

“Yield: The Point of Lent”
Meditation I – Lento
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On my way to work, I take Monticello Avenue, which links up with 199 via an on-ramp. My lane has the right-of-way. The other lane, coming from the opposite direction off Monticello, has a yield sign, lovingly installed by the Virginia Department of Transportation. Much to my frequent chagrin, however, my neighboring drivers often miss or misinterpret that large red-and-white triangular sign.

Perhaps my fellow motorists simply fail to notice the yield sign. It's obvious that many people are pre-occupied by cell phones or hot coffee or a breakfast sandwich or a sheaf of papers. Maybe others are in a big hurry, late to work or eager to get home after a long night. Whatever the case, there seems to be a lack of awareness about that sign to yield.

Of course, there have been moments when I've been in an uncharitable mood, a bit pre-occupied or pushed for time myself, and then my internal monologue sounds something like this: "What an idiot! Don't you know what a yield sign means? Huh?! It means slow down, not speed up. It means act with caution and allow people in the lane without the yield sign to pass by unimpeded. The yield sign does not mean 'aggressively merge into a lane full of traffic, playing chicken to see who will take the shoulder of the road first, oblivious the consequences!'" OK, that was the PG version of what goes on in my head.

But one day, about a year ago, in the midst of my fuming, after having nearly been side-swiped yet again, the Holy Spirit granted me a tiny epiphany. A quiet voice in my head said, "Boy, that's kind of like your relationship with God." And it dawned upon

me how right that voice was. Ever since, I've tried to use that insight to calm myself, whenever someone charges like a bull at a matador through that yield sign.

What I learn from that yield sign, and from every yield sign I notice, is that my experience on the Monticello/199 on-ramp is a lot like my relationship with God, and I am not alone. I need to yield in my relationship with God. I need to slow down and let God have the right-of-way in my soul, but too often I feel too busy to allow that to happen. I've got appointments to keep and sermons to write and e-mails to send and calls to make and meetings to lead and staff to supervise and children to chauffeur and groceries to buy and crises to quell and books to read and thoughts to think, and plenty more, but I'm out of breath now.

Many days I see that yield sign just fine, and I know what it means, and I just blow right through it, despite the potential consequences. The yearning to pause and pray gets shoved away until after this next meeting, until after I check my in-box one more time to make sure that the super-urgent message hasn't come through. You know, that super-urgent e-mail that gets deleted the next day and promptly forgotten the day following. Pretty soon it's 10:00. The kids are in bed, and that spiritual hunger has been dulled by distractions or buried underneath a big pile of anxiety about what lay ahead tomorrow.

Occasionally, God sends me a jumbo-sized yield sign, usually through a person I meet that has something I desperately want. You can almost smell it on them, a kind of deep centeredness that has little to do with self and lots to do with Jesus. They float through life with an awe and wonder and joy that's so attractive, you can't even muster the envy to be aggravated. Not to say that such folks don't face incredible challenges,

spiritually and otherwise, but they have cultivated the habit of yielding to God, and the blessing they receive is peace.

Sometimes, when God sends me those jumbo-sized yield signs, I feel inadequate and guilty, and I'm tempted to beat up on myself: "Bad priest! Bad priest!" But in my better moments I get the intended message: "Michael, the universe doesn't revolve around you. It revolves around Me. So slow your motor down and let me have the right-of-way in your life, because my Way is the right way."

Of course, like my companions on the on-ramp, I don't always see the yield sign. My pre-occupations are so consuming that I lose awareness of my immediate surroundings, even reality itself, and that's dangerous. Stop paying attention to the things that matter most, and there's a good chance of crashing, whether you're zooming up an on-ramp or zipping your way through life. When the yield sign disappears from our awareness, we're taking a needless risk.

And then, I must confess, there are moments when I see the yield sign just fine, and through an intricate, instantaneous, and apparently effortless process of self-justification, self-delusion, and self-aggrandizement, I interpret the yield sign to mean something else entirely. Just sample the amazing audacity that flits through my head: "That yield sign isn't for good drivers like me. I can merge into that traffic, no problem. I'm young, with reflexes like a jaguar." "It's just a little law. Nobody will notice, and besides the people in the right-of-way lane are driving at a ridiculously slow pace." "Yes, it's risky, but the risk is worth it, because if I don't eke out this extra 12 seconds, then I'll be less early than I would have been before, and my colleague/parishioner/wife will be less impressed with my promptness." Or my favorite: "I'm sick. I'm tired. I'm stressed,

and my taxes paid for this road. Get out of my way!"

