

# Coffee for Lent: A Lenten Memoir

## Jon Swanson

I'm a protestant. An evangelical protestant. I didn't grow up with Lent. My friend Chris grew up with Lent. He lived across the street and down a couple houses. He always gave up watermelon for Lent. It was perfect. Though he loved watermelon, winter watermelon hadn't been invented back then. I think he gave up licorice, too.

As I got older, I began to explore the idea of spiritual disciplines, of learning about discipline. For reasons that I don't remember, in 1989, I decided to take Lent seriously, to give up something that mattered.

I can't remember why. In fact, it wasn't until I start thinking about writing this essay, until I started telling you why a protestant evangelical college professor cares about Lent, that I understood how much I gave up that year.

I thought I was giving up coffee. I ended up giving up my heart. And, eventually, finding Hope.

You can stop reading now, if you want. This is going to get worse before it gets better. Before we are done, someone is going die.

But I suppose that's what Lent is about. It's about dying, in particular to self. It's about finding out what it means to willingly give up something that matters.

In that, I think, Lent has more to do with Philippians than with fasting.

Sorry. We're going to get biblical here as well. You can run now. Bible and death. And Lent.

But I'm glad you are still here.

### How I gave up coffee

In 1989, I was a college professor. I taught communication. Every Thursday afternoon, several of us had a coffee break in the staff lounge at the end of my hallway.

Those breaks were just one of the times I drank coffee. Because the pot was close, because the coffee was free, I drank eight or ten mugs of caffeinated coffee in a day. Every weekday. I got headaches on Saturday. It took awhile to figure out why.

In 1989, in my fifth year at a college that didn't make much of Lent, that didn't even know when it was, I gave up coffee. I decided that year that I needed to pick something that mattered, something habitual. Coffee was perfect.

What I gave up was everything but one cup of coffee a day. I wasn't going to be a legalist, an extremist. But I wanted to give up something that would make me think every time I would reach for a mug.

That's what Lent is about, by the way. It's a forty-day season of fasting, running from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. You are thinking about the calendar. You know there are

more than forty days in there. And you are right. It's 40 days of fasting in a 48 day span. You keep Sabbath, even from fasting. Because we need rest. We need to know that the value is not in giving up. It's in understanding that there is a good greater than the good things we give up.

I gave up coffee. I knew that there would be a challenge, both in the habit of drinking and the energy. All but one cup a day. I believed that I would be more likely to succeed if I allowed myself to appreciate one cup, to treasure it. And then realized that it was the end of the most important time of my doctoral research.

The long story of my doctoral studies is not for here. The classroom part starts in September 1982 in Austin, Texas. In 1985, finished with the classroom part and starting on the dissertation writing part, Nancy and I moved to Fort Wayne, to Fort Wayne Bible College. I taught full-time and spent lots of time trying to study, trying to research, trying to write. By 1989, I had wrestled through procrastination and confusion and was finishing writing the argument. I was counting down to deadline. I would defend my dissertation on Good Friday.

And I was going to be ready, caffeine headaches or not.

### **A baby on the way**

But there is another thread to this story, happening inside Nancy.

Andrew was born February 25, 1987. And we discovered before Christmas 1988, that Nancy was expecting again. We decided to tell my family in a cute way. We took a couple verses from Psalm 139, wrote them on paper, put them inside baby food jars.

*For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you because  
I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.  
My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place.  
When I was woven together  
in the depths of the earth,  
your eyes saw my unformed body.  
All the days ordained for me  
were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.*

[Psalm 139:13-16](#)

My family opened their jars. And looked at us. It was too subtle. We had to explain. There was another baby coming.

Sometime that winter, in the usual tests that are done for babies, there came a question. "It could be nothing. It could be this or that. You should have an amniocentesis."

It included an ultrasound. We saw the baby.

And so, on Wednesday morning, March 22, 1989, we sat with the geneticist and heard that our baby girl had Trisomy 18. She might live until birth. That was about 50/50. If she lived a long time, she might make it to her first birthday.

