



LENTEN LANDS

a devotional guide

— ST. CHARLES AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH —

Lenten Lands
A Devotional Guide
St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

“My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for testing,” wrote the ancient Jewish teacher, Ben Sirach.

These words would make a fitting summary of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. From his first three temptations in the wilderness to his last seven words on Calvary, his entire life was, as John Calvin once observed, “a kind of perpetual cross.” And yet, when we meet Jesus making wine for a wedding party or on a hillside inviting children to share their laughter and play, we are struck immediately not by a dour expression but by the face of compassion and love, by his willingness to forgive and heal and gently instruct. His outrage always seemed reserved for the self-righteous and the power-hungry, who profited by demeaning and bullying.

The Lenten Lands into which we are entering take us deep into the life and teachings of Jesus and into the most profound wisdom of the ages. The disciplines of life and prayer and study, to which we commit ourselves in these brief weeks, are directed to one end: *that we might emerge in the unshakable joy for which each of us was created as human beings.* Testing comes. That we know. But joy comes to those who wait.

A Prayer for Lent: *O God whose face we long to see, in Christ you come in search of us, judging not by outward appearance but gazing into our hearts at the light you have kindled within us. As you gave Samuel insight to see young David as your shepherd-king, as once you led the man born blind to look to Christ and behold healing in that face, so now clear our vision and focus our sight that we may see Christ as the light that shines in our darkness. Amen. (Benedictine Breviary, altered)*

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Daily Readings and Reflections for Lent

This guide provides a daily Gospel text (most are drawn from Mark’s Gospel) and a reflection (sometimes closely related to the text, sometimes only tangentially) for your devotional use during the season. The reflections are drawn from some familiar sources, some less familiar. The purpose of the reflections is sometimes to evoke, sometimes to inspire, often to illuminate, but at times deliberately to bewilder just a bit so that we are drawn more deeply into contemplating with hearts and minds this faith we share.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6 (ASH WEDNESDAY)

Matthew 6:1-21

Reflection: “What finally matters is that our hearts become quiet cells where God can dwell, wherever we go and whatever we do.” -Henri J. M. Nouwen, “Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life.”

THURSDAY, MARCH 7

John 17:1-8

Reflection: “I will tell you something of what I did understand and see of the work of mercy. I understood this ... In our lives we experience storms, sorrows and grief; and the reason is that we are blind; we do not see God. If we saw God continually, we would have no mischievous feelings, or any sort of urge or desire that led to sin.” -Lady Julian of Norwich, “Showings of Divine Love” (the first book written in English by a woman).

FRIDAY, MARCH 8

John 17: 9-19

Reflection: “The dark night is God’s best gift to you, intended for your liberation. It is about freeing you from your ideas about God, your fears about God, your attachment to all the benefits you have been promised for believing in God, ... your dedication to doing and believing all the right things about God, your positive and negative evaluations of yourself as a believer in God ... and your sure cures for doubting God.” -Barbara Brown Taylor, “Learning to Walk in the Dark.”

SATURDAY, MARCH 9

John 17: 20-26

Reflection: “I never ask God to give himself to me. I beg him to purify, to empty me. If I am empty, God of his very nature is obliged to give himself to me to fill me.” -Meister Eckhart.

SUNDAY, MARCH 10

Luke 4:1-13

Reflection: “What is your greatest comfort? That I belong body and soul, in life and in death, not to myself, but to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.” -Heidelberg Catechism

MONDAY, MARCH 11**Mark 1:1-13**

Reflection: “Our prodigal God will let no one be an outsider; the wide circle of God’s grace encompasses everyone. God is always present with those who appear to stand outside, with those who seem to reject divine love and mercy. But because our prodigal God has set such endless, merciful boundaries, heaven and hell have become the same place On the day of resurrection, there was an unbelievably universal redistricting of boundary lines.” -Morgan Roberts, “A Beautiful View: A Friendlier Christianity as a Way of Life.”

TUESDAY, MARCH 12**Mark 1: 14-28**

Reflection: “I guess I must face the fact that catching one fish would not... alter my legacy as the worst fisherman in my bloodline. It is too late, I suppose... Still, as the dusk creeps over the ridge line, I carry my rods and tackle to the edge of the pond. The day, another day, will end in disappointment. But sometimes it also ends in fireflies.” -Rick Bragg, “My Southern Journey.”