We will take some time translating that internal monologue from the roadway into our way of life during the third meditation on perception, a few weeks from now. Nextt week, we will consider precisely what it means to be aware, which is central to accurate perception. But right now, let's consider in greater detail the importance of yielding to God by slowing down, and why Lent is the perfect time to do this.

The word "Lent" came into use in the late Middle Ages, when preaching transitioned from Latin to the vernacular. The English word Lent is based upon Germanic roots that mean Spring, sensible considering that this season of fasting, penitence, and reflection consistently takes place at least partly during Springtime.

It may seem bit odd that our seasonal observance of Lent -- so often focused on self-denial -- would have its linguistic roots in a season we associate with joy and the rebirth of creation. For many people, springtime is the best time of the year. Days get longer, temperatures warm, plants bud and blossom, the smell of fresh cut grass returns. Yet for the original users of this word, the springtime meant something else, too. The word "Lent" emerged in a predominantly agricultural society, where most people tilled the soil, many for mere subsistence.

I grew up on a small farm in western Kentucky, and for me, springtime, with all its pleasures, also meant a lot of work. Thistles in the cow pasture had to be dug-up by hand. Strawberry runners would shoot out from underneath their protective layer of straw into the row, and have to be guided back into place by hand. The cows, excited by the new grass after a winter of hay, seemed to burst the fences more often, which had to be repaired by hand. The seeds for the garden, likewise, were planted by hand, in soil

tilled by a hand-driven tiller. Our farm was simply too small to warrant even the smallest of tractors.

This is the way our ancestors of the late Middle Ages worked during springtime. They tilled, planted, and tended their livestock by hand. Doing simple, repetitious, though arduous, tasks day after day gives a person a lot of time to think and dream. That's the type of rhythm Lent invites us to assume.

Of course, very few of us have access to more than a tiny patch of land anymore, and for those who live on farms in an age of agri-business, the use of modern implements are absolutely essential. But remember during these forty days that the first Christians to speak of Lent were referring to a season of the year that involved hard work, done at a fairly slow pace. You have to pace yourself when you're doing manual labor, and a poorly plowed or planted field could have disastrous consequences come harvest-time.

Consider the parable of the sower, who scattered seeds on the hard path, in thorny soil, in rocky soil, and in good soil. This parable can be taken a lot of different ways, but the first thing I notice is: what a rotten farmer. What a waste of good seed. Now the broadcast method of sowing was a typical technique in Jesus' day, but even broadcasters pay attention to where they're throwing the seed, unless they're in a really big hurry.

So a question to contemplate this Lent is, how well are you cultivating the soil of your soul? Are you taking your time, or are you in too big of a hurry to pay much attention? Are you prepared to take the time to plow properly and turnover the soil to its proper depth? Or are you reluctant to plunge the blade of scripture too deep? It will be hard for the seed of the Spirit to take root, if you aren't ready to prepare patiently the soil of your soul.

Think of the seed in the parable as time, maybe a seed equals a minute. Once you've prepared the ground of your spiritual being, the soil of your soul, how will you broadcast the seeds of time you've been given? Will you toss three-quarters of your minutes on land that has little hope of bearing spiritual fruit, or will you focus your time on good soil that can yield an abundant harvest for spiritual nourishment, not only your own, but for the nourishment of others as well?

Of course, doing a good job of plowing and planting the soil of your soul means slowing down, and that's hard to do in a world that seems to be accelerating out of control. I was reading a book last year, written by popular futurist Ray Kurzweil, in which he spent considerable time tracking the speed of development in technology, and its concomitant impact on change in our culture.

Right now, in the first decade of the 21st Century, Kurzweil claims that change is occurring a rate a ten times that of fifty years ago. In other words, the change that would have taken a decade to happen in the 1950's -- technologically and culturally -- occurs in the space of a single year today. Likewise, what at one time took a century, now takes only a decade. And the pace of acceleration is itself accelerating.

Just over a hundred years ago, information like the disastrous Indian Ocean tsunami a few years back might have taken weeks to permeate America by telegraph. Today, a space shuttle can explode over Texas on Saturday, and preachers can address the tragedy the following morning. But faster doesn't always mean better, or more.

