



Witness at the Cross

A FIVE WEEK LENTEN BIBLE STUDY

Adapted from the book
Witness at the Cross by Amy-Jill Levine

OVERVIEW



WEEK ONE	Bystanders and Scoffers
WEEK TWO	The Other Victims
WEEK THREE	The Soldiers
WEEK FOUR	The Women
WEEK FIVE	Joseph of Arimathea & Nicodemus

SOME GUIDING PRINCIPLES



- **Try to imagine yourself as a member of the group or characters in the story.**
- **Imagine what they are thinking.
What are they afraid of? What are they hoping for?**
- **Since the readings are shorter, take some extra time to read different translations, if possible.**
- **Pay attention to the unique elements of each of the four different gospel accounts.**



The Crucifixion, 1937

Michael Rothenstein (1908–1993)

WEEK ONE

Bystanders and Scoffers

BIBLE READINGS

- Mark 15:29-32
- John 19:19-22
- Matthew 27:39-43
- Luke 23:35

THEMES

- Blasphemy
- The Temple
- The Inscription – INRI
- Role of Bystanders

BYSTANDERS and BLASPHEMY

1. What would it have been like to be a bystander or passerby at the crucifixion?
2. What is blasphemy?

JESUS and the TEMPLE

Temple Timeline

- King Solomon oversaw construction of the First Temple (957 BC)
- Babylonian Empire destroys First Temple (586 BC)
- The Jews return from Exile and begin building the Second Temple (538 BC)
- King Herod greatly expands the Second Temple (40 BC)
- Roman Empire destroys the Second Temple (70 AD)

1. How do you understand the ministry of Jesus in relationship with the Temple in Jerusalem and the symbolism of the Temple to the Jewish people?
2. How do early Christians reinterpret and relocate the Temple's significance?

The INSCRIPTION on the CROSS

- *Titulus* – Latin word meaning “inscription”
- *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*

1. Why would Rome perceive claims about Jesus as King as challenging its authority? Do you think Jesus challenged Rome's rule?
2. What theological or spiritual significance might John and early Christians have seen in Pilate's use of many languages?
3. How and why did Jesus challenge worldly expectations of authority?



Oldest Depiction of Crucifixion

St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai

WEEK TWO

The Other Victims

BIBLE READINGS

- Mark 10:35-45
- Luke 23:39-43
- Matthew 27:38, 44
- John 19:18

THEMES

- Criminal Justice
- Definitions of Power
- Promise of Paradise

ROBBERS and REVOLUTIONARIES

1. Some commentators refer to the two men crucified with Jesus as bandits or criminals, while others argue they were revolutionaries. Does what we call these men affect our attitude toward or opinion about them?
2. How easy or difficult do you find it to think about those convicted of crimes and incarcerated as fellow human beings, created in God's image?

SEATED with JESUS

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

Mark 10:35-40

1. How is the request of the disciples at odds with the Jesus' teaching about leadership?
2. What are the "cup" and "baptism" to which Jesus refers?
3. What connection might there be between the request of James and John and the two criminals executed with Jesus?

CONVERSATION on the CROSS

1. How does or how would believing God knows, takes notice of, and remembers you make a difference to you?
2. How do you interpret Jesus' promise of paradise?



The Crucifixion c.1315

Duccio di Buoninsegna (c.1255–1319)

WEEK THREE

The Soldiers

BIBLE READINGS

- Matthew 8:5-13
- Matthew 27:54
- Mark 15:39
- Luke 23:47

THEMES

- Understanding Romans Soldiers
- The Role of Centurions
- Role of “Outsiders”
- Responding to Suffering

SOLDIERS at the CROSS

1. The detail that the soldiers cast lots for Jesus’ clothing is an allusion to Psalm 22. Why did early Christians connect this psalm to Jesus’s death?
2. Why is it important for Christians today to remember the Roman Empire’s responsibility for Jesus’ death?

