



LENT

Week Two

OPENING PRAYER

Jesus, our savior. We turn our eyes and ears to you. We give our attention to you. Awaken us. Help us to hear what you are saying. Help us yield our hearts to you.

SCRIPTURE***Mark 14:1-2***

Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. "But not during the festival," they said, "or the people may riot."

MEDITATION**Time**

an excerpt from "Reliving the Passion" by Walter Wangerin Jr.

...the Story starts right here. Here, suddenly, Mark locks his Gospel into time.

In one sense, everything heretofore has been preliminary to the crucial event of Jesus' passion. We've learned who Jesus is (but not completely, since he's been coy about his messianic identity and many have erred through the ages in picturing him.) We've heard his teachings (but words without action make no story, and his parabolic method of teaching has left many hearing without understanding after all.) We've watched his miracles, fine little stories in themselves (but these have grown fewer the closer he's come to Jerusalem, and Jesus himself has diminished their importance by making more of forgiving than of healing paralytics.)

There's more than this, the first thirteen chapters imply: *You ain't seen nothing yet.*

Indeed, if those chapters were all we had from Mark, we'd have a wonder-worker, a charismatic rabbi, a list of ethical lessons, a minor political pest in history—and an enigma. Jesus may have been remarkable, but not essentially different from other notable figures in human memory: no radical revelation of God, no savior of humankind.

The core story starts right here.

Throughout his Gospel until this passage, Mark has been vague about historical time; the time references that join one episode to another have been altogether internal, closed inside the Gospel itself. the events of Jesus' ministry happen "in those days." Which days? Don't know. What time of year? Once or twice we can figure a harvest; besides that, he doesn't say. When things move swiftly, Mark says "immediately." More slowly, they occur "after some days" or "on the same day" or "after six days."

When Jesus journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem, all time references are to that journey: "As he was setting out on his journey, a man..."; "they were on the road..."; "as he was leaving Jericho..."; "and when he drew near Jerusalem.." There is a persistent sense of motion in these references. The trip becomes dreadfully significant, foreshadows something momentous at its end, and in this way Mark gives the journey a discrete, nearly serpentine life of its own. But when did it take place? Don't know. What was the rest of the world doing then? Can't tell. What time of year was it? He doesn't say.

There's an odd timeless quality to the appearing and presence of Jesus, and then to his progress toward Jerusalem. Jesus in history is like a dream in walking reality: nearly mythic, strangely untouchable.

But suddenly all that changes.

Look: now it's "two days before the Passover." Suddenly we know precisely the time of year and we can see the rest of the world; we know what the people are doing. Suddenly Jesus is rooted very much in time, terribly touchable, dangerously historical. We grow tense and attentive. A new thing is happening! It's happening within the calendar of human days: Wednesday, the thirteenth day of the month called Nisan. This is no myth, no legend, no mere lesson or instructive biography. This is the story Mark intended to tell from the beginning. This is *the* "something else," revelation, the profounder identity of Jesus: the Savior!

Mark's canny device (of saving till now the link between actual time and his Gospel) wakes us heart and soul to the central event of that Gospel, without which there is no Gospel at all Listen! Listen! The story is starting right now...

REFLECTION

1. How does it feel to think about death?
 2. How do you relate to the idea of preservation? Do you store up "surplus" - does the demand of scripture seem unfair?
 3. As Lent begins, consider a part of your life that you are afraid to lose. Write it down. Spend time in prayer processing feelings about what would happen if this part was demanded from you.
 4. What does Christ's actual death mean to you?
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OPENING PRAYER

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SCRIPTURE***Psalm 13:1-6***

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me.

MEDITATION**Living Lent**

by Barbara Cawthorne Crafton

We didn't even know what moderation was. What it felt like. We didn't just work: we inhaled our jobs, sucked them in, became them. Stayed late, brought work home—it was never enough, though, no matter how much time we put in.

We didn't just smoke: we lit up a cigarette, only to realize that we already had one going in the ashtray.

We ordered things we didn't need from the shiny catalogs that come to our houses: we ordered three times as much as we could use, and then we ordered three times as much as our children could use.

We didn't just eat: we stuffed ourselves. We had gained only three pounds since the previous year, we told ourselves. Three pounds is not a lot. We had gained about that much in each of the twenty-five years since high school. We did not do the math.

