

## Navel Gazing

Wedgewood Baptist Church, Charlotte,

North Carolina

Delbridge E. Narron

February 20, 2005

Lessons: Philippians 3:17-4:1

We have begun the season known as Lent. In Lent we put aside the jubilant praise of Epiphany to sit quietly at the window watching for verdant pots to boil, seeking self-awareness not as an end, not as an absolute, but as a means to then seek greater awareness of God and of each other. Lent calls us to dark clouds, rough and steep ways, oftentimes painful soul-searching.

Lent creeps slowly along. Lent moves slowly. We don't want to rush through Lent. We'd rather bear the pain of looking ourselves directly in the eye than be even vaguely aware of the creeping doom of Maundy Thursday or the awful brilliance of Good "God save us" Friday.

There's an old saying, "Into every life a little rain must fall." But we all know that there are some folks that have lived for years in a perpetual monsoon season. Some of us gathered here are flooded with anxiety, cares, concerns, disappointments, fears, regrets. We wade each day slowly through the hurts that love brings, through betrayal's hateful barbs. All of us, if we are able to be truthful with ourselves, have experienced much pain in our lives, if not in the present, at least through the past. And so you must wonder what sane person would suggest that we engage in a forty-day period of introspection; that we take a tenth of our days to contemplate our brokenness and pain and meditate on our need for healing.

I have said many times that perspective is everything. The way you look at things has a great deal to do with how you see them. Half-full and half-empty are lifestyles, not mere observations. One person's trash is another's treasure. Fresh cow blood is disgusting to some and a delicacy to others. Copernicus' objections aside, the Earth is truly the center of our universe, no matter where it may be in other schemes.

Paul weeps either for those who are enemies of the cross of Christ or for their effect in the world. "Their god is their belly." The word can mean "womb". Or it can mean "navel", or so one source tells me. They set their minds on earthly things. Again, perspective rears its head. Perhaps Paul meant earthly in the sense of being opposed to "other-worldly", or heavenly things. But perhaps when we read this and apply it to ourselves, we mean "earthly" more as opposed to spiritual. I.e., earthly things such as circumstances, such as material gain, wealth, power. Spiritual things such as love, care, concern, worship. Perhaps what Paul means to us is the gray division between overarching, important values and the false worship of material substance.

Perhaps Paul meant that B.F. Skinner had a screw loose when he tried to say that human beings were just incredible series of complex chemical reactions. Maybe Paul is reminding us, here, now, that life is more than -- possibly even other than jobs, cars, brand names, or even security; maybe even more than lovers or children or warm summer nights. Maybe Paul's words remind us that anything found outside oneself is subject to another's whim; that God is the only constant, not baseball; that God's steadfastness is the only sure exterior base for integrity; that Dorothy had to walk all that way just to figure out what she had to begin with -- the shoes were secondary -- her desire and self-awareness and wisdom were primary.

And so, yes, the church universal for centuries has set aside these forty days to navel gaze - to stare at the belly until familiarity breeds contempt - until we can know that material satisfactions are never satisfying, that circumstances, painful though they may be, are temporary in the cosmic scheme. We look inside ourselves to find where God's healing is needed. Where in me do I need change, healing, salvation? Where are my priorities out of place? Where do I mistakenly find goals where there are only processes? When have I built my life around the expectations of others, of the world, when God was calling me elsewhere?

In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.

If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money and why?

When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?

If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?

Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?

Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?

If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth

and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.  
(Whistling in the Dark, Frederick Buechner, p. 74)

The gospel challenges us to risk everything -- everything that we hold dear. We are called to let ourselves be cleansed, our spiritual houses, the way we live. The gospel challenges us to risk giving up our beloved decay -- to turn ourselves inside out, to wash and be clean - to don sackcloth and ashes for only a while in anticipation of joy. To mourn in anticipation of dancing. Growing pains are not for physical growth alone. For many species in our world, growth means the shedding of dead skin. For us, it may well require the shedding of dead skins as well.

Knowing God does not make our lives more comfortable -- hardly ever. Perhaps knowing ourselves will not either. But the pursuit of relationship with God, the knowledge of God in us -- and, I believe, the knowledge of ourselves gained in the process of being in relationship with God -- this will give our lives meaning beyond what we could ever imagine. And though the process be sometimes excruciatingly painful, new life comes through it, and the cost of resurrection is a trifle when seen through an opened tomb.

AMEN.