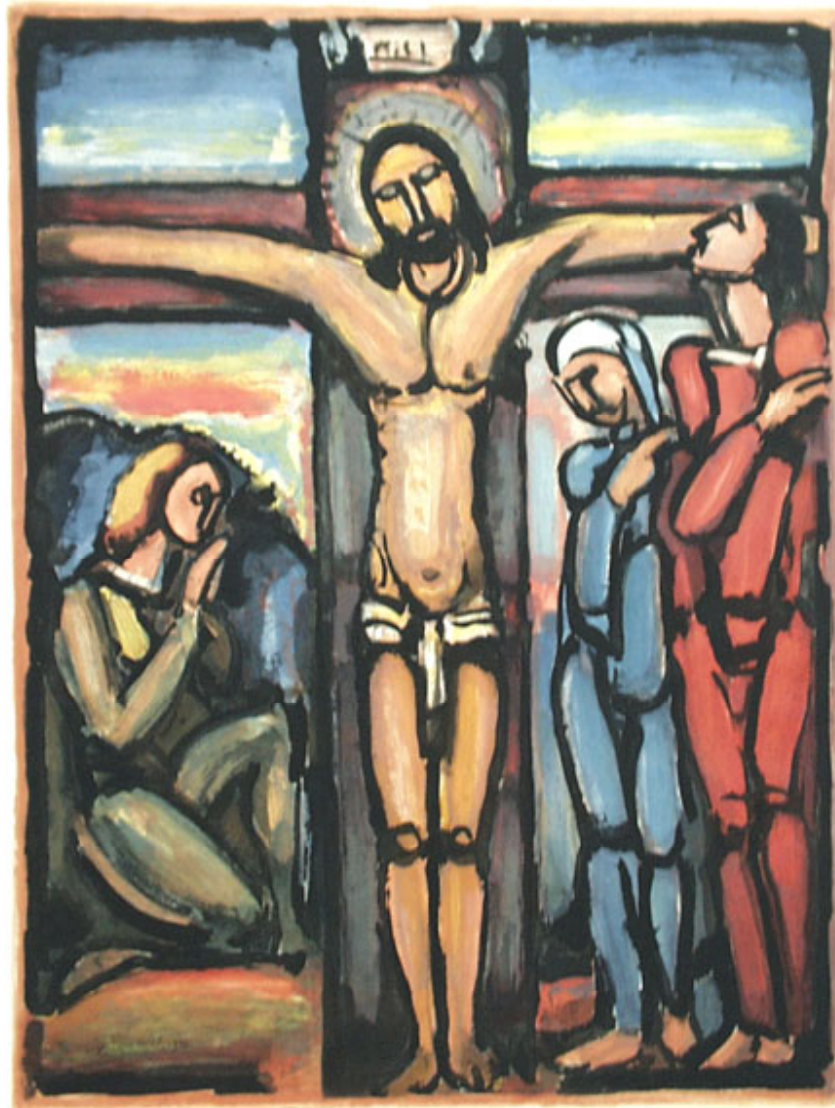


ECCE HOMO: POEMS FOR LENT AND HOLY WEEK



COMPILED BY KAREN A. KEELY
FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP
MEDITATION

IMAGE: GEORGES ROUAULT, *CRUCIFIXION*

Reading Poetry

Some people reading this book are probably long-time lovers of poetry, while for others this may be a new experience. For those of you who are new to reading poetry, I offer a few suggestions:

Read the poem aloud, at least some of the time. Remember that reading poetry is supposed to be enjoyable. Read the poem out loud and enjoy the words rolling off of your tongue. Read the poem naturally, pausing at punctuation, such as commas and periods, rather than at the end of lines. Feel free to enjoy the beauty of a poem even if you can't say specifically what every line is about.

Re-read it. I like to say that poetry can't really be read; it can only be re-read. So if at first you don't know what's going on in a poem, take a deep breath, relax, and read it again.

Think about the poem. Ask yourself what the poem is primarily trying to do. Is it telling a story about characters? Is it painting a picture or presenting an image? Is it trying to say something to a particular audience?

Is the poem trying to tell us something, and if so, what? Is the poem about a great universal truth – about human nature, about God, about love? Or is it perhaps about current social conditions? Or does the poem relate a personal, individual experience or emotion, either the poet's own, or something he or she has imagined?

Poetry is, of course, an art form, so it's worth thinking about the poet's aesthetic choices. For example, does the poem have a central image? Several images? If so, how do the images relate to one another?

Are there repeated words or lines? Are there words with specific connotations that are especially interesting? What words have unusual or special meanings? Why does the poet phrase things the way he or she does? (For example, think about the phrases "died," "deceased," "passed on," "now with God," and "kicked the bucket." They literally mean the same thing, but the connotations are quite different.)

Relax. If the poem as a whole is overwhelming to you, begin with the parts of the poem that you do get, and then work from there. Remember that there is no one right answer to the puzzle of a poem; your job is not to "solve" the poem but to respond to it, both intellectually and emotionally. It is okay not to understand everything!

And if, after reading a particular poem a couple of times, you simply are not getting much out of it, leave it. You could put the book down and try again later. Or, even better, go back to an earlier poem that really spoke to you and read it again. In fact, returning to poems you've already read and thought about is the best way to make them truly yours, to internalize them such that phrases or lines from the poems may come to you at odd moments. At that point, when you begin to live with a poem – or it begins to live with you – you will have gained the blessing of a new lifelong companion.

Talking about Poetry

Some of you may be reading this book in community this Lent, and so I offer a few suggestions for conducting a discussion about poetry.

The length of time you have to talk as a group will obviously affect how many poems you can discuss. Some poems may generate a lot of response from a group, while other poems may “fall flat” for any number of reasons. If that happens, then simply move on to another poem; it certainly doesn’t mean that it’s not a good poem or that you all aren’t good discussants!

Read the poem aloud. Even if all of the participants have already read the poem on their own, ask someone to read the poem aloud. This refreshes everyone’s memory and gives you one more chance to appreciate the poem.

Ask if anyone has initial thoughts on or responses to the poem. Sometimes this opening question is all it takes to launch an interesting conversation about a poem. If discussion lags, try one of the following conversational gambits:

Ask what people think of important images in the poem. Is there a central image to the poem? An interesting symbol?

Ask about the language of the poem. Think together about any repeated words or lines in the poem, or about words with interesting connotations.

If the poet seems to be making an argument about something, discuss whether you agree or disagree. Sometimes poets have a specific message to their audience; you can certainly enjoy a poem without agreeing with the poet! Alternatively, you may agree with the poet’s argument but not care for all or part of the poem. All of these responses can be fruitful contributions to discussion.

How does this poem speak to you theologically this Lent? You are talking about these poems as a spiritual discipline this Lenten season, so honor that commitment in your discussion. Do these poems express anything that you have not been able to put into words?

Once discussion seems to wind down, read the poem aloud again. You may hear something new in a poem after discussing it with others.

Ash Wednesday and the First Week of Lent: The Journey Begins

The forty days of Lent that begin on Ash Wednesday are a time for Christians' self-examination, purification, and a closer journey with God. Many Christians adopt a spiritual discipline for the forty days, including fasting from certain foods or adding spiritual study and reading to their daily schedules.

The forty days of Lent remind us of the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism, fasting and being tempted by Satan (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13), as well as the forty days that Moses spent in spiritual questing on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 24:18). There is also the spiritual legacy of the forty years that the Israelites spent wandering in the desert after their release from slavery in Egypt (Deuteronomy 8:2-4). All of these scriptural traditions give us a heritage of spiritual questing through prayer and self-discipline.

The Lenten journey begins with Ash Wednesday, the day on which worshipers' foreheads are marked with a cross of the dark ash of palms (often palms used in the previous year's Palm Sunday observances) as a sign of penitence and mourning and as a foretaste of the death that is to come on Good Friday.

The Lenten poems in this collection include a poem on prayer every Monday and one about the Crucifixion every Friday, a weekly rhythm we'll continue throughout the Lenten season. We will also read poems of lamentation and pain – reminders of Jesus's suffering – as well as of contemplation and praise, thanking God in the midst of woe.

Ash Wednesday: Lenten Discipline

Many Christians adopt a new spiritual discipline for the period of Lent. George Herbert recognizes that human frailty may well result in many of those Lenten disciplines faltering before the season is over, but he reassures us that any spiritual discipline – even an incomplete, imperfect one – puts us on Christ’s pathway, where we will be more likely to meet Him.

From *Lent*

GEORGE HERBERT

Welcome deare feast of Lent: who loves not thee,
He loves not Temperance,¹ or Authoritie,
But is compos’d of passion.
The Scriptures bid us *fast*,² the Church sayes, *now*:
Give to thy Mother, what thou wouldst allow
To ev’ry Corporation.

... It’s true, we cannot reach Christ’s fortieth day;
Yet to go part of that religious way,
Is better than to rest:
We cannot reach our Savior’s purity;
Yet are bid, Be holy ev’n as he.³
In both let’s do our best.

Who goeth in the way which Christ hath gone,
Is much more sure to meet with him, than one
That travelleth by-ways:
Perhaps my God, though he be far before,
May turn, and take me by the hand, and more
May strengthen my decays.

Yet Lord instruct us to improve our fast
By starving sin and taking such repast
As may our faults control:
That ev’ry man may revel at his door,
Not in his parlor; banqueting the poor,
And among those his soul.

1633

¹ “Temperance” – moderation, self-restraint.

² “fast” – to eat little or to abstain from certain foods as a religious discipline.

³ “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

Thursday of Last Epiphany: Lenten Discipline

Fasting – complete abstinence from all food on certain days, or from a particular type of food for the entire forty days – has for centuries been a traditional Lenten discipline. In this poem, Robert Herrick explores the intended meaning behind such self-denial, emphasizing the spiritual rather than physical meaning of a fast. Herrick uses “fast” metaphorically as well as literally in his description of “fast[ing] from strife/ And old debate,/ And hate.”

To Keep a True Lent

ROBERT HERRICK

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,¹ yet still
To fill
The platter high with fish?

Is it to fast an hour,
Or ragg'd 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.²

To show a heart grief-rent;
To starve thy sin,
Not bin;³
And that's to keep thy Lent.

1648

¹ “flesh” – meat; many Christians fast from meat on Fridays during Lent but still eat fish, to which the remainder of the stanza alludes.

² Circumcision is often used as a metaphor for spiritual conversion, as in St. Paul's description of Abraham, who “received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Romans 3:11).

³ “bin” – container for storing food.

Friday of Last Epiphany: Crucifixion

This traditional spiritual asks the listener to imagine him or herself at Jesus's crucifixion. Such an imaginative step is particularly powerful for oppressed people, such as the American slaves who traditionally sang this song, who are thus reminded that Jesus has experienced terrible suffering and understands their own pain. The repetition of lines allows for ease of communal singing; when combined with the song's slow, somber melody, this repetition also gives the spiritual a meditative quality. Note the physical response to the spiritual contemplation; picturing oneself at the scene of the crucifixion leads one to "tremble, tremble, tremble."

Were You There?

TRADITIONAL

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
O sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
O sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
O sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when the sun refused to shine?¹
Were you there when the sun refused to shine?
O sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
O sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

before 1865

¹ A reference to the darkness that comes over the land for the three hours before Jesus's death (Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44-45).

Saturday of Last Epiphany: Lenten Journey

The speaker in Joyce Rupp's poem equates the black ash of Ash Wednesday with black humus, decayed organic material that facilitates new life. Notice the scope of her poem, including both the small and concrete ("little blip of life," "palms, fried and baked") and the entire cosmos (with which the poem begins and ends). Lent is a season of reflection on both of these extremes, from the finite to the infinite. Notice also that the fourth stanza has an extra line, such that "I am one in the One" alters the rhythm of the poem somewhat and therefore stands out when one reads the poem aloud.

Lent 2001

JOYCE RUPP

The cosmos dreams in me
while I wait in stillness,
ready to lean a little further
into the heart of the Holy.

I, a little blip of life,
a wisp of unassuming love,
a quickly passing breeze,
come once more into Lent.

No need to sign me
with the black bleeding ash
of palms, fried and baked.
I know my humus¹ place.

This Lent I will sail
on the graced wings of desire,
yearning to go deeper
to the place where
I am one in the One.

Oh, may I go there soon,
in the same breath
that takes me to the stars
when the cosmos dreams in me.

2001

¹ "humus" – black or brown organic substance, consisting of partially or wholly decayed vegetable or animal matter; provides nutrients for plant life. The word "humility" comes from the same Latin root as does "humus."

First Sunday in Lent: Brokenness

As Dylan Thomas movingly argues in this poem, the very bread and wine of the Eucharist are themselves signs of brokenness, for they are produced by destruction. Only when oats and grapes are broken do they become bread and wine, which are in turn consumed by people who will harvest more oats and grapes. This is an eternal life, but one only made possible through brokenness.

