



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for

Lent

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us examine the history of Lent—the season which begins the Church’s second cycle of preparation, celebration, and rejoicing—and explore its practices so that we can observe the Lenten season faithfully and winsomely today. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

Preparing for Joy 2

Lent is an invitation to honesty and clarity. It can be our preparation for joy because it is the concentrated and disciplined time when we together work to root out the blindness and deception that prevent us from receiving each other as gracious gifts from God.

The Early History of Lent 4

The season of Lent appears after the Council of Nicea. With so many biblical precedents, did it really take the Church more than 300 years to seize upon the idea of fasting for forty days? The early history of Lent is interesting and complex; it is something of a “choose your own adventure” story.

Responsive Fasting 6

Fasting in the Bible is almost always focused on a grievous condition. This practice is a response to something instead of a means to something else. Lenten fasting, then, is a response to sins and the prospects of death in our culture, our nation, our church, and our own lives.

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Walking the stations of the cross—a devotional path of reflection and repentance based on events in the passion and resurrection of Christ—is being adapted in creative ways today. How did this form of spiritual pilgrimage originate and why is it important for our discipleship?

Keeping Vigil 10

The season of Lent, and especially Holy Week, are traditional times for keeping vigil—an attentive openness to the work of God in our lives and in our world. But what does it mean to keep vigil today, when most of us no longer adhere to the strict discipline of late night prayer?



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Focus Article:

📖 Preparing for Joy
(Lent, pp. 11-17)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Adding In, Not Giving Up
(Lent, pp. 87-93)

What do you think?

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Preparing for Joy

Lent is an invitation to honesty and clarity. It is our preparation for joy because it is the concentrated and disciplined time when we together work to root out the blindness and deception that prevent us from receiving each other as gracious gifts from God.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:11-32

Meditation¹

Let us begin the [Lenten] Fast with joy. Let us give ourselves to spiritual efforts. Let us cleanse our souls. Let us cleanse our flesh. Let us fast from passions as we fast from foods, taking pleasure in the good works of the Spirit and accomplishing them in love that we all may be made worthy to see the passion of Christ our God and His Holy Pascha, rejoicing with spiritual joy.

Reflection

If this emphasis on Lenten joy strikes us as surprising, or even perverse, it may be because we think of penitence as giving up things and activities we otherwise love. How can we enjoy that?

To answer, Norman Wirzba says, let's get "clear about our most basic commitments and attachments and then determine if they have their impulse in a clean heart. The time of Lent is not about saying 'No' to anything made or provided by God. It cannot be, because everything God has made is good and beautiful, a gift and blessing that God has provided as the expression of his love. If there is a 'No' that has to be said, it will be a 'No' directed to the distorting and degrading ways we have developed in appropriating these gifts," he observes. "We do not appreciate how in mishandling the gifts of God we bring ruin to ourselves and to the world *while we are in the midst of having a good time.*"

Think of the Christian life as wearing a new pair of glasses that help us see everything from Christ's point of view (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:16 ff.). But, they keep getting "dirty or scratched and we gradually lose the ability to see things as the gifts of God that they really are. Instead we see them in terms of what they can do for us," Wirzba notes. It's difficult to notice how distorted our vision is becoming, because (as you recall) we are looking at everything, including ourselves, through now-dirty glasses! "Simply by living in a consumerist culture like our own we are daily taught to see everything as a means to the satisfaction of whatever end we choose. We are not, for the most part, mean-spirited about this. We are simply performing a script that is written out for us in thousands of media and marketing messages."

This is where the season of Lent comes in.

- ▶ By *starting with self-examination and repentance*, Lent helps us "appreciate how much our vision and handling of the world is a distortion and degradation" and "learn to see each other rightly as gifts of God's love." We can even enjoy cleaning our glasses, for we anticipate seeing clearly once again.
- ▶ *Corporate embodied practices like fasting* train us to relate to the world properly. Because eating is "the daily means through which we relate to the created world, communities of humanity, and ultimately to God," it is thus "a paradigmatic act that expresses...who we think we are and how we fit into the world," Wirzba notes. Fasting helps us enjoy food properly.



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- ▶ Lenten practices *teach us humility*, which is not a form of self-loathing, but a true perspective on ourselves that rejects arrogance. Since humility is “the honest admission of personal life as necessarily enfolded within and dependent on the lives of others and the gifts of God,” Wirzba explains, it “makes possible the true enjoyment of others because we now perceive and receive them properly: namely, as gifts and blessings meant to be cared for, celebrated, and shared.”
- ▶ These practices *draw us into communion with others*. Lent is difficult for us because we are trying to “experience real togetherness simply by relating to others always on *our* terms. But this cannot work.... Communion is built upon love, and love is always an hospitable act that welcomes, nurtures, and sets others free to be themselves. To love another is to give oneself and one’s abilities and gifts to them. Only then can our presence in the world be a source of joy to those we meet.”

Study Questions

1. Jesus’ story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is often read during Lent. How does it frame our view of the season?
2. Why, for Norman Wirzba, is fasting so important? What is the “improper eating” that it calls attention to and corrects?
3. “What are you *adding in* for Lent this year?” Elizabeth Sands Wise asks. Discuss how the four answers she canvases — “adding in practices that free us from false cares, setting time aside for reading, cultivating humility, praying through ancient texts alone or in a community, or digging into Scripture to encounter Christ anew” — prepare us for Lenten joy.
4. How does Robert Robinson’s famous hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” express Lenten joy?

Departing Hymn: “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” (vv. 1 and 3)

Come, thou Fount of every blessing,
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount I’m fixed upon it
mount of God’s redeeming love.

Oh, to grace how great a debtor
daily I’m constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee:
prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here’s my heart, O take and seal it;
seal it for thy courts above.

Robert Robinson (1758), alt.
Tune: NETTLETON

† This is from the Orthodox Church’s Vespers Liturgy for Forgiveness Sunday, which is the Sunday before Lent. Thomas Hopko, *The Lenten Spring: Readings for Great Lent* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983), 12.



