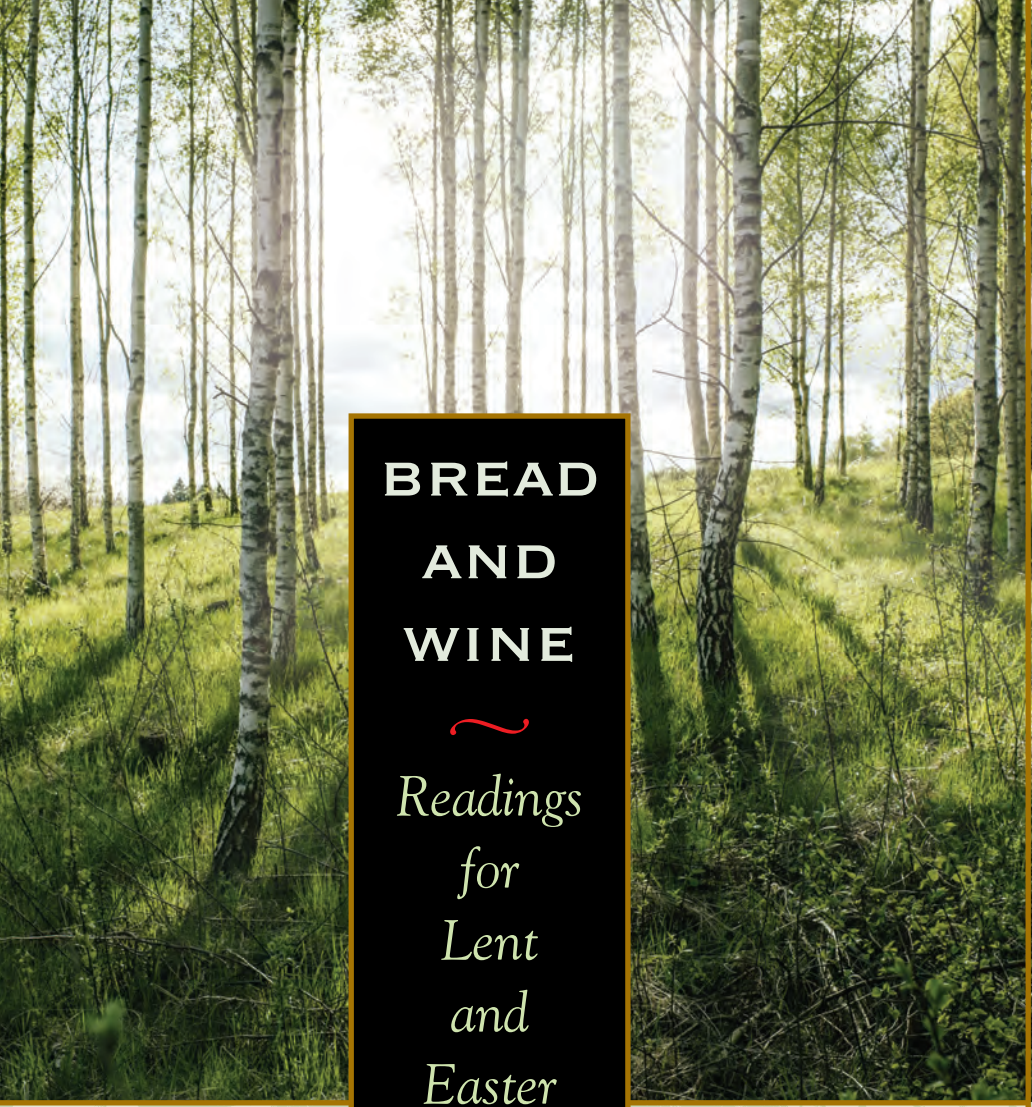

BREAD AND WINE

Readings for Lent and Easter

Arnold ♦ Augustine ♦ Berry ♦ Buechner ♦ Chesterton
Eckhart ♦ Gibran ♦ Kierkegaard ♦ Lewis ♦ Merton
Muggeridge ♦ Norris ♦ Nouwen ♦ Pascal ♦ Rossetti
Sayers ♦ Tolstoy ♦ Updike ♦ Wilde ♦ Yancey ♦ and others

Bread and Wine

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Looking at Stars

The God of curved space, the dry
God, is not going to help us, but the son
whose blood splattered
the hem of his mother's robe.

