

Monday of the Fourth Week of Lent
Day 23: Everybody in the Pool

For Reflection: I was the only girl in my family, the youngest after two boys, and by all accounts, my mother was thrilled to have a daughter at age 37-- by her generation's standards, that made her an older mother. Mom grew up with very little in the way of opportunity, and she left home at age 15, lying about an age to get a job as a live-in maid so she could finish high school. Thanks in large part to Mom's drive, my life was much easier than hers had been.

Perhaps not surprisingly, our relationship was complicated. I couldn't possibly meet the standards she set for the daughter she'd always dreamed of, and she couldn't let go of her unfulfilled dreams. At least that's my side of the story. But I developed a habit that, sadly, I was only able to grow out of as she slid more deeply into a haze of Alzheimer's. My habit was a sort of rule: if I was behaving like my mother, or enjoying something my mother had enjoyed-- if I was like her in any way-- I had to stop. So my rule made me my mother's opposite. Of course, this was as much a trap as setting out to be just like her would have been.

That's the problem with rules. They can become traps, and I think this is what Jesus warns. If rules exist for us to serve them, they're dangerous. If we exist to serve rules, it's destructive. But if we use the rules to hasten God's kingdom – for the sake of justice, and to alleviate suffering – the rules serve God's purpose, and enhance our lives as well.

Suggestion for Prayer: Pray without rules today. If you usually say the Daily Office, sit in silence. If you often use the Lord's Prayer, use your own words today. Instead of concentrating on the rosary, allow the faces of those for whom you pray to surface. And tomorrow, give the experience some thought. How does praying by the rules – or outside them – affect your relationship with God and your neighbors?

Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Lent
Day 24: Dream a Little Dream

For Reflection: When Bishop Katharine wrote, “Having one language and the same words seems to be a big part of why God gets ticked off,” I wondered what St. Patrick would have said. I wondered about St. Patrick because we celebrated his feast day a few days ago.

Here's what we know about St. Patrick. He was born around 390 into a well-to-do Christian family with connections to Rome. Somewhere around his sixteenth birthday, Patrick was kidnapped from his home on the northwest coast of Britain and taken to Ireland, where he was enslaved. After about five years, mostly spent tending sheep, Patrick escaped. Back home, he continued to feel Ireland's pull, and even received a vision calling him to return. Somewhere around age 40 (ah, the power of a mid-life crisis), Patrick upended his comfortable life and returned to Ireland as a missionary for Christianity. He never left. By the time of his death about thirty years later, Patrick had converted kings and entire tribes, and had inspired the building of scores of Christian churches.

In the course of his work, Patrick encountered many who didn't speak his language, either literally or religiously. My favorite story about Patrick is that when Druids, who worshipped nature, asked him about the Trinity, he plucked a shamrock and used its three leaves to explain the concept of God in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So how would Patrick react to God's annoyance when we persist in bending the world into our safety zone? I think he'd pick up whatever was handy, whatever was familiar—whatever language his listeners would understand—and use it to explain the love of God.

***Suggestion for Prayer:** Pray with something from nature – a feather a bird has left behind, a shell you picked up on the beach, a pebble worn smooth over time. Spend time feeling it – the pebble's cool weight, for instance. Smell it. And be grateful for the beauty of God's world. Let yourself pray using this object. What does the object teach you about God? How does the object expand the language of your prayer?*

Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Lent
Day 25: Alternate Universe

For Reflection: Bishop Katharine's essay brings to mind a 30-something couple I know. Their marriage is solid, and they long for children. Years of fertility treatments led them finally to adoption, and their hearts led them to apply for adoption in Ethiopia. After a few more years of waiting and hoping and preparing, a phone call came. "We think we have a fit for you," the voice on the other end of the phone said. "A boy or a

girl?” “Would you consider one of each?” And so the nearly year-old twins, whom their new parents have named Emma and Henry, will soon be on their way from Africa to Connecticut.

Emma and Henry’s parents had a vision – a vision of seeing God’s glory in the face of their child. While their first vision was of a newborn who resembled them, maybe with Mom’s red hair and Dad’s long fingers, God has given them two toddlers with skin the color of coffee. “It has to be God,” the new Mom told her mother, “because this is more than we could have asked for.”

So it is when we turn our dreams over to God. There’s no guarantee that our dreams will come true, or that it will be an easy ride. But there *is* a guarantee that God will expand us – and our dreams.

***Suggestion for Prayer:** What are you envisioning these days? A new job? The chance to go back to school? A healthier relationship? A way to give back to the world? Have you prayed for it? Really prayed for it, to the point that you can give the dream to God? (A warning: this may take patience and persistence!) Keep praying, and let yourself – and your dream – be expanded in the process.*

Thursday of the Fourth Week of Lent
Day 26: Practicing Resurrection

For Reflection: Bishop Katharine’s advice to practice resurrection calls to mind a priest I knew who proclaimed, “We are an Easter people!” He was right, of course, and it’s a wonderfully rich theology on which to build a church. Problem was, though, he seemed to use the phrase as an admonishment directed toward parishioners he thought

were whining or complaining. And to make matters worse, he was a world-class whiner himself. So the theology of “We are an Easter people,” a reminder that the Christian life is a joyful life didn’t seem to offer parishioners a lot of inspiration.