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Focus Article:

📖 The Early History of Lent
(*Lent*, pp. 18-26)

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The Early History of Lent

The season of Lent appears after the Council of Nicea. With so many biblical precedents, why did it take the Church over three hundred years to seize upon the idea of fasting for forty days?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:1-13

Meditation[†]

Observing Lent can help us enter the fullness of God. In the broadest sense, Lent re-enacts Jesus' turn toward Jerusalem and his turn toward the suffering that culminates at the cross.

Scott Waalkes

Reflection

Forty-day fasts are common and significant in Scripture—think of Moses fasting after he received the law (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9) and again when he saw the people worshiping the Golden Calf (Deuteronomy 9:18), Elijah fleeing from Jezebel without food (1 Kings 19:7-8), the Ninevites repenting of their sins (Jonah 3:4), and Jesus fasting in the wilderness. So, it's not surprising the Church year includes a forty-day season of penitence and fasting. This helps explain why until recently scholars assumed that Lent—known as *Tessarakosti* in Greek and *Quadragesima* in Latin, for “the Forty”—had been established by the apostles or next generation of Christians as a time to prepare for Easter baptisms and was celebrated by everyone in the Church.

That assumption now appears to be much too simple. “While fasting before Easter seems to have been ancient and widespread, the length of that fast varied significantly from place to place and across generations,” Nicholas Russo explains. “Only following the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. did the length of Lent become fixed at forty days, and then only nominally.” So, how did Lent arise? Russo canvases three current theories.

- ▶ *The early history of Lent is impossible to reconstruct.* Several parts of the simple view above are doubtful. It appears Easter baptism was not widespread before the mid-fourth century, and other occasions for baptism were common; pre-baptismal fasts occurred throughout the year; and the forty-day Lenten fast arose independently of the pre-Easter fast. For these reasons, as Russo notes, some conclude “Lent is best understood as an entirely new phenomenon that emerges rather suddenly after Nicea and that any organic or genetic relationship it may have to pre-Nicene fasting practices cannot be proved.”
- ▶ *Lent grew from one Egyptian tradition of fasting for forty-days after the Feast of Theophany (i.e. Epiphany).* After honoring Jesus' baptism on January 6, this community imitated his forty-day fast in the wilderness. “After the Council of Nicea, the theory speculates, this fast would have been moved from its original position after Theophany and joined to Easter creating the Lent we know and with it bringing Egypt's baptismal practice in line with the rest of the Church.” But the evidence for this post-Theophany fast is rather slim, and the theory about why it was shifted to just before Easter is controversial (since it involves the possibly fraudulent “Secret Gospel of Mark”).



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► *Lent emerged from various fasts that were common, especially in Egypt.* In addition to some evidence for the post-Theophany fast noted above, there are Egyptian church rules prescribing forty-day fasts to restore lapsed Christians, prepare catechumens who had certain “impure occupations,” and serve as penance for certain sins. The puzzle on this theory is why it took so long for the Church as a whole to commend fasting for forty-days! The answer may be that the Theophany feast itself was suspect because it started with an unorthodox group – the Basilidians, who taught that Jesus was *adopted* as God’s son at his baptism. Did this Egyptian group also begin the post-Theophany fast? “If...the custom was common among the heterodox,” Russo suggests, “it would go a long way to explaining why we hear nothing about it in the early period.” Perhaps the Council of Nicea established the “forty-day Lent prior to Easter...[to] stand in contradistinction as a touchstone of liturgical and theological allegiance.”

While the origins of Lent are shrouded in uncertainty, Russo believes its relation to “early baptismal and penitential practices whose common trait is *metanoia* – literally a changing of the mind and heart – suggest Lent can be ‘a tithe of the year’ (to use the patristic expression). We turn in prayer and fasting to be renewed in that forgiveness purchased on the Cross and that salvation vouchsafed in the Resurrection: these gifts received in baptism and renewed through repentance.”

Study Questions

1. What were the spiritual purposes of the fasts observed in Christian communities before the Council of Nicea? Which of these purposes inform the observation of Lent today?
2. Discuss how the forty-day fasts by Moses, Elijah, the Ninevites, and Jesus are relevant to our understanding of Lent.
3. In Claudia Hernaman’s hymn “Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days,” how is Jesus’ fasting in the wilderness presented as a model for our discipleship?

Departing Hymn: “Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days” (vv. 1, 2 and 3)

Lord, who throughout these forty days
for us didst fast and pray,
teach us with you to mourn our sins
and close by you to stay.

As you with Satan did contend,
and did the victory win,
O give us strength in you to fight,
in you to conquer sin.

As you did hunger and did thirst,
so teach us, gracious Lord,
to die to self, and so to live
by your most holy Word.

Claudia Frances Hernaman (1873)

Suggested Tunes: ST. FLAVIAN or MARTYRDOM

† Scott Waalkes, *The Fullness of Time in a Flat World: Globalization and the Liturgical Year* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 160



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Focus Articles:

📖 Lent as a Season of Responsive Fasting
(*Lent*, pp. 27-33)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Why and How of Fasting
(*Lent*, pp. 82-86)

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Responsive Fasting

Fasting in the Bible is almost always focused on a grievous condition. It is primarily a response to something rather than a means to something else. Lenten fasting, then, is a response to sins and the prospects of death in our culture, our nation, our church, and our own life.

Prayer

Responsive Scripture Reading (based on Joel 2:1-2, 12-14 and Psalm 70)

The word of the Lord that came to Joel:

hear this all who live in the land.

Put on sackcloth mourn and cry.

Wear it all night for we are neglecting God.

Declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly.

Gather the community and cry out to God.

Make haste, O God and deliver me.

O Lord, make haste to help me.

Reflection

The characteristic disciplines of Lent really cut “against the grain of American culture [and]...of personal spiritualities of all sorts,” Scot McKnight notes, because they require us to be honest about our sinfulness and turn to God for forgiveness and correction. We resist these disciplines in many ways, sometimes by twisting their meaning. For instance, we can misconstrue fasting as an instrument to purge our bodies of bad foods, become intimate with God, evangelize others, enhance our prayers, and so on. McKnight jokingly refers to this “inflation of benefits” in an “increasing list of items one is promised by fasting” as “benefititis.”

