



LENT

Week Five

OPENING PRAYER

Thank you, Jesus, for this moment to turn our attention to you. Speak loud and clear. May we be moved by your words and your example. Help us to listen and obey.

SCRIPTURE***Matthew 12:25-32***

Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

"Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.

"Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

MEDITATION**The Real Battle**

by N.T. Wright

Just in case anyone thought that the vision of a gentle, humble Messiah meant that he would be a pushover for every evil power that came along, the present passage sets the balance straight. One of the things everybody knew about the coming Messiah was that he would fight God's battles and rescue his people. The Bible had said so.

But what is the real battle? For Jesus, it wasn't the battle they all expected him to fight— with the occupying Roman troops, or with Herod and his supporters, or perhaps even with the Sadducees and their would-be aristocratic clique in charge of Jerusalem and the Temple. Jesus' followers probably thought he would fight one or all of them. Having watched as he did many other remarkable things, it was quite easy for them to believe that he could fight a supernatural battle against these natural enemies. Jesus himself spoke, later on, of being able to call several legions of angels to his help.

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But on that occasion he refused; because that was the wrong sort of battle to be fighting. In fact, as gradually becomes clear, the real battle is against violence itself, against the normal human wickedness that shows itself in the desire for brute force to win the day. If you fight fire with fire, fire still wins. And Jesus has come to win the victory over fire itself, over the rule of the bullies and the power-brokers, in favor of the poor, the meek, the mourners, the pure in heart. It is precisely because Jesus is right in the middle of the real battle that it is vital not to confuse it with other battles.

The real battle, then, is against the real enemy, who is not the flesh-and-blood enemy of foreign soldiers, or even renegade Israelites. (When the Romans crushed the Jewish rebellion in AD 66-70, more Jews were killed by other Jews, in bitter factional fighting, than were killed by the Romans themselves—and they killed quite a lot.) The real enemy is the power of darkness, the insidious, sub-personal force of death, deceit and destruction that goes in scripture by the name of 'Satan', which means 'the accuser'. It goes by other names, too; a familiar one was 'Beelzebub', which means literally 'Lord of the flies'.

One of the most familiar tactics of this nasty, underhand enemy is to hurl accusations around, which, even though they may be absurd, can be painful and damaging. Ironically, it is the accusation in verse 24 that shows how seriously the Pharisees were taking Jesus and his powerful deeds of healing. You don't bother saying that someone is in league with the devil if all they are doing is mouthing platitudes. But Jesus' response shows where things had got to from his point of view: 'If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you'(verse 28). God's sovereign power is at work—through Jesus; and he has won the right to put in into practice because he has first 'tied up the strongman' (verse 29), which presumably refers back to his initial victory over the dark enemy in his own solitary wilderness temptations (4:1-11). As is so often the case, the initial struggle that an individual has with temptation will, if successful, clear the way for fruitful work in the days and years to come. In fact, one might suggest that precisely the reason for the fierce temptation early on in someone's life, or ministry, is because the enemy knows precisely how important that later work will be, and how vital it is—from that hostile viewpoint! — to sabotage it as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

As well as being conscious of having won that earlier victory, Jesus was also fully conscious, ever since his baptism, that he had been endowed with God's own Holy Spirit, to enable him to do what had to be done. When people discounted him personally, that was one thing. They were entitled to their opinion, however mistaken. But someone who looks at the work of God's own Spirit and declares that it is instead the work of the devil is building a high wall around themselves, preventing any light or grace getting in. It isn't that 'the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' (verse 31) is a peculiarly bad sin which God will punish in a specially harsh way. It is simply that if I deny the existence of the train that is coming in to the station, or declare that it has been sent to deceive me and take me in the wrong direction, I am automatically stopping myself from getting on it. The Spirit was at work through Jesus, to launch God's kingdom; but if someone looked at what was happening and ascribed it to the devil, they could not possibly benefit from it.

A solemn warning, of course, and one that we should heed carefully. It may be that, in our own day, God will do new things which cut against the grain of what the church, or our contemporary world, has led us to expect or hope for.

