

Lent and Television

Niequist, Shauna, *Cold Tangerines: Celebrating the Extraordinary Nature of Everyday Life*.

I didn't grow up with a Lenten tradition, but in the last few years, I've started to celebrate it. One part of Lent is the decision to give up something, a practice or a way of living, in an effort to create space, to clean out a path for God's work in your life. Aaron and I stopped watching TV and movies for the six weeks of Lent. We knew it was the right thing for us, because we have somehow watched ourselves turn from thoughtful, creative, curious people to people who lay on the couch for hours on end, watching just one more episode of *The Jon Stewart Show* or the *Real World/Road Rules Challenge*. We're those people. We knew it would be good for us but also, like most things that are good for us, extremely painful.

Very unfortunately for me, I left my job right in the middle of Lent, and all the attending fear and sadness and anxiety and brokenheartedness landed with a thud in the newfound silence of our TV-free living room. To make matters much worse, I was pregnant, which meant, among other things, no drinking. I'm not a heavy drinker, but desperate times call for desperate measures, and if I had not been pregnant, the pain of that season might have been eased by, say, ninety glasses of wine and an *E! True Hollywood Story* marathon. But neither of those were options, so I drank sparkling water and cried in the cavernous, echoing silence.

In some moments it seemed cruel—why was this happening to me when I had nothing to protect myself with? Nothing to distract myself? Nothing to take me out of it even for five seconds? I couldn't even take NyQuil in the night when I was having the same imaginary conversation over and over for hours. None of my tricks worked, and I was helpless and exposed. I felt like I was in a winter storm with bare legs and bare arms, nothing to buffer or protect me. I felt, sometimes, like I had no skin, and everything struck bone and vein directly.

It was excruciating, and it never let up, and although I have not had this impulse before or since, I found that if I'm being completely honest, I wanted to be self-destructive. I wanted to make a mess. I wanted to stop the pain. I wanted to act out physically what was boiling over inside me. And the magic of pregnancy is that this little baby protected me from myself. I couldn't bring myself to even think about doing anything that would hurt the baby, so I couldn't do anything less than healthy for myself. I wanted to starve myself, drink ten martinis, take Ambien all day and all night, chain smoke – something that would feel destructive and visceral, something to match what was in my head, something to give me a little reprieve from my broken heart. But instead I waddled around and took my prenatal vitamins, and ate eggs and cheese and drank cranberry juice, and between Lent and pregnancy, I shuffled through that season clear-minded, wide awake, unmedicated, unshielded.

What I believed at the outset that I needed from Lent was space and silence, to create a space for God's voice and presence in my life. And wouldn't you know it, just like he does, God bloomed into my quiet house and into my broken heart and into those forty-odd days like yeast in bread, leavening and changing everything. If I had known that my life would be sliced open so deeply, I would never have chosen the quiet that I committed to. But that's the magic of Lent, I think, that you sign yourself up for something, hoping maybe that God will slide something new into your life with him, and when he

does, it's never what you thought, and never what would have been easy, and always just the right thing. What a gift, what graciousness, that silent season.

Lent is now over, but our house is still quiet. We had fantasies during Lent that as soon as the weeks passed, the TV would be on from morning until night, but at the same time, we knew that returning to our previous pattern would betray or dishonor Lent. So we've made ourselves a little plan, like the addicts that we are, and we turn it on sometimes, according to that plan, but largely, that scary terrible silence is here to stay. Every once in a while, I even have moments where the silence keeps me company, feels comforting. We're making peace, I guess, the silence and I.