In the Bible, by contrast, fasting almost always has a responsive structure:

A → B → C

in which A is a *grievous condition*, B is the *act of fasting*, and C is the *result* or benefit. “The Bible’s focus is not B leads to C, but B responds to A,” McKnight explains. Thus, he proposes that the most accurate schematic for biblical fasting is

A ← B, sometimes leading, but not all that often, to C

The “grievous condition” may be personal or communal, but it is something serious or tragic, and often involves death or a threat of death. “Hence, war or tragedy or the threat of war or calamity or capture, but especially sin and its consequences—these are the precipitants of fasting in the Bible.” Given the gravity of the situation, it just seems inappropriate to eat anything, or to eat in the normal way. In the paradigm cases, the faster is sharing the wrath, grief, sorrow, and love that God has in that situation. McKnight suggests, “fasting is entering into participation in the divine pathos over death and sin in Israel and Judah, and therefore also in the Church and our culture.”

As a season of prescribed fasting, Lent directs our attention to a grievous condition we tend to ignore—that Christ died due to our personal and corporate sins. It reminds us “that Christ died *with* us—in that he completely identified with us in our humanity all the



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way to our death (Philippians 2:5-11), that Christ died *instead of us* – in that he took upon himself the guilt and punishment and death of our sins (2 Corinthians 5:21), and *for us* – in that his death brings us the forgiveness of sins (Romans 4:25). We fast and afflict ourselves, or deny ourselves, in response to our life of sin and sinning. We embody then our conviction that our sins entangle us in death,” McKnight concludes.

Study Questions

1. How does Scot McKnight distinguish the *instrumental* from *responsive* approaches to fasting? What roles do benefits – personal or corporate, bodily or spiritual – play in each type of fasting?
2. McKnight observes that “The famous passage in Isaiah 58 about fasting is neither an example of a spiritual discipline leading to formation nor an intensification of intercession. It is the fast in response to the poverty of others that spurs the fasters to use their resources for the good of others.” How can our Lenten fasting become a proper response to what McKnight calls “our culture’s complicity in death-dealing systemic injustices”?
3. Rachel Marie Stone admits that fasting from food always draws her “into ‘a diet place’ rather than ‘a God place.’” What does she mean by this? How would this derail her attempts at responsive fasting? Discuss her suggestion that we might expand the meaning of fasting to include abstention from other things like movies, television, shopping, reading, or music. Could these non-food fasts be responsive in the way that McKnight describes?
4. We do not fast alone during Lent, or as spiritual solitaries, but together with others in community. Why is this fact important? Consider how this theme is expressed in Pope Gregory the Great’s hymn “The Glory of These Forty Days.”

Departing Hymn: “The Glory of These Forty Days” (vv. 1, 2, and 4)

The glory of these forty days
we celebrate with songs of praise;
for Christ, by whom all things were made,
himself has fasted and has prayed.

Alone and fasting Moses saw
the loving God who gave the law;
and to Elijah, fasting, came
the steeds and chariots of flame.

Then grant us, Lord, like them to be
full oft in fast and prayer with thee;
our spirits strengthen with thy grace,
and give us joy to see thy face.

Pope Gregory the Great (6th century)

Translated by Maurice F. Bell (1906)

Suggested Tunes: WINCHESTER NEW or OLD HUNDRETH



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Focus Article:

📖 Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)
(Lent, pp. 55-64)

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Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)

Walking the stations of the cross—a devotional path of reflection and repentance based on events in the passion and resurrection of Christ—is being adapted in creative ways today. How did this form of spiritual pilgrimage originate and why is it important for our discipleship?

Prayer

My Lord, Jesus Christ, you have made this journey to die for me with unspeakable love; and I have so many times ungratefully abandoned you.

But now I love you with all my heart; and, because I love you, I am sincerely sorry for ever having offended you. Pardon me, my God, and permit me to accompany you on this journey. You go to die for love of me; I want, my beloved Redeemer, to die for love of you.

My Jesus, I will live and die always united to you. Amen.

Alphonsus Maria de Liguori (1696-1787)†

Scripture Reading: Luke 13:31-35

Reflection

The ancient devotional exercise of walking the stations of the cross (or “way of the cross” or “way of sorrow”) is a thoroughly embodied means of commemorating the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Carmen Butcher notes, “Its tableaux of Christ’s passion—painted, engraved, carved, or sculptured, using stone, wood, or metal—create a literal prayerful path that helps spiritual seekers put on Christ’s sandals as they move slowly from station to station, reflecting on his life.”

“As a spiritual exercise, the stations of the cross developed organically from the scripturally focused lives of medieval followers,” Butcher reports. She identifies some of the major contributors to its spread as an alternative to traveling to places in Jerusalem where Jesus walked. Nevertheless, she admits, since its “vibrant devotional sources developed with unsystematic abundance in response to the gospel of Jesus, a linear history of this practice remains unclear.” She emphasizes the practices’ continuity through centuries of change and innovation.

- ▶ “Various stations have existed over the centuries, including extra-biblical ones based on inferences from the gospel and on legend,” Butcher writes. Five to thirty stations existed before the number was set at fourteen in 1731. Pope John Paul II put the practice on a solely biblical foundation in 1991 when he replaced six non-scriptural stations with new ones based on the Gospels. “Today, a fifteenth station, ‘Jesus rises from the dead,’ honors the gospel’s ‘Good News,’” Butcher reports, “because, as John Paul II taught, Christ’s resurrection reveals ‘the entire Christian mystery in all its newness.’”
- ▶ *Walking the stations of the cross engages one’s body in worship.* Physically moving among the stations “reminds us that our *bodies* are temples of the Holy Spirit”; it counters our tendency to settle for disembodied relationships encouraged by our constant use of social media and communication technologies.



