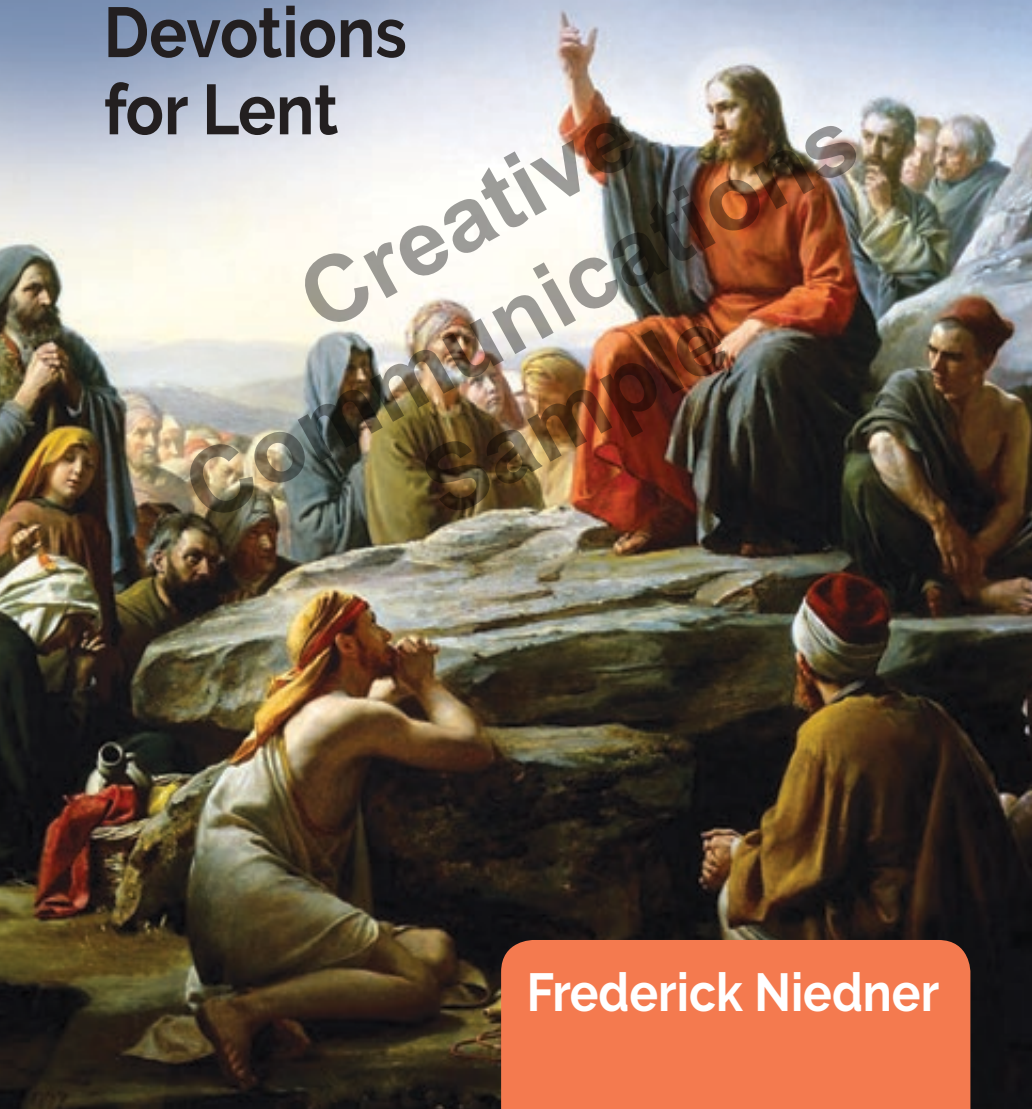


JESUS *and the* GOSPELS

Devotions
for Lent



Frederick Niedner

The Journey Begins

Ash Wednesday

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Mark 8:34

Lent is a season of repentance, a wilderness sojourn, spring cleaning for the soul, but more than anything, a cross-bearing journey. It begins with a liturgical artist's mark upon us, a cross of dust and ashes.

“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” says the one who marks us, recalling words of the Artist who made us. Only the Artist's breath distinguishes us from dust, and we breathe it so briefly. That sobering secret motivates every step we take.

We also bear our cruciform sign of that secret as a reminder of an earlier cross, the one made on our forehead and over our heart on the day of our baptism, when our death became his, his life became ours, and a voice said, “You are my child.”

Today begins a season of practice. With newly marked crosses on our faces, we practice living the Crucified One's life in the world. Come along.

You have marked us, Lord. We are yours. Watch and keep us as we follow in the way of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Daily Cross-Bearing

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Luke 9:23

Mark's first readers, even if they didn't carry wooden crosses as Jesus did, faced martyrdom at the hands of officers who used tools of execution no less brutal.

For most of us, however, cross-bearing remains a metaphor, as it was for Luke's wealthy, privileged audience. Luke's gospel calls them and us to *daily* cross-bearing, daily dying and rising, daily offering up our lives and livelihood for the sake of the poor, forgotten and unforgiven.