INTRODUCING CENTURIONS

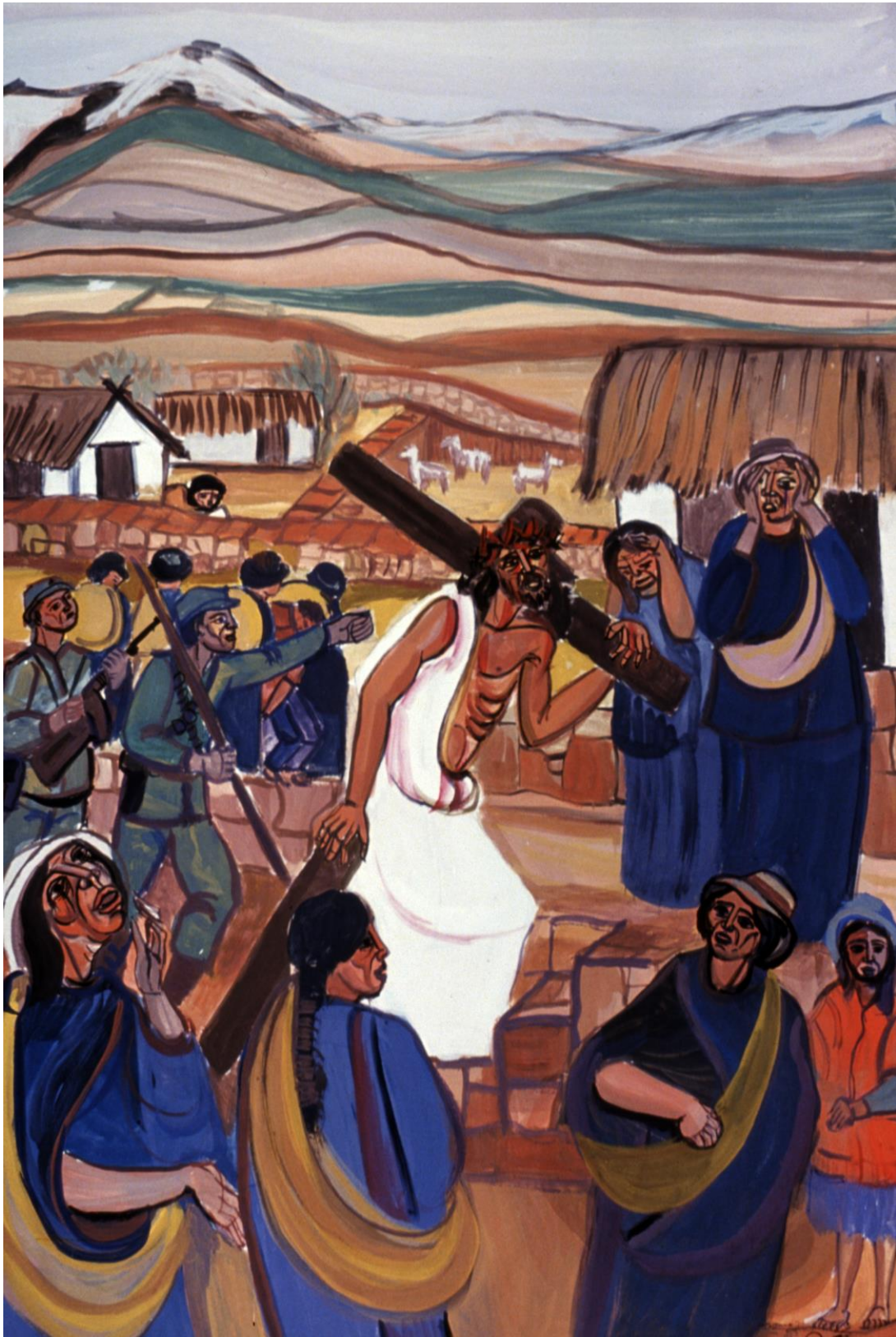
- Centurions were Roman army officers who commanded “centuries” (units of 80, not 100).
- Centurions had administrative and judicial responsibilities.
- Centurions were elected by tribunes in the Roman Republic and appointed by the Emperor in the Roman Empire.
- Centurions were usually literate, natural leaders, and well-paid. They were known for their steadiness.