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► *Unrushed prayer and reflection at each station fosters communion with Christ and other believers. It mirrors lectio divina in this way. "We could call the stations of the cross ambulatio divina ('divine walking')," Butcher says, because it "is often practiced simultaneously with Bible rumination." Stopping at each station to focus on a moment in Christ's passion and wait expectantly for God, we join with millions of believers, past and present. "The exercise of the stations helps us develop empathy for others who are waiting beside us."*

The Spanish mystic John of the Cross (1542-1591) believed "Silence is God's first language." Butcher concludes, "Learning to listen to divine silence is the crux of walking the stations. Church leaders through the centuries have encouraged and adapted this practice for the simple reason that it attunes a sojourner's soul to the Word's loving wordlessness."

Study Questions

1. How have the stations of the cross been modified in recent years? What do you think about these changes?
2. Carmen Butcher compares celebrating the stations of the cross to pilgrimage and to *lectio divina*. How does each comparison illuminate the spiritual meaning of the practice?
3. Consider how Liguori's prayer can prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate the stations of the cross.
4. Which features of walking the stations of the cross most appeal to you? Which ones make it counter-cultural and difficult for you to practice?

Departing Hymn: "Come Near Today" (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

The holy Son of God descends
to human pain and need.
O Lord, to my assistance come.
Come quickly, Lord, to help me.

*With love assured, your healing Word,
the Spirit's flame, your holy Name.
Redeeming grace in this place –
come near today to help me.*

The holy Son of God walks on
to darkened Calvary.
To bear his cross is now our path.
Come quickly, Lord, to lead me.

Refrain

Now may our prayer be joined with his
through life's uncertainty.
O Lord, to my assistance come.
Come quickly, Lord, to save me.

Refrain

Eric Howell (2013)
Tune: COME NEAR TODAY

† *The Augustine Club*, "St. Alphonsus Liguori's Stations of the Cross," March 30, 1999, www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/liguori.html (accessed May 10, 2012).



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Focus Article:

📖 Keeping Vigil
(*Lent*, pp. 65-73)

Suggested Articles:

📖 The Voice in the Wilderness
(*Lent*, pp. 34-37)

📖 The Penitence of Mary Magdalene
(*Lent*, pp. 38-39)

📖 The Penitence of Jerome
(*Lent*, pp. 40-41)

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Keeping Vigil

Lent is a traditional time for keeping vigil—an attentive openness to the work of God in our lives and throughout the world. But what does it mean to keep vigil today, when most of us no longer adhere to the strict discipline of late night prayer?

The Prayer of St. Ephraim

O Lord and Master of my life, give me not a spirit of sloth, vain curiosity, lust for power, and idle talk. But give to me, thy servant, a spirit of soberness, humility, patience, and love. O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother; for blessed are thou to the ages of ages. Amen.

The Prayer of St. Ephraim[†]

Scripture Reading: Luke 22:39-46

Reflection

“Vigil” calls to mind diverse images—late-night prayer, soldiers on guard, families waiting for a birth. From the Latin *vigilia*, originally for a soldier’s night watch, this word was adopted by early Christians for their nighttime *synaxis*, or worship meeting. Today we often hear the word referring to the night office of the Liturgy of the Hours, evening worship the night before a religious celebration, or the wake after a loved one’s death.

Given this complicated etymology, the multifaceted nature of keeping vigil is not surprising. Heather Hughes explores three features of this practice that make it important for our discipleship not only during Lent, but also through the Church year.

▶ *The enhanced awareness typical of late night wakefulness.* Think of waking up in the middle of the night when noises sound louder and you are hyper-sensitive to your surroundings. Intentional times of vigil employ this nighttime alertness to become more attentive to God’s presence in the world.

Thomas Merton notes the link between enhanced sensory awareness and the spiritual attentiveness characteristic of keeping vigil. In “Fire Watch,” he reports that guarding his monastery from fire through the night became “an examination of conscience in which your task of watchman suddenly appears in its true light: a pretext devised by God to isolate you, and to search your soul with lamps and questions, in the heart of darkness.” Keeping vigil is never an end in itself; it facilitates this kind of encounter with the living God.

▶ *The responsibility of being fully present.* Keeping vigil engages our natural bodily response to moments of intense love, fear, sorrow, compunction, or awe. At a loved one’s deathbed we cannot sleep or eat as the gravity of the situation overrides our basic physical needs. Our sense of what is truly important impels us to be fully present, without seeking distraction or escape. Likewise, keeping spiritual vigil cultivates our sensitivity to what is most significant in life—reminding us that we do not live by bread alone. We are fully present before God, as we are with loved ones in times of suffering or joy.

▶ *Complete obedience to God’s will.* Christ’s praying in Gethsemane is the pattern for our keeping vigil. As he is fully present to the



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Father, he discerns the Father's will through prayer and maintains obedience to the point of death.

Like the disciples in Gethsemane, we are called to pray with Christ—to stay spiritually awake and to keep watch in compunction for our own sin and sorrow for the world's need. This is not an easy task, as even the disciples abandoned Christ, falling asleep from grief.

Hughes commends practices to help us to keep vigil—ancient disciplines like corporate prayer, fasting, almsgiving, examination of conscience, and *lectio divina*, and creative activities like fasting from artificial light or committing to draw or write. Lent is a special time to keep vigil. As with Christ in Gethsemane, we have the agony of apprehending, wrestling with, and accepting God's saving will for the world and for our individual lives. We are given the chance to become fully awake to a world that requires Golgotha, but is also given the empty tomb.

Study Questions

1. What are the spiritual purposes of keeping vigil?
2. Discuss the practices, ancient and new, that Heather Hughes commends to help us keep vigil. How does each one foster our increased attentiveness to God?
3. Which practices appeal to you most? How could you use them to keep vigil during Lent or through the Church year?
4. Consider how Georges Rouault's *St. John the Baptist*, Donatello's *The Penitent Magdalen*, and Bernini's *St. Jerome* portray individuals who were particularly perceptive of God's work in their lives and in the world.

Departing Hymn: "Go to Dark Gethsemane" (vv. 1, 2, and 3)

Go to dark Gethsemane,
you that feel the tempter's power;
your Redeemer's conflict see;
watch with him one bitter hour,
turn not from his griefs away;
learn of Jesus Christ to pray.

See him at the judgment hall,
beaten, bound, reviled, arraigned;
O the wormwood and the gall!
O the pangs his soul sustained!
Shun not suffering, shame, or loss;
learn of him to bear the cross.