We redid living rooms in which the furniture was not worn out. We threw away clothing that was merely out of style. We drank wine when the label on our prescription said it was dangerous to use alcohol while taking this medication. "They always put that on the label," we told our children when they asked about this. We saw that they were worried. We knew it was because they loved us and needed us. How innocent they were. We hastened to reassure them: "It doesn't really hurt if you're careful."

We felt that it was important to be good to ourselves, and that this meant that it was dangerous to tell ourselves no. About anything, ever. Repression of one's desires was an unhealthy thing. *I work hard*, we told ourselves. *I deserve a little treat*. We treated ourselves every day.

And if it was dangerous for us to want and not have, it was even more so for our children. They must never know what it is to want something and not have it immediately. It will make them bitter, we told ourselves. So we anticipated their needs and desires. We got them both the doll and the bike. If their grades were good, we got them their own telephones.

There were times, coming into the house from work or walking early when all was quiet, when we felt uneasy about the sense of entitlement that characterized all our days. When we wondered if fevered overwork and excess of appetite were not two sides of the same coin—or rather, two poles between which we madly slalomed. *Probably yes*, we decided at these times. Suddenly we saw it all clearly: *I am driven by my creatures—my schedule, my work, my possessions, my hungers. I do not drive them; they drive me. Probably yes. Certainly yes. This is how it is*. We arose and did twenty sit-ups. The next moment had passed; we did none.

After moments like that, we were awash in self-contempt. *You are weak. Self-indulgent. You are spineless about work and about everything else. You set no limits. You will become ineffective*. We bridled at that last bit, drew ourselves up to our full heights, insisted defensively on our competence, on the respect we were due because of all our hard work. We looked for others whose lives were similarly overstuffed; we found them. "This is just the way it is," we said to one another on the train, in the restaurant. "This is modern life. Maybe some people have time to measure things out by teaspoonsfuls." Our voices dripped contempt for those people who had such time. We felt oddly defensive, though no one had accused us of anything. *But not me. Not anyone who has a life. I have a life. I work hard. I play hard*.

When did the collision between our appetites and the needs of our souls happen? Was there a heart attack? Did we get laid off from work, one of the thousands certified as extraneous? Did a beloved child become a bored stranger, a marriage fall silent and cold? Or, by some exquisite working of God's grace, did we just find the courage to look the truth in the eye and, for once, not blink? How did we come to know that we were dying a slow and unacknowledged death? And that the only way back to life was to set all our packages down and begin again, carrying with us only what we really needed?

We travail. We are heavy laden. Refresh us, O homeless, jobless, possession-less Savior. You came naked, and naked you go. And so it is for us. So it is for all of us.

REFLECTION

1. *I am driven by my creatures.* What have you been driven by lately? What are you driven by now? Take a moment to name it.
 2. Often it takes a crisis to shake us from the status quo. Do you have a moment like this in your story? What shook you, motivated you, or got you back in tune? Take a moment to reflect.
 3. Consider your current appetites and the needs of your soul today. Take a moment to invite Jesus into the space of desire in your life. Perhaps take a moment to express gratitude to the God who made us for relationship with Him.
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7 WEDNESDAY

OPENING PRAYER

Jesus, our savior. We turn our eyes and ears to you. We give our attention to you. Awaken us. Help us to hear what you are saying. Help us yield our hearts to you.

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 6:1-5

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

MEDITATION

Closer

an excerpt from “Reliving the Passion” by Walter Wangerin Jr.

Here comes Jesus, closer and closer to me. Ah, the closer he comes, the less I like it. His very existence threatens mine...

I’ve grown used to my way of life. I like the familiarity. I know my place in society, my reputation, my rights and privileges, all of which are comfortable to me. I know what power I have and what responsibilities. I worked hard for these things and deserve to keep them. Behold, I am a person of some prominence—small or large, it doesn’t matter: I am! This is me. This is my identity.

But here comes Jesus to Jerusalem, the seat of my existence, the place of my authority—and all of this is threatened. I rule here because Rome allows it and because religious tradition sanctifies it. Rome requires an obedient people. Religion authorizes me to hold them in check. But if the people riot, Rome will strip me of power. If religious practice is undermined, I lose identity. If religion here is ruined, why, the whole world tips in confusion and I slide off the edge.