JANE KENYON

Because Lent begins on a different date each year, the readings in this book are arranged by number, not date. The first 46 readings cover the season of Lent proper, beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending on Holy Saturday. The last two sections of the book offer additional readings on the themes of resurrection and new life.

Contents

Introduction

You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone, the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God. **GRAHAM GREENE**

DOROTHY SAYERS writes that to make the Easter story into something that neither startles, shocks, terrifies, nor excites is "to crucify the Son of God afresh." Certainly that would have been unthinkable for Jesus' first followers, who experienced it firsthand: the heady excitement of his entry into Jerusalem, the traitorous cunning of Judas and the guilty recognition of their own cowardice, the terror of his slow suffocation, and finally the disarming wonder of an empty grave and a living body resurrected from the dead.

As for us, his latter-day disciples, few would deny the magnitude or drama of these events. But how many of us embrace their pain and promise? How many of

us, even at Easter, give Christ's death and resurrection any more attention than the weather?

To observe Lent is to strike at the root of such complacency. Lent (literally "springtime") is a time of preparation, a time to return to the desert where Jesus spent forty trying days readying for his ministry. He allowed himself to be tested, and if we are serious about following him, we will do the same.

First popularized in the fourth century, Lent is traditionally associated with penitence, fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. It is a time for "giving things up" balanced by "giving to" those in need. Yet whatever else it may be, Lent should never be morose—an annual ordeal during which we begrudgingly forgo a handful of pleasures. Instead, we ought to approach Lent as an opportunity, not a requirement. After all, it is meant to be the church's springtime, a time when, out of the darkness of sin's winter, a repentant, empowered people emerges. No wonder one liturgy refers to it as "this joyful season."

Put another way, Lent is the season in which we ought to be surprised by joy. Our self-sacrifices serve no purpose unless, by laying aside this or that desire, we are able to focus on our heart's deepest longing:

unity with Christ. In him – in his suffering and death, his resurrection and triumph – we find our truest joy.

Such joy is costly, however. It arises from the horror of our sin, which crucified Christ. This is why Meister Eckhart points out that those who have the hardest time with Lent are "the good people." Most of us are willing to give up a thing or two; we may also admit our need for renewal. But to *die* with Christ?

Spiritual masters often refer to a kind of "dread," the nagging sense that we have missed something important and have been somehow untrue – to ourselves, to others, to God. Lent is a good time to confront the source of that feeling. It is a time to let go of excuses for failings and shortcomings; a time to stop hanging on to whatever shreds of goodness we perceive in ourselves; a time to ask God to show us what we really look like. Finally, it is a time to face up to the personal role each of us plays in prolonging Christ's agony at Golgotha. As Richard John Neuhaus (paraphrasing John Donne) advises, "Send not to know by whom the nails were driven; they were driven by you, by me."

And yet our need for repentance cannot erase the good news that Christ overcame all sin. His resurrection frees us from ourselves. His empty tomb turns our

attention away from all that is wrong with us and with the world, and spurs us on to experience the abundant life he promises.

"Christ must increase, and I must decrease," the apostle John declares, and his words resonate through the readings collected in this book. The men and women who wrote them faced the same challenge we do: to discover Christ—the scarred God, the weak and wretched God, the crucified, dying God of blood and despair—amid the alluring gods of our feel-good age. He reveals the appalling strangeness of divine mercy, and the Love from which it springs. Such Love could not stay imprisoned in a cold tomb. Nor need we, if we truly surrender our lives to it.

The Editors
August 2002

SECTION I

Invitation

THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

Oscar Wilde

…And thus we rust Life's iron chain
Degraded and alone:
And some men curse, and some men weep,
And some men make no moan:
But God's eternal Laws are kind
And break the heart of stone.