JESUS HEALS A CENTURION’S SERVANT

1. What do you think the centurion’s calling Jesus “Lord” indicates? What do you mean when you call Jesus “Lord?”
2. Does the centurion’s physical absence from Luke’s story heighten, diminish, or have no effect on his expression of faith in Jesus? How?

THE CENTURION’S DECLARATION

1. Why did Luke have the centurion, Rome’s representative, declare Jesus as righteous and innocent?



The Outcry of the Women (1992)

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel

WEEK FOUR

The Women

BIBLE READINGS

- Luke 8:1-3
- Mark 15:40-41
- Matthew 27:55-56
- Luke 23:27-31
- John 19:25b-27

THEMES

- Women as Patrons of Jesus
- Role of Women in the Gospels
- Women as Faithful Witnesses

THE WOMEN WHO SUPPORTED JESUS

1. What does Luke tell us about these women, and why?
2. Do you think women's patronage of Jesus and his early followers is as well-known as it should be? Why or why not?

WOMEN who Witness in MARK

- Who are the women watching Jesus die? What does Mark tell us about them and their relationship to Jesus? Why are they watching "from a distance?"

WOMEN who Witness in MATTHEW

- What does Matthew tell us that is different from Mark?

WOMEN who Witness in LUKE

- Jesus refers to the women along the Via Dolorosa as the "Daughters of Jerusalem. What does this mean?
- What is the role of lamentation in the story of women and the way of the cross?
- What are the similarities and differences with the accounts in Matthew and Mark?

WOMEN who Witness in JOHN

- Only John specifically locates Jesus' mother at his cross. Why is this significant for John?
- Do you think maternal love is different from paternal love? If so, how?



The Entombment of Christ c.1604

Caravaggio (1571–1610)

WEEK FIVE

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus

BIBLE READINGS

- Mark 15:42-46
- Matthew 27:57-60
- Luke 23:50-54
- John 19:38-42

THEMES

- The Role of Joseph of Arimathea
- Nicodemus: Disciple or Sympathizer?
- Exploring Your Own “Witness at the Cross”

The STORY of JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

1. Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin (the highest Jewish court in Roman-occupied Judea). Why does this make his request for Jesus’ body surprising?
2. How does Joseph’s request demonstrate a desire to partner with God?

GETTING to Know NICODEMUS

1. What do you know about Nicodemus?
2. How do the previous encounters between Jesus and Nicodemus help us understand his extravagant response after Jesus’ death?
3. Do you think Nicodemus becomes a disciple or remains a “sympathizer?”

GOD and NATURE

1. At the crucifixion, the presence of God is made manifest through the tearing of the Temple veil, the darkness, the earthquake, and the raising of the saints from the dead. How do you interpret these manifestations?
2. What does it mean for God to mourn? How do you see God as active during these excruciating moments?
3. How are you changed by the stories of the witnesses at the cross?

YOU are a WITNESS at the CROSS

1. Which witness at the cross did find most engaging or attractive? Which did you find most challenging?
2. How God calling you to be a witness at the cross?

SOME NEXT STEPS

WITNESS AT THE RESURRECTION



- **This Holy Week and Easter, read the various accounts of the resurrection in the four gospels.**

Mark 16:1-8
Matthew 28:1-20
Luke 24:1-48
John 20:1-29

- **Try to imagine yourself as a member of the group or characters in the story.**
- **Imagine what they are thinking.**
What are they afraid of? What are they hoping for?
- **How are you called to be a witness at the resurrection?**



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