

THE POETRY of LENT

A Lenten Companion to
Mary Oliver's *Devotions*



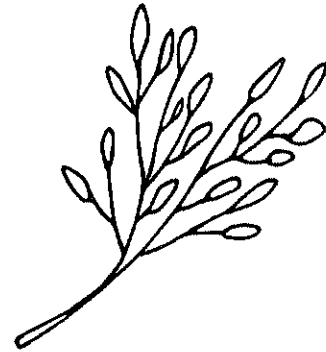


INTRODUCTION



Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.

Mary Oliver
"Sometimes," *Devotions*, p. 104



The word "Lent" comes from an old English word for "lengthen," and refers to the lengthening of those long-anticipated days of spring. With both the cross and the empty tomb approaching, the church prepares itself with forty days of fasting and reflection, all for the sake of more fully celebrating Easter's song of spring when it comes.

And so if Lent is about lengthening light, it's also about broadening our hearts and preparing the way, making room for careful attention to what matters most. As the poet Mary Oliver puts it, living well involves attention, astonishment, and testimony - and poetry itself can be a great help along the way. The best poems can help us notice the world, attuning our eyes and ears to wonders we might otherwise overlook, and inspiring us to share what we find.

In this Lenten devotional, the words of scripture and the poetry of Mary Oliver will be our guides. Each week, biblical texts and Oliver's poems illumine each other, pointing toward simple, powerful practices you can try yourself, with your family or friends, or with your congregation.

So grab your favorite Bible and a copy of *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (you can also find the poems online). Week by week, we'll travel this Lenten journey together toward Easter morning - and thereby do our part, in a world so full of shadows, to help lengthen the light and welcome the joy of God's spring.

Ash WEDNESDAY

READ

Scripture

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. + Matthew 6:21

Poem

Mary Oliver, "Storage," *Devotions*, p. 7

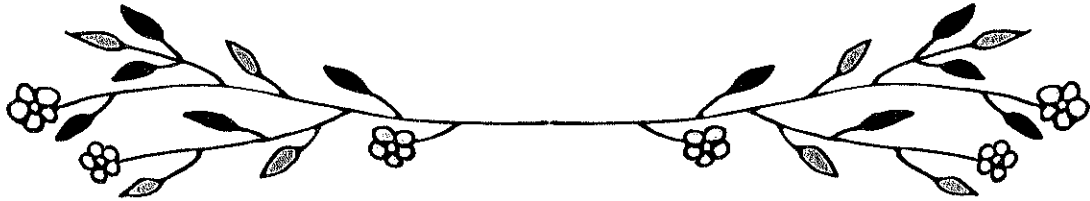
Prayer

God of dust and fire, help us lay our burdens down, so our hearts may be set right - and so we might fly! Amen.



MEDITATE

In this passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges us to examine our motives and priorities. When we pray, give alms, fast, or shop - what's really driving us? Are we secretly (even behind our own backs) trying to impress others? Are we storing up "treasures on earth," in effect placing our tender hearts in the wrong place? Like Oliver, have we become weighed down by things? Is it time to "make a beautiful fire"? How might a season of fasting from things free us to fly?

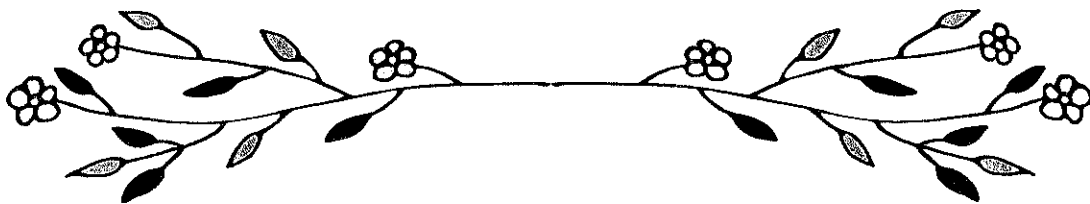


MORE LIGHT

Pair Jesus' instruction on prayer in this passage with with Oliver's "Praying" and "The Summer Day" (*Devotions*, pp. 131 and 316).

PRACTICES

- † This week begin each day by lighting a candle of simplicity, praying, "God of light and life, help me to focus on what's most important today. Turn my heart away from things and towards your grace and newness of life."
- † Schedule a "spring cleaning," simplifying your life by purging or donating whatever things are weighing you down - and notice the lightness and life this practice can bring!
- † Fast from buying and consuming this week. How might owning or using less make more room in your heart and reveal the goodness of God's grace? Explore this question in a journal, or discuss it with someone you love.