And every human heart that breaks,
In prison-cell or yard,
Is as that broken box that gave
Its treasure to the Lord,
And filled the unclean leper's house
With the scent of costliest nard.

Ah! happy those whose hearts can break
And peace of pardon win!
How else may man make straight his plan
And cleanse his soul from Sin?
How else but through a broken heart
May Lord Christ enter in?

1

My Messy House

Kathleen Norris

WHEN I'M WORKING as an artist-in-residence at parochial schools, I like to read the psalms out loud to inspire the students, who are usually not aware that the snippets they sing at Mass are among the greatest poems in the world. But I have found that when I have asked children to write their own psalms, their poems often have an emotional directness that is similar to that of the biblical psalter. They know what it's like to be small in a world designed for big people, to feel lost and abandoned. Children are frequently astonished to discover that the psalmists so freely express the more unacceptable emotions, sadness and even anger, even anger at God, and that all of this is in the Bible that they hear read in church on Sunday morning.

Children who are picked on by their big brothers and sisters can be remarkably adept when it comes to writing cursing psalms, and I believe that the writing process offers them a safe haven in which to work through their desires for vengeance in a healthy way. Once a little boy wrote a poem called "The Monster Who Was Sorry." He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him: his response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: "Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done all that.'"

"My messy house" says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?

2

Repent

William Willimon

John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance… **MARK 1:4**

THE CHURCH OF TODAY lives in an ethically debilitating climate. Where did we go wrong? Was it the urbane self-centeredness of Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking* and its therapeutic successors? Was it the liberal, civic-club mentality of the heirs to the Social Gospel? Now we waver between evangelical TV triumphalism with its Madison Avenue values or live-and-let-live pluralism which urges open-mindedness as the supreme virtue. And so a recent series of radio sermons on "The Protestant Hour" urged us to "Be Good to Yourself." This was followed by an even more

innocuous series on "Christianity as Conflict Management." Whatever the gospel means, we tell ourselves, it could not mean death. Love, divine or human, could never exact something so costly. After all, our culture is at least vestigially Christian and isn't that enough?

The first week of Lent begins with old John the Baptist. His sermons could not be entitled, "Be Good to Yourself." This prophetic "voice crying in the wilderness" appears "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). He is not the Christ. John is the one who gets us ready. How does one prepare for this new age? Repent, change your ways, and get washed.

Like the prophets of old, John's word strikes abrasively against the easy certainties of the religious Establishment. He will let us take no comfort in our rites, tradition, or ancestry. Everybody must submit to be made over. Everybody must descend into the waters, especially the religiously secure and the morally sophisticated. God is able to raise up children even from stones if the Chosen fail to turn and repent.

How shocked was the church to see its Lord appear on the banks of the Jordan asking John to wash him too (Matt. 3:14–15). How can it be that the Holy One of

God should be rubbing shoulders with naked sinners on their way into the waters? The church struggled with this truth. Why must our Lord be in this repenting bath?

When Jesus was baptized, his baptism was not only the inauguration of his mission, but also a revelation of the shockingly unexpected nature of his mission. His baptism becomes a vignette of his own ministry. Why so shocking? On two occasions, Jesus uses "baptism" to refer to his own impending *death*. He asks his half-hearted disciples, "Can you drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I must be baptized?" (Mark 10:38).

As he submits to John's bath of repentance, Jesus shows the radical way he will confront the sin that enslaves humanity. Jesus' "baptism," begun in the Jordan and completed on Golgotha, is repentance, self-denial, *metanoia* to the fullest. John presents his baptism as a washing from sin, a turning from self to God. Jesus seeks even more radical *metanoia*.

His message is not the simple one of the Baptist, "Be clean." Jesus' word is more painful—"Be killed." The washing of this prophetic baptism is not cheap. "You also must consider yourselves dead," Paul tells the Romans (Rom. 6:11). In baptism, the "old Adam" is

drowned. "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).

To be baptized "into Christ" and "in the name of Christ" means to be incorporated into the way of life which characterized his life, the life of the empty one, the servant, the humble one, the obedient one, obedient even unto death (Phil. 2:6–11).