REFLECTION

1. Sometimes, (maybe more often than not!) the way we think God should solve a problem is not the way he actually helps. Where are you hoping to see God show up in your story right now, or in the stories of those around you/around the world?
 2. Sometimes, it is difficult to discern the origin of our thoughts - is it me? Is it God? is it the enemy? This confusion can deter us from following through at all. Take a moment to free your mind and ask God for discernment for your thoughts. Invite the Holy Spirit to speak.
 3. Spend a moment in prayer reflecting about what the scripture passage and meditation of the day have brought to mind. Surrender, invite, let go, or ask as you feel led. End your prayer with an expression of gratitude to/for a God who is living, present, and active.
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OPENING PRAYER

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SCRIPTURE: *Matthew 20:26*

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...

MEDITATION**He Who Would Be Great Among You**

by Luci Shaw (naturalized U.S. Citizen, contemporary)

You, whose birth broke all the social and biological rules—
 son of the poor who was worshiped as a king—
 you were the kind who used a new math to multiply
 bread, fish, faith. You practiced a radical sociology:
 rehabilitating call girls and con men.
 You valued women and other minority groups.
 A family practitioner, you specialized in heart transplants.
 Creator, healer, shepherd, storyteller,
 innovator, weather-maker, exorcist, iconoclast,
 seeker, seer, motive-sifter, you were always beyond, above us,
 ahead of your time, and ours.
 And we would like to be like you!
 Bold as the Boanerges we hear ourselves demand:
 "Admit us to your inner circle.
 Grant us degree in all the liberal arts of heaven."

Why our belligerence? Why does this whiff of fame
 and power smell so sweet?
 Why must we compete
 to be first? Have we forgotten
 how you took, so simply, cool water
 and a towel for our feet?

REFLECTION

1. Read the meditation again. Highlight a description of Jesus that stands out to you.
 2. Ask the Spirit why that description stood out. What feelings arise when you consider this description? Admiration? Doubt? Desire? Take a moment to reflect.
 3. Jesus came to die for us, but he also came to show us how to live. Where do you struggle the most to live like Jesus? Take a moment in prayer to invite the Lord to show you how.
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25 WEDNESDAY

OPENING PRAYER

Thank you, Jesus, for this moment to turn our attention to you. Speak loud and clear. May we be moved by your words and your example. Help us to listen and obey.

SCRIPTURE

Mark 14:65

Then, some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him.

John 3:19-20

"This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed."

MEDITATION

Be Careful

by Walter Wangerin Jr.

Be careful. We humans tend to dehumanize our enemies. We drop them to a species lower than our own, thinking ourselves more highly developed, more complex, intelligent, virtuous, sensitive, etc. They, in our judgment, are beasts—animals in thought and habit and desire.

And since those who spit on Jesus are enemies of ours (since we love Jesus), we accept Mark's description of their brutish behavior. It's pretty juvenile stuff, don't you think? Spitting and hitting? Almost comic-book for nastiness. Yet we don't question it, because it fits our picture of the foes of Jesus (people different from us; people decidedly worse than us— inept in morals, inept in mind.) Pigs grunt. Geese honk. Our enemies stink and spit.

Be careful. They may be the enemies of our Lord at the moment when he is arraigned. But they are not different from us. They're quite as complex as we are now—and we have been what they are, enemies of Jesus. If we diminish them, we diminish ourselves.

Listen: sometimes the smile of a genuinely good man infuriates you. You hate the smile specifically—because it reveals a difference! Because the kindness in him is shining on some unkindness in you. Get it? You hate that sort of light. You want to slap the smile right off his face, right? And if he gives signs of forgiving you, why, then his moral superiority becomes simply insufferable. If he's that good, think how bad it

makes you out to be! Well of course he can't be that good. So he's a hypocrite—and you're right to get rid of him, by gestures of perfect contempt, if not by death.

Get it? We spit on him not because we're beasts but because he's not *worth* spit. It's a very complex thing after all.

True goodness accuses true evil; the better the good one, the worse the bad one, and the more outraged for being shown so.

