

UNSETTLING
LENT

A DEVOTIONAL

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Dear Readers,

In the fall of 2021 as Advent neared, the editorial team at *Word&Way* (a Christian media company based in Missouri and founded in 1896) discussed ideas for a possible series related to the impending season. But things didn't quite feel right.

The second COVID year weighed on us with the Delta variant surging (and unknown to us, the Omicron strain would hit hard during Advent). The racial justice protests of the previous year gave way to a growing whitelash as people attacked efforts to combat racism as some sort of "critical race theory" bogeyman. And the year had started with an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to overturn a democratic election.

How do we think about Advent in a time like that? How do we mark that holy season in such unsettling times?

And that's when we realized we need to unsettle Advent. After all, Jesus didn't show up on a silent night in a peaceful land with cute little angels like our domesticated versions of the story too often suggest. Jesus came during a time much like ours. A time of death. A time of racial injustices. A time of insurrection.

So, we launched a pop-up Substack newsletter with a daily devotion emailed each morning to people who signed up. We chose that format since we were already experiencing success with our regular Substack publication, *A Public Witness*, where Beau Underwood and I continue to publish in-depth reports each week on important issues of faith, culture, and politics. (So sign up at publicwitness.wordandway.org.) About twenty writers joined us in helping with this *Unsettling Advent* series that you can still read today at advent.wordandway.org (and that even won an award from the Religion Communicators Council). One writer was Angela Parker, who has also written other pieces for *Word&Way*. Another was Brad Lyons, publisher of Chalice Press. A few months later, over coffee, Beau and I talked with Brad about writing some Lenten devotions. He suggested we need to now unsettle Lent. So, that's exactly what we're doing.

Beau, Angela, and I plotted together over Zoom to bring this book to life. But now it's your turn. We hope these devotionals will enrich your experience over these several weeks as we walk toward the cross and the empty tomb. After the first half-week introducing Lent, each week we'll focus on a new theme: announcing the kingdom, social challenges, crossing boundaries, conspiracies/plotting, social/political context, and then Holy Week.

We hope you'll be challenged to not let the biblical texts hide behind stained-glass windows and cute coloring pages. We hope these devotionals will challenge and even irritate you as you reflect on them. Because they did for us as we put them together. Thanks for joining us on this unsettling adventure during unusual times.

—Brian Kaylor

1. Marked by the Cross

Genesis 3:19

"You are dust, and to dust you shall return."

(Genesis 3:19)

I once spent hours on a street corner confronting random strangers with their mortality. My witness was more subtle than shouting, "You're going to die!" Instead, as they walked by me on a cold spring day, I politely asked them if they wanted to be ritually marked with ashes. It was after they said "yes" that I hit them with the punch while moving my thumb across their forehead: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Like other church pastors, I was participating in a movement called "Ashes to Go" that's designed to take the Christian rituals of Ash Wednesday beyond the walls of church sanctuaries. While meant to make participation more convenient for busy people, the dislocation of the sacred act also adds to its meaning. Scripture's morbid witness disrupts a world in denial about the reality of death.

There's nothing more unsettling than reflecting on the brevity of our existence. Left to our own devices, none of us will make it out alive. So, we place our hope elsewhere. Trusting God with our present days and eternal futures requires us to first get out of the way. Finding the proper orientation requires taking the spotlight off ourselves.

So we start the journey through Lent by marking ourselves with a cross of ashes. A reminder of the death we cannot escape. Turning away from ourselves, we remember that Jesus shares our fate. Now will we let his cross disturb our lives enough to change our world?

Prayer: *Holy One, place your mark on us this Lenten season. By admitting we will die, allow us to live with a new hope in the life you offer us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

—Beau Underwood

2. Encountering the Mystery of the Kingdom of God

Mark 4:10-20

“To you have been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables.” (Mark 4:11)

Lent is a time of transition from ordinary times to extraordinary times. Such a transition can be wonderful, encouraging, discombobulating, and even mysterious. Entering a season of mystery means that often our hearts and minds experience disquiet because we have no understanding about how the mystery will unfold before us.

As the twelve disciples encircle Jesus, they are at the beginning of a journey that will unfold the mystery of the kingdom of God before them. As we journey together through Lent 2023, please know that there may be moments when the unfolding mystery will be unsettling. Our journey is a movement from ordinary times to extraordinary times, but it is also a movement from personal spirituality to communal moments of speaking truth to power and speaking truth to ourselves in our present political and social situations.

Even as we begin to unsettle Lent in these extraordinary times, may we indeed begin to look, so that we may perceive, understand, and turn again to be forgiven. In this time, we will ask hard questions. Have we ignored the racial battles going on around us? Have we ignored the rise of White Christian Nationalism? Do we place our proverbial heads in the sand because of political and social difficulties? Have we ignored God’s call to cross boundaries and have conversations with people vastly different from (yet quite similar to) ourselves? Just as the disciples were confused about the unfolding mystery of the kingdom of God, our hope for this devotional is for you to experience the same unsettling even as you proceed with a greater awareness and newness of service to Christ after these forty-seven days.

