

*Poetry, Art,
and the Spirituality
of the Imagination*



A Lenten Study

*by
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Poetry, Art, and the Spirituality of the Imagination
Lenten Study

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Week 1:

Theme: Entering the Lenten Season



A Calvary Path, Denise Levertov
The Last Supper, Rainer Maria Rilke
This Bread I Break, Dylan Thomas
Why Wonder the He Doffed His Garments, Jacobus Revius
Found Them That Sought Him Not, John Charles Earle
Pilate's Headquarters, Jean del la Ceppede
Often Have I Tried To Follow You, Jean de la Ceppede
In All Ages, Yutiva Drunin

Week 2:

Theme: Prayer and Betrayal



Pontius Pilate, Neil Azevedo
Pontius Pilate Discusses The Proceedings of the Last Judgment,
Vassar Miller
African Easter, Abioseth Nicol
Calvary, Edwin Arlington Robinson
The Question, Rachel Annand Taylor
The Rule, Richard Wilbur
What If This Present Were The World's Last? John Donne
Simon the Cyrenian Speaks, Countee Cullen

Week 3:

Theme: The Passion



Finally, One Arrives, Andrew Landsdown
Good Friday, Christina Georgina Rossetti
Crucifixion, Ana Akhmatova
Shepherd Who With Your Tender Calls, Felix de Vega Carpio
His Savior's Words, Going To The Cross, Robert Herrick
Fair is Fair, Ann Weems
Crucifying, John Donne
Luke XXIII, Jorge Luis Borges

Week 4:

Theme: Hope and Glory



The Twelve, Allen Tate
Judas, Vassar Miller
Arc of the Lily, Loretta Watts
Facing It, Daniel Berrigan
Seven Stanzas At Easter, John Updike
John 1:14 (1969), Jorge Luis Borges
Hast Thou No Scar? Amy Carmichael
On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus, Denise Levertov
Via Negativa, R. S. Thomas
Ascension, Denise Levertov

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Week 1: Entering the Lenten Season

INSTRUCTIONS: Gather in a group of five or six at your tables. Before you begin choose a timekeeper-prompter for your group. This person will keep time, read the questions, and help keep things moving by prompting responses and offering follow-up questions. Your group does not have to answer all of the reflection questions, nor deal with them in order. Choose those questions of most interest to the members of your group. Regather when time is called.

A Calvary Path, Denise Levertov

- Have you ever taken a spiritual pilgrimage? Where? What prompted you to go on that journey?
- Have you visited the site of Golgotha in the Holy Land? Share about that experience.

The Last Supper, Rainer Maria Rilke



They are assembled, astounded, bewildered,
round him who, like a sage centered at last,
withdraws from those to whom he once belonged
and flows beyond them as some foreigner.
The former solitude comes over him
which raided him to perform his profound acts;
again he'll wander in the olive grove,
and those who love him will now run from him.

He summons them to the final meal
and (as a shot shoos birds from the sheaves)
he shoos their hand from bread
with his word: they flutter up to him;
they flap about the table anxiously
search for some way out. But he,
like an evening hour, is everywhere.

- Rilke's use of imagery creates an ambiance and an emotional tone in this poem. What imagery can you identify, and what emotional tones are evoked in this poem?
- Share the memory of your first communion/Lord's Supper experience.

This Bread I Break, Dylan Thomas

- Thomas' words recall those used in communion, "broken for you." Do you believe that Jesus' "brokenness" was a requirement for our redemption? Our salvation? Why?
- Share with your group what the experience of participating in the Lord's Supper means for you.

Why Wonder the He Doffed His Garments, Jacobus Revius

- Have you ever participated in a foot-washing ritual? Share about that experience.
- Has someone ever done something extravagant for you that left you feeling humbled? What did they do for you?

Found Them That Sought Him Not, John Charles Earle

- How do you interpret Earle's line, "For seeking God, and finding Him, are one."?
- What are ways that you have gone about "seeking God"?
- In what places, persons, or experiences have you found God?

Often Have I Tried To Follow You, Jean de la Ceppede

- A traditional Lenten discipline is to "give up" something during the season. Have you given something up for Lent as a spiritual discipline? What? In what ways was that helpful, if at all?
- The poet presents the image of the cloak as something the world grabs onto in order to keep us from moving ahead. In order to follow Jesus, one must allow the world to take the cloak and leave us vulnerable on our journey, dependent on God alone. Have you ever let something in your life go in order to follow God? What was it? Share that story.
- **BONUS QUESTION:** 1000 extra credit points for getting this one right: Who do scholars say was the "young man wearing nothing but a linen garment" and "fled naked, leaving his garment behind."?