When I contemplate the efforts of my forebears in the priesthood, I am truly astonished to realize that someone like Phillips Brooks could write a sermon each week that lasted precisely one hour, and he did so for decades -- without the aid of typewriter

or computer. No "cut and paste" for him, and yet the quality and quantity of his output will easily outpace mine and that of most of my contemporaries.

Our obsession with speed -- with having the information at our fingertips, with finding the fastest way to our destination -- often influences our attitudes toward a host of other matters. We become enmeshed in a culture of immediate gratification, where waiting is despised as waste. In fact, several studies have shown that approximately 45% of our population cannot effectively establish and work toward goals that require more than a year to accomplish. Deliberateness is now linked with indecisiveness; simplicity valued over complexity; immediacy desired far more than anticipation.

In a world that spins ever faster, how can we slow down without being left behind? Well, first of all, we need to acknowledge the motive behind the question, and that motive is fear -- fear of being left behind, of being abandoned by a rapid world, should we dare to slow down. Being aware of the fear that keeps us jumping like fleas on a hot skillet is central to toning down our tempo.

What scares you about slowing down? Afraid you might miss out on something? Worried that perhaps the world would collapse without your unremitting efforts at work? Concerned instead that maybe it wouldn't and you'd have to come face to face with your dispensability? Do you really believe that the neighbors coming over Friday night are going to give your baseboards the white glove treatment? Find out what frightens you about slowing down. Step back from that anxiety and give it the ridicule it deserves.

Conjure up the worst-case scenario you can imagine, and play it out in your head. Write a mock newspaper article that starts off something like: "Williamsburg came to a halt today, as Ms. Rosemont of Liberty Lane took a genuine Sabbath. Stores closed due

to her absence and the company where she works declared bankruptcy after she failed to check her e-mail from home for six consecutive hours."

Now some of you may be saying, "I'm not motivated by fear. I like the buzz of our rapid world," and no doubt there's something pleasurable about it. Everybody likes their turn on the Tilt-a-Whirl. But if you stay on that ride 24/7/365, sooner or later, you're going to get sick.

Besides, if you want a real thrill, dump the buzz of rushing around, and spend a few quality minutes with Jesus every day. Adrenaline addiction is no substitute for holiness. For one thing, the adrenaline junkie is ultimately self-destructive: never met one who wasn't. For another, adrenaline doesn't hold a candle to the Holy Spirit.

Once you've confronted your fear of slowing down -- or your addiction to speed -- find a way to slow down and give up the rush. I left my bag of tricks at home, but you've got quality clergy here who have shelves full of books and decades of wisdom on how to spend time with God. Meditate, contemplate, pray the daily offices, sing your favorite hymns, intercede, give thanks, say the rosary, practice yoga -- do them all, or a combination of your favorites -- whatever works for you. Do it in the morning, in the evening, every three hours; on your knees, in a comfortable chair, flat on your back, or walking around the neighborhood. There's no right way, and the only wrong way is no way. Just find a way to slow down, and do it. Experiment, take your failures as lessons learned, and find a rhythm that works for you.

That's why this meditation is entitled, "Lento," a musical term that means slowly, deliberately. The practice of slowing down involves finding a different rhythm, a different tempo, so that you can expand your life repertoire. It's doesn't mean forever

surrendering the salsa beat, but it gives you another pulse to play with and enjoy.

When you find the pathway of prayer that helps you slow down, what you may well experience is the presence of God becoming more fully alive in your heart. The Sabbath of God's indescribable, unsurpassable, incomprehensible peace will make a home inside you, and you're going to find something magical happening. That Sabbath peace will cling to you through the day -- it's called abiding in the Spirit -- and time itself will slow, so that you can savor your life, rather than gobbling it up as fast as you can.

The blessings of God's grace will multiply in your life, like seed sown in good soil. And people who have a yield sign and cut you off won't bother you at all, because you will have already yielded to God, and God will take the right-of-way in your life, and you will experience transformation -- gradual, subtle, sometimes indiscernible -- yet nevertheless real.

Slowing down is absolutely essential, if we want to receive greater awareness and perceive reality with greater clarity. You can't be aware of too much when you're moving a mile a minute. There are simply too many stimuli to process at that pace, and your perception gets blurred once you pass a certain speed. Awareness and perception will be the topics of our next two meditations.