This Bread I Break

DYLAN THOMAS

This bread I break was once the oat,
This wine upon a foreign tree
Plunged in its fruit;
Man in the day or wind at night
Laid the crops low, broke the grape's joy.

Once in this wine the summer blood
Knocked in the flesh that decked the vine,
Once in this bread
The oat was merry in the wind;
Man broke the sun, pulled the wind down.

This flesh you break, this blood you let
Make desolation in the vein,
Were oat and grape
Born of the sensual root and sap;
My wine you drink, my bread you snap.¹

1936

¹ In the King James translation of the Bible, the brokenness of the bread is emphasized: "the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he *brake* it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is *broken* for you: this do in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:23-24, emphasis added). More accurate recent translations delete the second reference: "This is my body that is for you."

Monday of the First Week of Lent: Prayer

Thomas More's poetic prayer asks God for the strength and commitment to turn away from sin and towards God. In particular, the speaker in this poem imagines that, for a person who has sought to reject sin, the moment of death would be not a terrifying experience of judgment but rather the embrace of "a very tender, loving father." Notice the repeated imagery of fire and heat in the first part of the poem; clearly escaping sin's "thrall" and setting one's heart on God is not easy work. (The poem below is the final two stanzas of Thomas More's "A Prayer of Picus Mirandula Unto God.")

A Prayer

SIR THOMAS MORE

Grant I thee pray such heat into mine heart,
That to this love of thine may be egall;¹
God grant me from Sathanas service to astart,²
With whom me rueth so long to have be thrall;³
Grant me good Lord and creator of all,
The flame to quench of all sinful desire,
And in thy love set all mine heart afire.

That when the journey of this deadly life
My silly ghost hath finished, and thence
Departed must without his fleshly wife;⁴
Alone into his lord's high presence,
He may thee find: O well of indulgence,
In thy lordship not as a lord: but rather
As a very tender, loving father.

Amen

c. 1510

¹ "egall" – equal.

² "Sathanas" – Satan's. "astart" – to escape.

³ In this line, the speaker expresses remorse for having been enslaved by Satan for so long.

⁴ "silly" – pitiable. That is, upon death, the "silly ghost" of the soul leaves behind the "fleshly wife" of the body to enter into God's presence.

Tuesday of the First Week of Lent: Lamentation

This sonnet of lamentation expresses both fear of judgment but also a tentative faith that we may be spared judgment. The speaker asks that Christ show the same mercy he did towards the disciple Peter, whose attempts at faithfulness regularly failed. Jesus in this poem is both the strong savior who can walk on water and the man with “the weary human face.”

*E Tenebris*¹
OSCAR WILDE

Come down, O Christ, and help me!² reach thy hand,
For I am drowning in a stormier sea
Than Simon on thy lake of Galilee:³
The wine of life is spilt upon the sand,
My heart is as some famine-murdered land,
Whence all good things have perished utterly,
And well I know my soul in Hell must lie
If I this night before God’s throne should stand.
“He sleeps perchance, or rideth to the chase,
Like Baal, when his prophets howled that name
From morn to noon on Carmel’s smitten height.”⁴
Nay, peace, I shall behold before the night,
The feet of brass,⁵ the robe more white than flame,⁶
The wounded hands, the weary human face.

1881

¹ “E Tenebris” – out of darkness (Latin).

² Perhaps addressed to the representation of Christ on a crucifix.

³ A reference to the gospel scene in which Simon Peter and other disciples, having spent the night at sea in a storm, are amazed to see Jesus walking on the water toward them. Peter, taking heart, walks on the water toward Jesus but then becomes afraid of the storm and begins to sink; he calls out in fear, “Lord, save me!” and is rescued by Jesus, who asks him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52; John 6:16-21).

⁴ A reference to the Biblical scene in which the Lord’s prophet Elijah triumphs over the priests of the deity Baal in a competition on Mount Carmel, a mountain in what is now northern Israel. Baal’s priests, who have been calling out to their god for hours with no answer, are mocked by Elijah, who scornfully wonders whether their god “has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” The Lord helps Elijah to win the prophecy competition, after which all of the priests of Baal are killed (1 Kings 18).

⁵ “feet of brass” – In John’s Revelation, Christ is shown with “feet ... like burnished bronze [or brass], refined as in a furnace” (Revelation 1:15).

⁶ White robes are used as a symbol of purity in several Biblical texts, including the Book of Revelation, in which “they who have come out of the great ordeal ... have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14).

Wednesday of the First Week of Lent: Fear

Langston Hughes contrasts joy and fear: the joy of spring and of Jesus, destroyed by those who fear such joy. Hughes recognizes Jesus's blessed nature ("the Son of God") but concentrates far more on Jesus's humanity, referring to him repeatedly as "Mary's Boy" and "Mary's Son." The crucifiers also seem all too human – confused, fearful – in their terrible contribution to the "awful thing" that happened in the midst of a joyful spring.

The Ballad of Mary's Son

LANGSTON HUGHES

It was in the Spring
The Passover had come.
There was feasting in the streets and joy.
But an awful thing
Happened in the Spring –
Men who knew not what they did¹
Killed Mary's Boy.
He was Mary's Son,
And the Son of God was He –
Sent to bring the whole world joy.
There were some who could not hear,
And some were filled with fear –
So they built a cross
For Mary's Boy.

1954

¹ "Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'" (Luke 23:34).

Thursday of the First Week of Lent: Thanksgiving

One May 11, 1661, the American Puritan Anne Bradstreet wrote in her journal about her mixed feelings about the four months of illness she had been suffering. In the journal entry, she wrote of her physical distress, acknowledged that she was now feeling better, and confessed that she was not as consistently grateful or faithful as she felt she should be: "... it pleased the Lord to support my heart in His goodnes, and to hear my Prayers, and to deliver me out of adversity. But, alas! I cannot render unto the Lord according to all His loving kindnes, nor take the cup of salvation with Thanksgiving as I ought to doe." She then wrote the following poem, in which she expressed the gratitude and submission that she confesses she cannot always feel as she ought.

My Thankfull Heart with Glorifying Tongue

ANNE BRADSTREET

My thankfull heart with glorying Tongue
Shall celebrate Thy name,
Who hath restor'd, redeem'd, recur'd¹
From sicknes, death, and Pain.

I cry'd thou seem'st to make some stay,²
I sought more earnestly;
And in due time thou succour'st³ me
And sent'st me help from High.

Lord, whilst my fleeting time shall last,
Thy Goodness let me Tell.
And new Experience I have gain'd,
My future Doubts repell.

An humble, faitfull⁴ life, O Lord,
For ever let me walk;
Let my obedience testefye,
My Praise lyes not in Talk.

Accept, O Lord, my simple mite,⁵
For more I cannot give;
What Thou bestow'st I shall restore,
For of thine Almes I live.

1661

¹ "recur'd" – cured, healed.

² "stay" – delay. That is, she cries out to God about the delay in her recovery.

³ "succour'st" – succor; to give assistance in time of difficulty.

⁴ "faitfull" – faithful.

⁵ "mite" – a reference to the widow's mite (Mark 12:42; Luke 21:2).

Friday of the First Week of Lent: Crucifixion

Christina Rossetti's poem laments the hardness of the human heart, that it is possible to contemplate the Crucifixion and not weep in terrible grief as did the women at the cross, the disciples, and nature itself. The poem ends with an entreaty to Jesus to break that hardness of heart; she compares a "stone" heart to the stone in the wilderness that Moses, obeying God's command, strikes with a staff, bringing forth water from the stone so that the thirsty Israelites could drink (Exodus 17:6). Note that in the first line she contrasts a stone and a sheep but by the end recognizes that even a stone-hearted person is a sheep to be cared for by the Shepherd. For Rossetti, no heart is so stony, no sheep is so lost, that it is beyond redemption.

Good Friday

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Am I a stone, and not a sheep,
That I can stand, O Christ, beneath Thy cross,
To number drop by drop Thy blood's slow loss,
And yet not weep?
Not so those women loved
Who with exceeding grief lamented Thee;¹
Not so fallen Peter weeping bitterly;
Not so the thief was moved;²
Not so the Sun and Moon
Which hid their faces in a starless sky,³
A horror of great darkness at broad noon –
I, only I.
Yet give not o'er,
But seek Thy sheep, true Shepherd of the flock;
Greater than Moses, turn and look once more
And smite a rock.

1862

¹ A reference to the women followers who gathered at the Cross (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:49; and John 19:25-27).

² A reference to the thief on the cross who asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom (Luke 23:42).

³ A reference to the darkness that comes over the land for the three hours before Jesus's death (Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44-45).

Saturday of the First Week of Lent: Meditation

In this poem by Li-Young Lee, a child's curiosity about the world becomes the basis for a man's spiritual inquiry into the nature of the universe. For the child, this inquiry is a way of reassuring himself within the warm embrace of his family of his place in the universe; for the man, such reassurance is harder to come by but is a necessary discipline in spiritual questing, as the last stanza proclaims.

Nativity

Li-Young Lee

In the dark, a child might ask, What is the world?
just to hear his sister
promise, An unfinished wing of heaven,
just to hear his brother say,
A house inside a house,
but most of all to hear his mother answer,
One more song, then you go to sleep.

How could anyone in that bed guess
the question finds its beginning
in the answer long growing
inside the one who asked, that restless boy,
the night's darling?

Later, a man lying awake,
he might ask it again,
just to hear the silence
charge him, This night
arching over your sleepless wondering,

this night, the near ground
every reaching-out-to overreaches,

just to remind himself
out of what little earth and duration,
out of what immense good-bye,

each must make a safe place of his heart,
before so strange and wild a guest
as God approaches.

2001

Second and Third Weeks of Lent: The Journey Through the Desert

We've been in the desert, in the wilderness, for several days now, and there is no end in sight. We must rely on faith to continue on our journey.

We begin this next week, as every week, with a Sabbath celebration, a feast day in the midst of our Lenten fast. Sundays are not included in the forty days of Lent as they are always feast days of the Resurrection. Then, fortified by our worship, we return to our Lenten journey, traveling through lamentation, sacrifice, and Crucifixion once again.

We have a long tradition in the Psalms both of calling out to God in distress as well as in praise and of using music in our devotional life. Several of the poems in the next two weeks are psalms or hymns, and of course poetry itself is a musical form, one that relies on sound and rhythm to create beauty.

Second Sunday in Lent: Sabbath

Wendell Berry's commitment to a weekly Sabbath is apparent in his series of Sabbath poems, which he has been writing for more than twenty years now. In this poem, he explores the terrible effects of not taking such a day of rest and worship. He concludes that the loss of this rhythm of work interspersed with rest is ultimately the loss of the world itself, of "all light and singing."

Sabbath Poem V, 1980

WENDELL BERRY

Six days of work are spent
To make a Sunday quiet
That Sabbath may return.
It comes in unconcern;
We cannot earn or buy it.
Suppose rest is not sent
Or comes and goes unknown,
The light, unseen, unshown.
Suppose the day begins
In wrath at circumstance,
Or anger at one's friends
In vain self-innocence
False to the very light,
Breaking the sun in half,
Or anger at oneself
Whose controverting will
Would have the sun stand still.
The world is lost in loss
Of patience; the old curse
Returns, and is made worse
As newly justified.
In hopeless fret and fuss,
In rage at worldly plight
Creation is defied,
All order is unpropped,
All light and singing stopped.

1980

Monday of the Second Week of Lent: Prayer

Prayer can be poetry, as we see in this poem from a 1506 Sarum Book of Hours – that is, a devotional compilation of prayers, illustrations, psalms, and poems, used for daily and weekly worship. The prayer asks for God’s presence in every part of one’s life, both one’s actions and emotions. The earliest known version of the poem is below, followed by a contemporary English translation. The poem has been set to music several times and is to be found in many hymnbooks.

God Be in My Head

ANONYMOUS

God be in mihede And in min vnder ston dyng
God be in myn hyesse And in min lokeyng
God be in mi movthe And in myspekeyng
God be in my hart And in my thovgvt
God be at myneyende And ad myde partyng

God be in my head
 And in my understanding;
God be in mine eyes
 And in my looking;
God be in my mouth
 And in my speaking;
God be in my heart
 And in my thinking;
God be at mine end,
 And at my departing.

1506 or earlier

Tuesday of the Second Week of Lent: Lamentation

The Lenten path is in part a journey through grief and anguish. Jesus's cry on the cross – “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” – is an expression of agony of spirit and flesh. His question is one that may rise on the lips of his followers, especially during this season of traveling towards the Cross. Jesuit priest-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who suffered depression for much of his life, offers a window into the desolation that can come in the middle of the night, even to believers who trust in God. In the last stanza, Hopkins uses a metaphor of bread-making to reflect on the effect that such bitterness has on the spirit. This poem is one of a series of “Sonnets of Desolation” that Hopkins wrote during a particularly difficult period of desolation.

I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark, Not Day

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

I wake and feel the fell¹ of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! what sights you, heart, saw, ways you went!
And more must, in yet longer light's delay.