That afternoon, we drove to Illinois. On Thursday we flew to Texas. On Friday I defended my dissertation. On Sunday I drank coffee. And we flew back to Illinois. And we thought about Easter and the joy. In one week I learned that I would be a doctor and we learned that we would lose a daughter.

Waiting through pregnancy is like Lent. It is discomfort and disruption which we endure because there is great delight at the end.

Kathryn Anne Swanson was born on July 28, 1989. She lived for five weeks. She died on Friday, September 1, 1989.

On Saturday, we buried her body.

### **Sabbath as completion of God's work**

With every burial we understand a bit of the disciples' sense of loss between Jesus' death and resurrection. Friday, great pain. Sunday, great delight. Saturday. Great ache. Great hollowness. Creation aches. On that Sabbath between death and resurrection, there was no rest or restoration. It wasn't a Sabbath.

Or was it?

Mark Buchanan writes in [\*The Rest of God\*](#) about the two versions of the command to remember the Sabbath. When Exodus lists the commandments, the people are told to keep the Sabbath holy because on it God rested. Forty years later, when Moses is teaching the people one last time in Deuteronomy, he says to keep the Sabbath holy because God brought them out of Egypt, away from their task masters. God rested, God gave rest.

On this Sabbath, after the most traumatic work possible, after dying for the lost creation, Jesus was dead. But in Jesus' words "It is finished", there is hope. Something is done. And the Sabbath was to remember the deliverance. God bringing Israel out of Egypt. With a mighty hand and outstretched arm. No one living on that day understood how much Jesus had done, knew that restoration and reconciliation were on their way.

On the morning of Kate's burial, our small house was busy. The living room and kitchen and yard were full of people. Both sides of family, some seeing each other for the first time since our wedding. Seven years of catching up, tempered by the context. I stood in our small bedroom. I cried. And I cried out.

I couldn't yell. Too many people. But I yelled nonetheless. "I do not understand." I told God. "I know you are God, but I do not understand."

I may not have the words right. It's been 23 years. But I see out the second floor window to the stone driveway. I feel the slanty ceiling of our bedroom compressing the thoughts, pointing them up. I remember that for the first time in my life I wasn't worrying about the words. I wasn't considering shades of meaning. Something was dragging across the raw edges of my soul. My chest was collapsing. My left arm ached with emptiness where it had held our daughter as she stopped breathing.

And then it was time to go. To ride in the first car in the informal procession. To look out the window at the people who stopped looking back. To stop by the big tree and walk to the small hole and see the tiny box on the platform.

A baby casket is a little thing.

We sat there, Nancy and I. I don't remember people around. I don't remember what Carl said. I don't remember leaving. But I remember the sun and the box and the pile of dirt behind.

And I remember this:

In the middle of whatever else happened. I felt something inside. You know that feeling we describe as butterflies in your stomach, that sense of anxiety before a major event? The sense you have before you stand to speak? Take the opposite of that. Not a deadness, not at all. But a moving peace like the moving fear.

And that peace stayed for the day, through the conversations, through the meal.

### **Peace that makes no sense.**

God gives peace at moments that make no sense.

At times when by every right, everything emotionally should be cascading in, there can be peace. Not a denial, but an acknowledgment that yes, indeed, there is cancer, but God has a clue. Not a denial but an acknowledgment that yes, that casket holds the body of an infant daughter, but God is present.

Ah, but the peace doesn't come because suddenly everything makes sense: "If I get cancer, then other people will understand that life is important and so my life, however short, will accomplish something."

That kind of explaining would allow us to arrive at peace as some rationalization of suffering. And I'm not sure that's what Paul means when he writes,

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ([Philippians 4:6-7](#))*

I know. We want a recipe. We want to know that we will understand why things are the way they are. And in these two sentences there is no promise of understanding. There is no promise that things will work out fine.

Instead, Paul says that our hearts and our minds, those things that churn and process and spin and struggle in the middle of pain and chaos and ambiguity and inadequacy, will be guarded.

I suppose that part of the guarding comes from inviting someone else into the discussion. Knowing that someone who is capable of acting on our behalf is aware of the problem gives peace. But sometimes, nonsensical peace, incomprehensible peace, is an evidence of God, offered to rational minds in danger of spinning out of control.

Like mine.