To sinners, the mere presence of goodness can feel like an attack. It triggers guilt. Guilt hurts. Guilt forces us to notice ourselves, thereby to question and to second-guess ourselves; and such an internal process destroys the joy of an unconscious life. We are altogether *too* conscious, suddenly—too self-aware. Doubt destroys the thoughtless satisfactions.

So: who proved such complications and pain? Him we hate!

Goodness is a spotlight. It shines on our shame, our filth, our deformities; it picks out the parts we hide from the world and even from ourselves. We will strike at that light. We'll haul it into court, discredit it, and smash it in order to put it out. We'll spit on it and belittle it. We'll blindfold it, hit it, and ask it to prophesy—all to prove what a fraud this "prophet" us! (And to dehumanize him! Get it?)

Where patience shines, impatience is revealed and hates the attention. Kindness shows unkindness to be hideous. True joy intensifies true bitterness; gentleness enrages belligerence; and self-control proves the pig to be nothing but a pig.

The real trial in Caiaphas's house is not of the guilt of Jesus. Rather, Jesus is judging the guilt of the others, not by speaking, but by being perfectly innocent. Innocence accuses its accusers. (This is the great war between secular powers and genuine religion; the trial continues even today.) They hate it. They scream to drown the sweeter truth; they condemn him to death in order to put out the light. They want dearly to put out the light.

REFLECTION

1. Jesus was perfect. His goodness and innocence can illuminate our lack, and perhaps even cause us to feel shame and disengage. Jesus says to his followers, "Be perfect." (Matthew 5:48) What do you make of this charge? How do you feel about it? Take a moment to reflect.
 2. Jesus also said, "love your enemies." (Matthew 5:43-48) As Wangerin mentions in this meditation, we can dehumanize our enemies and make them the "other." Does anyone come to mind? Take a moment to reflect and confess.
 3. What is one way we can "love an enemy" today? Take a moment in stillness before the Lord. Invite the Spirit to bring to mind a person, and perhaps, a way to serve this person.
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OPENING PRAYER

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SCRIPTURE***Matthew 4:4***

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

MEDITATION**The Rituals of Lent: Fasting**

by Esau McCaulley

The best-known part of Lent is fasting. The practice of fasting has varied across time and different parts of the church. Saint John Chrysostom said,

There are those who rival one another in fasting and show a marvelous emulation in it; indeed some who speaks two whole days without food; and others who, rejecting from their tables not only the use of wine and of oil and of every dish, taking only bread and water, preserve in this practice during the whole of Lent."

During my first Lent I was something of a zealot. I had never fasted and wanted to "do it right." I decided to give up meat for the entirety of Lent. I also did a total fast on Fridays, except for liquids. I have not done this again since—not because it was too difficult, but because I realized it had become about achievement and not my life before God. The purpose of fasting is to remind us that "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4 NRSV). Fasting wasn't supposed to be something I achieved but a reminder of my need for God's provision.

Another danger I saw in myself as the years went by was to turn Lent into a sanctified excuse to get into shape. Gluttony—seeking solace in food rather than God—is a real temptation. At the same time, in a society that hypersexualizes human persons and treats the perfection of the body as our defining virtue, the gift of the human body can become an idol. Therefore we must be careful that we are fasting to glorify God and not to win fleeting acclaim for our figure.

I am intentional about my fasts now. It's not about finding the biggest possible sacrifice. It's about examining the idols in myself and discerning the best way to tear them down. I also try to link sacrifices to goals for spiritual growth. If I decide to forgo

coffee, the desire for coffee inevitably arises in my caffeine-deprived soul, so I use that opportunity to pray for patience or self-control.

Churches differ on how to count fasting days. In much of the Western Christian tradition, Sunday is a day of celebration and the Lenten fasts are not observed.

