

Session 1. Promise of Ashes: First Set of Sacred Words of Jesus on the Cross



Overview. Jesus spoke 7 times during his agony on the cross. Each weekly reading during Lent will address one or more set of those 7 sacred, final words. In each 3-4 page reading, you'll find a discussion of the relevant Gospel(s) as well as Lenten insights from featured writers and talented artists. The current reading will be attached to each weekly St. Richard's E-Mail during Lent. You may also pick up hard copies in the St. Richard's Church Office. The readings have visuals as well as words.

We'll hold **the first Summoning the Divine Zoom session** on Wednesday evening, **February 24 (6:30-7:30 p.m.)**. We' will focus on this first reading (attached) and on anything else you'd like to discuss. It would be great if you have time to do the reading, but don't worry if you can't get to it, you can still be an active participant. Dates for the Wednesday evening Zoom discussions will be February 24, March 3, 10, 17, 24, & 31.

SESSION 1: FORGIVENESS & COMPASSION

THE FIRST WORDS: *Gather, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.*

Luke 23:34

Gospel Passages. An agonized Jesus of Nazareth is hanging on the Cross between 2 criminals, who are awaiting crucifixion. He can see the Roman soldiers who have tortured him and have just now nailed him to the cross. He is aware that Caiaphas and the high priests of the Sanhedrim are the ones who betrayed him and handed over for judgment (Matthew 27:18, Mark 15:10). His key apostles have deserted him; he knows Judas has betrayed him; he knows Peter has denied him three times; and he knows that the huge crowd who welcomed him only days before now scorns him and demands his crucifixion. Yet as he hangs in agony on the cross, he asks his Father to forgive all of humanity.

Jesus consistently preaches forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:12). When asked by Peter, how many times should we forgive someone, Jesus answers 70 times 7 (Matthew 18:21-22). He forgives the Capernaum paralytic (Mark 2:3-12), the sinful woman who anointed him in the home of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:37-48), and the adulteress who is about to be stoned (John 8:1-11). During the Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, Jesus tells the Apostles to drink of the cup: "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:27-28). 22-23). /jesuschrist Savior.net/Words.html.

Featured Author: Madeleine L'Engle (1918-2006)



L'Engle is the accomplished author of numerous plays, poems, novels, and reminiscences for children and adults. She is known for her book *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962). Although it was initially rejected by 26 publishers, *Wrinkle in Time* was awarded the 1963 Newbery Medal for Children's Literature. For nearly 30 years, L'Engle was the librarian & writer in residence at the Episcopal Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City. In 2004, President George W. Bush awarded her the National Humanities Medal. She was cited for works that "reflect the creative spirit of America." L'Engle believed in Christian universalism, insisting that everyone will

ultimately be saved by God. She firmly believed in the compassion and forgiveness of Christ. She declared: "The world's in the worst mess we've been in for generations, and we no longer get down on our knees and say, I'm sorry....The Confession must come before we can change things and rejoice."

L'Engle, *For Lent* (1966)

It is my Lent to break my Lent,
to eat when I would fast,
to know when slender strength is spent
taking shelter from the blast.

When I would run with wind and rain--
to sleep when I would watch.

It is my Lent to smile at pain,
but not ignore its touch.

It is my Lent to listen well
when I would be alone.
To talk when I would rather dwell
in silence....

Turning from none to call on me...
to try to see that what is truly
meant is not my choice.

If Christ's I'd be, it's thus I'll keep my Lent.

L'Engle, *First Coming*

**He did not wait till the world was ready till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady, and prisoners cried out for release.
He did not wait for the perfect time. He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime, turned water into wine. He did not wait till
hearts were pure. In joy he came...**

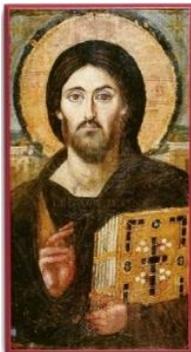
**We cannot wait till the world is sane to raise our songs with joyful voice, for to share
our grief, to touch our pain, He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!**

Poetry Comment. L'Engle insist that whatever the pain, whatever the fear, whatever the work waiting to be done; whatever the mockery, whatever the fury, whatever the suffering – we cannot wait until the world is sane. Christ did not wait until the world was calm and well-mannered before he arrived; we cannot wait until the world is sane. We can't pause for a more opportune moment to reach out to others, to share their burdens and to lift our voices and rejoice. Source: /wesleyanaccent.com/the-startling-poetry-of-madeleine-lengle.

L'Engle, "Icon Tree" from *The Irrational Season* (1977)

Madeleine L'Engle insists that symbolic icons are important to us. She discusses our need for icons as little children. "We hold on to the favorite little piece of blanket, or the beloved stuffed animal. The blanket is not a blanket, nor is the animal a mere animal; they are icons of all-rightness in a world that early shows itself to be not all right. They are icons of tender love in a society that daily becomes more brutal and violent/." From

Penguins and Golden Calves (2003).



On the left is the oldest known icon of Christ Pantocrator; it in in the ancient Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai. The 2 different sides of Christ's facial expressions emphasize Christ's two natures as fully God and fully human. In the *Irrational Season*, L'Engle reflects on the Church year from Advent to Advent. This excerpt from the *Icon Tree* is full of anger at God to utter joy. It is particularly relevant to the concept of Lenten meditation, mirroring the process L'Engle follows to move from bitter anger and range at God to utter joy. It is particularly relevant to the concept of forgiveness and compassion.