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13**Mark 1: 29-45**

Reflection: “O divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console, to be understood, as to understand, to be loved, as to love” -St. Francis of Assisi

THURSDAY, MARCH 14**Mark 2:1-12**

Reflection: O Lord, “make me so obedient to your Spirit that my life may become a living prayer, and a witness to your unfailing presence.” -Martin Israel

FRIDAY, MARCH 15**Mark 2:12-22**

Reflection: “It also seemed to me that forgiving . . . and being forgiven . . . were the very same thing. ‘Forgive and you shall be forgiven’ sounds like a bargain. But perhaps it is something much more [F]orgiving and being forgiven are two names for the same thing. The important thing is that a discord has been resolved, and it is certainly the great Resolver who has done it.” -C. S. Lewis, “Letters to Malcolm”

SATURDAY, MARCH 16**MARK 21:23-3:6**

Reflection: “All our work is prayer.” -St. Jerome

SUNDAY, MARCH 17**John 5: 19-24**

Reflection: “In the meantime, there are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair, irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem from insignificance.” -W.H. Auden, “For the Time Being”

MONDAY, MARCH 18**Mark 3: 7-19a**

Reflection: “A Christian who has lived with a steady but essentially shallow form of faith may find himself called to suffer the full human truth of God, which is the absence of God, may find himself finally confronted with the absolute emptiness of the cross. God calls to us at every moment, and God is life, this life.” -Christian Wiman, “My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer”

TUESDAY, MARCH 19**Mark 3: 19-35**

Reflection: “It may be indispensable that our Lord’s teaching, by that elusiveness (to our systematizing intellect), should demand a response from the whole [person], should make it so clear that there is no question of learning a subject but of steeping ourselves in a Personality, acquiring a new outlook and temper, breathing a new atmosphere, suffering Him, in His own way, to rebuild in us the defaced image of Himself.” -C. S. Lewis, “Reflections on the Psalms”

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20**Mark 4:1-20**

Reflection: “The House of God stretches from one corner of the universe to the other I am not in charge of this House, and never will be I am a guest here, charged with serving other guests – even those who present themselves as my enemies.” -Barbara Brown Taylor, “An Altar in the World”

THURSDAY, MARCH 21**Mark 4:21-34**

Reflection: “We Christians must not sit among them [those who do not share our faith] like melancholy owls.” -Karl Barth

FRIDAY, MARCH 22**Mark 4:35-41**

Reflection: “O Lord, calm the waves of this heart; calm its tempests. Calm thyself, O my soul, so that the divine can act in thee. Calm thyself, O my soul, so that God may repose in thee, so that God’s peace may cover thee.” -Søren Kierkegaard

SATURDAY, MARCH 23

Mark 5:1-20

Reflection: “Sometimes to break a spell of death and destruction, you just have to drop a house on a witch.” -Rick Bragg, “My Southern Journey”

SUNDAY, MARCH 24

John 5:25-29

Reflection: In the Spanish of the Christian mystic Saint John of the Cross “his word for God is nada. God is no-thing. And since God is not a thing, God cannot be held on to. God can only be encountered as that which eclipses the reality of all other things.”

-Barbara Brown Taylor, “Learning to Walk in the Dark”

MONDAY, MARCH 25

Mark 5:21-43

Reflection: “Of what use is it to discourse learnedly on the Trinity, if you lack humility and therefore displease the Trinity? Lofty words do not make a person just or holy; but a good life makes him dear to God. I would far rather feel contrition than be able to define it.” -Thomas a Kempis, “The Imitation of Christ”

TUESDAY, MARCH 26

Mark 6:1-13

Reflection: “O Lord, who has taught us that to gain the whole world and to lose our souls is great folly, grant us the grace so to lose ourselves that we may truly find ourselves anew in the life of grace, and so to forget ourselves that we may remember your kingdom.” -Reinhold Niebuhr

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27

Mark 6: 13-29

Reflection: “Love is not blind. That is the last thing that it is. Love is bound. And the more it is bound the less it is blind.” -G. K. Chesterton

