beasts," says Job, "and they will teach you." Jesus says, "Consider the birds." Perhaps animals are purveyors of some sort of wisdom not readily accessed by humans. Maybe observing them could unlock some window we normally keep shuttered. Surely there is something we can learn from the birds and the beasts—something about our humanity and inhumanity, about what it is to be a living creature.

The farm is not the ark, but we are outnumbered by the animals. Eight adults live here and five children (now that two have left for college). The domesticated animals alone could take us (six dogs, four cats, two horses, two goats, and I can't keep track of how many chickens). The farm is not the wilderness, but its edges press closer than they might in the city. Our roads are not paved. The wind howls. In a snow emergency, we don't worry about which side of the street to park on; we have to figure out how we'll dig ourselves out. The driveway is half a mile long. There are no streetlights or taxis.

In these unfortunate times, when there is little true wilderness left, the farm will suffice. But the resurrection is resounding here. Easter changes everything. The time of sensory deprivation will be over, and even the smell of manure will fill us with gratitude (at first).

The spring frogs are no less than miraculous. When their singing breaks the silence of winter, we inevitably greet each other with the words, "Have you heard the frogs?" This is not the same as proclaiming, "Christ is risen!" Still, the silence is broken, and the smells are back. Hallelujah. Let Target have its bunnies and chicks: on the farm we are all about the frogs.

I am not being hyperbolic. Each frog species has a different song, from a birdlike trill to a metallic buzz. The spring peeper's peep is short, loud, and high-pitched, while the mink frog sounds like a hammer striking wood. (Singing in groups, the two species sound like sleigh bells and horses' hooves on cobblestone, respectively.) The green frog, on the other hand, sounds like the pluck of a loose banjo string. The

northern leopard frog produces a long, deep snore followed by chuckling. The western boreal chorus frog sounds like a fingernail dragged across a comb. Consider the beasts!

Their music isn't just for our pleasure. It is about mating. Bunnies may be prolific, but some frogs are called "explosive breeders." Female frogs can lay up to 20,000 eggs at a time. The frog is all about transformation and fertility. It can go from an egg to a tadpole to a full-fledged amphibian in as little as six weeks. Some have compared the three forms of the frog to the Holy Trinity.

The ancient Egyptians revered a frog goddess, Heqet. When the Nile flooded in spring, it brought fertility to a barren land. It also brought millions of frogs. Thus they became symbols of birth and resurrection. Women often wore frog amulets during childbirth. Early Christians even used these amulets, inscribed with the words, "I am the resurrection."

Frogs make excellent Easter symbols. Yet they haven't enjoyed a great deal of respect in the Christian tradition generally. Maybe it's because of the plague in Exodus, or the "three foul spirits like frogs" in Revelation. In Christian art, frogs often represent devilish desires, the repulsive aspect of sin. They symbolize those who snatch at life's fleeting pleasure.

But isn't the fleeting nature of life part of what we contemplate during Lent? Not to disrespect the life of Easter, but to savor it more fully? Wood frogs bury themselves in dead leaves for the winter. They actually stop breathing during hibernation, and their hearts quit beating. Ice crystals form in their bodies. But they come alive again. How is this not miraculous?

Frog populations have been declining worldwide at unprecedented rates. Nearly a third of the world's amphibian species are threatened with extinction. In Minnesota, scientists are finding widespread deformities in frog populations. We have witnessed this firsthand on the farm: frogs with missing eyes, missing or extra limbs, partial or contorted limbs. Most don't survive the winter. The frog population's health reflects the health of the entire ecosystem, and we need to pay attention. The image of the ark should help us and haunt us here—God saying, "Take them, and keep them alive with you."

Easter will come, but not because we have behaved well. It is a gift. Our greater attention to death should lead us to a greater appreciation of life—and not just ours.

Maybe the 40 days will free us humans from our sense of superiority. (In the Seychelles, there is a male frog that carries its young on its back until they become adults. The male Darwin frog does the same, but *in its mouth*. The skin of one type of frog contains a painkiller 20 times more powerful than morphine. Frogs can see in all directions. We can hardly compete. I could go on and on.)

Out here on the farm, life is not all sunshine and flowers. We begin Lent by acknowledging that we are dust. By Easter it is all frogs and red-winged blackbirds—more a wild and beautiful cacophony than just plain pretty. There will also be mud, and our anticipation includes this, too. We long for spring, we can hardly wait one more minute, and we swear we will only be grateful—but then there is the mud. Our houses get dirty, our dogs unbearable.

Once we are through with the mud there will be ticks and then mosquitoes. But we aren't living here to punish ourselves. It is not about self-flagellation. It is about learning to love the rhythm. It's the beauty of change that pummels us here.

Jesus says, "Deny yourself." This is a cornerstone of Lent. I think going outside, looking at the light on the snow, and trying to distinguish frog calls is the sort of nonstriving effort that makes at least a little bit of selflessness possible. It's quite a bit different from giving up chocolate or beer. It isn't about sacrifice; it isn't as self-important as that. It is about being attentive to the gift of God's creation and redemption.