As Bishop Katharine points out, to practice resurrection often requires a trip through vulnerability, wounds, and ugliness. Only after “Doubting” Thomas examined Jesus’ hideous wounds could he accept the gifts of redemption and resurrection. It isn’t easy to face the pain in our world, and in ourselves. But ignoring or denying pain often emerges in forms that wound others as well as ourselves.

So face the pain, examine the pain, embrace the pain – no need pretend your divorce wasn’t devastating or that you’re not bitter toward the boss you fired you -- and remember that Jesus walks us through the Good Fridays of our life as well as the Easters. No matter what the state of your life, your sins are forgiven, you are loved, and eternal life awaits you.

Suggestion for Prayer: What are your wounds? Old scars from childhood? New pain in adult relationships? Fear? Anxiety? Unhealed memories? Find a painting of Jesus on the cross from the Middle Ages and do what many Christians in the Middle Ages did. Meditate on Jesus’ wounds, and replace them with your own. Giving Jesus your wounds is what He desires, and what your soul needs.

Friday of the Fourth Week of Lent
Day 27: The Secret Places of Your Heart

For Reflection: *The African Queen* was on television the other night. It's a movie I'd only seen bits and pieces of before, so watching it from start to finish was a treat. What I enjoyed most was watching Katharine Hepburn's performance. Her character, Rose, grows from a retiring, prim, prissy and judgmental sort into Rosie, a self-assured woman who embraces life with exuberance. Like any satisfying character, of course, Rose must endure many trials. She and Humphrey Bogart's character, Charlie, face dangers aplenty: white water rapids, choking swamps, crocodiles, their rickety boat's volatility. Too naïve to realize the seriousness of the perils at hand, Rose's changing point comes after a hazardous trip down some rapids. To the surprise of both Charlie and herself, she joyfully announces, "I never dreamed that any mere physical experience could be so stimulating!"

I think that's how it can be when we adopt God's dreams for us. We'll be surprised, and we'll discover parts of ourselves we didn't know we had. And our "boat" is far more reliable than *The African Queen*. Since Christianity's earliest days, the church has been symbolized as a boat or ship. Noah's ark brought the faithful to safety. Jesus' calming of the storm (see Mark 4.2-41) also helped make the boat a symbol of safety and refuge. In the fourth century, St. Ambrose compared the church to a ship, with the cross as its mast. To this day, the central seating area of a church is called the "nave," which is Latin for "ship."

So give your dreams to God, climb aboard Christ's ship, and hang on tight for the adventure of your life!

***Suggestion for Prayer:** Today, envision Christ as the ship that enables you to sail through all kinds of troubled waters. Every time you feel your courage fail, confusion caving in, or anxiety destabilizing you, think of yourself in the safety of a boat with Jesus at the helm. At the end of the day, reflect on the journey, and offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the adventures that you've traveled with Christ.*

Saturday of the Fourth Week of Lent
Day 28: A New Thing

***For Reflection:** Bishop Katharine's essay on how God keeps promises even though life doesn't turn out as planned takes me to the largest disappointment of my life: a fast-spreading cancer taking my husband's life when we were 32 and our baby was 26 months old. I've earned two divinity degrees since Scott's death, and I still don't know if God allows suffering because He can't – or won't – stop it.*

For a long time after Scott died, I couldn't feel joy. I only felt lonely, afraid, angry, confused, and very, very sad. Every loss I'd ever experienced demanded to be felt anew. My life was shattered. Thank God I had our child to care for. My responsibility for Teddy required me to go on. Because of who he was, and is, I gradually began to *want* to go on.

I also began to slowly see that God was taking the shattered pieces of my life and making a future I couldn't have imagined. I started to see God as a master artist, using the fragments that were me to create a fascinating new mosaic.

Even now, my life is entirely different than the way I would have imagined it would become before Scott got sick. But it is full, it is beautiful, it is rich, it is good. I'm

engaged to be married to a wonderful man, Jim, this October. God has given me a bivocational ministry in which I'm both a writer and a priest. And I write this accompanied by the scent of the birthday cake I've just taken out of the oven for Ted, who celebrates his 18th birthday today. When Scott died, I could never have imagined how God would shape my life. And I would never have imagined that I could be grateful for the ways in which I've grown, hopeful about the future, and happy in the present. But God has done a wonderful new thing in my life. And I'm so thankful for it.

***Suggestion for Prayer:** What are the shards in your life? What mosaics do you see emerging? If it's hard to see mosaics in your life, can you see them in others' lives? If you need to, rail at God for shattered lives. And Try to give thanks for the mosaics God makes from our broken pieces.*