FIRST SUNDAY of LENT

READ

Scripture

Mark 1:9-15

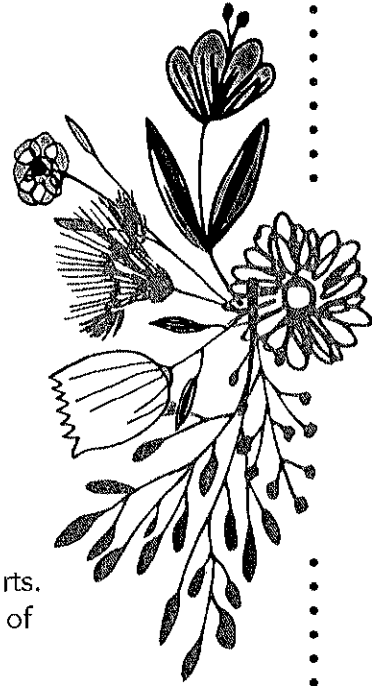
The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.
+ Mark 1:15

Poem

Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese," *Devotions*, p. 347

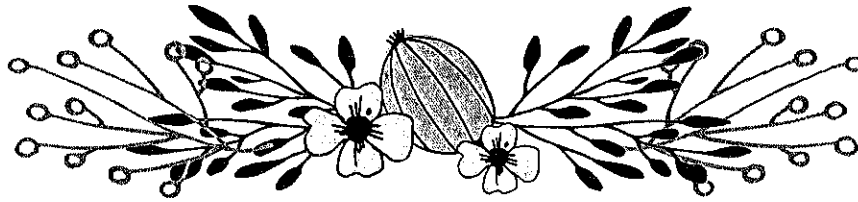
Prayer

God of life, help us change our lives. Soften our hearts.
Help us to repent, and to believe in your good news of wild love and grace. Amen.



MEDITATE

The baptism-in-the-wilderness by John was about repentance, and Jesus' preaching was, too. In Mark's original Greek, the word for repentance is *metanoia*, from *meta* ("change") and *noia* ("mind"); today we might say, "change of heart," or "change of life." Oliver claims that this kind of change doesn't flow from self-defeating guilt but rather from incarnate, wild, imaginative love for the world. So: what "change of life" is God calling you toward today, nipping at your heels like a wild goose, that ancient Celtic image for the Holy Spirit?

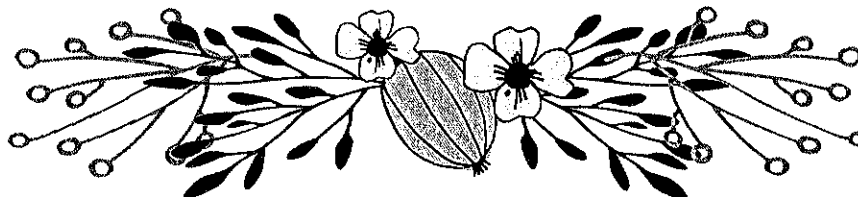


MORE LIGHT

For more on the holy wildness of love, human and divine, see Oliver's "Wild, Wild" (*Devotions*, p. 156).

PRACTICES

- + This week begin each day by lighting a candle of repentance, praying, "God of mercy, help me change my life; let me love today with a wild and imaginative love, on earth as it is in heaven."
- + Schedule a "wilderness walk," listening for how God may be calling you to change.
- + Reach out online or in person to an organization changing the world in inspiring ways, and learn more about their work, their impact, and how you can get involved.
- + Power down, take a breath, look out a window, and experiment with journaling this week. What changes are you making (or would you like to make) to be more in tune with God's good news? Explore this question with someone you love.



— SECOND SUNDAY of LENT —



READ

Scripture

Mark 8:27-38

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? + Mark 8:36

Poem

Mary Oliver, "In Blackwater Woods," *Devotions*, p. 389

Prayer

God of grace, help us to love what is mortal. Give us the courage to hold it close and, when the time comes, to let it go. Amen.



MEDITATE

This passage in Mark is full of mysteries, and at its core is how salvation somehow involves both losing one's life and saving it. Jesus warns that there are ways to "gain the whole world" and yet still lose your life; and at the same time he promises that God works through loss in order to save. With Oliver, we can see these mysteries unfold in the natural world - and in our own lives - through the ancient rhythms of giving and receiving, losing and saving, holding on and letting go.

MORE LIGHT

For wisdom on how “losing one’s life” should never mean merely succumbing to the needs of others, see Oliver’s “The Journey” (*Devotions*, p. 349); and for her take on Jesus, love, mystery, and miracles, see “Logos” (*Devotions*, p. 179).

PRACTICES

- † This week begin each day by lighting a candle of salvation, praying, “God of grace, help me love what is mortal. Help me hold on to what needs to be embraced, let go of what needs to be let go - and have the wisdom to know the difference.”
- † Experiment with a “letting go” fast this week, creating little sanctuaries of Sabbath time. Try fasting from technology for an hour, a day, or the whole week; or create a mealtime “Sabbath box” for cell phones or other devices, so you can better taste and see how God is good!
- † Reach out to someone living an “all-in” life of service, and thank them for their commitment and inspiration. Schedule an outdoor get together or Zoom meeting to learn more about their work and how you can help.
- † Make a list of what you need to embrace and to release in order to live more fully. Make the list itself beautiful (handwrite it on special paper; illuminate initial letters like an ancient manuscript; whatever works!) and put it up somewhere you’ll see it every day. Explore this question in a journal, or discuss it with someone you love.