Prayer: *May God’s mercy and grace be upon us as we begin to delve into the mystery of the kingdom of God and our work in God’s movement in the world. Amen.*

—Angela N. Parker

3. What Are You Giving Up?

Acts 14:21-25

“Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.” (Acts 14:23)

Perhaps you’ve already received the question this year. What are you giving up for Lent?

A 2021 poll by YouGov listed the most common things people said they would give up for Lent that year.¹ Food items topped the list, like desserts, soda, fast food, and alcohol. But also in the top ten were things like social media, watching TV, and video games. Apparently, technology and modern treats make it harder to be holy!

While not in that poll, there’s a trend I’ve also noticed on Facebook (because I don’t give up social media for Lent) of people giving up things during Lent that don’t quite fit in the chocolate or video game genres. Like single-use plastic for Lent. The Church of England helped popularize that Lenten challenge in 2018. But I wonder if it misses the point.

If we’re really concerned about the ways we are choking our oceans with islands of plastic waste and destroying our planet with the carbon footprint necessary to create such plastic, then maybe we should do more than give it up for forty days. I’m convicted by my use of plastic year-round and know I need to improve my care of creation in the 318 days beyond Lent.

Jesus fasted from food in the desert not because it was bad but because it was good. But if we’re moving beyond necessities and indulgences to the things destroying us or harming our neighbors, we don’t need to just fast more but also sin no more.

Prayer: *Creator God, help me to give up what I need during this season to focus more on you and how I need you. And help me to remove from my life all year those things which reap destruction upon this planet and those who live here. Amen.*

—Brian Kaylor

¹Linley Sanders, “What are Americans giving up for Lent 2021?,” YouGov-America, Feb. 17, 2021, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2021/02/17/what-are-americans-giving-up-lent-2021>.

4. We May be Dust, But We Don't Have to Look Dusty!

Matthew 6:16-18

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites."

(Matthew 6:16)

In her book *This Here Flesh*, Cole Arthur Riley writes, "We've grown numb to the idea that we ourselves are made of the dust, mysteriously connected to the goodness of the creation that surrounds us."²

Many devotionals highlight the Genesis 3:19 narrative which states, "You were made from dust and from dust you shall return." While that may be very well true, Jesus's sermon reminds me that even though we may look dust, we do not have to be dusty!

Jesus instructs the crowds of people not to be dismal or like the hypocrites when they fast. Personally, I am a lover of makeup. Eyeshadow palettes and lipsticks sometimes make my heart flutter with happiness. So, even in the midst of my fasting, social activism, or seminary teaching, I love to wear a "full face" and a smile no matter what. What face are you presenting to the world? In our justice work, similar to our fasting, we must put our best faces forward so God our Father sees the work without us announcing the work to other people. The point is that we *do the work!* While announcing his ministry through the sermon, Jesus also serves as a model on how to do our work with proper focus. As we embark on "Unsettling Lent," let us all remember that there is work without looking dusty, ashy, unkempt, or worse. Put your best face forward as our unsettling begins.

Prayer: *May God's grace be that shining oil anointing our faces as we unsettle Lent and begin to do the justice work and solidarity that God has called this to do. Amen.*

—Angela N. Parker

²Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh* (New York: Convergent), 7.

5. Do I Need That Kind of Power?

Luke 4:1-13

“Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.” (Luke 4:5)

As a seminary professor, I have to disavow my students of the false idea that politics have no place in the biblical text. Often, students bring the “separation of church and state” into their readings of scripture. Some argue that Jesus was not interested in politics. However, good Christians run the risk of damaging peoples’ lives and faith with such a belief.

In Luke’s temptation of Jesus, the Tempter offers Jesus “all of the kingdoms of the world” along with the authority attached to them. The Greek word that Luke uses is *oikoumene*. This word connotes the idea of the “administrative unit of the Roman Empire” and differs from a common Greek word *cosmos* that biblical readers recognize from John 3:16.

Luke uses the same word in Luke 2:1 when he writes about Caesar Augustus registering the whole *oikoumene*. Luke specifically places the birth of Jesus in conversation with the Roman emperor. The Devil is essentially saying, “Worship me and I will give you all of the glory of the Roman Empire.” He tries to overwhelm Jesus with Empire! How are we overwhelmed by Empire in today’s contexts? Beginning in 2016, a whole group of “Christians” became enamored with a former president who promised “power.” Such power is antithetical to the gospel of Jesus. So, instead of giving up bread or chocolate for Lent, perhaps we should give up political power in the name of Christianity.

