

Third Sunday in Lent, Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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There's a part of me that wishes that my bookshelves were filled with the great literature of the 20th century — William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin. They aren't. I mean, I've read a lot of that stuff, but it was mainly for classes or book groups. In my heart of hearts, I am a disciple of the fantastic. I read the Chronicles of Narnia in grade school and have basically been trying to recreate that wonder in my reading ever since. Harry Potter, Gandalf, dragons, quests, terrifying Dark Lords and unlikely heroes — these are the stories I like to read before I shut my eyes for sleep. I realize that these books aren't everyone's cup of tea, but it has been my experience that they plumb the human condition for meaning as well, and usually more entertainingly, than other novels with better critical reception.

If you are a connoisseur like me, you know that the library is full of fantastic quest stories, strange alternate earth stories, and epic space battle stories. They all have their way of making me turn pages way past my bedtime. But this morning I want to talk about one particular kind of story. I want to talk about stories where there is a portal. Think about the children finding their way into Narnia through the wardrobe. Think about Alice finding her way into Wonderland through the rabbit hole. Even think of Harry, falling through the wall on platform 9¾. In each of these instances, the main figure finds him or herself seeing an entirely different world from what they thought was possible.

I always liked these portal quests. They made me think that someone — just an ordinary person like me — could find their way into the unknown. These portals had a way of making heroes out of cowards and magicians out of mundanes. Maybe the portal was guarded by a dragon or just hidden for a thousand years. The details don't matter — when you go through the portal, nothing is ever the same. Everything on the other side must be seen with entirely new eyes and experienced with renewed senses. The person who goes through the portal must be ready for action and to be changed.

We're right in the middle of our observance of a holy Lent. Many of us have tried extra prayer and fasting to help our bodies draw closer to God. And the church — in our prayers and preaching — have been pretty liberal about the use of the word repentance. What I wonder though is this: did the church ever give a decent definition?

It's easy to think of repentance as kind of a celestial, "I'm sorry." Which it is. We confess each week to think things we have done and the things we have left undone. This is an important part of our Christian vocation — to name aloud the ways that we have missed the mark. But repentance is more — a lot more. The biblical authors had a richer understanding of the concept than we always give them credit for. Repentance is the radical reorientation of every one of our perceptions. To repent is to see the kingdom of God instead of this weary world — it is seeing the webs of grace, love, and connection that exist among God's people. It is perceiving the grave injustices in our world perpetuated by gigantic, soulless systems bent on erasing the lives —

sometimes literally — of human beings. Or put another way, to repent is to walk through a portal and be able to see with perfect clarity another world — the world that God craves for all God's people. Sadly, we have a historic tendency not to accept that invitation into another world. We sometimes like to stay stuck right where we are.

The fig tree in Jesus' parable won't bear fruit, and the owner understandable wants to cut it down. After all, what good is a fruit tree that won't bear fruit? And yet the patient gardener begs for a reprieve — wants to tend to the tree for another year to ensure that it will bloom. I don't want to spoil the surprise, but we're supposed to be the tree. And, I'll admit, it's understandable to look around this weary world and think that it's not bearing the fruit it ought to bear. You don't have to travel all the way to Christchurch to see that this world has a sickness. Any fifth grader could explain to you in about five minutes the ways in which the world is unwell. Almost every day, I remember that we live in the most racially segregated city in the country. I think about the gross inequality of access to education, to basic resources, to safety, to health. I can see why our God might look on us and want to cancel the entire human experiment.

And then our Christ gives us a chance to repent and to grow — to follow Jesus through the portal and to see a new world with the eyes of Christ. To bear the fruit we were meant to bear. The invitation is constantly here with us, and we just need a bit of courage and a bit of a shove from the Lord almighty to get us through the wardrobe.

I think we are living in that year of reprieve that the gardener asked for. We are living in a time of opportunity to repent — not just to say we're sorry for swearing so much or for being nasty sometimes — but to enter into an entirely new world where we are able to see with the eyes of Christ. To see that the poor really are beloved of God. To see that the margin is really the center; the meek are really the strong; the fools are really wise. We will see with Christ's eyes that we can't hurt another human being because that person is our beloved family member. And we will see that the tiniest hurt to the least of the children of God is an assault on Godself. God, please give us the push that we need through that portal so that we can repent and begin to see with your eyes the majesty, grace, and courage of this world. And if we have a hard time getting through the wardrobe, or the rabbit hole, or the platform, please, Lord God, give us the tiny push we need. Especially during Lent. Amen.