During my first Lent I kept up my Lenten observance throughout the entire season, including Sundays. In my enthusiasm I considered taking Sundays off too easy. Now I realize the wisdom the church offered me. If the purpose of a fast isn't to show God how much we are willing to suffer, then the Sunday exception makes sense. Sundays celebrate the victory of the bridegroom and his presence among us in the bread and wine. It's proper that Sundays be occasions of feasting. It's why throughout church history every Friday (even outside of Lent) has been an occasion for fasting of some kind, in remembrance of his passion. Every week is a mini liturgical experience with feasts, fasts, and even saints.

In some corners of the Anglican tradition only two days of complete fasting from food are encouraged: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Even then it is not a rule, it is simply recommended. For the rest of Lent and throughout our Christian lives, we trust individuals in conversation with their pastors and spiritual directors to discern the best ways to fast. We might choose to abstain from a certain food or practice as an offering to God. We might include total fasts, or fasts from certain meals. It doesn't matter what we do, but that we do it to God's glory

REFLECTION

1. We are all at different stages of our fasting journey. We all have different stories and different experiences with fasting. Take a moment to reflect on your relationship with the practice of fasting as it stands now. How do you feel about fasting? Do you understand it? Do you consider it part of your spiritual rhythms?
 2. Our motivations for fasting can be warped, at times, as McCaulley points out in this meditation. Consider your motivation for fasting and reflect on how your motivations may have changed through different experiences.
 3. Spend a moment in prayer, bringing your thoughts and feelings about fasting to the Lord. Thank the Lord for the way He uses spiritual practices to shape us.
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OPENING PRAYER

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SCRIPTURE***Revelation 2:4***

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.”

MEDITATION**The Rituals of Lent: Renewal**

by Esau McCaulley

The church has also used the season of Lent to renew spiritual practices that have fallen away over the course of the year. In other words, Lent is not just about letting go of vices, but adding or recovering aspects of Christian faith and practice.

We engage in more liturgical practices during Lent than we do in any other period of the liturgical year. There are more recommended services, devotions, and practices in Lent than, for example, Advent or Eastertide. This can be dangerous if we turn the season into an opportunity to store up extra merit in a spiritual bank account that we can slowly deplete over the rest of the year.

But it's also true that our relationship with God is like all other great loves. There are peaks and valleys. The fervency of young love gives way to the stability of lifelong commitment. In a marriage, it's easy to begin to take our spouse for granted along the way—the nights out and acts of kindness can give way to presumption and self-interest. There's a reason churches encourage the periodic renewal of marital vows. Likewise, clergy are required to renew their ordination vows annually. The whole church renews its baptismal vows whenever there is a baptism. We need constant recommitments.

Along the path of our lifelong spiritual journey it's easy to stop reading our Bibles and saying our prayers. We replace concern for the disinherited with competition with other inherited folks. Our focus turns from caring for the penniless to outdoing those whose coffers are full. Lent is about recovery, and recovery includes the Scriptures, prayer, the Eucharist—and works of charity.

REFLECTION

1. Think back to the time you first said "yes" to Jesus, or perhaps a time early on in your journey following Jesus. Do you remember the first time (or any time) you recognized Jesus as your "first love?" Take a moment to reflect and remember. If nothing comes to mind, invite the Spirit to speak to your heart.
 2. Is there anything different between your relationship with Jesus now compared to the way it used to be? What has changed for the better? What are some opportunities you notice? Take a moment to reflect with the help of the Spirit, considering the ways that the Lenten journey might be shaping your relationship with Jesus.
 3. Spend a moment or two renewing your vow to God in prayer - recommitting, or asking for what you need to recommit your life to him. End with a prayer of gratitude for his patience, kindness, and gentleness.
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OPENING PRAYER

Thank you, Jesus, for this moment to turn our attention to you. Speak loud and clear. May we be moved by your words and your example. Help us to listen and obey.

SCRIPTURE***Luke 22:42***

“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”

Isaiah 53:3

He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces,
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

MEDITATION**Theodicy**

by Tish H. Warren

Theodicy names the abstract “problem of pain”—the logical dilemma of how God can be good and all-powerful even as horrible things regularly happen in the world. And it also names the crisis of faith that often comes from an encounter with suffering.