Calvary's mournful mountain climb;
there, adoring at his feet,
mark that miracle of time,
God's own sacrifice complete:
"It is finished!" hear him cry;
learn of Jesus Christ to die.

James Montgomery (1820)

Tune: REDHEAD

† *The Lenten Triodion*, translated by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1978), 69

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Preparing for Joy

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To focus on the penitential season of Lent as a time of joy because it trains us to receive each other as gracious gifts from God.
2. To consider how the parable of the Prodigal Son frames our understanding of Lent.
3. To discuss how specific Lenten practices – such as self-examination, repentance, and fasting – teach true humility and undergird communion with others.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Lent (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” locate the familiar tune NETTLETON in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

“People think it’s strange to like Lent,” Sarah Parsons admits, for “actually *liking* Lent seems to verge on masochism. It sounds as if one enjoys scrutinizing the past, dragging out every misdeed, and wallowing in guilt for six weeks.” Yet she captures the homecoming joy of this season when she notes, “Lent...is a time of introspection, true, but its ultimate purpose lies beyond penitence. In essence Lent serves as our annual invitation to come closer to God. It provides a time to look at our lives and ourselves, not so we may criticize ourselves more harshly but so we can identify the obstructions that keep us from God. What keeps us from feeling the presence of the divine in our every day? How do we hide from God, and why? Lent gives us a chance to look at such obstructions and to move them gently away so that we can come closer to the Love that gives us life, the Love whose triumph we will celebrate on Easter morning.” (Sarah Parsons, *A Clearing Season: Reflections for Lent* [Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2005], 8)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to help members find joy in the Lenten season of penitence.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 15:11-32 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study begins our reflection on the season of Lent, a time of penitence in preparation for Easter and Pentecost. Norman Wirzba describes it as a season of joy because the point of Lenten practices is not denying ourselves God’s good gifts, but becoming more aware of and rejecting those attitudes and desires that cause us

to misuse one another and creation. (These distorted attitudes and desires are called “passions” in the Orthodox tradition.) We can even enjoy the cleansing process of the self because we know it is preparing us for the greater joy of loving communion with God and others.

Study Questions

1. The story of the Prodigal Son, which is a lection for the fourth Sunday of Lent during year C, frames Norman Wirzba’s understanding of the joy of the Lenten season. Like the prodigal, we often tread “a path of quick pleasure but long-term ruin and misery.” We do not intentionally choose the dire results, but “the effect of so many of our choices and practices – all of them expected and deemed by our culture to be normal – put us precisely where as Christians we should not be. To repent we need to be confronted with the blindness and the foolishness of our ways. The confrontation can be painful because few of us like to come face to face with the arrogance, anxiety, and pettiness that animate our hearts.” Perhaps, like the prodigal distrusted his father, we have even doubted God’s love and taken life into our own hands. Lent is a time of joy because we know that by rejecting the attitudes and resisting the desires that distort our love for God, we are preparing for God’s loving embrace and communion with one another that is beyond all we can imagine.
2. Wirzba analyzes fasting as a paradigm Lenten practice because eating is so central to our creaturely lives and clearly expresses how we relate to one another and the creation as God’s gifts. In fasting we do not reject God’s good gift of food, but our distorted use of food. “Improper eating,” he writes, “assumes food is ours for the taking. It is eating that has regard primarily for the pleasures of one’s own belly but not for the bellies of others. It is eating that dishonors God because it degrades the sources of food – land, water, plants, animals – and abuses the means – farm workers, cooks, waiters, clean-up crews – that put food on our tables. It is eating that forgets food is a blessing to be shared.” Fasting expresses remorse for our improper ways, and refocuses our attention on proper reception of the gift of food. The practice illustrates “cleaning the glasses to see rightly.” (We will learn more about the practice of fasting in the third study guide in this series, “Responsive Fasting.”)
3. Create four small groups to discuss the activities Elizabeth Sands Wise identifies in her review of Lenten resources, *Adding In, Not Giving Up*. The first one, based on Paula Huston’s *Simplifying the Soul*, adopts actions that thoughtfully refocus our relationships to the places we live, the marketplace, our bodies, our minds, our schedules, other people, prayer, and God. Emilie Griffin’s *Small Surrenders* recommends setting aside time for spiritual reading. John Indermark’s *Gospelled Lives* directs us to reflect on Gospel passages, and Frederica Mathewes-Green’s *First Fruits of Prayer* invites us to pray along with ancient Christian texts.

How can each activity provoke self-examination and repentance, lead to humility, and engender communion with others and God? Sands Wise does not recommend trying all of them at once, but focusing on just one each Lenten season. Members might discuss whether they, individually or as a group, would adopt one of these activities for Lent.
4. “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” was written for Whitsunday (a term used in Great Britain for Pentecost Sunday). Most hymnals publish the first three verses of Robinson’s text; here we will study verses one and three from the perspective of Lenten repentance and joy. The third verse reminds us of the story of the Prodigal Son: we admit “prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, / prone to leave the God I love” even *after* we have acknowledged “God’s redeeming love” (in verse one). Thus, we are in debt to grace “daily” as God draws us back to himself. The hymn text is brutally honest about our failings, yet totally assured of God’s “streams of mercy, never ceasing.” As a result, we can learn now to sing the joyful “songs of loudest praise” of God that will culminate in “thy courts above.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

The Early History of Lent

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To canvas the possible origins of the Lenten season in the various fasting practices before the Council of Nicea in 325.
2. To review the forty-day fasts in Scripture.
3. To consider how the spiritual purposes of the scriptural and pre-Nicene church forty-day fasts should inform our understanding of Lent today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Lent (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days" locate one of the tunes ST. FLAVIAN or MARTYRDOM in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

During years of introducing evangelical Christians to the richness of Church tradition, Robert Webber (1933-2007) sometimes heard the complaint, "You're attaching too much significance to the Christian year. It is impossible for the discipline of the Christian year to accomplish so much for my spirituality." Webber took seriously the objectors' concern about empty formalism in religion, and he responded, "This objection has validity if the Christian year is seen as an end in itself. However, if we see the Christian year as an instrument through which we may be shaped by God's saving events in Christ, then it is not the Christian year that accomplishes our spiritual pilgrimage but Christ himself who is the very content and meaning of the Christian year." (Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004], 24)