Selections from *Icon Tree*. L'Engle shares this account with us. "I always find respite in our Connecticut country home. When we open our house in the spring we know that it will still be winter on our hill....I have several favorite places where I love to sit and think....the most favorite is a large rock above the brook. Directly in front of the rock is an old maple tree. When the trees are fully leafed it is always shaded, and cool there. I knew that now the brook would be rushing, filled with clear water from melting snow. Last summer, I had taken my daughter, her husband, and their two little girls to a fair at Regina Landis Monastery in Bethlehem, Connecticut. That day my special friend among the Sisters gave me a small, laminated icon of a medieval Mother and Child along with a little cross. I attached both to the trunk of the big maple. In late afternoons, it was my habit to go to my thinking rock and say my prayers and then, with the icon tree as my focus, move beyond the words of prayer to prayers of the heart.

This year on a spring afternoon, I headed through the trees which leads to the rock, but something was wrong. I quickened my steps and when I had climbed up on the rock I saw that someone had shot the icon at close range. It was split in four parts. There was a bullet hole through the face of the holy child. The cross had been pulled from its ring; only the broken ring still clung to the nail. I felt an incredible wave of hate flood over me. I was literally nauseated.

What had been done had been done deliberately; it was not an accident; it was a purposeful blasphemy, an act of cursing. I began walking trying to come to the point where I could simply turn over to God whoever had shot the icon and the cross. This person was beyond my puny human ability to understand. I could not add to the curse by cursing. But I did not know how to bless. The next day I carried tools and took the remains of the icon off the tree and gave them to the brook. I took away the small nail with the broken loop. Then I sat on the rock and looked at the gouge in the tree's wood. The prose poem I write below did not happen right away, but it did happen. It redeemed the act of hate and made the tree far more of an icon for me than it was before."

[Summary. L'Engle continues her discussion with a story from the Hebrew Bible (Numbers 22-24). Balak, the king of Moab, wants to remove the people of Israel who are who are camped on the nearby plains. The prophet Balaam states that he will utter only what his god (Yahweh) inspires, but he is willing to accompany the Moabite messengers. On the journey, he is met by an angel of Yahweh, who is recognized only by Balaam's ass. The wise ass lies down and refuses to continue. Then Balaam's eyes are opened, and the angel permits him to go to Balak but commands him not to curse but to bless Israel. Despite Balak's pressure, Balaam remains faithful to Yahweh and blesses the people of Israel.]

[L'Engle continues.] "The God who redeemed the icon tree for me will not create creatures able to ask questions only to be snuffed out before they can answer them. The joyful God of love who shouted the galaxies into existence is not going to abandon any iota of his creation. So the icon tree is for me a symbole of God's concern, forever and always and unto ages of ages, for all of us, every single one of us, no matter what we think or believe or deny." [Note: L'Engle, who was fluid in French, uses the concept of Symbole Informatique. This concept refers to anything symbolic, especially an Icon. She concludes with this prose poem.]

"As I sit at the shot-at tree, the rough wound opens and grows strange and deep within the wood till suddenly I see s galaxy swirl ng with flame....I see a trillion stars speed light in ever-singing dance within the hole surrounded by the tree. Each leaf's alight with flame. "And then a burning living coal hissing in the brook, and all the suns burst outward in their joy. The shot child, like the great and flaming tree, runs with fire and water, alive and wild. Gentle and strong, becoming free from the wounded tree. 'Lord God! The icon's here, alive and free!'"



Compassion! (1897)
William-Adolphe Bouguereau

Compassion presents the artist's deeply personal response to the Crucifixion. Holding his own cross, Bouguereau envisions himself embracing the suffering body of Christ. Bouguereau (1825-1905) understood profound grief. He buried 3 of his children; and, in 1900, two years before his own death, he would lose a 4th child and his wife. In the 1880's and early 1890's. Bouguereau devoted himself to painting scenes from the life of Christ for the chapel of the Virgin in the Church of San Vicente de Paúl (Paris).

His work was highly regarded in France even though the "moderns" considered him a "history" painter. He was President of the French Institute and recipient of France's highest award: the Legion of Honor. He was considered a dedicated artist, who helped young painters prosper.

Comment. When we first look at this painting we might interpret the person holding Christ as an Apostle or Saint. If that were so, the effort would be similar to other Crucifixion paintings. But here, the portraits of Christ and his follower are intensely personal. They are empathically merged and are comforting one another. The follower soothes Jesus' bloody wound as Jesu looks down with compassion.

On the crossbar a statement is posted which reads "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" in three languages, Greek, Latin, and Aramaic. In many

depictions, Christ is crucified at the top of a mountain, Bouguereau, however, chooses to portray the Savior on a barren wasteland, symbolic of the human's desolate spiritual life before finding his or her way to Christ. Bouguereau kept this painting because it meant so much to him. It remained in his studio until his descendants donated it to the Paris Museum.

Note: I used comments in this section (often rewritten) from an article by Kara Lysandra Ross; www.artrenewal.org/artworks/compassion/william-adolphe-bouguereau/4910.