With witness I speak this. But where I say
Hours I mean years, mean life.² And my lament
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters³ sent
To dearest him that lives alas! away.

I am gall,⁴ I am heartburn. God's most deep decree
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.

Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

1885

¹ “fell” – a moor, a stony hill; lethal, destructive, cruel nature.

² This sentence has two complementary meanings: Both that the hours of sleepless anguish seem to last for years rather than simply one night, and that the sleepless night is merely the latest anguish in a lifetime of desolate suffering.

³ “dead letters” – letters that are undeliverable because the addressee is deceased or unreachable. This sentence thus compares lamentations to letters that are never read.

⁴ “gall” – bitterness.

Wednesday of the Second Week of Lent: Discipleship

During Lent, many Christians reflect on and try to improve their own discipleship, their sense of the work that God has given us to do. But of course such discipleship has costs, not least the scorn of others. Lucille Clifton explores discipleship through images drawn from gospel stories: Jesus's calling of his first disciples through the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11), his walking on water (Matthew 14:22-23, Mark 6:45-52, and John 6:16-21), and his feeding of the crowds (Matthew 14:13-21 and 15:32-38, Mark 6:32-44 and 8:1-10; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13). In the poem below, notice which words Clifton does and does not capitalize. And what does it mean to be "God's fool"?

the calling of the disciples

LUCILLE CLIFTON

some Jesus
has come on me

i throw down my nets
into water he walks

i loose the fish
he feeds to cities

and everybody calls me
an old name

as i follow out
laughing like God's fool
behind this Jesus

1972

Thursday of the Second Week of Lent: Sacrifice

Some of the church's most beautiful poetry comes to us in the form of hymns, poems set to music for collective worship. Isaac Watts is one of the greatest hymnodists in Christian tradition, and the poem below is his most famous hymn. Charles Wesley, a fellow hymnodist, reportedly judged "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" so remarkable that he said he would give up all his hymns to have written this one. Watts defines Christ's blood as "sorrow and love," a sacrifice to be matched by the believer's own sacrifice of "the vain things that charm me most." He argues that this death on the Cross deserves a tribute greater than the "whole realm of nature"; such tribute most fittingly comes in the form of the believer's entire self: "my soul, my life, my all."

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

ISAAC WATTS

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

1707

Friday of the Second Week of Lent: Crucifixion

In this poem, Denise Levertov draws on the influence of Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century English mystic. (We do not know Julian's name; she is called "Julian" because she was anchoress of the Church of St. Julian in Norwich.) In 1373 at age thirty, Julian fell very ill and, as she spiritually prepared for the death she thought was imminent, had sixteen visions of the Passion of Christ and of Mary. Over the next twenty years, she wrote down these visions in *Revelations of Divine Love*, the first published book in English by a woman. In the poem below, Levertov reflects on Julian's description of her eighth vision, in which Julian saw "our Lord Jesus languoring long time. For the oneing¹ with the Godhead gave strength to the manhood² for love to suffer more than all men might suffer: I mean not only more pain than all men might suffer, but also that He suffered more pain than all men of salvation that ever were from the first beginning unto the last day might tell or fully think. . . . And for every man's sin that shall be saved He suffered: and every man's sorrow and desolation He saw, and sorrowed for Kindness and love."³

On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX

DENISE LEVERTOV

Six hours outstretched in the sun, yes,
hot wood, the nails, blood trickling
into the eyes, yes –
but the thieves on their neighbor crosses
survived till after the soldiers
had come to fracture their legs, or longer.
Why single out the agony? What's
a mere six hours?
Torture then, torture now,
the same, the pain's the same,
immemorial branding iron,
electric prod.
Hasn't a child
dazed in the hospital ward they reserve
for the most abused, known worse?
The air we're breathing,
these very clouds, ephemeral billows
languid upon the sky's
moody ocean, we share
with women and men who've held out
days and weeks on the rack –
and in the ancient dust of the world
what particles
of the long tormented,
what ashes.

¹ "oneing" – Julian's medieval English term, meaning "uniting."

² "the manhood" – that is, Jesus, the human person of the Trinity.

³ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 20.

But Julian's lucid spirit leapt
to the difference:
perceived why no awe could measure
that brief day's endless length,
why among all the tortured
One only is "King of Grief."

The oneing, she saw, *the oneing*
with the Godhead opened Him utterly
to the pain of all minds, all bodies
– sands of the sea, of the desert –
from first beginning
to last day. The great wonder is
that the human cells of His flesh and bone
didn't explode
when utmost Imagination rose
in that flood of knowledge. Unique
in agony, Infinite strength, Incarnate,
empowered Him to endure
inside of history,
through those hours when he took to Himself
the sum total of anguish and drank
even the lees of that cup:

within the mesh of the web, Himself
woven within it, yet seeing it,
seeing it whole.¹ *Every sorrow and desolation*
He saw, and sorrowed in kinship.

1984

¹ In her language of "mesh" and "woven," Levertov alludes to another famous passage in Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love*, from Chapter 53: "He would have us understand that His dearworthy Soul was preciousy knit to Him in the making which knot is so subtle and so mighty that it is oned into God: in which oneing it is made endlessly holy. Furthermore He would have us know that all the souls that shall be saved in Heaven without end, are knit and oned in this oneing and made holy in this holiness."

Saturday of the Second Week of Lent: Faith

Who or what is God? Is language or human understanding big enough to express any complete definition of God? Negative theology, also called *Via Negativa* (“Negative Way”) or Apophatic theology, says that the best we can do, given our human limitations, is to say what God is not. Such a theology rests on the unknowability of God and is often associated with mysticism. As is clear in the work of poet-priest R. S. Thomas, who has been called “the poet of the hidden God,” this is a challenging theology, one that operates on faith without direct experience of God.

Via Negativa

R. S. THOMAS

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm.¹ We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.

1972

¹ A reference to the disciple Thomas, who was absent on Jesus’s first post-resurrection appearance and thus found it difficult to believe that he was actually beholding the risen Christ until he put his hands in Jesus’s wounded side (John 20:24-29).

Third Sunday in Lent: Sabbath

The forty days of Lent do not include Sundays, the Lord's Day, which is always a day of celebration rather than fast. In "Come Sunday" (most famously recorded by Mahalia Jackson in 1958), Duke Ellington captures this sense of Sunday as a day of rest and comfort for the weary and downtrodden.

Come Sunday

DUKE ELLINGTON

Lord, dear Lord of love, God Almighty, God above,
Please look down and see my people through.

I believe that God put sun and moon up in the sky.
I don't mind the gray skies 'cause they're just clouds passing by.
He'll give peace and comfort to every troubled mind,
Come Sunday, oh come Sunday, that's the day.

Often we feel weary but he knows our every care.
Go to him in secret, he will hear your every prayer.
Up from dawn till sunset, man works hard all day,
Come Sunday, oh come Sunday, that's the day.

1943

Monday of the Third Week of Lent: Prayer

What is prayer? What does it mean to pray? In this sonnet, George Herbert uses a series of metaphors to attempt a definition of prayer but ultimately concludes only that it is “something understood.” The “(I)” in the title indicates that this is the first of two poems on prayer that Herbert wrote, always trying to express what it is the Christian does in prayer.

Prayer (I)

GEORGE HERBERT

Prayer the Church’s banquet, Angels’ age,
God’s breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav’n and earth;

Engine against th’ Almightye, sinners’ towre,¹
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,²
The six-daies world-transposing in an houre,²
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;

Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
Exalted Manna,³ gladnesse of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The Milkie way, the bird of Paradise,

Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the soul’s bloud,⁴
The land of spices; something understood.

1633

¹ “towre” – tower. Perhaps a reference to the Tower of Babel, by which people tried to reach Heaven (Genesis 11).

² A reference to Genesis 1, in which God creates the world in six days before resting on the seventh.

³ “Manna” – the bread of heaven, sent by God to the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16).

⁴ “bloud” – blood.

Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent: Discipleship

Kathleen Norris finds poetry in Jesus's commands to his followers, found throughout the three synoptic gospels. Notice particularly how she groups these imperatives in these six stanzas. The first three stanzas are all commands from the Sermon on the Mount (or, in the Gospel of Luke, the Sermon on the Plain). The fourth and fifth stanzas are then healing commands, in which Jesus requires the person he has just healed to take some action. The fifth stanza ends on Jesus's command to his sleepy disciples in Gethsemane, telling them to wake up and stand up, for the moment of betrayal is at hand. What do you make of the final imperatives in the last stanza? What is required of the Christian disciple?

Imperatives, Part 2 of Mysteries of the Incarnation

KATHLEEN NORRIS

Look at the birds¹
Consider the lilies²
Drink ye all of it³

Ask⁴
Seek
Knock
Enter by the narrow gate⁵

Do not be anxious⁶
Judge not;⁷ do not give dogs what is holy⁸

Go: be it done for you⁹
Do not be afraid¹⁰
Maiden, arise¹¹
Young man, I say, arise¹²

Stretch out your hand¹³
Stand up,¹⁴ be still¹⁵
Rise, let us be going ...¹

¹ Matthew 6:26. See also Luke 12:24, "Consider the ravens."

² Matthew 6:28; Luke 12:27.

³ "Drink from it, all of you" (Matthew 26:27). Norris uses the King James translation here.

⁴ This stanza is a series of Jesus's commands from the Sermon on the Mount: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matthew 7:7, King James; also Luke 11:9).

⁵ Matthew 7:13-14; also Luke 13:23-24.

⁶ Matthew 6:25, 31; Luke 12:22, 29.

⁷ Matthew 7:1; Mark 4:24; Luke 6:37-38.

⁸ Matthew 7:6.

⁹ Matthew 8:13.

¹⁰ "Do not be afraid" – a frequent command by Jesus; for example, Matthew 10:31; 14:27; 17:7; 28:10.

¹¹ The healing of Jairus's daughter: "Little girl, get up!" (Mark 5:41; also Luke 8:54).

¹² The healing the widow's only son; Luke 7:14.

¹³ The healing of the man with the withered hand: Matthew 12:13; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11.

¹⁴ Jesus's healing the paralyzed man: Matthew 9:2-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26.

¹⁵ Jesus's command to the ocean: Mark 5:39; also Matthew 8:26; Luke 8:24.

Love²
Forgive³
Remember me

1995

¹ Jesus to his disciples in Gethsemane: “Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me” (Matthew 26:46; Mark 14:42).

² Jesus’s two great commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39; also Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28).

³ Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 17:4.

Wednesday of the Third Week of Lent: Sin

Poet-priest John Donne wrestles with the fact that Christians continue to sin even after they repent and vow to sin no more. This poem enumerates different types of sin – repeating already repented-of sins, causing others to sin, remembering older sins – and wonders at God’s ongoing forgiveness. Notice the repetition in the last two lines of each stanza; the poem moves from requesting God’s continued forgiveness in response to continued sin to beseeching God for final forgiveness at the moment of death.

A Hymn to God the Father

JOHN DONNE

I

Wilt Thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which is my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt Thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done,¹
For I have more.

II

Wilt Thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin? and, made my sin their door?
Wilt Thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year or two: but wallowed in, a score?
When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done,
For I have more.

III

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
Swear by Thyself, that at my death Thy Son
Shall shine as He shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, Thou hast done,
I fear no more.

1623

¹ “done” – a pun on the poet’s name.

Thursday of the Third Week of Lent: Lamentation

Poetry of lamentation has a long history in Jewish tradition, and the words that came to Jesus in his suffering on the cross were those of scriptural poetry. Right before his death, he called out, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34), an Aramaic transliteration of the opening line of Psalm 22. Worshippers have been praying the psalms for thousands of years and finding comfort in the scriptural tradition of lamentation as well as praise.

Psalm 22

Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
“Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver —
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”¹

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan² surround me;
they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.

¹ The gospel writers allude to this psalm passage in their descriptions of Jesus’s being scorned on the cross by passers-by, “shaking their heads and saying, ... ‘He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to’” (Matthew 27:39-44; see also Mark 15:29-32; Luke 23:35-37).

² “Bashan” – an area east of Galilee known for its cattle.

I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.¹

But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.

¹ This psalm passage is alluded to in the gospel accounts of Jesus's Passion, in which soldiers cast lots for Jesus's clothes even before he is dead (Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:23-24).

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.

Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

Friday of the Third Week of Lent: Crucifixion

In this dramatic monologue, Bruce Dawe narrates the story of the Crucifixion from the perspective of a Roman centurion, required by his military superiors to do the physical labor of crucifying condemned prisoners of the state. The speaker clearly abhors his work and tries to avoid looking and listening to the effects of his labors, but he follows orders nonetheless. In the second stanza, he notes that Jesus's nonviolent response to his execution makes the dirty job all the more difficult.