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Week 2: Prayer and Betrayal

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Pontius Pilate, Neil Azevedo

- In this poem Pilate seems to be trying to justify his actions. This seems a common trait of human nature. Why do you think it's so difficult for people to own up to their mistakes or take responsibility for their actions? Is this true of you?
- Have you ever been swayed by a crowd, or gone along with a decision or action against your better judgment because of others' influence? Share that story.

Pontius Pilate Discusses the Proceedings of the Last Judgment, Vassar Miller



- The voice of Pilate in this poem seems to suggest that there is a thin line between religiosity and insanity. Do you agree? In what ways or how so?
- The voice of Pilate in this poem echoes the ancient belief that gods were fickle and often were tricksters. Do you believe that God plays jokes? Do you think God has a sense of humor? Why or why not?

Barabbas (a Zealot's Prayer), Neil Azavedo

- In this poem the Barabbas seems to have created the Messiah in his own image. To what extent do you think we do that with God? With Jesus?
- Are you a "zealot" about something? What are the things you are most passionate about in your life? Share those.

African Easter, Abioseth Nicol

- This poem depicts the universal inner struggle between belief and unbelief. Share one thing you used to believe about faith that you no longer do.
- Is there something you long to believe but have difficulty committing to or accepting fully? What is it?

Calvary, Edwin Arlington Robinson



Friendless and faint, with martyred steps and slow,
Faint for the flesh, but for the spirit free,
Stung by the mob that came to see the show,
The Master toiled along to Calvary;
We gibed, as he went, with houndish glee,
Till his dimmed eyes for us did overflow;
We cursed his vengeless hands thrice wrethchedly,---
And this was nineteen hundred years ago.

But after nineteen hundred years the shame
Still clings, and we have not made good the loss
That outraged faith has entered in his name.
Ah, when shall come love's courage to be strong!
Tell me, O Lord—tell me, O Lord, how long
Are we to keep Christ writhing on the cross!

- Robinson uses the collective “we” throughout this poem, thereby placing the reader as part of the crowd. In what ways do you think we, today, remain part of that crowd that “gibed” and “cursed” Jesus on the way to the cross?
- In what ways do we “keep Christ writhing on the cross!”, or is that merely a poetic overstatement?

The Question, Rachel Annand Taylor

- Is there a sense in which God's work of redemption is yet “unfinished”? How so? Do you think we have a part in it?

The Rule, Richard Wilbur

- Religion has its ways and rituals. Do any “offend” you? Do you suppose God is offended by some elements of our “religion”? Which? Why?
- Are there some practices, habits or rituals in church that you just don't understand? Are there some about which you ask, “Why do we do it that way?” Have you ever asked “Why do they *DO* that?!” about churches? What are those?

What If This Present Were the World's Last? John Donne

- Death by crucifixion is one of the most horrible of spectacles. Yet Donne suggests that there is beauty in Jesus' death on the cross. Interpret what you think he means by that.

Simon the Cyrenian Speaks, Countee Cullen

- Have you ever been “pressed into service” against your will? Share that story.
- Like Simon, have you ever been called to bear a cross of burden? What was that cross? Share about that.

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Week 3: The Passion

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Finally, One Arrives, Andrew Landsdown

- The final lines of this poem are, “Man’s heart conspired with the devil/And cared little for disguise.” What is it that you think they conspired?
- The final line of the poem hints at an inability, or unwillingness, to feel shame. Some have argued that attitude is a defining characteristic of our times. Do you agree? Do you see evidence of that?

Good Friday, Christina Georgina Rossetti



- In the final lines of the poem, the poet writes, “Greater than Moses, turn and look once more/And smite a rock.” What is the poet referring to here?
- We often have great capacity to “harden our heart” in the face of things that should move us toward compassion, grace, kindness, or redemptive action. Why do you think we are easily capable of doing so?

Crucifixion, Ana Akhmatova

A choir of angels glorified the hour
The vault of heaven was dissolved in fire.
“Father, why hast Thou forsaken me?
Mother, I beg you, do not weep for me...”

Mary Magdalene beat her breasts
and sobbed,
His dear disciple, stone-faced, stared,
His mother stood apart. No other looked
Into her secret eyes. Nobody dared.

- This poem depicts various “witnesses” at the cross, and catalogues their emotional responses. Name and interpret the emotional reaction of each.
- What emotional responses(s) do you think YOU would have experienced as a witness to the event? Anger? Sorrow? Despair? Satisfaction? Rapture? Gratitude? Indifference? Confusion? Indignation? Hope? Sadness? Others? What emotional response to the cross do you have now?

Shepherd Who With Your Tender Calls, Felix de Vega Carpio

- The poet represents Christ as “tender,” “pitying,” “beauteous,” and “friend.” Is there another side to the person and character of Christ?

His Savior's Words, Going To The Cross, Robert Herrick

- The poet presents a particular interpretation of the death of Christ on the cross: Jesus took our punishment unto himself so that we could escape it. Do you subscribe to that interpretation? Do you interpret the death of Christ on the cross—its cause and purpose—differently?