This is an important point to keep in mind as we sift through historical research into the origins of Lent. In the various (possible) precursors to the season, how did early Christians experience Christ guiding their spiritual pilgrimage? How does Christ guide us through Lent today?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide members' spiritual pilgrimage through the Christian year, especially as they participate in Lent.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 4:1-13 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

By the early years of the fourth century we find references to *Tessarakoste* ("the Forty"), a season of fasting. Perhaps this was the earliest form of Lent. But if so, what were its precursors? Nicholas Russo outlines the

investigation that has led scholars to three possible scenarios. Like the other liturgical practices we know today, the season of Lent emerged as Christians reflected on Scripture and their discipleship. Encourage members to use this historical detective hunt to reflect on the meaning of their practice of Lent.

Study Questions

1. Nicholas Russo notes that many liturgical fasts expressed shared grief with Christ's suffering for the sins of the world. Thus, fasts in preparation for Easter were "ancient and widespread," ranging in length from forty hours (in remembrance of Jesus' time in the tomb) to six days. In places where Jesus' baptism was commemorated at the Feast of Theophany, or Epiphany, the forty-day post-Theophany fast may have been held in imitation of Jesus' fasting in the wilderness after his baptism.

Other fasts were commended to express remorse for one's own sins. Thus, fasts were assigned to baptismal candidates. For instance, the three-week fast practiced in Rome may have been a pre-baptismal fast on a free-floating schedule rather than a pre-Easter fast. Also Russo reports that in various places in Egypt forty-day fasts were assigned for "lapsed Christians to be readmitted from their term of excommunication," for the purification of baptismal candidates "who earn their living by 'impure occupations' — for example, by wrestling, running, acting, hairdressing, and so on," and "as penance for adulteresses and executioners who wish to be readmitted to the Eucharist."

Consider how the practice of fasting during Lent might express grief and identification with Christ's suffering, grief for the sins of the world, and remorse for one's own sin.

2. Moses fasted for forty days in response to the holiness of receiving God's law, and fasted a second time in grief for the people's faithless violation of it. The Ninevites fasted in remorse for their personal and corporate sins. Elijah's fasting seems to be a natural response to the burden of his ministry; he is keenly aware of his helplessness in the face of Jezebel's anger. Jesus does not fast for his own sin or in terror, but in the sober recognition of the world's sin and his difficult calling. Russo notes that the *Canons of Hippolytus* describes Jesus as "God who fasted on our behalf."

Thus, these scriptures involve fasting in remorse for personal and corporate sins, in grief for the sin and distress of others, and in sober recognition of God's call upon one's life. (We will learn more about the practice of fasting in the third study guide in this series, "Responsive Fasting.")

3. The first verse of Claudia Hernaman's "Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days" says that Jesus teaches us to "mourn our sins" and not turn away from his difficult work of reconciliation ("and close by you to stay"). In the next verse, Jesus' successful struggle with Satan gives us hope of victory over temptation, not through our own wiles but in his strength. Finally in the third verse, Jesus gracious, self-giving attitude teaches us "to die to self, and so to live / by your most holy Word."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Responsive Fasting

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand scriptural fasting as an act that is responsive to a grievous condition.
2. To consider the communal dimensions of fasting – both that we fast in community with others and that our fasting can express solidarity with others.
3. To examine the value of fasting from things other than food.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Lent (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “The Glory of These Forty Days” locate one of the familiar tunes WINCHESTER NEW or OLD HUNDRETH in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

“Fasting seems so countercultural – for what could be less North American than voluntarily going without food?” Rachel Marie Stone writes. “On the other hand, about forty-five million Americans each year adopt some form of dieting plan, and some of those diets, like Rick Warren’s *The Daniel Plan* and Don Colbert’s *Get Healthy Through Detox and Fasting*, claim to provide spiritual as well as physical benefits through their supposedly biblical patterns of fasting. Is fasting just a spiritualized form of self-denial – a not altogether worthless exercise in restraining our excessive consumption, but relatively unimportant to contemporary Christian life? Or is fasting more essential to our discipleship, holding the promise of connecting us more deeply to God and to that which God cares about deeply?” (*Lent*, p. 82)

In this study Scot McKnight examines the nature of fasting in Scripture, and on that basis he proposes a proper attitude toward liturgical fasting during Lent.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to open your eyes and heart to the grievous condition of sin in our fallen world and to be with you in this time of Lenten fasting.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This study guide – like the next two, “Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)” and “Keeping Vigil” – explores a central discipline of Lent in both its traditional form and its creative adaptations today. Of course, the discipline of fasting is appropriate on occasions throughout the Church year. Scot McKnight emphasizes that biblical fasting is not an instrument to gain something (though it has benefits), but a response to a grievous condition. In the case of Lenten fasting, he suggests that our fasting is in response to a deep awareness of our personal and corporate sin.

If your group would like to extend their study of the practice of fasting or plan a Lenten fast together, some excellent resources are Scot McKnight's *Fasting* and the other books reviewed by Rachel Stone in "The Why and How of Fasting."

Study Questions

1. The *instrumental* approach to fasting emphasizes the "B → C" segment of Scot McKnight's schema: one fasts in order to secure a benefit such as physical health, intimacy with God on our own terms, success in evangelism, or power in intercessory prayer. The *responsive* approach focuses on a grievous condition; one fasts in order to respond appropriately to this condition, expressing through the body one's recognition of and participation in the divine pathos. Responsive fasting may have characteristic benefits—e.g., seeing the world as God sees it, deeper identification with God's purposes, receiving further guidance from God, being empowered by the Holy Spirit to do God's will, and so on—but these are welcomed as unmerited and sometimes unexpected gifts one receives in growing friendship with God.
2. If time allows, read Isaiah 58 from a modern translation. Otherwise, read Isaiah 58:6-7. McKnight urges us to "not withdraw from the world in contemplating only our own sins. As Isaiah told his audience that genuine fasting was care for the poor, so in our day: genuine Lenten truth-telling is the story of complicity, of systemic injustices in the United States, in the Western World, and in the stories of those around the globe, and of unrealized participation in evils that affect us all, like consumerism and individualism. Lenten fasting is the proper response to our culture's complicity in death-dealing systemic injustices."