And a Good Friday Was Had by All

BRUCE DAWE

You men there, keep those women back¹
and God Almighty he laid down
on the crossed timber and Old Silenus
my offsider looked at me as if to say
nice work for soldiers, your mind's not your own
once you sign that dotted line Ave Caesar²
and all that malarkey Emperor Rex³

well this Nazarene
didn't make it any easier
really – not like the ones
who kick up a fuss so you can
do your block and take it out on them
Silenus

held the spikes steady and I let fly
with the sledge-hammer, not looking
on the downswing trying hard not to hear
over the women's wailing the bones give way
the iron shocking the dumb wood.

Orders is orders, I said after it was over
nothing personal you understand – we had a
drill-sergeant once thought he was God but he wasn't
a patch on you

then we hauled on the ropes
and he rose in the hot air
like a diver just leaving the springboard, arms spread
so it seemed
over the whole damned creation
over the big men who must have had it in for him

¹ “those women” – referring to Mary Magdalene and the other women who gather at the cross (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:49; and John 19:25-27).

² “Ave Caesar” – Hail, Caesar.

³ “Imperator Rex” – the supreme commander of the Roman Empire, in whose name the military fought; at the time of Jesus's crucifixion, the emperor was Tiberius, who reigned from 14 to 37 A.D.

and the curious ones who'll watch anything if it's free
with only the usual women caring anywhere
and a blind man in tears.

1964

Saturday of the Third Week of Lent: Pain

The recurring image in this poem is that of the brier, of prickly thorns that tear at the flesh. In the first two stanzas, the speaker thanks Jesus for minimizing the pain of life's thorns by putting his own body in harm's way, bending back the brier with his "wounded arm" and walking ahead over the thorns to crush them. The last stanza then builds on that image; the brier thorns are now the crown piercing Jesus's head as he once again suffers to save humanity.

Brier (Good Friday)

E. PAULINE JOHNSON (TEKAHIONWAKE)

Because, dear Christ, your tender, wounded arm
Bends back the brier¹ that edges life's long way,
That no hurt comes to heart, to soul no harm,
I do not feel the thorns so much to-day.

Because I never knew your care to tire,
Your hand to weary guiding me aright,
Because you walk before and crush the brier,
It does not pierce my feet so much to-night.

Because so often you have hearkened to
My selfish prayers, I ask but one thing now,
That these harsh hands of mine add not unto
The crown of thorns upon your bleeding brow.

1912

¹ "brier" – a tangled mass of prickly, thorny plants.

Fourth and Fifth Weeks of Lent: The Journey Continues

We are still wandering in the wilderness, still struggling through the desert. We have come so far, and yet our journey does not draw to a close. We turn to sources of strength to uphold our faith in the wilderness. The next two weeks may be a time in which we return to poems we've read earlier, to the comfort of poems we have already found meaningful. In particular, it may be helpful to reread George Herbert's "Lent" from Ash Wednesday (page 4), which reminds us that, although "we cannot reach Christ's fortieth day" or "reach our Savior's purity," it is an act of faith and devotion to travel "in the way which Christ hath gone."

Fourth Sunday in Lent: Thanksgiving

On Sunday, we come to church, to the Lord's table, where we give thanks to God for the Lord's meal. But this sacred meal is not simply a comfort for us but nourishes us to do God's work in the world. Alcuin's eighth-century prayer of thanksgiving over a meal is a reminder of the Christian obligation to provide food for the poor. God's love requires justice and compassion "for the least of these." (This poem was translated from the original Latin by Helen Waddell.)

In the Refectory

ALCUIN

Lord Christ, we pray thy mercy on our table spread,
And what thy gentle hands have given thy men
Let it by thee be blessed: whate'er we have
Came from the lavish heart and gentle hand,
And all that's good is thine, for thou art good.
And ye that eat, give thanks for it to Christ,
And let the words ye utter be only peace,
For Christ loved peace: it was himself that said,
Peace I give unto you, my peace I leave with you.¹
Grant that our own may be a generous hand
Breaking the bread for all poor men, sharing the food.
Christ shall receive the bread thou gavest his poor,²
And shall not tarry to give thee reward.

eighth century

¹ John 14:27.

² "Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'" (Matthew 25:34-40).

Monday of the Fourth Week of Lent: Prayer

Mary Oliver's poetry is steeped in the natural world, and her unsentimental observations of animals, plants, weather conditions, and other natural phenomena have the accuracy and attention to detail of scientific description. In "The Summer Day," she argues that such close attention is itself a form of prayer, of honoring the created universe and thus the Creator. The three questions at the poem's end insistently confront readers with our own mortality and need for prayer and attention.

The Summer Day

MARY OLIVER

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean –
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down –
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

1990

Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Lent: Anger

The tradition of the psalms teaches us that we can shout furiously at God as well as praise God. Anger seems to be an inevitable part of the Christian devotional life – anger for prayers apparently unanswered, for tragedies witnessed, for injustice experienced. Madeleine L'Engle recognizes that her anger at God and her love for God are not in conflict; indeed, they stand side by side in her love letter.

Love Letter

MADELEINE L'ENGLE

I hate you, God.
Love, Madeleine.

I write my message on water
and at bedtime I tiptoe upstairs
and let it flow under your door.

When I am angry with you
I know that you are there
even if you do not answer my knock
even when your butler opens the door an inch
and flaps his thousand wings in annoyance
at such untoward interruption
and says that the master is not at home.

I love you, Madeleine.
Hate, God.

(This is how I treat my friends, he said to one great saint.
No wonder you have so few of them, Lord, she replied.)¹

I cannot turn the other cheek
It takes all the strength I have
To keep my fist from hitting back
the soldiers shot the baby
the little boys trample the old woman
the gutters are filled with groans
while pleasure seekers knock each other down
in order to get their tickets stamped first.

I'm turning in my ticket
and my letter of introduction.
You're supposed to do the knocking. Why do you burst my heart?

¹ A reference to the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic and Carmelite nun Teresa of Avila, who reported having this conversation with God.

How can I write you
to tell you that I'm angry
when I've been given the wrong address
and I don't even know your real name?

I take hammer and nails
and tack my message on two crossed pieces of wood:

Dear God
is it too much to ask you
to bother to be?
Just show your hindquarters
and let me hear you roar.¹

Love,
Madeleine

1977

¹ In the Bible, God is frequently depicted as a lion (see, for example, Job 10:16; Amos 1:8; Isaiah 31:4; Jeremiah 4:6-7; Hosea 5:14, 11:10, 13:7; Revelation 5:5).

Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Lent: Discipleship

Puritan Edward Taylor takes an unusual poetic twist on the discipleship of surrendering one's life to God. In this poem, his central metaphor is of creating cloth from raw wool or flax; the speaker asks to be first God's spinning wheel, then thread spool, then loom instruments, and finally cloth. The poem ends by taking this metaphor in another direction: The speaker asks that this cloth – created by complete submission to God's will – be sewn into holy robes to wear for the moment of meeting God.

*Huswifery*¹

EDWARD TAYLOR

Make me, O Lord, thy Spining Wheele compleate.²
Thy Holy Worde my Distaff³ make for mee.
Make mine Affections thy Swift Flyers⁴ neate
And make my Soule thy holy Spoole to bee.
My Conversation make to be thy Reelee⁵
And reele the year thereon spun of thy Wheele.
Make me thy Loom then, knit therein this Twine:
And make thy Holy Spirit, Lord, winde quills:⁶
Then weave the Web⁷ thyself. The yarn is fine.
Thine Ordinances make my Fulling Mills.⁸
Then dy⁹ the same in Heavenly Colours Choice,
All pinkt¹⁰ with Varnisht Flowers of Paradise.
Then cloath therewith mine Understanding, Will,
Affections, Judgment, Conscience, Memory
My Words, and Actions, that their shine may fill
My wayes with glory and thee glorify.
Then mine apparell shall display before yee
That I am Cloathd in Holy robes for glory.

between 1674 and 1689

¹ "Huswifery" – housewifery.

² "compleate" – fully equipped; an outstanding example of its kind.

³ "Distaff" – the staff that holds one end of the unspun wool or flax from which the thread is drawn during spinning.

⁴ "Flyers" – the horse-shoe shaped piece of wood that holds the bobbin.

⁵ "Reele" – the device on which the spool sits for winding thread.

⁶ "winde quills" – fill spools with thread or yarn.

⁷ "Web" – cloth.

⁸ "Fulling Mills" – water mills where cloth is cleaned during the the cloth-making process.

⁹ "dy" – dye.

¹⁰ "pinkt" – adorned, decorated.

Thursday of the Fourth Week of Lent: Sin

Poet-priest Robert Herrick writes with characteristic wit in the following two poems, both of which are concerned with sin and judgment. In “To His Conscience,” the speaker attempts to bribe or fool his conscience into letting him transgress freely without judgment; his bribes are to no avail, however, and in the last four lines the speaker resolves to live in keeping with his internal sense of right and wrong, so that he need not fear either divine judgment or his own conscience. In “Sin,” the poem rests on the metaphor of God as alchemist, who takes human sin and transforms it into the penitence that leads to everlasting life.

To His Conscience

Robert Herrick

Can I not sin, but thou wilt be
My private protonotary?¹
Can I not woo thee to pass by
A short and sweet iniquity?
I'll cast a mist and cloud upon
My delicate transgression,
So utter dark as that no eye
Shall see the hugg'd² impiety.
Gifts blind the wise, and bribes do please,
And wind all other witnesses;
And wilt not thou with gold be tied
To lay thy pen and ink aside,
That in the murk and tongueless night
Wanton I may, and thou not write?
It will not be; and therefore, now,
For times to come I'll make this vow,
From aberrations to live free,
So I'll not fear the Judge, or thee.

Sin

ROBERT HERRICK

There is no evil that we do commit,
But hath the extraction of some good from it:
As when we sin, God the great Chymist³ thence
Draws out the elixar⁴ of true penitence.

1648 or earlier

¹ “protonotary” – the title of the chief clerk in the civil courts.

² “hugg'd” – hidden.

³ “Chymist” – chemist, or alchemist, one who can change the nature of substances (often base metal into gold); one who seeks an elixir of life.

⁴ “elixar” – elixir, a remedy for all ills; a substance that prolongs life eternally; often called the “elixir of life.”

Friday of the Fourth Week of Lent: Crucifixion

John Greenleaf Whittier imagines nature's response to the Crucifixion, picturing the change in the sky and the earth at Jesus's death. In doing so, he is relying on the Gospel of Matthew, which records that at the moment of Jesus's death, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many" (27:51-53). Whittier's final question is challenging: If the very heavens and earth tremble at the Crucifixion, what should be the response of a person's "sinful heart"?

Crucifixion

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

Sunlight upon Judah's hills!
And on the waves of Galilee;
On Jordan's stream, and on the rills
That feed the dead and sleeping sea!
Most freshly from the green wood springs
The light breeze on its scented wings;
And gayly quiver in the sun
The cedar tops of Lebanon!

A few more hours, – a change hath come!
The sky is dark without a cloud!
The shouts of wrath and joy are dumb,
And proud knees unto earth are bowed.
A change is on the hill of Death,
The helmed watchers pant for breath,
And turn with wild and maniac eyes
From the dark scene of sacrifice!

That Sacrifice! – the death of Him, –
The Christ of God, the holy One!
Well may the conscious Heaven grow dim,
And blacken the beholding Sun.
The wonted light hath fled away,
Night settles on the middle day,
And earthquake from his caverned bed
Is waking with a thrill of dread!

The dead are waking underneath!
Their prison door is rent away!
And, ghastly with the seal of death,
They wander in the eye of day!
The temple of the Cherubim,
The House of God is cold and dim;
A curse is on its trembling walls,

Its mighty veil asunder falls!

Well may the cavern-depths of Earth
Be shaken, and her mountains nod;
Well may the sheeted dead come forth
To see the suffering son of God!
Well may the temple-shrine grow dim,
And shadows veil the Cherubim,
When He, the chosen one of Heaven,
A sacrifice for guilt is given!

And shall the sinful heart, alone,
Behold unmoved the fearful hour,
When Nature trembled on her throne,
And Death resigned his iron power?
Oh, shall the heart – whose sinfulness
Gave keenness to His sore distress,
And added to His tears of blood –
Refuse its trembling gratitude!

1834

Saturday of the Fourth Week of Lent: Brokenness

Singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen explores human frailty and brokenness in many of his songs. In “Anthem,” he echoes centuries of spiritual teaching by celebrating the fractures in human lives, for it is only through these fractures that “the light gets in.”

Anthem

LEONARD COHEN

The birds they sang
at the break of day
Start again,
I heard them say,
Don't dwell on what
has passed away
or what is yet to be.

The wars they will
be fought again
The holy dove
be caught again
bought and sold
and bought again;
the dove is never free.

*Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.*

We asked for signs
the signs were sent:
the birth betrayed,
the marriage spent;
the widowhood
of every government –
signs for all to see.

Can't run no more
with that lawless crowd
while the killers in high places
say their prayers out loud.
But they've summoned up
a thundercloud.
They're going to hear from me.

*Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.*

*There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.*

You can add up the parts
but you won't have the sum
You can strike up the march,
there is no drum.
Every heart
to love will come
but like a refugee.

*Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.*

1992

Fifth Sunday in Lent: Sabbath

George MacDonald praises the church bells that call everyone within hearing to Sabbath rest and to joyful worship. The last two stanzas use a metaphor particularly apt for Lenten readers: Christians are depicted as desert-weary travelers in need of refreshing, life-giving water to replenish them in their journey. Sabbath worship reminds these travelers where this living water – that is, Christ himself – is to be found.

Sabbath Bells

GEORGE MACDONALD

Oh holy Sabbath bells,
Ye have a pleasant voice!
Through all the land your music swells,
And man with one commandment tells
To rest and to rejoice.

As birds rejoice to flee
From dark and stormy skies
To brighter lands beyond the sea
Where skies are calm, and wings are free
To wander and to rise;

As thirsty travellers sing,
Through desert paths that pass,
To hear the welcome waters spring,
And see, beyond the spray they fling
Tall trees and waving grass;

So we rejoice to know
Your melody begun;
For when our paths are parched below
Ye tell us where green pastures glow
And living waters¹ run.

1840

¹ “living waters” – a reference to Jesus, who in the Gospel of John refers to himself in these terms (John 4:7-15; 7:37-39).

Monday of the Fifth Week of Lent: Prayer

Most of us have experienced the apparently endless night when we lie awake with a mind that won't stop churning. In Anne Bradstreet's poem, such restless insomnia becomes an opportunity for prayer, for seeking God in the darkness. The speaker moves from tears to rejoicing over the course of the night.

By Night When Others Soundly Slept

ANNE BRADSTREET

By night when others soundly slept,
And had at once both ease and Rest,
My waking eyes were open kept,
And so to lye I found it best.

I sought him whom my Soul did Love,
With tears I sought him earnestly;
He bow'd his ear down from Above,
In vain I did not seek or cry.

My hungry Soul he fill'd with Good,
He in his Bottle putt my teares,¹
My smarting wounds washt in his blood,
And banisht thence my Doubts and feares.

What to my Savior shall I give,
Who freely hath done this for me?
I'll serve him here whilst I shall live,
And Love him to Eternity.

1647 or earlier

¹ "You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle" (Psalm 56:8).

Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Lent: Mystery

Li-Young Lee ponders the unknowable world, the mysteries of life and death and human connection. The speaker has far more questions than answers, and he cannot even articulate to God exactly what it is for which he prays. And yet, despite this confusion and mystery, despite his imperfect understanding of his mother, his child, and the universe, the mood of the poem is not anxious. Rather, this exploration of mystery rests on the paired images of a child nestled in his parent's loving embrace and on the poem's comforting conclusion that life is "a little singing between two great rests."

The Hammock

LI-YOUNG LEE

When I lay my head in my mother's lap
I think how day hides the star,
the way I lay hidden once, waiting
inside my mother's singing to herself. And I remember
how she carried me on her back
between home and the kindergarten,
once each morning and once each afternoon.

I don't know what my mother's thinking.

When my son lays his head in my lap, I wonder:
Do his father's kisses keep his father's worries
from becoming his? I think, *Dear God*, and remember
there are stars we haven't heard from yet:
They have so far to arrive. *Amen*,
I think, and I feel almost comforted.

I've no idea what my child is thinking.

Between two unknowns, I live my life.
Between my mother's hopes, older than I am
by coming before me. And my child's wishes, older than I am
by outliving me. And what's it like?
Is it a door, and a good-bye on either side?
A window, and eternity on either side?
Yes, and a little singing between two great rests.

2001

Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Lent: Work

In his poetry, Wendell Berry usually emphasizes Sabbath as a day of rest and worship, separate from the work of the other six days of the week, but in this poem he recognizes the extent to which work and worship are intertwined. As a farmer as well as a poet, he recognizes that the success of his work depends not only on the labor of his hands but also on God's work in the created universe. Notice the verbal play on the word "rest" in the last line of the poem; Sabbath is a day of *rest*, and its spirit *rests* on any day in which work is done well, with a grateful recognition of God's grace.

Sabbath Poem X, 1979

WENDELL BERRY

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.

And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.

When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good.

1979

Thursday of the Fifth Week of Lent: Discipleship

The poet John Milton went blind from glaucoma in his forties and afterward had to dictate his poetry, including the entirety of his epic *Paradise Lost*. In this sonnet, composed when his blindness was complete, he laments that he cannot serve God in his condition.

“Patience,” however, teaches him otherwise; service to God may include dramatic actions, but it may also consist of quiet faithfulness.

When I Consider How My Light Is Spent: Sonnet XIX

JOHN MILTON

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide¹
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,²
“Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”
I fondly³ ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies: “God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
And post⁴ o’er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.”⁵

c. 1655

¹ “one talent which is death to hide” – a reference to Jesus’s parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30).

“Talent” is here a play on words; in Jesus’s usage, the word refers to money, but Milton also uses the word in its modern meaning of ability or gift, in his case a talent for poetry.

² The punctuation here can be confusing. Treat the comma here as a period, such that the previous sentence ends with “chide,” and a new sentence begins with the quoted question.

³ “fondly” – foolishly.

⁴ “post” – to travel quickly.

⁵ This final line of the sonnet was often repeated during World War II to refer to the work of those waiting and working on the “homefront” rather than serving in the front lines of battle.

Friday of the Fifth Week of Lent: Crucifixion

“Calvary” refers both to the hill outside Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified (also called “Golgotha”) and to statues of the Crucifixion, which are often displayed at crossroads in Roman Catholic countries. In this poem, soldier-poet Wilfred Owen describes one such statue, near the Ancre River in France, that has been damaged in the fighting of World War I; the area around the Ancre was part of the contested No Man’s Land fought over by the opposing armies in the war. He portrays the devastation of the war as, symbolically, a kind of Crucifixion, with the killed soldiers described as true followers of Jesus, “bear[ing] with Him” when even his disciples have abandoned him. Owen criticizes religious leaders (“many a priest” and “the scribes”) for their “allegiance to the state” – that is, for their complicity with Jesus’s Crucifixion and, by extension, the war – while praising soldiers who, like Jesus, “lay down their life” and “love the greater love.” Owen was killed in battle one week before the war ended.

At a Calvary Near the Ancre (For Good Friday)

WILFRED OWEN

One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
In this war He too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
And now the Soldiers bear with Him.

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast¹
By whom the gentle Christ’s denied.

The scribes on all the people shove
And bawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life;² they do not hate.

1917/18

¹ “flesh-marked by the Beast” – wounded in the fight against Germany; but also, symbolically, marked as one of Satan’s followers – a significant criticism against the prideful priests who “hide apart” from the soldiers as the disciples did from Jesus after his arrest.

² “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

Saturday of the Fifth Week of Lent: Lamentation

In 1895, poet Oscar Wilde was sentenced to two years of hard labor in prison for his homosexuality, which at the time was a crime in England. He spent two difficult years in jail and emerged a broken man, dying three years later. He wrote a lengthy poetic lament, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, that explores suffering, death (and particularly the execution of a fellow prisoner), redemption, and faith. This excerpt of the long poem concludes with the conviction that our brokenness is the doorway through which we invite Christ into our lives.

From *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*¹

OSCAR WILDE

I know not whether Laws be right,
Or whether Laws be wrong;
All that we know who lie in gaol
Is that the wall is strong;
And that each day is like a year,
A year whose days are long.

But this I know, that every Law
That men have made for Man,
Since first Man took his brother's life,²
And the sad world began,
But straws the wheat and saves the chaff
With a most evil fan.³

This too I know – and wise it were
If each could know the same –
That every prison that men build
Is built with bricks of shame,
And bound with bars lest Christ should see
How men their brothers maim.

... With midnight always in one's heart,
And twilight in one's cell,
We turn the crank, or tear the rope,
Each in his separate Hell,
And the silence is more awful far
Than the sound of a brazen bell.

And never a human voice comes near

¹ "Gaol" – British spelling of "jail." "Reading" is an English city west of London.

² A reference to Cain's murder of his brother Abel (Genesis 4).

³ Wheat was traditionally separated from its chaff (that is, the seed covering and remnants of stems or leaves) by exposing it to the wind so that the chaff blew away; "separating the wheat from the chaff" is now an expression that means separating the good or useful from the bad or useless. In this instance, Wilde argues that the penal system is an "evil fan" that destroys the wheat and saves the chaff in imprisoned people.

To speak a gentle word:
And the eye that watches through the door
Is pitiless and hard:
And by all forgot, we rot and rot,
With soul and body marred.

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.¹

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?

1898

¹ “nard” – spikenard, an aromatic herb. This stanza is a reference to the anointing of Jesus, in which a female follower of Jesus breaks an alabaster flask of expensive nard and pours it onto his head, an extravagant act of worship that draws the dismay of the other disciples (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-50; John 12:1-8).

Holy Week

This week is the culmination of our Lenten travels, as we move from Jesus's fasting and temptation in the desert to his Passion, culminating in his death. We begin with Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, with the crowds rejoicing and waving palms before him. By the week's ends, Jesus will be betrayed by his disciples and the crowds, will be arrested and tried, and will be executed and laid to rest in the tomb. This is a somber, grim week, one that has inspired poets through the generations to speak of pain, of suffering, and of sacrifice.

Palm Sunday:

Palm Sunday celebrates Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, with crowds lining the road before him with tree branches and shouting his praises (Matthew 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19); less than a week later, the crowds will turn against him, and he will be executed. Many Christians mark this day with processions, during which they often sing the following hymn, written by Theodulph, the ninth-century Bishop of Orléans. Theodulph wrote the hymn while in jail, where he had been apparently unjustly imprisoned by King Louis the Pious; as the (possibly untrue) story goes, as Theodulph sang this hymn in his jail cell, the king, passing by the prison in the Palm Sunday procession, heard it and was so moved that he released the prisoner, who died soon thereafter. Other accounts, however, have Theodulph dying in jail, possibly from poisoning. The 1854 translation below, by John Mason Neale, is the most familiar to English-speaking worshipers.

All Glory, Laud and Honor

THEODULPHUS OF ORLÉANS

Refrain:

All glory, laud, and honor
to thee, Redeemer, King!
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring.

Thou art the King of Israel,
thou David's royal Son,
who in the Lord's Name comest,
the King and Blessed One. *Refrain.*

The company of angels
are praising Thee on high;
and mortal men and all things
created make reply. *Refrain.*

The people of the Hebrews
with palms before Thee went;
our praise and prayer and anthems
before Thee we present. *Refrain.*

To Thee, before Thy Passion,
they sang their hymns of praise;
to Thee, now high exalted,
our melody we raise. *Refrain.*

Thou didst accept their praises;
accept the prayers we bring,
who in all good delightest,
Thou good and gracious King. *Refrain.*

Monday of Holy Week: Betrayal and Forgiveness

After his Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples that they will “all fall away”; Peter objects that he would never abandon Jesus, that he would lay down his life for Jesus. Jesus responds, “Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times” (Mark 14:26-31¹). And indeed, after Jesus’s arrest, Peter does just that, denying three times that he has been one of Jesus’s followers; “I do not know the man,” he repeatedly declares, after which a rooster crows.² In Luke’s version of this betrayal story, after the last denial, “the Lord turned and looked at Peter,” a look that makes Peter break down and “wept bitterly” (Luke 22:61-62). In the following pair of sonnets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning reflects on this look, imagining what is going on in the mind and heart of Jesus at this moment. She is particularly interested in the absence of divine judgment and condemnation of Peter despite his terrible betrayal. Notice at the end of the second sonnet that Jesus reverses Peter’s denial, declaring, “I KNOW this man.”

The Look

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

The Savior looked on Peter. Ay, no word,
No gesture of reproach! The heavens serene,
Though heavy with armed justice, did not lean
Their thunders that way! the forsaken Lord
Looked only on the traitor. None record
What that look was, none guess: for those who have seen
Wronged lovers loving through a death-pang ken,
Or pale-cheeked martyrs smiling to a sword,
Have missed Jehovah at the judgment –
‘I never knew this man’ – did quail and fall, call.
And Peter, from the height of blasphemy
As knowing straight THAT GOD – turned free
And went out speechless from the face of all,
And filled the silence, weeping bitterly.

The Meaning of the Look

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

I think that look of Christ might seem to say –
‘Thou Peter! art thou then a common stone
Which I at last must break my heart upon
For all God’s charge to his high angels may
Guard my foot better?’³ Did I yesterday
Wash thy feet, my beloved, that they should run
Quick to deny me ’neath the morning sun?

¹ See also Matthew 26:30-35, Luke 22:31-34, and John 13:36-38.

² Peter’s denials are described in Matthew 26:69-75, Mark 14:66-72, Luke 22:56-62, John 18:25-27.