Fair is Fair, Ann Weems

- The poet seems to ascribe the cause of Christ's death to human agents and greedy motives ("...the ones in charge of politics wanted to hold onto their crowns/And the ones in charge of religion wanted to hold on to the keys of the church."). Do you have another explanation?
- The line "The whole idea of a sacrificial Lamb/is not to our liking" suggests that the idea of Christ as victim, or the sacrificial mode of redemption, is offensive in some way. Do you find this true for you? Was the sacrifice necessary, or can you imagine that there could have been another way for our redemption?

Crucifying, John Donne

- The final line of this poem is, *'Moist with one drop of thy blood, my dry soul.'* Share your experience of conversion or salvation, your moment of embracing Christ.

On A Theme From Julian's Chapter XX, Denise Levertov



- Mel Gibson's controversial film, "The Passion," placed its focus on the suffering of Christ; the pain, humiliation, and torture of the body. The poet suggests that others also have suffered as much and asks the question: "Why single out the agony?" How would you answer?

Luke XXIII, Jorge Luis Borges



- The episode of the thief on the cross, and his exchange with Jesus, is one of the most intriguing in the Passion narrative. The Gospel writer, Luke, chose to include this vignette in the narrative; he could as easily have left it out. Offer an interpretation about why you think this story is important to the Christian community.

The Beloved Disciple at the Cross, Denise Levertov



- Who is "The Beloved Disciple"?
- Share with your group members what the death of Christ on the cross means to you personally.
- What kind of God does the death of Christ on the cross allow you to imagine?

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Week 4: Hope and Glory

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The Twelve, Allen Tate

- The disciples were witness to an event that changed their lives forever. Have you been a witness to something that changed your faith? What was it? Share that story.
- The poet masterfully depicts the sense of hopelessness felt by the disciples on this side of the Passion event. Did you ever experience a hope lost and then regained (in a person, institution, relationship, for a dream)? Share about that.

Judas, Vassar Miller

Always I lay upon the brink of love,
Impotent, waiting till the waters stirred,
And no one healed my weakness with a word;
For no one healed me who lacked words to
 prove
My heart, which, when the kiss of Mary wove
His shroud, my tongueless anguish spurred
To cool dissent, and which, each time I heard
John whisper to Him, moaned, but could not
 move.
While Peter deeply drowsed within love's deep
I cramped upon its margin, glad to share
The sop Christ gave me, yet its bitter bite
Dried up my ducts. Praise Peter, who could
 weep
His sin away, but never see me where
I hang, huge teardrop on the cheek of night.

- The poet depicts Judas as a person in the margins, unable to move toward the center of the shared lives of the disciples. How do people move from the periphery of church life (visitor, non-participant) toward the center (member, participant, leadership, commitment)?
- What does the second line of the poem refer to?
- The voice of Judas in this poem seems to hint that he needed a simple thing for his healing. What might that be?
- Have you ever been an “outsider” to some circle or group? Share about that.

Arc of the Lily, Loretta Watts



- The juxtaposition of birth and death in this poem provides a dramatic contrast. One phrase often used of Jesus is that “he was born to die.” Interpret that phrase.
- For 1000 extra credit points: Why is this poem titled “Arc of the Lily”?

Facing It, Daniel Berrigan

- The poet describes the manner of Jesus' death as “. . . a hollow death; men dread it like the plague. Thieves die this way,/charlatans, rejects.” Concerning the manner of the death, do you agree?
- If you had your choice, how would you like to die at the conclusion of your life? Under what conditions?

Seven Stanzas at Easter, John Updike

- The poet claims that if Jesus' resurrection was not “real” in the physical sense, “. . . the Church will fall.” Do you agree?
- Do you believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus? Is that a confession that is necessary to make? Share why.

John 1:14 (1969), Jorge Luis Borges



- What are your beliefs about life after death? Will we have consciousness? Will we retain our memories; our personalities? Will we have bodies? Will we recognize each other?

Hast Thou No Scar? Amy Carmichael

- The poem suggests that there should be a price to pay for being a Christian, a follower of Christ. Have you paid a price for your faith? Has your Christian conviction or testimony ever cost you anything? Share that story.
- A common practice is to give something up for Lent as a spiritual exercise to help us focus on our faith in more intentional ways. What are some things you've “given up” for Lent, past or present?

On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus, Denise Levertov

- Are you one who embraces the possibilities of “miracles” easily? Or, are you a skeptic?
- Do you, personally, need to believe in miracles as an affirmation of the validity of your faith?

Via Negativa, R. S. Thomas



- Is God an abstract concept, an “Ideal” for you, or is God a personal, intimate being?
- What are the “reflections” of God that you see in your life?

Ascension, Denise Levertov

- Was the ascension of Christ necessary? Why could Christ not have stayed on earth?