That day at the Jordan, knee deep in cold water, with old John drenching him, the Anointed One began his journey down the *via crucis*. His baptism intimated where he would finally end. His whole life was caught up in this single sign. Our baptism does the same.

The chief biblical analogy for baptism is not the water that washes but the flood that drowns. Discipleship is more than turning over a new leaf. It is more fitful and disorderly than gradual moral formation. Nothing less than daily, often painful, lifelong death will do. So Paul seems to know not whether to call what happened to him on the Damascus Road "birth" or "death"—it felt like both at the same time.

In all this I hear the simple assertion that we must submit to change if we would be formed into this cruciform faith. We may come singing "Just as I Am," but we will not stay by being our same old selves. The needs

of the world are too great, the suffering and pain too extensive, the lures of the world too seductive for us to begin to change the world unless we are changed, unless conversion of life and morals becomes our pattern. The status quo is too alluring. It is the air we breathe, the food we eat, the six-thirty news, our institutions, theologies, and politics. The only way we shall break its hold on us is to be transferred to another dominion, to be cut loose from our old certainties, to be thrust under the flood and then pulled forth fresh and newborn. Baptism takes us there.

On the bank of some dark river, as we are thrust backward, onlookers will remark, "They could kill somebody like that." To which old John might say, "Good, you're finally catching on."

3

In Mirrors

Walter Wangerin

IN MIRRORS I SEE MYSELF. But in mirrors made of glass and silver I never see the *whole* of myself. I see the me I want to see, and I ignore the rest.

Mirrors that hide nothing hurt me. They reveal an ugliness I'd rather deny. Yow! Avoid these mirrors of veracity!

My wife is such a mirror. When I have sinned against her, my sin appears in the suffering of her face. Her tears reflect with terrible accuracy my selfishness. My *self!* But I hate the sight, and the same selfishness I see now makes me look away.

"Stop crying!" I command, as though the mirror were at fault. Or else I just leave the room. Walk away.

Oh, what a coward I am, and what a fool! Only when I have the courage fully to look, clearly to know myself—even the evil of myself—will I admit my need for healing. But if I look away from her whom I have hurt, I have also turned away from her who might forgive me. I reject the very source of my healing.

My denial of my sin protects, preserves, perpetuates that sin! Ugliness in me, while I live in illusions, can only grow the uglier.

Mirrors that hide nothing hurt me. But this is the hurt of purging and precious renewal—and these are the mirrors of dangerous grace.

The passion of Christ, his suffering and his death, is such a mirror. Are the tears of my dear wife hard to look at? Well, the pain in the face of Jesus is harder. It is my *self* in my extremest truth. My sinful self. The death he died reflects a selfishness so extreme that by it I was divorced from God and life and light completely: I raised my *self* higher than God! But because the Lord God is the only true God, my pride did no more, in the end, than to condemn this false god of my *self* to death. For God will *be* God, and all the false gods will fall before him.

So that's what I see reflected in the mirror of Christ's crucifixion: my death. My rightful punishment. My sin and its just consequence. Me. And precisely because it is so accurate, the sight is nearly intolerable.

Nevertheless I will not avoid this mirror! No, I will carefully rehearse, again this year, the passion of my Jesus—with courage, with clarity and faith; for this is the mirror of dangerous grace, purging more purely than any other.

For this one is not made of glass and silver, nor of fallen flesh only. This mirror is made of righteous flesh and of divinity, both—and this one loves me absolutely. My wife did not choose to take my sin and so to reflect my truth to me. She was driven, poor woman. But Jesus did choose—not only to take the sin within himself, not only to reflect the squalid truth of my personal need, but also to reveal the tremendous truth of his grace and forgiveness. He took that sin *away*.

This mirror is not passive only, showing what is; it is active, creating new things to be. It shows me a new me behind the shadow of a sinner. For when I gaze at his crucifixion, I see my death indeed—but my death *done!*

His death is the death of the selfish one, whom I called ugly and hated to look upon.

And resurrection is another me.

4

Living Lent

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 came 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 waking 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 day the 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 teaspoonfuls." 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.

Shucks.

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