³ Satan tempted Jesus to throw himself off of the pinnacle of the temple, quoting Psalm 91 to him: “‘He will command his angels concerning you’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus refuses to test God (Matthew 4:5-7; also Luke 4:9-13).

And do thy kisses, like the rest, betray?
The cock crows coldly. – GO, and manifest¹
A late contrition, but no bootless fear!²
For when thy final need is dreariest,
Thou shalt not be denied, as I am here;
My voice to God and angels shall attest,
Because I KNOW this man, let him be clear.”

1844

¹ “manifest” – show, demonstrate.

² “contrition” – repentance, sorrow for wrongdoing. “bootless” – fruitless, useless.

Tuesday of Holy Week: Lamentation

Gabriela Mistral takes on the voice of Jesus in this poem, crying out to God in lamentation. In the first three stanzas, Jesus compares his own suffering to the care that God shows to fruits and flowers. The opening and closing lines of the poems are both, as Jesus says, a “cry I have learned from Thee!” That is, they are both scriptural allusions, the first to the opening line of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4), and the second to the opening line of Psalm 22, which the gospel writers tell us Jesus cried out on the cross (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

*Nocturne*¹

GABRIELA MISTRAL

Our Father who art in heaven,
Why hast Thou forsaken me!
Thou did’st remember the February fruit,
When torn was its pulp of ruby.
My side is pierced also
Yet Thou will’st not look at me!

Thou did’st remember the dark grape cluster
And did’st give it to the crimsoned press,
And Thou did’st fan the poplar leaves
With thy breath of gentleness.
Yet in the deep wine press of death
Thou still would’st not my heart express!²

As I walked I saw violets open;
And I drank the wine of the wind,
And I have lowered my yellowed eyelids
Never more to see Winter or Spring.
And I have tightened my mouth to stifle
The verses I am never to sing.
Thou hast wounded the cloud of Autumn
And Thou will’st not turn toward me!

I was sold by the one who kissed my cheek;³
He betrayed me for the tunic vile.
I gave him in my verses, my blood-stained face,
As Thine imprinted on her veil,⁴
And in my night of the Orchard¹ I have found

¹ “nocturne” – a pensive musical work (especially for the piano); a painting of a night scene.

² “express” – to squeeze, as in the juice from grapes; the action of a wine press.

³ Judas Iscariot.

⁴ A reference to the legend of Veronica, a woman of Jerusalem who was said to have used her veil to wipe the blood and sweat from Jesus’ face as he carried his cross to Golgotha, after which the image of his face appeared imprinted on her veil. This story is traditionally the sixth station in the Stations of the Cross.

John reluctant and the Angel hostile.

And now an infinite fatigue
Has come to pierce my eyes:
The fatigue of the day that is dying
And of the dawn that will arise;
The fatigue of the sky of metal
The fatigue of indigo skies!

And now I loosen my martyred sandal
And my locks, for I am longing to sleep.
And lost in the night, I lift my voice
In the cry I have learned from Thee:
Our Father who art in heaven,
Why hast Thou forsaken me!

1922

¹ “Orchard” – a reference to the garden of Gethsemane, one that emphasizes the fruit-bearing trees that are important in the poem’s first two verses.

Wednesday of Holy Week: Sin

Poet Edith Sitwell, living in England during the Blitz of World War II, compares the Nazi bombing of London to the Crucifixion. As befits the historical context, this is a bleak poem about the sinfulness of humanity. Each year since Christ's birth become another nail that humanity has driven into his body on the cross ("nineteen hundred and forty nails"), and the poem alludes to famous betrayers, murderers, and sinners from the Bible and literature. But there is a turn in the final stanza, as Jesus continues to shed his blood willingly for sinful humanity. (Composer Benjamin Britten wrote a musical setting for this poem in 1955.)

Still Falls the Rain

DAME EDITH SITWELL

(The Raids, 1940. Night and Dawn)

Still falls the Rain –
Dark as the world of man, black as our loss –
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
Upon the Cross.

Still falls the Rain
With a sound like the pulse of the heart that is changed to the hammer-beat
In the Potters' Field,¹ and the sound of the impious feet
On the Tomb:

Still falls the Rain
In the Field of Blood² where the small hopes breed and the human brain
Nurtures its greed, that worm with the brow of Cain.³

Still falls the Rain
At the feet of the Starved Man hung upon the Cross.
Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have mercy on us –
On Dives and on Lazarus:⁴
Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one.

Still falls the Rain –
Still falls the Blood from the Starved Man's wounded Side
He bears in his Heart all wounds, – those of the light that died,
The last faint spark

¹ "Potter's Field" – a burial ground for poor and unknown people. From Matthew, in which Judas's thirty pieces of silver for betraying Jesus are used to buy a potter's field for burying foreigners (Matthew 27:7-8).

² "Field of Blood" – the name given to the potter's field in Matthew 27:7-8, because it is bought with Judas's "blood money."

³ "Cain" – the Bible's first murderer, who kills his brother Abel (Genesis 4).

⁴ "Dives and Lazarus" – the rich man and the poor man in Jesus's parable about judgment and the afterlife. Dives (Latin for "rich man") ignores the suffering of Lazarus, a beggar at his gate; when both men die, Lazarus ascends to heaven while Dives is sent to hell (Luke 16:19-31). In the poem's next line, "the sore" refers to Lazarus, who was afflicted with terrible sores while on earth, and "the gold" refers to Dives.

In the self-murdered heart, the wounds of the sad uncomprehending dark,
The wounds of the baited bear, –
The blind and weeping bear whom the keepers beat
On his helpless flesh ... the tears of the hunted hare.

Still falls the Rain –
Then – O Ile leape up to my God: who pulles me doune –¹
See, see where Christ's blood streames in the firmament:
It flows from the Brow we nailed upon the tree
Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart
That holds the fires of the world, – dark-smirched with pain
As Caesar's laurel crown.

Then sounds the voice of One who like the heart of man
Was once a child who among beasts has lain –
“Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee.”

1942

¹ This line and the next are a quotation from Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* (first performed in 1594), a play in which a man sells his soul to Mephistopheles, the devil, in exchange for knowledge and power. Unlike other versions of this same tale, Marlowe's Faust is unable to redeem his soul after regretting his choice and apparently is condemned to hell. The two lines that Sitwell quotes here are from the play's final act, in which Faust calls on the redeeming power of Christ's blood but also recognizes that he has put himself outside that redemption through his pact with Mephistopheles.

Maundy Thursday

Geoffrey Hill's sonnet addresses Christ directly, wondering whether the pain Jesus experiences when hearts are closed against him is another kind of Passion, another Crucifixion. The second half of the sonnet recalls Jesus's parable of the wise and foolish virgins, only half of whom are prepared and wake promptly when their bridegroom appears (Matthew 25:1-13). The speaker's "half-faithful" drowsing flouts Jesus's advice at the end of that parable: "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matthew 25:13). This poem is particularly haunting on Maundy Thursday, when Jesus, walking through Gethsemane after the Last Supper and wrestling with the knowledge of his impending death, asks his disciples to watch with him; they all fall asleep, leaving him without their support in his pain (Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:35-38).

*Lachrimae Amantis*¹

GEOFFREY HILL

What is there in my heart that you should sue
so fiercely for its love? What kind of care
brings you as though a stranger to my door
through the long night and in the icy dew

seeking the heart that will not harbour you,
that keeps itself religiously secure?
At this dark solstice² filled with frost and fire
your passion's ancient wounds must bleed anew.

So many nights the angel of my house
has fed such urgent comfort through a dream,
whispered "your lord is coming, he is close"

that I have drowsed half-faithful for a time
bathed in pure tones of promise and remorse:
"tomorrow I shall wake to welcome him."

1978

¹ "lachrimae amantis" – tears of the lover (Latin).

² "dark solstice" – the winter solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year.

Good Friday

One tradition during the Passover observance in Jerusalem was that the government would free one criminal. After Jesus's arrest, Roman governor Pontius Pilate offered the gathered crowds their choice of the prisoner to be freed: Jesus or Barabbas. The crowd cried out for Barabbas to be freed and for Jesus to be crucified, even though Pilate declared that Jesus was guilty of no crime deserving death (Matthew 27:15-23; Mark 15:6-14; Luke 23:17-23; John 18:39-40). This moment of betrayal is reenacted by some churches during their Holy Week observances to remind all gathered of their part in Jesus's passion. Andrew Hudgins goes even further, arguing that there is a Pilate, a crowd of tormenters, and a Jesus within us all.

*Ecce Homo*¹

ANDREW HUDGINS

Christ bends, protects his groin. Thorns gouge
his forehead, and his legs
are stippled with dried blood. The part of us
that's Pilate says, *Behold the man*.
We glare at that bound, lashed,
and bloody part of us that's Christ. We laugh, we howl,
we shout. *Give us Barabbas*,
not knowing who Barabbas is, not caring.
A thief? We'll take him anyway. A drunk?
A murderer? Who cares? It's better him
Than this pale ravaged thing, this god. Bosch² knows.
His humans waver, laugh, then change to demons
as if they're seized by epilepsy. It spreads
from eye to eye, from laugh to laugh until,
incited by the ease of going mad,
they go. How easy evil is! Dark voices sing,
You can be evil or you can be good,
but good is dull, my darling, good is dull.
And we're convinced: How lovely evil is!
How lovely hell must be! *Give us Barabbas!*

Lord Pilate clears his throat and tries again:
I find no fault in this just man.
It's more than we can bear. In gothic script
our answer floats above our upturned eyes.
O crucify, we sing. O crucify him!

1991

¹ "Ecce Homo" – Latin for "Behold the man"; Pontius Pilate's statement to the crowd upon the presentation of Jesus in the crown of thorns and purple robe (John 19:5); a term used to describe a representation of Jesus wearing the crown of thorns.

² "Bosch" – 15th- and 16th-century Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch, whose paintings include the 1490 work *Ecce Homo*, in which Jesus is jeered at by the crowd whose faces, as Hudgins notes, seem to lose their humanity in their savagery.

Holy Saturday

After Jesus's death on Friday, Joseph of Arimathea claimed Jesus's body from Pilate, wrapped it in linens, and placed it in the tomb. The next evening, after the Sabbath was ended, Jesus's women disciples came to the tomb with the spices used to preserve bodies; they were there to perform their last service for their fallen Lord (Matthew 27:57 – 28:1; Mark 15:42 – 16:2; Luke 23:50 – 24:1; John 19:38 – 20:1). Christina Rossetti pays tribute to these faithful women who keep their vigil. Although the last stanza hints at what will happen shortly, the poem does not rush to that joyful moment but rather remains intently in the interval in which "Our Master lies asleep."

Mary Magdalene and The Other Mary; A Song For All Maries

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Our Master lies asleep and is at rest:
His Heart has ceased to bleed, His Eye to weep:
The sun ashamed has dropt down in the west:
Our Master lies asleep.
Now we are they who weep, and trembling keep
Vigil, with wrung heart in a sighing breast,
While slow time creeps, and slow the shadows creep.

Renew Thy youth, as eagle from the nest;
O Master, who hast sown, arise to reap: –
No cock-crow yet, no flush on eastern crest:
Our Master lies asleep.

1888

Easter Week

The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Our suffering has ended. Let our rejoicing begin!

Easter Sunday

Edmund Spenser celebrates the glory of the Resurrection in this famous sonnet. In Spenser's explanation of Easter, Jesus through his sacrifice rescues both the dead and the living from captivity in sin into everlasting life; through the Harrowing of Hell, dead sinners are released to Heaven, and through Christ's blood, living sinners are washed clean. In the poem's conclusion, we are reminded that the love Jesus showed for humanity is the love we must show one another.

Easter

EDMUND SPENSER

Most glorious Lord of lyfe, that on this day,
 Didst make thy triumph over death and sin:
And having harrowd hell,¹ didst bring away
 Captivity thence captive us to win:
 This joyous day, deare Lord, with joy begin,
And grant that we, for whom thou diddest dye,
 Being with thy deare blood clene² washt from sin,
May live for ever in felicity.
And that thy love we weighing worthily,
 May likewise love thee for the same againe:
And for thy sake that all lyke deare didst buy,
 With love may one another entertayne.
 So let us love, deare love, lyke as we ought,
 Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught.

1595

¹ "harrowd hell" – According to Christian tradition, Jesus descended to Hell during the three days between the Crucifixion and Resurrection; while there, he rescued souls from damnation, referred to as "the Harrowing of Hell."

² "clene" – "clean."

Easter Monday: Resurrection

Before reading the poem below, turn the book sideways and look at the image formed by the lines of the poems. This is a visual as well as a verbal poem; Herbert wrote it to appear as a pair of wings, thus emphasizing the same theme found in the words themselves. In each “wing,” the first stanza describes a downward journey – humans descend from the Garden of Eden into an impoverished state, and from innocence into sin – a journey that the second half of the “wing” reverses, allowing the speaker to soar “with Thee.” The poem’s title makes clear that these are wings of new life, of Christ’s – and thereby the sinner’s – resurrection from sin and death.

