

Sin is like a suitcase abandoned at the baggage claim

Lent beckons us to claim those forgotten things we'd packed away.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue



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One night shortly before the pandemic began, I flew into my local airport and stood waiting for the baggage carousel to engage. The fact that it didn't budge for a good 15 minutes made for some irritated travelers. To kill time, I wandered around the arrival area and eventually stood in front of a glassed-in room full of unclaimed baggage. Here was the holding cell for lost suitcases cut off from all air, water, hope, and home.

An airport service worker in a neon vest asked if I needed help. "No, I'm just waiting for my bag over there, and I got curious as to what all these are doing over here."

"That's a good question," she said. "You have to wonder if some of these people even want their stuff back. I think some of these have been in here for years. They just sit unclaimed."

My mind started to stir. Was it possible that there were travelers who intentionally left their bags behind because they no longer wanted (or needed) the contents? Frayed underwear. A worn toothbrush. A dental floss roll with only two inches of string. A pair of tired shoes that never fit right in the first place. Some of the bags had no luggage ID tag. Did a conveyor belt tear those off, or did the owners do it themselves? Could it be that some of these bags in lockdown were purposely left behind by people who no longer wanted to be associated with their contents? Or inadvertently forgotten by people who already have too much stuff in their lives to keep track of?

It occurs to me that sin possesses certain features similar to the behavior these luggage owners may be exhibiting. On one hand, sin can be full of intention. We know exactly what we're doing when we capitulate to temptation and embrace the distortion as if it's acceptable. On the other hand, sin is so inescapably a part of being human. We end up not doing the good we genuinely intend, without any desire to disappoint God. In either case, intentional wrong or unintended hurt, sin is the mess we create from the inside out.

Maybe sin is that unbecoming stuff jammed into the suitcase we call life. The task of faith is to reckon with our interior instincts, transgressions, and choices that prevent us from being all God wants us to be. "Create in me a clean heart, O God," the psalmist pleads.

What if we used Lent to unzip the luggage we tote around so that God can have a good look at the contents? Allow guilt some fresh air and grievances the light of day. Permit shame, squeezed between the yellowed shirt and the old shoes, a chance to dry out in the sun. Pull out the pride packed in so awkwardly. God doesn't need to poke through our laundry like a TSA agent with a gauze swab on a stick. God already knows the complicated stuff that's in there.

I don't know of a better occasion than these 40 days for welcoming the One whose desire is to repack our suitcase with a new wardrobe—compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, all sized to fit. These new threads come with a luggage ID tag, by the way. It happens to look an awful lot like a cross.

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