Invite members to brainstorm how these cultural realities might shape their responsive fasting. We might abstain from foods whose production or delivery involves injustice; might break our fast with simple meals that help us identify with the poor or oppressed; or might fast in concert with others in the Church. Discuss how such plans resist the consumerism and individualism that typically informs our eating. How can we go beyond "personal spiritual formation" and "intensification of intercession" for those who are unjustly treated, and actually "use [our] resources for the good of others"? The early Christians were encouraged to give to the poor the money which they had saved by fasting. Also, focused fasting can lead us to new patterns of economic behavior that help others.

3. "As a woman who has struggled with an eating disorder and from obsession with a diet mentality, I can report that fasting from food inevitably triggers thoughts of weight loss," Rachel Marie Stone explains. This interfered with her focusing on the grievous condition of sin and participating in God's pathos for it (to use McKnight's terms). Stone gives two reasons for expanding the meaning of fasting: (1) this "opens the practice to those (such as pregnant or nursing women, diabetics, the elderly, and individuals with a history of eating disorders)" who cannot abstain from food, and (2) it recognizes that "Food is no longer the only or even the primary thing we recognize as necessary to our existence (as it was in the Bible and through much of the Church's history, and as it still is for many people today)."

Would a fast from television, shopping, the Internet, etc. be an appropriate response to the grievous condition of sin? Here's a reason to answer "yes." When we are grieving, we naturally withdraw from these things as we do from eating. So, voluntarily giving them up can redirect our attention to the grievous condition just as effectively as fasting from food.

On the other hand, these other things cannot be as central and necessary in our lives as food is, even in a Western consumer culture. If we fast from anything that is more discretionary than food, we "dodge" the seriousness of the grievous condition. (However, Stone might reply that fasting from them might be better than doing nothing, and much less distracting than fasting from food for those who struggle with a diet mentality.)

4. Gregory situates Lenten fasting in a spiritual community that includes Christ, Moses, and Elijah. His plural pronouns remind us that we fast in a present community of worshipers during a liturgical period. Discuss how fasting with others in these communities, invisible and visible, can encourage us to keep our fast, to keep it rightly focused on the grievous condition of personal and corporate sin, and to participate in the divine pathos.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate how the practice of walking the stations of the cross originated and how it can enrich our discipleship today.
2. To understand how the stations of the cross have been modified in recent years to place them on a solely scriptural foundation.
3. To compare the stations of the cross with some other Christian practices such as pilgrimage and *lectio divina*.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Lent (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Comment

Carmen Butcher believes that walking from station to station of the cross enables us to “connect in a profoundly transformative way with the stages of Christ’s earthly journey.” This exercise has an important communal dimension, even when we do it alone as a personal meditation. She explains, “*Station* is a term often credited to fifteenth-century British pilgrim William Wey and is rooted in the Latin for ‘to stand.’ Stations are places where we stop and be still, waiting for a bus, taxi, or train, in transit to somewhere else. Similarly, in this life, we are always waiting on God, en route to heaven. The exercise of the stations helps us develop empathy for others who are waiting beside us.” (*Lent*, 58)

Perhaps members have experienced going from station to station, focusing on particular moments in Christ’s passion, and waiting there expectantly for God. What does it mean for us to do this with millions of other believers – stopping our lives exactly where they stop, waiting where they wait?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the prayer by Alphonsus Ligouri.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 13:31-35 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study guide – like the previous one, “Responsive Fasting,” and the following one, “Keeping Vigil” – explores a central discipline of Lent in both its traditional form and its creative adaptations today. Though walking the stations of the cross is often emphasized during Holy Week, this practice is appropriate throughout the Church year. Carmen Butcher notes that the practice “is increasingly embraced by Christians of all denominations seeking an ‘interior Jerusalem’ where we can know God as ‘more inward than [our] most inward part,’ as Augustine wrote.” She indicates in her footnotes some excellent resources to help congregations creatively celebrate the stations of the cross.

Study Questions

1. “Pope John Paul II shifted the makeup of the stations away from legend and toward a solely scriptural foundation, dropping from this traditional list those six non-scriptural stations and adding ones from Gospel accounts of Christ’s life,” Carmen Butcher explains. What thematic differences do members notice in these changes?

Traditional Stations of the Cross

Jesus is condemned to death.

Jesus is handed his cross.

Jesus falls for the first time.

Jesus meets his mother.

Simon of Cyrene is required to carry Jesus' cross.

Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.

Jesus falls a second time.

Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.

Jesus falls a third time.

Jesus is stripped of his clothes.

Jesus is crucified.

Jesus dies on the cross.

Jesus' body is taken down from the cross.

The body of Jesus is placed in the tomb.

Scriptural Stations of the Cross

Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus is betrayed by Judas.

Jesus is condemned to death by the Sanhedrin.

Jesus is denied by Peter.

Jesus is judged by Pilate.

Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns.

Jesus carries his cross.

Jesus is helped by Simon of Cyrene.

Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.

Jesus is crucified.

Jesus promises to share his reign with the good thief.

Jesus is on the cross, with his mother and disciple below.

Jesus dies on the cross.

Jesus is placed in the tomb.