Easter-wings

GEORGE HERBERT

Lord, Who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:

With Thee
O let me rise,
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day Thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne;
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.

With Thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day Thy victorie;
For, if I imp¹ my wing on Thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

1633

¹ “imp” – to furnish with new wings; to graft new feathers onto a bird’s wing.

Easter Tuesday: Resurrection

Easter can be a cultural and familial as well as church celebration, as Benjamine Sáenz depicts in his poem “Easter,” which narrates many iterations of “new life” on Easter Sunday: Christ’s resurrection, children’s new clothes, spiritual renewal from Lenten discipline, a freshly waxed truck, the first cry of “Alleluia!” after weeks of its absence. Notice that the grandmother and the priest make the same gesture, with raised palms; the sacramental and holy may be present in the family home as well as in church.

Easter

BENJAMIN ALIRE SÁENZ

My mother woke us that Sunday – her voice
a bell proclaiming spring. We rose
diving into our clothes, newly bought.
We took turns standing before mirrors,
combing, staring at our new selves.
Sinless from forty days of desert,
sinless from good confessions, we
drove to church in a red pickup, bright
and red and waxed for the special
occasion. Clean, polished as apples,
the yellow-dressed girls in front
with Mom and Dad; the boys in back,
our hair blowing free in the warming
wind. Winter gone away. At Mass,
the choir singing loud: ragged
notes from ragged angel’s voices;
ancient hymns sung in crooked Latin.
The priest, white robed, raised his palms
toward God, opened his mouth in awe:
“Alleluia!” The unspoken word of Lent
let loose in flight. Alleluia and incense
rising, my mother wiping her tears
from words she’d heard; my brother and I
whispering names of statues lining
the walls of the church. Bells ringing,
Mass ending, we running to the truck,
shiny as shoes going dancing. Dad
driving us to see my grandmother. There,
at her house, I asked about the new word
I’d heard: *resurrection*. “Death,
death,” she said, her hands moving downward,
“the cross – that is death.” And then she
laughed: “The dead will rise.” Her upturned
palms moved skyward as she spoke. “The dead
will rise.” She moved her hands toward me,
wrapped my face with touches, and

laughed again. *The dead will rise.*

1991

Easter Wednesday: Praise and Honor

The Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries was a time of technological, mechanical, scientific, and manufacturing innovation that affected most facets of life in England. Anglican priest and author Charles Kingsley became a leader in this revolution in 1872 when he became president of the Birmingham and Midland Institute, an institution of technical and scientific education, which remains to this day a site of public education. In the poem “Easter Week,” written for an exhibition showcasing new industrial achievements, Kingsley presents human intellectual abilities as a gift from God, one that we use as an Easter tribute to our Maker.

Easter Week

CHARLES KINGSLEY

(Written for music for a Parish Industrial Exhibition.)

See the land, her Easter keeping,
 Rises as her Maker rose.
Seeds, so long in darkness sleeping,
 Burst at last from winter snows.
Earth with heaven above rejoices;
 Fields and gardens hail the spring;
Shaughs¹ and woodlands ring with voices,
 While the wild birds build and sing.

You, to whom your Maker granted
 Powers to those sweet birds unknown,
Use the craft by God implanted;
 Use the reason not your own.
Here, while heaven and earth rejoices,
 Each his Easter tribute bring –
Work of fingers, chant of voices,
 Like the birds who build and sing.

1867

¹ “Shaughs” – woods.

Easter Thursday: Resurrection

In the gospel of John, the risen Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene, who initially thinks that he is a gardener and asks him if he knows where Jesus's body has been moved. He says her name – “Mary” – at which point she immediately recognizes him; he then sends her to tell the other disciples of the Resurrection (John 20:14-17). Andrew Hudgins plays with this idea of Jesus as a gardener, creating new life where there seemed only death. The poem ends with Jesus's Ascension into Heaven (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:9-11).

Christ as a Gardener

ANDREW HUDGINS

The boxwoods planted in the park spell LIVE.
I never noticed it until they died.
Before, the entwined green had smudged the word
unreadable. And when they take their own advice
again – come spring, come Easter – no one will know
a word is buried in the leaves. I love the way
that Mary thought her resurrected Lord
a gardener. It wasn't just the broad-brimmed hat
and muddy robe that fooled her: he was that changed.
He looks across the unturned field, the riot
Of unscythed grass, the smattering of wildflowers.
Before he can stop himself, he's on his knees.
He roots up stubborn weeds, pinches the suckers,
deciding order here – what lives, what dies,
and how. But it goes deeper even than that.
His hands burn and his bare feet smolder. He longs
To lie down inside the long, dew-moist furrows
and press his pierced side and his broken forehead
into the dirt. But he's already done it –
passed through one death and out the other side.
He laughs. He kicks his bright spade in the earth
and turns it over. Spring flashes by, then harvest.
Beneath his feet, seeds dance into the air.
They rise, and he, not noticing, ascends
on midair steppingstones of dandelion,
of milkweed, thistle, cattail, and goldenrod.

1991

Easter Friday: Discipleship

In this poem, Jane Kenyon contrasts wealth and poverty, conventional piety and true devotion. An artistic rendering of the crucified Jesus creates an emotional response in a viewer, but the response for which Jesus asks is not for believers to *feel* a certain way but rather to *act* a certain way. The poem's final stanza quotes the risen Jesus talking with Peter and explaining that to love the Lord is to feed the hungry (John 21:15-17), something the poem's speaker has clearly failed to do in the midst of her "piety."

Back from the City

JANE KENYON

After three days and nights of rich food
and late talk in overheated rooms,
of walks between mounds of garbage
and human forms bedded down for the night
under rags, I come back to my dooryard,
to my own wooden step.

The last red leaves fall to the ground
and frost has blackened the herbs and asters
that grew beside the porch. The air
is still and cool, and the withered grass
lies flat in the field. A nuthatch spirals
down the rough trunk of the tree.

At the Cloisters¹ I indulged in piety
while gazing at a painted lindenwood Pieta² –
Mary holding her pierced and dessicated son
across her knees; but when a man stepped close
under the tasseled awning of the hotel,
asking for "a quarter for someone
down on his luck," I quickly turned my back.

Now I hear tiny bits of bark and moss
break off under the bird's beak and claw,
and fall onto already-fallen leaves.
"Do you love me?" said Christ to his disciple.
"Lord, you know that I love you."
"Then feed my sheep."

1986

¹ "Cloisters" – The New York City building that houses the Metropolitan Museum of Art's medieval European collection.

² "lindenwood" – a type of soft wood sometimes used for carving. "Pieta" – an image of Mary cradling the dead Christ.

Easter Saturday: Praise

Easter season is a time of rejoicing in Jesus's resurrection and (for those in the Northern hemisphere) in the coming of spring, itself a sign of rebirth. Jesuit priest-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins revels in the beauty of the created world and sings praises to the Creator.

Pied¹ Beauty

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

Glory be to God for dappled things –
 For skies of couple-colour as a brinded² cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple³ upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth⁴ whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.

1877

¹ “pied” – patchy in color; splotched.

² “brinded” – brindled; patchy coloring on an animal.

³ “stipple” – the effect of painting using short strokes, dots, or flecks.

⁴ “fathers-forth” – a play on words in which God as “father” comes “forth.”

The Poets

Alcuin (c. 735 – 804)

Alcuin of York was a poet, scholar, teacher, and abbot. He studied and then taught in York, England, after which he worked under King Charlemagne of France, reforming the King's Palace school by introducing study of religion and the liberal arts. For the last nine years of his life he served as the abbot of a monastery in Tours, France. He was a strong defender of religious orthodoxy in a time of theological controversy. He was a prolific writer and scholar, leaving behind letters, poems, hymns, a revision of the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible, and a several liturgies.

Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612 – 1672)

The first American poet and the first American woman author to be published, Anne Bradstreet was born and raised in England, where she received an unusually thorough education for a woman. In 1630, she and her husband and her parents sailed to America on the *Arbella* as part of the Puritan migration to the New World, where both her father and her husband served as governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company. Bradstreet wrote poetry on religious, historical, and personal themes. In 1647, her brother-in-law took her manuscript with him (apparently without her knowledge) when he sailed to England, where he had the poems published under the title *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America, by a Gentlewoman in such Parts* (1650). After this publication, she continued to write as well as to revise her earlier poems, a collection of which were published posthumously by her family in 1678.

Wendell Berry (1934 -)

Wendell Berry is a many of many professions. He refers to himself as an “amateur poet,” despite his many published collections of poetry, fiction, and essays. He was also a professor of English and creative writing, teaching for many years at the University of Kentucky where he received his own education. And he is a farmer, one who works the land in Kentucky as his family has done for five generations. The importance of respecting and living with the rhythms of nature informs much of his writing. He minimizes his use of electricity, works his land with a team of horses rather than motorized equipment, and contributes his important voice to contemporary ecological debates. His devout Christianity informs his environmentalism, and he has written a series of “Sabbath poems” that are meditations on Sundays spent outside in nature.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806 – 1861)

English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of the most important authors of the Victorian era. She lived as an invalid for much of her life, although her health improved during her happy marriage to poet Robert Browning. The couple settled in Italy, where she lived the rest of her life. Their romance was the inspiration for her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

Lucille Clifton (1936 –)

Born and raised in New York state, American poet Lucille Clifton is now a Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at St. Mary's College in Maryland, where she was also the state's Poet Laureate from 1975 to 1985. Her work often celebrates the female body, African American heritage, the lives of family members, and a deep religious faith.

Leonard Cohen (1934 –)

Leonard Cohen is a Canadian novelist and poet, but his greatest fame comes from his work as a lyricist and singer. Cohen is Jewish and spent five years in seclusion as a Buddhist monk, and a strong spiritual element runs through much of his music. He has also suffered from depression for much of his life, and this theme too recurs in his work.

Bruce Dawe (1930 –)

Bruce Dawe is one of Australia's most popular poets. Of working-class origins, he left school at 16 and did several stints of manual labor until he joined the Royal Australian Air Force. Earning his college degree and eventually his Ph.D. through part-time study, he became a lecturer in literature and eventually a professor at the University of South Queensland. In addition to his many books of poetry, he has also published short stories, essays, and children's books.

John Donne (1572 – 1631)

John Donne was an English poet whose works were alternatively sacred and erotic and, sometimes, both at once. He grew up in a Roman Catholic family during a time of intense anti-Catholicism; as an adult he converted to Anglicanism and became a priest in 1615. After a youth of wine, women, and song, Donne became far more serious in the last twenty years of his life, a change clearly represented in his writing.

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (1899 – 1974)

An American composer and jazz musician, Duke Ellington composed more than 2000 songs and led his own orchestra for fifty years. The grandson of slaves, Ellington came to fame during the 1920s Harlem Renaissance when his band was featured in weekly radio broadcasts from Harlem's Cotton Club. Experimenting with longer musical forms in the 1940s, he wrote *Black, Brown, and Beige*, a musical exploration of African American history and faith. Many of his compositions are central to the body of musical standards known as the Great American Songbook. In Ellington's own assessment, his most important work was his three Concerts of Sacred Music (performed in 1956, 1968, and 1973), which brought together Christian liturgy and jazz.

George Herbert (1593 – 1633)

George Herbert was an English poet, most of whose poems were published only after his death; he had gathered many of them into a manuscript, titled *The Temple*, and gave them to a friend on his deathbed. He had become a priest in the Church of England only three years before his death of tuberculosis at age 39, and his poems are largely on sacred themes.

Robert Herrick (1591 – 1674)

English poet-priest Robert Herrick wrote poems of spirituality and carnality; he was interested in both the state of his soul and in seizing the day. He is perhaps best known for his work “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” (“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may”) and for his series of lustful poems to “Julia,” who may have been the bachelor’s mistress or a fictional creation. He was a parish vicar in the Devon countryside for many years, where he wrote much of his best work but also longed for the urban excitement of his native London.

Geoffrey Hill (1932 –)

Geoffrey Hill is an English writer of dense and difficult poems, many of them about religion and history. He grew up working-class in Worcestershire, and witnessed at age eight the Nazi bombing that destroyed Coventry Cathedral. He studied at Oxford University, where his first poems were published, and went on to an academic career as an English professor, first at the University of Leeds and then at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. In 1988 he moved to the United States, where he received medical treatment for the depression he had suffered for many years. He is now a professor of literature and religion at Boston University. Hill is an Anglican, and his wife, Alice Goodman, is an Anglican priest.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 – 1889)

An English Jesuit priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins was not widely known as a poet until after he died; his collected poems were first published in 1918 at the instigation of his friend Robert Bridges, who was at the time the Poet Laureate of England. Hopkins was both an observant lover of natural beauty and a deeply faithful man who suffered from depression, themes that reoccur in many of his poems. As a poet, he was also an experimenter, relying on alliteration, innovative meter, and created words, as well as on traditional forms such as the sonnet.