Theodicy is not nearly a cold philosophical conundrum. It is the engine of our grimmest doubts. It can sometimes wither belief altogether. A recent survey showed that the most commonly stated reason for unbelief among Millennials and Gen Z-ers was that they “have a hard time believing that a good God would allow so much evil or suffering in the world.”

This is an increasingly common struggle. More young people voice frustration and confusion about theodicy now than in the last several generations. Many of those who walk into agnosticism or atheism do so not out of any reasoned proof (since there is no irrefutable proof for or against God’s existence.) but out of a deep sense that, if there is a God, he (or she or it) cannot be trusted. This is unbelief as protest.

Where are you, Oh God? Is anyone watching out for us? Does anyone see? And tell us why! Why this evil, this heartbreak, this suffering?

I have come to see theodicy as an existential knife-fight between the reality of our own quaking vulnerability and our hope for a God who can be trusted.

At the end of the day—in my case, literally in the darkness of the night—the problem of theodicy cannot be answered. As Flannery O'Connor wrote, it is not “a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured.”

We sometimes talk about mystery as if it's a code to crack—as if the full sweep of knowledge is available to us, but we just haven't sussed it out yet. But true mystery invokes things that are fundamentally beyond our grasp. Mystery is an encounter with an unsearchable reality, an acknowledgement that the world crackles with possibility because it is steeped in the shocking and unpredictable presence of God. Avery Cardinal Dulles wrote that mysteries are “not fully intelligible to the finite mind,” but that the reason for this is “not the poverty but the richness” of the mystery.

One reason the problem of suffering cannot be answered tidily is that pain and brokenness are, at their roots, anti-rational. Christians understand evil and suffering to be forces of “anti-creation.” They don't fit in the realm of reason and order because they frustrate reason and disintegrate order. If there was a neat rationale for pain, it would necessarily fit somewhere in the order of the cosmos, an essential part of reality. But the early church's understanding of suffering and evil was that they were an absurd and inexplicable abnormality, a gross absence of the good and true.

But secondly, and much more importantly, the problem of pain can't be adequately answered because we don't primarily want an answer. When all is said and done, we don't want God to simply explain himself, to give an account of how hurricanes or head colds fit into his overall redemptive plan. We want action. We want to see things made right.

At its heart, theodicy is the longing for a God who notices our suffering, who cares enough to act, and who will make all things new. It is an ache that cannot be shaken, which we all share deep in our bones and carry with us every day—and every night.

My deepest question, *Where is God in all this?*, is an ache that I hope to endure until my longing meets its end. I want justice; I want resurrection; I want wholeness, wellness, and restoration. And I won't be fully satisfied until God—before whose face our questions die away—sets every last thing right.

But we're not there yet. We live in the meantime. And in this meantime, how can we endure such a mystery? How can we live as Christians in a world where children suffer, where marriages disintegrate, where injustice rages, where tyrants succeed, where we face frustration and futility, where we get sick, where we all eventually die? How do we trust a God who does not stop all this from happening? How do we dare ask him to keep watch?

REFLECTION

Make space and time for *lamentation* today.

Lamentation is something we have practiced as a church during various times and various fasts. We'll practice again now.

Lamentation is a passionate expression of grief and sorry. You are invited to speak *out loud* instead of just in your head. Or, you are welcome to write.

Take a moment to cry out to God in prayer about the things that break your heart. Things that you are angry about. Things that you are sad about. Things that you are struggling to reconcile. Things that you are mourning. Grieving. Feeling.

When you have spent a few minutes in this posture and space, sit in stillness and invite the Spirit of God that has been present in your lamentation to speak to you. What does the Spirit have to say?

Consider journaling about your experience. Although this is a practice that you'll likely do individually, perhaps God would invite you to talk to someone about your pain and sorry - maybe a pastor or a trusted friend.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus - you cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," so that we never have to. As we sit in the midst of grief, sorrow, pain, anger, distrust, and everything in between, we turn to you for peace. O Emmanuel, open our eyes to the ways you are *with* us. You are counselor. You are comforter. You are prince of peace. Deliverer. Thank you for your peace and your presence.

