

# Moving From, Moving In, Moving On:

## ***Reflections on Lent and Relocation***

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On Ash Wednesday morning, the moving van pulled up in front of our new home at Pilgrim Place in Claremont, California. After the community dinner on Easter Sunday, we returned home to hang the one remaining painting on our walls. That Lent was relocation time for two pilgrims named Linda and Dwight.

When did it start—this amazing adjustment for two confirmed mid-Westerners who grew up in Kansas, ministering in church and college and seminary in Iowa and Illinois? In retrospect, the way it started was a pilgrim sign. Linda and I had retired from the faculty at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in May of 2003. In seminar and banquet, music and prayer, Word and Table, we were blessed by friends and family, students and colleagues, and sent forth into retirement. We didn't know where retirement would take us. We were happy in Chicago with a host of wonderful friends and many opportunities for continued growth. Yet, we suspected we would be called somewhere else. We just didn't know where or when.

In the fall of 2003, during ordinary time, we planned to travel to Santa Barbara, California, for the Order of Saint Luke retreat. Nothing startling about that, it happens every year. Nor was it surprising that our good friend and colleague, Sister Barbara Troxell invited us to come a few days earlier and visit her in her new home at Pilgrim Place.

Pilgrim Place is an ecumenical intentional Christian retirement community for persons who have been in ministry for twenty years or more. Its residents have served in 59 different countries. There are former pastors and priests, teachers and missionaries, YM-YW workers and professors from a wide variety of denominations, bound together by their service to Christ and the Church and their continuing passion for peace and justice. As Barbara introduced us to person after person, group after group, we felt the tugging of the Spirit. On the second day, Linda looked at me and said: "we need to think about coming here." I agreed and that afternoon we met with the director of admissions.

One afternoon at the Santa Barbara retreat, we sat in a beautiful courtyard and weighed the pros and cons of such a momentous move. At first we didn't have language for what we were feeling. Then, simultaneously, we recognized it. The only language to make sense of it for us was the language of vocation: we were being called to go to Pilgrim Place. We recalled the words on the banner of Wheadon United Methodist Church in Evanston: "The sign of God is that we will be led where we did not intend to go."

So we filled out the forms, got our seven references apiece, wrote the requested essays, sent it all in and eventually heard that we'd been accepted. Another trip with Linda's

mother confirmed our decision. Whenever our names would be next on the waiting list and a house became available, we would move. We began preparations immediately.

On the day before we left for the 2004 OSL retreat (another sign, we realized later), we got the call. There would be a house available for us the first of February. We said we'd take it. A month later, like a pastor going to a new appointment, we went to see what we'd agreed would be our new home. A lot of work needed to be done, but it was clear it would be a great house for us. When the moving van arrived, we were ready.

We had agreed that no matter where we were in the moving-in process, we would go to the Ash Wednesday evening service at Claremont United Methodist Church. And when the pastor, Br. Robert Davis, came down the aisle, saw us and gave us a good OSL<sup>1</sup> bow, we knew we were home. I told him later: "I've discovered our move has been a lot like Lent."

Like our move, *Lent begins with a call*—God's call to us to be conformed to the death and resurrection of Christ that marks our baptism. Here we must recognize that this has *not* been the primary meaning of Lent for most Christians for a very long time. We continue to think of Lent as primarily a penitential season. In it we are called to walk the way of the cross. Self-examination and contrition seem to be primary. Let us be honest: for most of us most of the time, Lent has not been a time of preparation for baptism and baptismal renewal. It has been a preparation for Good Friday, not the Triduum as a whole. As a result, the fullness of the gospel found in baptism has been truncated. Only half of the death-and-resurrection theme has been appropriated.

But let us not over-compensate. The Lenten call *must* include repentance. The first question in the Service of the Baptismal Covenant is essential to our Lenten pilgrimage: "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?"<sup>2</sup>

Linda and I received a letter from a co-worker in our conference who had rewritten the baptismal service so as to be "more appropriate for the baptism of infants." One of the primary revisions had to do with removing all references to sin. We can understand where that came from: baptism has all too often been understood primarily as canceling the stain of original sin.

Our reply insisted that the baptismal covenant can't be understood if we don't recognize the reality of sin. Sin is real in the world, in the church, in the parents. And a child of sinning parents growing up in a community of sinners will sin just as surely as a child of English speaking parents growing up in a community of English-speaking people will grow up speaking English and not Chinese! Penitence and contrition have to be there if we are to respond to the Baptismal Covenant's call.

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<sup>1</sup> OSL = The Order of Saint Luke, of which both Pastor Davis and the author are members.

<sup>2</sup> "The Baptismal Covenant I" in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 34.