Andrew Hudgins (1951 –)

Andrew Hudgins, Humanities Distinguished Professor in English at Ohio State University, is the author of several collections of poems as well as of essays on American poets. A Southerner born in Texas, raised a Southern Baptist, Hudgins spent his childhood on military bases because of his father’s career, and all of these biographical elements appear regularly in his poetry.

Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967)

American author and social activist Langston Hughes is most famous for his 1920s Harlem Renaissance literature, but his career as a poet, playwright, and fiction writer continued well into the Civil Rights movement. He wrote of African American culture in twentieth-century classics such as “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “I, Too, Sing America.” He was forced to testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953 for his alleged membership in the Communist Party, a membership that he denied. His writing was heavily influenced by the jazz movement in music.

E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake) (1861 – 1913)

Canadian Emily Pauline Johnson was born on the Six Nations Indian Reserve in Ontario; her father was a Mohawk, and her English mother was the sister-in-law of the Anglican missionary to the reservation. As an actress and poet, Johnson had a successful fifteen-year stage career in which she dressed in Native costume, read her poetry, and introduced her Native culture to mostly white audiences. She died of breast cancer at age 51.

Jane Kenyon (1947 – 1995)

Born and educated in Michigan, Jane Kenyon moved to New Hampshire when she married fellow poet Donald Hall, eventually becoming New Hampshire’s Poet Laureate. She struggled with depression for much of her life, a subject that plays an important role in her poetry. She was also a translator and argued for this art as an important poetic genre in itself. Her career was cut short when she died of leukemia. In addition to the four books of poems published during her lifetime, additional collections have been published posthumously.

Charles Kingsley (1819 – 1875)

Charles Kingsley was an English novelist, Anglican priest, and University of Cambridge historian who is now perhaps most famous for his 1863 children’s novel *The Water-Babies*. This novel and his other writings display his fierce interest in social reform.

Li-Young Lee (1957 –)

American poet Li-Young Lee was born in Jakarta, Indonesia, where his Chinese parents had been exiled after the Chinese civil war. After his father was jailed in Indonesia, the family escaped the anti-Chinese prejudice there by moving to Hong Kong, where his father became an evangelist. After the family immigrated to America in 1964, his father studied in seminary and became a Presbyterian minister. Lee’s poetry is deeply personal and spiritual and is influenced by the Chinese poetry and the King James Bible that his father read aloud to his children. Lee lives in Chicago.

Madeleine L’Engle (1918 –)

An American author best known for her children’s books, especially *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) for which she won the Newberry Medal, Madeleine L’Engle is also a poet,

novelist, memoirist, and playwright. Much of her writing displays her scientific understanding of the universe. A devout Episcopalian, she was for many years the writer-in-residence at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. She has for decades divided her time between New York and Crosswicks, a 200-year-old farmhouse in Connecticut.

Denise Levertov (1923 – 1997)

Born in England, Denise Levertov moved to the United States in 1948 and became an American citizen in 1955. She published her first poem in 1940 and ultimately published over twenty books of poems as well as collections of essays. Her father was a Hasidic Jew who converted to Christianity and became an Anglican priest, and Levertov herself converted to Christianity in 1984. Religion was a primary theme in her poetry, which also addressed topics of war and justice, including many poems about the Vietnam War.

George MacDonald (1824 – 1905)

George MacDonald was the Scottish author of fantasy novels, fairy tales, children's stories, and poems; his friendship and his writings were highly influential to several generations of authors. He was also a Congregationalist minister, although not a very successful one due to his rejection of some elements of Calvinist doctrine; in 1860, he converted to the Anglican church, where he occasionally preached as a layman. After 1877, he was supported by a government pension at the specific request of Queen Victoria.

John Milton (1608 – 1674)

John Milton was one of the most learned of English poets, thanks to his years of university and private study in most branches of knowledge. The author most famously of the epic poem *Paradise Lost*, Milton also wrote essays, shorter poems, plays, and political commentaries. Educated to be an Anglican minister, he instead served as a civil servant in the Puritan Commonwealth government.

Gabriela Mistral (1889 – 1957)

Gabriela Mistral was the *nom de plume* of Lucila Godoy Alcayaga, a poet, teacher, and diplomat for her native Chile. Of mixed Basque and Indian heritage, Mistral in 1954 became the first Latin American to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In addition to her teaching career and her poetry writing, she also worked for the League of Nations' League for Intellectual Co-operation, taught at several colleges internationally, and served as Chilean consul in several countries. At her death, the Chilean government called for three days of national mourning.

Thomas More (1478 – 1535)

Sir Thomas More was a renowned English scholar, lawyer, writer, and public official (including service as Lord Chancellor from 1529 to 1532). His best-known work is the

novel *Utopia*, the title of which is a term that he coined. King Henry VIII had him executed in 1535 for refusing to acknowledge the king as the head of the newly established Church of England. He was canonized as a saint by the Roman Catholic church in 1935.

Kathleen Norris (1947 –)

Kathleen Norris is an American poet and memoirist who has been a Benedictine oblate since the late 1960s. Long associated with the South Dakota landscape through her books such as *Dakota* and *The Cloister Walk*, she now lives in Hawaii where she spent part of her growing-up years.

Mary Oliver (1935 –)

American writer Mary Oliver is as much a naturalist as she is a poet; observations of the New England natural landscape are central to her poems. She has lived in Provincetown, Massachusetts, for over forty years with her now late partner, Molly Malone Cook, who was her literary agent. In addition to her many volumes of poetry (for which she has won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award), she has published collections of essays and books on the poetic craft.

Wilfred Owen (1893 – 1918)

Wilfred Owen is one of the greatest of England's war poets, having fought and died in World War I. In the hospital in 1917, recovering from neurasthenia (or "shell-shock"), he met poets Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, who were fellow patients and who encouraged him to write poems about his experiences in the war. Owen returned to active service in 1918 and was killed one week before the armistice. His poems were published after the war and were promoted by Sassoon. Owen is famous especially for his war poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est."

Christina Rossetti (1830 – 1894)

Poet Christina Rossetti grew up in an Italian family in England. With her brother, painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, she was part of an important Victorian cohort of artists who referred to themselves as the Pre-Raphaelites. A devout member of the Anglo-Catholic movement within the Church of England, she often wrote about religious themes in her poems.

Joyce Rupp (1943 –)

A Sister of the Servites (Servants of Mary), Joyce Rupp is a spiritual writer, poet, retreat leader, and hospice volunteer living in Des Moines, Iowa. Her many books, CDs, and videos include meditations and prayers in prose and poetry. Her work has explored, among other themes, the feminine aspects of the divine.

Benjamin Alire Sáenz (1954 –)

A writer of fiction, poetry, and children's literature, Benjamin Sáenz grew up on a farm in New Mexico. He writes in both Spanish and English and teaches in the Bilingual Program in Creative Writing at the University of Texas at El Paso. In addition to his other academic work, he studied theology for four years at the University of Louvain in Belgium.

Edith Sitwell (1887 – 1964)

Dame Edith Sitwell, born into the English aristocracy, attracted some controversy in the 1920s by championing innovative directions in poetry. After living in France for much of the 1930s, she returned to England at the outbreak of World War II; her poems during the war brought her renewed fame. In addition to her several volumes of poems, she also wrote biographies and one novel about English figures such as Elizabeth I, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift. She converted to Catholicism in 1955. Part of Sitwell's public persona was her extravagant clothes and jewelry, some of which is now on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Edmund Spenser (1552 – 1599)

English Poet Laureate Edmund Spenser is best known for his epic poem *The Faerie Queen*, for which he created a verse form later called the "Spenserian stanza" and adopted by other poets. Fellow poets were his pall-bearers at his funeral and tossed pens and poems into his grave; he is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Edward Taylor (c. 1642 – 1729)

Puritan Edward Taylor emigrated in 1668 from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, a Puritan settlement in the New World. He studied at Harvard University and then became a minister and physician in Massachusetts. His many poems were written in his private meditations and spiritual preparations for communion. They were not published until the twentieth century, after they were rediscovered in Yale University's library in 1937.

Theodulph of Orléans (c. 760 – 821)

Theodulph was a theologian, a writer, and a powerful member of the French King Charlemagne's court, serving for a time as an imperial theological advisor, as the abbot of a monastery, and eventually as the Bishop of Orléans (France). After the king's death, Theodulph was thrown into jail in 818 by Charlemagne's successor, Louis the Pious, who charged him, apparently with little evidence, with treason against France. He remained imprisoned until he died in 821, although some histories have him released shortly before his death; other stories argue that he was poisoned to death in prison.

Dylan Thomas (1914 – 1953)

Dylan Thomas was a major Welsh author of poems, plays, short stories, and radio essays. Thanks to his striking voice, he became particularly well known for his radio

broadcasts and was a popular speaker on both sides of the Atlantic. Thomas drank excessively and bragged about doing so; indeed, his drinking was part of his famous bohemian persona. He died at age 39, having collapsed after a drinking bout. His poem to his dying father, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” is a modern classic.

R. S. Thomas (1913 – 2000)

Ronald Stuart Thomas was an Anglican priest and the most prominent Welsh poet of the late twentieth century. An ardent Welsh nationalist, he wrote two prose works, including his autobiography, in the Welsh language, which he learned at age 30; but he wrote all of his poetry in English, saying that he had learned Welsh too late for poetic purposes. Apparently a rather difficult and bitter man, he insisted on living in the barest of conditions, rejecting modern machinery as the icons of lives led for consumption rather than spirituality.

Isaac Watts (1674 – 1748)

“The Father of English Hymnody,” Isaac Watts largely introduced into church worship the tradition of singing songs other than psalm settings. He wrote over 750 hymns, many of which continue to be sung in churches to this day. He was a Nonconformist – that is, not a member of the Church of England – and served as the pastor of an Independent congregation. He was also a theologian and logician; his logic textbook was the standard at many universities for over one hundred years.

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807 – 1892)

American poet John Greenleaf Whittier was a Quaker, an abolitionist who worked for the end of slavery in the United States, and one of the founders of the Republican Party. His poems include hymns, patriotic verses such as the famous “Barbara Frietchie,” and poetic descriptions of his native New England. His poems were very popular, and most of his publications in the last twenty years of his life were best-sellers.

Oscar Wilde (1854 – 1900)

An Irish playwright, poet, and fiction writer best known for his wit and cleverness, Oscar Wilde was also a spiritual man whose work often dealt with questions of sin and redemption. A gay man in a time when this sexual orientation was outlawed in England, Wilde was put on trial, convicted, and sentenced to jail for two years for the crime of homosexuality. His works include the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and the poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

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Alcuin, "In the Refectory," translated by Helen Waddell, from *More Latin Lyrics: From Virgil to Milton*, 1985; copyright 1976 by Victor Gollancz. Permission needed from Stanbrook Abbey, Worcester, England.

Wendell Berry, "Sabbath Poem X, 1979" and "Sabbath Poem V, 1980," from *A Timbered Choir*, Counterpoint, 1998.

Lucille Clifton, "the calling of the disciples," from *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir, 1969-1980*, BOA Editions, 1987.

Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," from *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*, Vintage, 1993.

Bruce Dawe, "And A Good Friday Was Had By All," from *Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems, 1954-1978*, Longman Cheshire Poetry Ltd., 1988.

Duke Ellington, "Come Sunday"

Geoffrey Hill, "Lachrimae Amantis," from *Collected Poems*, Penguin Books, 1985.

Andrew Hudgins, "Christ as a Gardener" and "Ecce Homo," from *The Never-Ending*, Houghton-Mifflin, 1991.

Langston Hughes, "The Ballad of Mary's Son," from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Vintage, 1995.

Jane Kenyon, "Back from the City," from *Collected Poems*, Graywolf Press, 2005 (or from *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, 1986).

Li-Young Lee, "Hammock" and "Nativity," from *Book of My Nights*, BOA Editions, 2001.

Madeleine L'Engle, "Love Letter," from *The Weather of the Heart*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1978.

Denise Levertov, "On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX," from *Breathing the Water*, New Directions Publishing, 1984.

Kathleen Norris, "Imperatives," Part 2 of "Mysteries of the Incarnation," from *Journey: New and Selected Poems, 1969-1999*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001.

Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," from *House of Light*, Beacon Press, 1990.

Joyce Rupp, "Lent 2001," available on her website; which book?

Benjamin Sáenz, "Easter," from *Calendar of Dust*, Broken Moon Press, 1991.

Edith Sitwell, "Still Falls the Rain," from *Collected Poems*, Sinclair-Stevenson (or Overlook TP?), 2006.

Edward Taylor, "Huswifery," from *The Poems of Edward Taylor*, ed. Donald E. Stanford, Yale University Press, 1960.

R. S. Thomas, "Via Negativa," from *H'M*, University of Arkansas Press, 1972 (or from *Poems of R. S. Thomas*, University of Arkansas Press, 1985).