THURSDAY, MARCH 28

Mark 6: 30-46

Reflection: “The spiritual life is not a life before, after, or beyond everyday existence. No, the spiritual life can only be real when it is lived in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now As long as we have only a vague inner feeling of discontent with our present way of living, and only an indefinite desire for ‘things spiritual,’ our lives will continue to stagnate in a generalized melancholy.” -Henri J. M. Nouwen, “Making All Things New”

FRIDAY, MARCH 29

Mark 6: 47-56

Reflection: “Mark’s disciples are not the best candidates for accurately preserving explanations of parables [or other teachings of Jesus]. Whether they are as clueless as Mark portrays them, or whether the evangelist has deliberately portrayed them as in need of remedial instruction, the literary effect of their description is the same. Mark is telling his readers, ‘Go beyond the disciples, be open to the mystery and the challenge, interpret for yourselves.’”

-Amy-Jill Levine, “Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi”



“The Northend” (watercolor) by Michael Jinkins

SATURDAY, MARCH 30

Mark 7: 1-23

Reflection: “Reverence runs across religions and even outside them through the fabric of any community, however secular. We may be divided from one another by our beliefs, but never by reverence. If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent.” -Paul Woodruff, “Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue”

SUNDAY, MARCH 31

Luke 15: 16-32

Reflection: “At sunrise everything is luminous but not clear. It is those we live with and should know who elude us. You can love completely without complete understanding.”
-Norman Maclean, “A River Runs Through It”

MONDAY, APRIL 1

Mark 7:24-37

Reflection: “You’ve heard it said that when all else fails, follow instructions. So we breathe, try to slow down and pay attention, try to love and help God’s other children, and hardest of all - at least for me – learn to love our depressing, hilarious, mostly decent selves. We get thirsty people water, read to the very young and old, and listen to the sad. We pick up litter and try to leave the world a slightly better place for our stay here. Those are the basic instructions, to which I can add only: Amen. Let it happen. Yes!... So it is, we do the best we can, and we leave the results in God’s good hands. Amen.” -Anne Lamott, “Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers”

TUESDAY, APRIL 2

Mark 8: 1-10

Reflection: “If you regard contemplation principally as a means to escape from the miseries of human life, as a withdrawal from the anguish and the suffering of this struggle for reunion with other [people] in the charity of Christ, you do not know what contemplation is and you will never find God in your contemplation.” -Thomas Merton, “New Seeds of Contemplation”

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 3

Mark 8: 11-26

Reflection: “The world is the unquiet city of those who live for themselves and are therefore divided against one another in a struggle that cannot end, for it will go on eternally in hell But if you try to escape from this world merely by leaving the city and hide yourself in solitude, you will only take the city with you into solitude. And yet you can be entirely out of the world while remaining in the midst of it, if you let God set you free from your own selfishness and if you live for love alone.” -Thomas Merton, “New Seeds of Contemplation”

THURSDAY, APRIL 4

Mark 8:27-91

Reflection: “Bonhoeffer is not prepared to find a category for Christ. His questions are not, ‘How is it possible for Christ to be both [human] and God?’ His question is never ‘How?’ but always ‘Who?’ He will not even have a disguised ‘What?’ or ‘How?’ in the form of a ‘Who?’ Every avenue of his thinking leads him to confront Christ and ask, ‘Who art thou, Lord?’ or to be confronted by Christ and hear his question, ‘Who do you say that I am?’”
-Edwin H. Robertson, Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Christ the Center”

FRIDAY, APRIL 5

Mark 9: 2-13

Reflection: “Have you found what you sought, my soul? You sought God, and you found God to be the highest of all things, which nothing better could be conceived; you found God to be Life itself and Light, Wisdom and Good, eternal Blessedness and blessed Eternity; you found God to be everywhere and always.” -St. Anselm of Canterbury

SATURDAY, APRIL 6

Mark 9: 14-29

Reflection: “We ought not to have or let ourselves be satisfied with any thought of God. When the thought goes, our God goes with it. No, what we want is a real God who far transcends the thoughts of people and creatures. This God does not disappear unless we turn our back on him of our own accord. He who has God thus, in reality, has gotten God divinely; to him God is apparent in all things. Everything smacks to him of God; everywhere God’s image stares him in the face.” -Meister Eckhart