While keeping that dimension in place, we must recognize that the baptismal covenant is about more than repentance. The other half of what ought to be one word for us---“death-and-resurrection”---is the new life in Jesus Christ. For the third question in the Baptismal Covenant service is also important to our Lenten pilgrimage: “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations and races?”<sup>3</sup> Repentance is not an end in itself. It is for the sake of reconciliation. Grace has the last word. The old wisdom is true: the font is both tomb and womb. And both are for the sake of life—abundant life in Christ.

But grace is also the first word. We are called, invited, welcomed. “All this is God’s gift,” we say, “offered to us without price.”<sup>4</sup> And it is that call that starts us on our Lenten pilgrimage. So the Ash Wednesday invitation from *The United Methodist Book of Worship* speaks of the early Christians observing “with great devotion the days of our Lord’s passion *and resurrection*” and reminds us that “before *the Easter celebration*” there should be this “season of spiritual preparation.”<sup>5</sup> If we have ears to hear, we will hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church, calling us to be transformed by God’s grace in Christ through the baptismal covenant.

Answering the call, however, involves more than lip service. What are we called to do in order that we might live this new life in Christ?

Like our move, *Lent calls us to a pilgrimage in which we have to leave some things behind*. In baptism, we are called to die to the excess baggage of our lives. Any move, especially a move to smaller quarters, makes that demand upon us.

Some of that process is easy: things we haven’t used or thought about or cared about for years—out they go! Some things we couldn’t imagine why we ever kept—yet there they were, cluttering up our lives---out they go! Some were precious to us once but neither we nor anyone else would be interested in them now—out they go!

But some of that divesting of excess baggage is difficult. Some things—like the portraits of our ancestors, some of our art, and family heirlooms—are still dear to us, but there isn’t a place for them in our new home. So (with a tug at the heart-strings) out they go to others who will love them. Part of the joy of moving was giving things that were still precious to us as gifts to family and friends who were delighted and moved by the gift. We gave beautiful bowls my great-aunts had brought back from Japan when they were missionaries there before World War I to the other couples in our covenant group. “You’re giving us part of your family!” said one friend, holding the bowl tenderly with a tear in his eye. And we wondered why we had been hoarding so many unused things so long when they could bring joy to others.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 322.

The practice of “giving up something for Lent” has sometimes been the occasion for humor. One gives up what one doesn’t like or want anyway. If I gave up broccoli for Lent, it would not be any sacrifice! When we give up what isn’t good for us, what we shouldn’t be doing or having anyway, it *is* a beneficial tool for self-discipline—especially if it leads to new life that lasts after Easter!

Part of the divesting ourselves of excess baggage during the Lenten pilgrimage is a matter of identifying what’s cluttering up our lives, taking space or time and energy they don’t deserve. Getting rid of them takes intentionality, but once gone, we’re glad to see them go.

In addition to asking ourselves what we give up, however, we also need to ask what we want to give, both to simplify our lives but also to bring joy to others. That’s the resurrection side of things—the new life and love and care that overflows the hole the absence of what we have loved might otherwise leave in our lives. And sharing that is as important as getting rid of excess baggage that no-one needs to be lugging around with them.

Like our move, *Lent also calls us to a pilgrimage in which we are to find some nourishment along the way.* The trip from Chicago to Claremont was made easier because it involved stops along the way—with our daughter and her husband, with Linda’s mother, and with our granddaughter and her family. There was beautiful scenery and roads through parts of the country that were new to us. Along the way, we read Karen Armstrong’s *The Spiral Staircase* to each other, and found ourselves growing through her deep insights and observations. And perhaps most significantly, praying the OSL tan card rite that we have prayed in so many far-flung places in our travels. There we were reminded that the God who had been our help in ages past was with us on the journey and would be at our destination. More than that, this community of brothers and sisters who pray the daily office in so many places in so many ways was going with us, too.

The nourishment along the way in our Lenten pilgrimage comes from the rites and services, the prayers and patterns that are there for us. Sometimes it may seem as if we are only going through the motions. But even when devoid of significance at the moment, they are patterning our lives. And here and there, now and then, the Spirit breaks through and we see with new eyes and understand in new ways.

Like our move, *Lent calls us to a pilgrimage in which what we choose to take with us is reconfigured in a new context.* Hardly anything is where it was in our former home. Different furniture is in different rooms, different books live on different shelves, the art is on different walls. Even when some of our possessions are still companions, residing side-by-side as they did before, the new surroundings put them in a new context.

In Chicago, we had a wall of icons in our bedroom. It’s beside the living room fireplace now—a central place that says something about our faith and our values. The bookshelves on the other side of the fireplace hold our classics of spirituality books,

along with the bowl and pitcher of servant ministry and the chalice and patten of sacramental living. Together they speak to us and for us about who we are and what we are about.

On our Lenten pilgrimage, we take our talents and abilities and values and commitments that are part of what God is making us. We attend or lead services that may look and sound like what we have done before. But we are not the same persons we were last year. We have had different experiences—some good, some bad. We reappropriate things in a new way. As the ancient Greeks knew, you can't step into the same river twice. The challenge is to use what we take with us in ways that speak to us and for us about who we are and what we are about.