Prayer: *Most Holy God, please disavow me of the desire to gain political power that I can lord over other people. In Jesus’s name, amen.*

—Angela N. Parker

6. An Urgent Mission

Luke 4:16-21

“He began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’” (Luke 4:21)

Procrastination often arises when we face hard decisions or difficult tasks. Few of us relish conflict or struggle, so why rush into it when there’s so many convenient distractions on our phones or another episode to stream?

Here’s one of those moments when Jesus confronts our worst impulses. In affirmation of Jewish practice, Jesus attends synagogue on the Sabbath and uses scripture to make an announcement about his identity. He prophetically announces his messianic mission. Jesus is anointed to bring good news to the poor, healing to the sick, and freedom to the oppressed.

Not only that, but it’s happening “today.” Jesus isn’t wasting any time. What he speaks aloud will happen because his agenda reflects the desires of God. In the person, teachings, and ministry of Jesus, we starkly see the contrasting priorities between the realm of God and those holding social power in the world.

Unfortunately, few willingly give up power. Turning the world upside down as Jesus promises will prove costly for those benefiting from the status quo. As the theologian Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt notes in *The Love That is God*, “Jesus does not merely die but is killed by powerful forces who take offense at his life.”³

There’s a direct connection between Jesus’s proclamation that the kingdom of God has arrived and his eventual crucifixion. Despite the risks, Jesus didn’t hesitate to challenge the powers that be with the power of God. Are we equally eager to cause such offense regardless of the costs?

Prayer: *O God, may the good news of Jesus found in love, in liberation, in healing, and in justice be heard from our lips and seen from our hands. Do not let us delay in witnessing to the radical ways our world needs to change. As citizens of your kingdom we pray, amen.*

—Beau Underwood

³Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *The Love That Is God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 30.

7. The Problem with Home

Luke 4:22-30

“Truly I tell you,” Jesus continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.” (Luke 4:24)

Hometowns can be odd places for those who move away. Places change and people evolve in ways that render the once familiar into something strange. Yet that distance often isn’t recognized or respected. Despite all that is different, you can return home and still be treated the same.

After announcing his prophetic mission in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus is met with outrage rather than joy. They drove him out of town with the intention to kill him. It’s not the initial reaction you’d expect to the news that the reign of God is arriving.

Perhaps expectations got in the way. Nazareth wasn’t exactly a highly regarded place (see John 1:46). Jesus didn’t fit many traditional Jewish ideas of the Messiah. Plus, these people had watched him grow up. They didn’t expect that skinny, awkward carpenter’s son to amount to much.

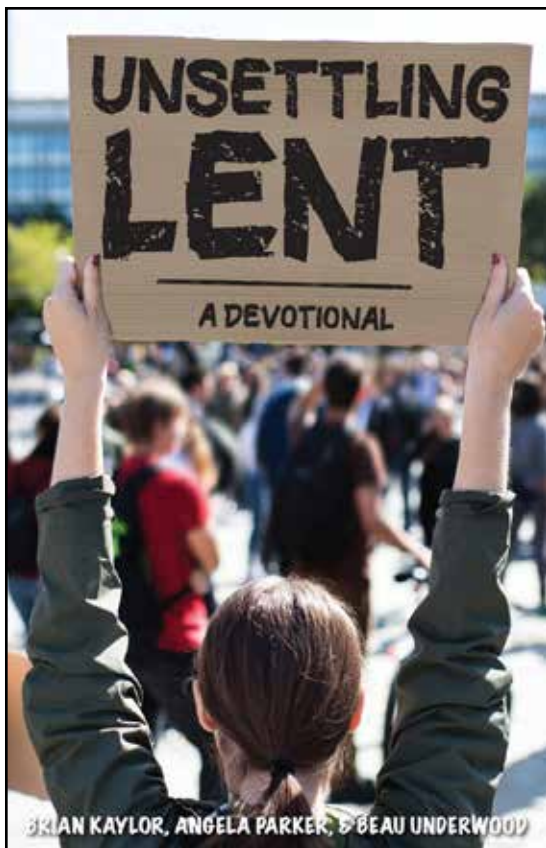
Luke describes how Jesus evades the murderous crowd but doesn’t say anything about his emotional response. Did he anticipate that rejection? What kind of sting did it carry?

Lent is a season designed for reflection and growth. You should emerge from it more committed to following Jesus and serving God’s ways. Those who know you the best might struggle the most with accepting such a change. It might be difficult to return to the comforts of “home” once you’ve been made uncomfortable by demands that follow from the justice and love of God.

But that doesn’t really matter because you’re no longer after their approval. The expectations that count have also changed.

Prayer: *O God, you relentlessly call us toward you. During this Lenten season, instill in us the convictions of our ultimate home. Conform our lives to your expectations made known in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

—Beau Underwood



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