SUNDAY, APRIL 7

John 8: 46-59

Reflection: “I do not know much about God and prayer. But I have come to believe, over the last twenty-five years, that there’s something to be said about keeping prayer simple. Help. Thanks. Wow.” -Anne Lamott, “Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers”

MONDAY, APRIL 8

Mark 9: 30-41

Reflection: “If you think you have understood God, it is not God.” -St. Augustine of Hippo

TUESDAY, APRIL 9

Mark 9: 42-50

Reflection: “Immortal Heat, Oh let thy greater flame/ Attract the lesser to it: let those fires,/ Which shall consume the world first make it tame;/ And kindle in our hearts such true desires,/ As may consume our lusts, and make thee way.” -George Herbert, “Love II”

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 10**Mark 10: 1-16**

Reflection: “Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, ‘Do it again’ and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead, because grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, ‘Do it again’ to the sun; and every evening, ‘Do it again’ to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, but our God is younger than we.” -G. K. Chesterton, “Orthodoxy”

THURSDAY, APRIL 11**Mark 10: 17-31**

Reflection: “You leave me, then, to my own practice and experience?” “Absolutely! Here there is no room for any opinion except that which comes out of experience. Go, try, test what you have learned.” -Caspar Calvor, “The Ladder of Devotion”

FRIDAY, APRIL 12**Mark 10: 32-45**

Reflection: “The incarnate Word is with us,/ is still speaking, is present/ always, yet leaves no sign/ but everything that is.” -Wendell Berry, Sabbath Poem, VIII, “Given: Poems”

SATURDAY, APRIL 13**Mark 10: 46-52**

Reflection: “What do we really believe? I mean, believe in such a way that we stake our lives on it? The church is the church only when it exists for others.” -Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison.”

SUNDAY, APRIL 14 (PASSION SUNDAY ALSO CALLED PALM SUNDAY)**Luke 19: 41-48**

Reflection: “We want the operation because we want the cure. We are naked and open to his eyes, though draped in antiseptic linens. He is quick and powerful, piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, though both choose amnesia. He separates them, even as he divides the joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart in a small, vestigial rooted, and determined thing Thus God performs his surgery, closing and opening simultaneously, always with new reasons to go in.” -Mark Jarman, “Epistle”

MONDAY, APRIL 15**Mark 11: 12-25**

Reflection: “And opening my eyes, I am afraid/ to look – this inward look that society scorns – /Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse/ than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.” -Anne Sexton, “Kind Sir, These Woods”

TUESDAY, APRIL 16**Mark 11:27-33**

Reflection: “This is the light of autumn, not the light of spring./ The light of autumn: you will not be spared./ The songs have changed; the unspeakable/ has entered them./ This is the light of autumn, not the light that says/ I am reborn./ Not the spring dawn: I strained, I suffered, I was delivered./ This is the present, an allegory of waste.” -Louise Glück, “October 4” from “Averno.”

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17**Mark 12-1-11**

Reflection: “Our God of mercy, hear me – for their sake! ... You know, sweet Lord, how much I love them, how I have poured out on them all that I can from the depths of my being, how my heart melts over them ... You know how I want to profit them in love rather than to preside over them ... Hear me, then, O Lord my God, hear me so that your eyes may watch over them day and night.” -Aelred of Rievaulx, “Pastoral Prayer”

THURSDAY, APRIL 18 (MAUNDY THURSDAY)**Mark 14:12-25**

Reflection: “O Lord, I do not pray for tasks equal to my strength: I ask for strength equal to my tasks.” -Phillips Brooks

FRIDAY, APRIL 19 (GOOD FRIDAY)**Mark 15: 1-47**

Reflection: “O Lord Jesus Christ ... save us from the error of wishing to admire you instead of being willing to follow you and resemble you.” Søren Kierkegaard

SATURDAY, APRIL 20 (HOLY SATURDAY)**John 19: 38-42**

Reflections: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” -Ludwig Wittgenstein
Thus, we might agree with the Desert Father, Sisois, who said: “Our form of pilgrimage is keeping the mouth closed.”



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