Yet here comes Jesus, at Passover! At the feast of Unleavened Bread! When Jerusalem’s full of pilgrims, swollen five times its size—from 50,000 to 250,000 people!

Always the threat of this man is manifested in those whom his presence excites. Look how volatile the people are now! Worse than that, he is questioning religious laws developed over the centuries, the very forms by which we order ourselves and know ourselves and name ourselves.

If order is lost, so am I.

If I lose my power and prominence, I lose my identity, my being, my very self. And then I am not!

What then? What, then must I destroy before I am destroyed. Self-preservation is a law of nature. I will arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. Because if I do nothing, I will be nothing.

But look: here comes Jesus in my mother, in my spouse, in my children! Always, always he is manifest in those whom he has excited. They seem so fanatical; and their love of Jesus undermines their respect for me and my authority. I'm losing prominence in my own house, and power and honor. Worse, the zealots declare that I should willingly sacrifice these things, though I need them in order to maintain my identity and to be! They say that I should actually welcome the changes Jesus causes here and now—that I should deny my very self!

What then? What will I do to the Jesus in these people, coming closer and closer to the seat of my power, to me? Well, if I do nothing...

REFLECTION

1. *Here comes Jesus.* Where is Jesus encountering you today? This week?
 2. Where in your life or in the world around you do you notice a need for Christ's renewal? Reflect on one or two of these spaces/things.
 3. It is God's kindness that leads us to repentance. Take a moment to confess your own need for renewal to Jesus in prayer.
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OPENING PRAYER

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SCRIPTURE**1 John 3:18-24**

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

MEDITATION**A Look Inside (part one)**

by Edna Hong

The grinding power of the plain words of the gospel story is like the power of millstones; and those who can read them simply enough will feel as if rocks had been rolled upon them. —G.K. Chesterton

"Did you ever look inside yourself and see what you are not?" the crippled daughter in one of Flannery O'Connor's short stories shouts at her spiritually crippled mother. Few of us have looked long enough into ourselves to see that what seems to us and to others as normally attractive is actually as graceless as a scarecrow and even repulsive. It is an easy matter for the physical eye to spot physical deformity and blemishes in others and in oneself. It is not so easy for the eye of the spirit to spot a spiritual dwarf, hunchback, or cripple, although it is easier to see these spiritual deformities in others than in oneself.

This x-ray look at others is called "naked truth," "unvarnished truth." In literature and art it is called realism. But to spot it in one's self is not only difficult but painful, and no one wants to take the descending path to that naked, unvarnished truth, with all its unacceptable humiliations. It is much more comfortable to stay on the level of the plain and ordinary. Yet it is to this path that Lent invites us.

The reason Lent is so long is that this path to the truth of oneself is long and snagged with thorns, and at the very end one stands alone before the broken body crowned with thorns upon the cross. All alone—with not one illusion or self-delusion to prop one up. Yet not alone, for the Spirit of Holiness, who is also the Spirit of Helpfulness, is beside you and me. Indeed, this Spirit has helped to maneuver you and me down that dark, steep path to this crucial spot.

“But I’ve been to that place before,” the born-again Christian may protest. “Of course, the non-Christian and perhaps the brought-up Christian need to be brought to that crucial spot, but of all people, we who are born again should not. Is it not a kind of heresy to say that we need to go there again and again and again? Is it not to doubt our salvation, the power of our Savior to deliver us from the dominion of darkness?”

Lent would indeed be futile liturgical farce if the redeemed were henceforth sinless and if the tides of human nature were not always moving even the twice-born, who have not shed their human nature, in the direction of complacency and taking it all for granted. The tides of God always move in exactly the opposite direction—toward an ever deeper skepticism about ourselves (that we may have all the more confidence in God), toward an ever deeper self-distrust (that we may trust in God all the more). The high tides of human nature, even of the twice-born, move to drown the conscience. As long as the consciences of the born-again are housed in human flesh and bone, they are prone to the sleep of death and need continual rescuing.