Along that way, the screams may remain silent, the nails invisible, but the cost is just as high as on any other road, and the grace of it all just as profound. In losing our lives we find them handed back to us as gifts to be shared on yet another day.

Open our eyes, Lord, to see the places and the people around us that need the flesh, blood and substance of your own body offered up to and for them. Let us find our lives in being that gift to the world today. Amen.

Heading for Jerusalem

Friday after Ash Wednesday

So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

John 12:10-11

On his final journey to Jerusalem in John's gospel, Jesus stops in Bethany to pick up a friend. Trouble was, Lazarus had died a few days earlier and didn't seem up for the trip. Lazarus' miffed sisters asked, "What kept you, Jesus?"

Because Jesus does everything to glorify God, he waited until Lazarus was dead, then called his friend from the tomb. The two of them then head for Jerusalem, where people wait to kill them both. Jesus has summoned Lazarus from one death to another, from ordinary mortality to becoming an offering.

This is true of all of us who have died with Christ and been raised to a new life to glorify God. We give these new lives away in loving service, in ways that may or may not get noticed. Except, of course, by God, and perhaps by those we serve.

Awaken us, Lord. Call us from tombs of fear and weariness. Lead us where we can become your life-giving gift to others who suffer, mourn or wander about lost. Amen.

Our Father Who Art in Secret

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret.

Matthew 6:17-18

“Let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven,” urges Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. Soon after, he warns, “Don’t even think about making a show of your charity or the eloquence of your prayers. Keep your fasting a secret. In your closet, pray to your Father who is in secret.”

This isn’t the contradiction it may seem, but the elements of a discipline that shapes us so that those we support with our gifts and prayers don’t notice us, and therefore have none but God to thank and praise for their blessings. In the stealth of flesh and blood, God goes about feeding, clothing, healing and comforting.

Though we recognize the faces of those who serve us, if we search them carefully, we see that each belongs to him.

Help us, Lord, to wrap ourselves so thoroughly in your mercy that everything we do and say appears to come from you alone. May your name be blessed by every tongue. Amen.

The King No One Noticed

First Sunday in Lent

Those who went before and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Mark 11:9-11

The little band that accompanied Jesus acclaimed him God’s chosen one. In Mark’s telling, none but those few singers noticed Jesus’ arrival. Jesus looked around briefly and left again for Bethany, while the bustling city went about its business. And Passover was big business.

Jesus would return, and later in the week ascend the strange throne his executioners prepared. Once again, hardly anyone would notice.

Like every generation, we crave signs and proofs of God’s interventions. Instead, the Son of God slips into our world mostly unnoticed. He lives in the same shadows we inevitably visit and dies in the darkness that will envelop us all. He chooses those places so we’ll find him when we get there.

Draw us to you, Lord Jesus. Give us eyes and ears to see and hear you in the dim, abandoned places our busy world scarcely notices. Amen.

A Moment Beyond Time

Monday, the First Week in Lent

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

John 12:14-15

John describes Jesus' arrival as an extraordinary spectacle. Hearing of Jesus' approach, pilgrims inside Jerusalem proceed out, waving palm branches, to meet him. Another crowd, witnesses to the raising of Lazarus, accompanies Jesus. The two crowds meet, one singing hosannas, the other testifying about Bethany's amazing, empty tomb.

The Revelation to St. John (7:9-17) recounts a strikingly similar scene. Somewhere outside time and space a multitude from every tribe and nation converges from all directions, palm branches in hand, to praise the Lamb and worship God.

We find ourselves in all three multitudes—those ready to welcome a deliverer, those who have seen folks raised to new life, and those who have washed in the blood of the Lamb.

For now, we hunger and thirst. The heat withers us. But the Lamb guides us to the water of life. God wipes away our tears—daily, and forever.

Hosanna, Lamb of God! Make your throne in our city, that in you and in your mercy we find daily washing, nourishment and comfort. Amen.

Downstream from the Temple

Tuesday, the First Week in Lent

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."

Mark 11:12-14

Did Jesus overreact? What can a fruit tree do in April when a hungry traveler finds only blossoms?

In Mark's gospel, we occupy Ezekiel-time, not ordinary time, so approaching Jerusalem's temple we should find trees bearing fruit in every season, nurtured by living water (Ezekiel 47:1-12).

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Devotions for Lent

Each gospel text selected for reflection contains a detail or bit of narrative unique to the gospel in which it appears. In these unique elements we find clues to the meaning of the good news of the crucified and risen Jesus as each evangelist understood it as well as to the circumstances and needs of the ancient audiences for whom these gospels were first shaped.

We may not share every circumstance or concern with Mark's persecuted readers, Matthew's theologically divided community, Luke's prosperous audience, or John's isolated and beleaguered flock. Ultimately, however, the written gospels that spoke directly to their numb and fearful hearts enliven ours as well with the saving message of Christ, despite our separation in time and circumstances.



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