2. Butcher explains how the practice emerged from the desire to pilgrimage to Jerusalem, visit the holy sites, and prayerfully retrace the route of Christ's crucifixion. The practice retains the physical elements of moving through the stations, using visual and tactile experiences to focus on an element of Christ's passion, and prayerfully sharing his suffering. It is similar to *lectio divina* because participants often meditate on a scripture passage at each station.
3. Liguori's prayer introduces his meditations on the stations that were popular in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Addressed to Christ, the prayer expresses repentance in striking language of personal relationship: though one previously has "ungratefully abandoned you," one now seeks Christ's forgiveness and asks permission "to accompany you on this journey." The prayer identifies with Christ's death and promises to "live and die always united to you." Walking the stations of the cross becomes emblematic of repentance from sin and renewed commitment to spiritual friendship with Christ.
4. Encourage members to share their experiences in walking the stations of the cross. If they have not celebrated the stations, they may describe their response to Butcher's description of the practice. The stations themselves – fourteen permanently or temporarily installed tableaux of Christ's passion – often involve great artistry. A congregation might commission the creation of the stations, or artists and worship designers among the membership may share their interpretations of the events. Participants can learn the historic iconography of the stations and deepen their appreciation for faithful Christian artistry.

Celebrating the stations is very participatory. One must move around to each station (though full access should be provided to those who cannot walk or stand for long periods), focus one's thoughts through the provided scripture passage and art, and quiet one's heart through silence. Communion with others living and dead is very real, but indirect in that one usually walks the stations alone or in small groups. This may be difficult for members who are accustomed to louder, other-directed worship experiences.

Departing Hymn

"Come Near Today" is on pp. 45-47 of *Lent*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Keeping Vigil

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on the the origins of the Christian practice of keeping vigil.
2. To consider the value of this practice for our discipleship throughout the Church year, but especially during the Lenten season.
3. To explore corporate and personal practices that can help us in keeping vigil today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Lent (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Go to Dark Gethsemane” locate the tune REDHEAD in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“Sitting in a hospital room waiting for a loved one’s death can seem surreal, but for me such times of vigil have been *more* real than day-to-day life,” Heather Hughes recalls. “Being with my grandmother during her last days, the terrible reality of death demanded the challenging discipline of being fully present with someone I love while she was in pain. Watching her struggle with the reality of her situation – asking questions no one could answer, filled with fear and hope – I realized that there was nothing I could do for her; I could not end her pain or give her more life. I was completely helpless to do anything other than pray and be near her. Yet this “doing nothing” was one of the hardest things I have ever done. Sitting in apparent stillness, I was whirring through a cycle of desires to ease, to end, to ignore, to run from her suffering. It is easy to say ‘you can’t know until you’ve been there,’ but I think that we can – indeed, that we are called to do this by remembering Christ’s crucifixion.

“The only thing I could do for my grandmother is exactly what Christ desired from his disciples in Gethsemane. Knowing what he was going suffer, Christ asked only that his disciples remain with him in the night, keep watch, and pray. Their response reveals how difficult such a vigil can be.” (*Lent*, 67-68)

Keeping vigil beside a loved one’s deathbed is a human analogue of the Christian practice of keeping vigil before God. How can we keep vigil today – remaining attentive to God’s work in our lives and throughout the world – when with Christ’s closest disciples we are greatly tempted to escape through worried distraction or sleep?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the Prayer of St. Ephraim in unison.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 22:39-46 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study guide – like the previous two, “Responsive Fasting” and “Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)” – explores a central discipline of Lent in both traditional forms and its creative adaptations today. It is

appropriate and beneficial to keep vigil throughout the Church year, but Lent is a special season to practice this discipline that attunes us to God's work in our lives and throughout the world. As we enter Gethsemane and keep vigil with Christ we will awaken more fully to the reality of the Crucifixion as our path to the Resurrection.

Study Questions

1. The purpose in keeping vigil is to become spiritually awake. The various practices, ancient and new, that Heather Hughes commends can make us more attentive to the work of God in our lives and throughout the world. Even this attention to God's work is not an end in itself; rather it facilitates an encounter with the living God by increasing our sensitivity to his presence. Encountering God through keeping vigil transforms us, making us more capable to follow Christ's example in Gethsemane – praying, discerning the Father's will, wrestling with that will, and submitting in loving obedience to God, who works in ways that transcend our understanding.
2. Create smaller groups to discuss some of these particular practices, ancient and new, that Hughes discusses: praying the Liturgy of the Hours, reflecting on the Stations of the Cross, attending Holy Week services, fasting, almsgiving, volunteering at worthy organizations, examining our consciences, engaging in *lectio divina*, fasting from artificial light, committing to regular times of sketching or creative writing, going on prayer walks, and so on.

How do these diverse activities accomplish the same good work? Consider how each one fosters an attentive openness to God's work, leads us to be fully present to God and neighbors, and promotes obedience to God's will.

3. The ancient practices of the Church, such as *lectio divina*, have passed the tests of time and place. Yet we should recall that these ancient practices developed from popular devotions by faithful Christians. Invite members to share their own ideas for creatively keeping vigil, or to discuss a favorite practice from the previous question. Has exploring the discipline of keeping vigil inspired them or changed their plans for personal devotion during Lent or through the Church year? Encourage them to make a plan and to check in with one another through the season or year.
4. Heidi Hornik remarks that Georges Rouault's *St. John the Baptist* was "created by an artist whose own faith became stronger over the years as he reflected on the suffering of Christ and the perpetual pain and suffering of humans due to sin." Rouault presents John the Baptist as a classic figure of penitence, with his features saddened by sin and his body robed in a shirt of camel's hair. The figure projects the artist's own sensitivity to the suffering world's deep need for God's redemptive and reconciling work.

In *The Penitent Magdalen* Donatello hints that Mary Magdalen's penitent asceticism has physically marked her body: "the flesh was originally painted to suggest a leathery tan produced by years of exposure to the sun in the wilderness." Attuned to God's presence, her attitude is filled with hope in God: "Donatello depicts the penitent Mary Magdalen with physical and emotional tenacity in the face of adversity – her suffering having increased her spiritual strength. Her faith is evident as her hands are clasped in prayer."

In Bernini's *St. Jerome*, the fourth century scholar monk's perception of God's presence through Christ is strikingly portrayed: "His eyes are closed in prayer as his cheek touches gently the head of Christ [on the crucifix Jerome holds]. The impact of that touch is compounded by the dramatic effect of the drapery that billows out of the niche." The saint seems more aware of Christ's reality than of his immediate surroundings. He has developed his sensitivity to God's presence through penitential practices and clearly encountered Christ through his prayerful contemplation of the crucifix.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.