Our self-indulgent and self-flattering age looks up on the self-maltreating and self-hating practices of the monastic and desert ascetics as pathetic and futile. We shiver to think of Suso making himself a cross with thirty protruding nails and wearing it on his back like a porcupine skin day and night. We laugh to think of him never taking a bath in order to mortify his comfort-seeking body. But for us who feel the need for daily showers (because soap had not broken dirt’s dominion), it most certainly is not spiritual self-mortification and asceticism that convince us we no longer need spiritual shower baths. It is rather our comfort-seeking spirits.

But the spirit of truth does not seek comfort. The purpose of Lent is not to escape the conscience, but to create a healthy hatred for evil, a heartfelt contrition for sin, and a passionately felt need for grace. This continuous movement of faith from a sense of sin to grace and forgiveness ends only when the spirit is ultimately released.

REFLECTION

1. The passage above invites us to consider our propensity to seek comfort, and also, perhaps, our resistance to discomfort. Does this resonate with you? Why?
 2. Are there areas of struggle in your life that feel like revolving door? Take a moment to bring these areas before Jesus in prayer.
 3. Take a moment to consider God’s love for you - love where you are, however you are. Respond with a prayer of gratitude.
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OPENING PRAYER

Jesus, our savior. We turn our eyes and ears to you. We give our attention to you. Awaken us. Help us to hear what you are saying. Help us yield our hearts to you.

SCRIPTURE***Luke 13:22-30***

Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"

He said to them, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.'

"But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'

"Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.'

"But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'

"There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."

MEDITATION**A Look Inside (part two)**

by Edna Hong - poem on the next page by Robert Herrick

Robert Herrick was moving the keeping of Lent in the right direction, away from mortifications of the flesh—fasting, hair shirts, pebbles in the shoes, burrs next to the skin, dour faces, and all that. But he stopped somewhat short of the true purpose of Lent, which is not to starve one's sin but to get rid of it. And then—then comes the spiritual energy, spiritual activity, spiritual eloquence...

These do not come from ecstasy but from a humbly grateful heart. Forgiveness of sins is what the gospel is all about. Forgiveness of sins is what Christ's death upon the cross is all about. The purpose of Lent is to arouse. To arouse the sense of sin. To arouse the sense of guilt for sin. To arouse the humble contrition for the guilt of sin that makes forgiveness possible. To arouse the sense of gratitude for the forgiveness of sins. To arouse or to motivate the works of love and the work for justice that one does out of gratitude for the forgiveness of one's sins.

To say it again—this time, backward: There is no motivation for works of love without a sense of gratitude, no sense of gratitude without forgiveness, no forgiveness without contrition, no contrition without a sense of guilt, no sense of guilt without a sense of sin.

In other words, a guilty suffering spirit is more open to grace than an apartheid or smug soul. Therefore, an age without a sense of sin, in which people are not even sorry for not being sorry for their sins, is in rather a serious predicament. Likewise an age with a Christianity so eager to forgive that it denies the need for forgiveness. For such an age, therefore, Lent can scarcely be too long!

"I have found only one religion that dares us to go down with me into the depth of myself," wrote G.K. Chesterton. And it is true. No other religion dares to take me down to the new beginning. Hence Lent is not a tediously long brooding over sin. Lent is a journey that could be called an upward descent, but I prefer to call it a downward ascent. It ends before the cross, where we stand in the white light of a new beginning. So fresh and new, says Chesterton, waxing lyrical, "that one can be grey and gouty—but only five minutes old!" The spirit that shuns this downward ascent all its lifelong days eventually ends up an aged fetus. There is an infinite difference between being brand-new and five minutes old and being an aged fetus!

Is this a Fast, to keep
the larder lean?
And clean
From fat of veals and sheep?

Is it to quit the dish
of flesh, yet still
To fill
The platter high with fish?

Is it to fast an hour,
Or ragg'd to go,
Or show
A down-cast look and sour?

No: 'tis a Fast to dole
Thy sheaf of wheat,
And meat,
Unto the hungry soul.

It is to fast from strife
And old debate,
And hate;
To circumcise thy life.

To show a heart grief-rent;
To starve thy sin,
Not bin;
And that's to keep thy Lent.

