



SIEBENQUELL

Can you hold life in your hand for forty days?



SOURCE: SOMETHINGGRAND

With the beginning of the 40 days of Lent, I like to ask myself the question: What would I like to re-awaken to life in the coming 40 days? Since Lent is expected to be a holy springtime, it should naturally be the time when those things that have slumbered in winter hibernation need to rise again and return to the business of living.

Therefore, I would like to suggest a model of the posture and the attitude for a Lenten springtime. I turn to a saint of the Celtic tradition, Kevin of Glendalough. There is a beautiful legend told of him about his encounter with a blackbird. I believe that this story contains within itself a deeply helpful and very vivid symbolism that can show us the way through the 40 days.

The story begins with St. Kevin praying in his small stone hut beside the waters of a lake. It is the time of Lent. St. Kevin extends his arms in prayer so that his hands stretch out through the windows of his small stone hut. With outstretched arms and wide, open hands, cupped towards the heavens, he opens himself to the presence of God, and the gifts that God might bestow upon him.

While he is praying in this manner, a blackbird comes and lands upon one of his open, cupped hands. There the blackbird lays her egg in his hand. She uses his hand as the nest in which she entrusts the future life she has within herself. Aware of

what he is now holding in his hand, St. Kevin continues to pray without moving his hand in order not to disturb this fragile egg. And the legend says that he simply kept on praying until the egg was hatched.

This beautiful yet simple story is ripe with images that could help us move through the 40 days. First, we learn from it, that we need to enter the small and quiet spaces of life, just as Kevin goes to a small stone hut, and prays beside a quiet lake. We need to remove ourselves from the hustle and bustle, to pull ourselves out and away from the places that will otherwise distract us, consume all our attention, and sap the strength of our heart with their many requirements and demands.

Second, the story tells us that he prayed with outstretched arms. As soon as we stretch out our arms, we leave our heart exposed. We do this every time we stretch out our arms to embrace or hug another. In that very moment, even if we are unaware of it, we prepare a space of welcome by exposing our hearts. We draw the other straight to our heart, with nothing between us and them. This is a good posture for prayer and for meeting the world, as well as God. If we are not willing to expose our hearts, then the alternative will be that we are constantly protecting them from what we perceive to be danger. All the while, we are also shielding these hearts of ours, from any possible encounter with that which might heal us, touch us, move us, or expand our hearts.

In the story, by stretching out his arms, St. Kevin stretches himself beyond the walls of his hut out into creation. He moves beyond the narrow confines of his room, the place that he can normally control, arrange, and manage. Moving beyond the living space he is accustomed to, he stretches out into the wider and more spacious world of God's creation. It is not the least of the symbols of the story. We, too, must stretch of ourselves beyond the ordinary experiences of daily life. We must stretch ourselves beyond the comfortable confines that we have nested in. If we remain within the small places of our days, what do we expect to encounter there? In the spaces of life that are so small that we can keep an inventory of everything they contain, what surprises could we possibly expect to arise? For new encounters and fresh experiences, we need to move out into the spaciousness of God, to the wideness of his mercy and love, where these things can be found.

While St. Kevin prays with arms stretched out the windows, we should ask ourselves a question. Do the spaces of our lives, the rooms of our days, still have windows? In other words, do we have places that are still opening out into the world and not just imprisoning us in the comfort zones of life? Furthermore, if we still have these windows into the world, are they open?

Kevin's arms are not just stretched out into the world, but his hands are open and cupped towards the heavens. This poses the question whether we are open to receive something we do not give ourselves. In the 40 days of the Lenten springtime we move from the administration of every facet of life, the time management we so crave, and almost worship, to the possibility that something could be placed into our hands that we have not imagined, that we could not foretell, that we did not expect. It is the posture that moves us beyond the administration of life. It is the posture that moves us into a great adventurous receptivity to the God of Mystery and surprise.

Then the black bird comes and leaves its egg in the hand of the waiting saint. The egg speaks of the promise of new life. This is a life that is not yet fully formed. It needs time and space to unfold. It requires a time of protection, so that the process of gestation might allow a budding life to emerge into the world. The warmth that is needed must now come from the hand of Kevin. This is the gift that is often laid into our hands, and it puzzles us. The reason we are puzzled, is because we are enamored of finished products and end results. Therefore, we are often ill equipped to deal with gifts that still need time to develop. We are unaccustomed to dealing with blessing and giftedness that is going to ask something of us and not just give something to us.

I deeply appreciate this part of the story, because it reflects a deep and ancient truth of biblical stories. It reminds us of a central truth about all the gifts God gives to us. Every gift God gives us requires our participation. Unlike the gifts of gold,

frankincense, and myrrh, which the Magi give the child, the gifts which God gives the three wise men require participation. If they are to be meaningful and helpful to their lives. God gives them three gifts. He gives them a star, a word, and a dream. However, without participation, these gifts become useless and meaningless. A star that we do not follow leaves us where we stand. A word that we do not heed can have no effect on our lives. A dream which we dismiss and to which we pay no attention can never have an influence on the directions we take for our future. Here, too, we witness this truth. A gift of God is laid within Kevin's hand. If he does not participate and withdraws his hand, the gift cannot unfold, the life contained within it will be lost, and no blessing remains.

Here the legend of St. Kevin shows us the final posture of the holy 40 days of Lent. Giftedness will be placed into tender hands that give new life precisely the time and the space that is needed. My favorite part of the story is the very simple line that says »he kept on praying«. When things begin to happen, when the egg is in our hand, when life has been entrusted to our care, we should keep on praying. We should give new life a chance. And we should practice the tenderness of this time and move to the gentleness of being still so that life might flourish.

Lent is a holy springtime. We should ask of ourselves: Can you hold life in your hand for forty days?

Erik Riechers SAC

Vallendar, February 22, 2024