Like our move, *Lent calls us to a pilgrimage in which grace comes to us anew—the baptismal presence of resurrection in our lives*. Sometimes that grace comes to us in expected ways—in the Eucharist, while praying the daily office, in the words of a familiar psalm. But often it comes unexpectedly, surprising us when we least expect it.

Our first view of our new home was not a delightful experience. We confessed to each other later that, while we didn't say anything to each other, our hearts fell and each of us thought “we've made a dreadful mistake.” From top to bottom, stem to stern, it was a boring, ugly dirty white—shutters, trim, eaves, roof, door, all the same. The house was largely obscured by a jungle of vegetation covering up the windows. It was tiny and cramped-looking---a house we would have passed by without a second thought. Inside, walls of floor-to-ceiling drapes covered the front and back walls, windows barely able to peek out, unable to see through the jungle outside, every wall the same off-white. A dingy carpet covered the floors.

But then we looked again and imagination took over. What if the overgrown jungle were removed? What if the shutters, eaves, and trim were a contrasting color? What if the heavy drapes were removed to reveal windows and walls? Look, there's a fireplace with built-in bookshelves beside it. Pulling back a corner of the carpet, we discovered hardwood floors. And in the study, a whole wall of built-in oak bookshelves from floor to ceiling. The surprises kept coming, our excitement mounting. And by the time we talked with the project director who would oversee getting our house ready for us, we had three pages of ways to make our dreams become realities.

So often we settle for what is immediately observable. The congregation is what it seems; the worship space is what it appears to be, nothing more; our schedule and responsibilities are already set in stone. When we settle for all that is as it is, and only wish it were different, we tend to get what we expect.

The Lenten pilgrimage asks us to see with baptismal eyes: the heavens opened and the Spirit descending to help us see beyond what appears to be. When I served the little church in Martelle, Iowa, while Linda was completing her doctoral studies, I found various relics of bygone days stuck here and there. One of them was an old pulpit, with its backside facing the adult Sunday School room---a convenient place to stack this and

that. It was right beside the door to my office, and I couldn't help noticing it with disgust every time I walked by. Then, one day, the Spirit nudged me to pull it out from the wall. The front was a beautiful example of craftsmanship, so I turned it around, but it still seemed to be facing the wrong way. I discovered that the reading desk on the top could be turned around. With an old pulpit Bible on it, and the old "Christ Knocking at the Door" picture from another wall hung above it, it became a visual center calling us into the presence of the Word. The next Sunday I was asked, "Where did you find that? It's wonderful." And I said, not too smugly I hope: "it's been there all the time, waiting to be turned around."

In our Lenten pilgrimage, grace comes to us anew—the baptismal presence of resurrection in our lives, calling us to notice what needs to be turned around or recognized or transformed. Old things come to us in new ways, and new things come with points of contact with the old. Linda and I have recognized that grace is often like a falling star—you can't predict where it will appear, but you have to be looking, or you'll miss it!

Like our move, *Lent calls us to continue our pilgrimage into the Triduum and beyond*. When the last picture was hung on Easter Sunday, something changed (although we didn't realize it at the time). We were no longer moving in; now we were moving on. In the early church, it was a move from the catechesis of Lent to the mystagogy of the great fifty days.

The fulcrum, then as now, was the Triduum, those three holy days whose theme is always that one word: "death-and-resurrection." Past, present, and future intersect with power. In the last supper, the seder of tradition morphs into the eucharist of the future church. The Christ that was present talks about his broken body and shed blood of the next day as already present, just as the Risen Christ invites us to receive the transforming power of the crucifixion in the past as real in the present. And that present meal becomes also the meal of the coming kin-dom. We can seek to relive the crucifixion as if it were bad Friday, but it isn't. It's *Good* Friday. The only hymn I know that really captures that is by the sixth century hymn-writer Fortunatus:

Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle,  
sing the ending of the fray;  
now above the cross, the trophy,  
sound the loud, triumphant lay;  
tell how Christ, the world's redeemer,  
as a victim won the day.<sup>6</sup>

For the observance of these three holy days is not over until the celebration of the resurrection, a reality underscored by omitting the closing hymn, benediction, and postlude in all services until that time.<sup>7</sup> It is this unified celebration of the death-and-resurrection implicit in our baptism that is the focus of Lent.

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<sup>6</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 296.

<sup>7</sup> See the suggestion in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 362, 365.

So, as I observed to Brother Robert, the depth dynamics of our move were a lot like those of Lent. We weren't likely to have noticed that if it hadn't been that the moving van arrived on Ash Wednesday and we hung that last picture on Easter. Even then, it was only by God's grace that the Holy Spirit taught us that even moving half way across the county can be an exercise in sacramental living.

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