REFLECTION

1. Throughout the week, we have had an opportunity to reflect on sin, comforts that are not from god, and things in our lives that lead us astray. Take a moment now to consider some of those things if you have not already.
 2. Author Edna Hong suggests that we mustn't just starve our sin - we must get rid of it. What do you make of this? Take a moment to pray in response.
 3. Take a moment to share with Jesus what has risen to the surface this week that you'd like to leave at His Cross.
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10 SATURDAY

OPENING PRAYER

Jesus, our savior. We turn our eyes and ears to you. We give our attention to you. Awaken us. Help us to hear what you are saying. Help us yield our hearts to you.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

MEDITATION

Psalm of Ascent

by N. T. Wright

I must have sung this Psalm a hundred, perhaps a thousand, times before I stopped to think about the famous first verse. (I have seen it carved above doors and mantelpieces in mountainous parts of the country, sometimes in Latin.) 'I lift my eyes to the hills': it evokes a romantic picture of the Psalmist gazing up into crazy heights with awe and wonder. And the old translation made it seem as though the next line ('from whence comes my help') was a reference to the hills themselves: I look up to the hills, because that's where my help comes from.

But of course the opening lines mean nothing of the sort. In fact, it is as the Psalmist looks to the hills that he realizes that they are not the source of his help: his help comes from a much greater place, indeed a person, namely the God who made them (and everything else as well) in the first place.

Actually, the Psalmist might even be looking to the hills not as a pleasant and helpful sight, but as a source of danger: Jerusalem, surrounded by hills, could be the victim of a surprise attack. But even if we don't go that far, the opening of the Psalm appears to contrast the hills with the Lord himself, Yahweh, the creator God—even if only to say that if the hills appear great and powerful, the God who made them is far, far more powerful again.

The Psalm then launches out into a sustained praise of God as the one who watches over Israel, moving from the Psalmist's own trust ('my help' in verse 1) to an initiation: Yahweh will do this for you too. He will not let your foot be moved; he keeps you; and so on. It's worth turning this back into a claim that we make on our own behalf: Gracious Lord, you made heaven and earth; now, I pray, don't let my foot be moved, don't go to sleep while you're watching over me, be my shade on my right hand, keep me from all evil, preserve my going out and coming in. Whether we're on the move, resting, working, leaving home and returning—at every point, the Psalm promises that the world's creator will be with us and guard us.

But if we stop there, we're only made our way into the first level of the Psalm. Lent is a great time for pausing and pondering, for reading more deeply and, perhaps, more slowly. This short Psalm is a good place to see some of the other depths. In particular, we might contemplate the fact that Jesus himself made the Psalms his own prayer book, and doubtless knew most if not all of them by heart. What did it mean for him to pray these, up in the hills perhaps, as a boy, as a young man, as the 30-year-old coming to terms with the strong and clear vocation that it was time to act? What did it mean for him to realize that the unsleeping God, who had dwarfed him all his life, was now asking him to go to the unguarded place, the ultimate danger zone, the hill outside Jerusalem where she would go to his final great work but would not return home in the normal way?

As we think of Jesus fulfilling and transcending this Psalm, our hearts go out as well to all those who live with the times when it seems as though God has indeed been asleep, as though the sun and moon share hostile, as through all kinds of evil have won the day, and the comforting business of going out and coming in has been canceled forever by sickness, accident or a roadside bomb. Somehow, in Jesus, the promises come true again but at a different level. To see this takes courage and perseverance. As we pray this Psalm with God's suffering world on our hearts, let us pray particularly that the gap which to us seems so large, between the help promised here and the dire needs of the world, will be narrowed. And let us pray that we who take comfort in this Psalm may bring that comfort to others who need it.

REFLECTION

1. Set a timer for two minutes and sit in stillness/silence, imagining yourself at the bottom of a hill. When you are ready, read Psalm 121 again with this in mind.
 2. Read Psalm 121 again, but this time, read it in a posture of prayer.
 3. Take a moment to pray for one or two things in our suffering world that are on your heart, or pray for something around you that God brings to mind.
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CLOSING PRAYER

Jesus, our savior. The one who gave yourself for us that we may know life. Thank you for your gentleness and kindness. Thank you that we have experienced this kindness and gentleness as we have opened our hearts and minds to you this week. Cleanse us. Purify us. Make us empty vessels, and fill us, O Lord. Holy Spirit, be with us as we engage this world. We surrender to you. May your kingdom come and your will be done.

