

SERMON ON THE MOUNT STUDY

Below you will find words (poetry, lyrics or prose for the various Studies, but for the Introduction below only poetry) that are provided with the hope of augmenting and enriching each Study. Sometimes the words' connection to a particular Study are obvious, while at other times only a phrase or a line might directly relate to the Study. We hope you will enjoy, but understand that this may not be every person's cup (or three cups) of tea. Please check back next Monday (January 21st) when we plan to post the remainder of the material for the entire Study.

Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount

Maybe

by Mary Oliver

Sweet Jesus, talking
his melancholy madness,
stood up in the boat
and the sea lay down,
silky and sorry.
So everybody was saved
that night.
But you know how it is

when something
different crosses
the threshold -- the uncles
mutter together,

the women walk away,
the young brother begins
to sharpen his knife.
Nobody knows what the soul is.

It comes and goes
like the wind over the water --
sometimes, for days,
you don't think of it.

Maybe, after the sermon,

after the multitude was fed,
one or two of them felt
the soul slip forth

like a tremor of pure sunlight
before exhaustion,
that wants to swallow everything,
gripped their bones and left them

miserable and sleepy,
as they are now, forgetting
how the wind tore at the sails
before he rose and talked to it --

tender and luminous and demanding
as he always was --
a thousand times more frightening
than the killer storm.

Messiah (Christmas Portions)

by Mark Doty

A little heat caught
in gleaming rags,
in shrouds of veil,
torn and sun-shot swaddlings:

over the Methodist roof,
two clouds propose a Zion
of their own, blazing
(colors of tarnish on copper)

against the steely close
of a coastal afternoon, December,
while under the steeple
the Choral Society

prepares to perform
Messiah, pouring, in their best
blacks and whites, onto the raked stage.
Not steep, really,

but from here,
the first pew, they're a looming
cloudbank of familiar angels:

that neighbor who

 fights operatically
with her girlfriend, for one,
and the friendly bearded clerk
 from the post office

 —tenor trapped
in the body of a baritone? Altos
from the A&P, soprano
 from the T-shirt shop:

 today they're all poise,
costume and purpose
conveying the right note
 of distance and formality.

 Silence in the hall,
anticipatory, as if we're all
about to open a gift we're not sure
 we'll like;

 how could they
compete with sunset's burnished
oratorio? Thoughts which vanish,
 when the violins begin.

 Who'd have thought
they'd be so good? *Every valley*,
proclaims the solo tenor,
 (a sleek blonde

 I've seen somewhere before
—the liquor store?) *shall be exalted*,
and in his handsome mouth the word
 is lifted and opened

 into more syllables
than we could count, central *ah*
dilated in a baroque melisma,
 liquefied; the pour

 of voice seems
to *make* the unplanned landscape
the text predicts the Lord
 will heighten and tame.

This music
demonstrates what it claims:
glory shall be revealed. If art's
acceptable evidence,

mustn't what lies
behind the world be at least
as beautiful as the human voice?
The tenors lack confidence,

and the soloists,
half of them anyway, don't
have the strength to found
the mighty kingdoms

these passages propose
—but the chorus, all together,
equals my burning clouds,
and seems itself to burn,

commingled powers
dedded to a larger, centering claim.
These aren't anyone we know;
choiring dissolves

familiarity in an up-
pouring rush which will not
rest, will not, for a moment,
be still.

Aren't we enlarged
by the scale of what we're able
to desire? Everything,
the choir insists,

might flame;
inside these wrappings
burns another, brighter life,
quickenened, now,

by song: hear how
it cascades, in overlapping,
lapidary waves of praise? Still time.
Still time to change.

The Grand Miracle

BY MARY KARR

for John Holohan

Jesus wound up with his body nailed to a tree—
a torment he practically begged for,
or at least did nothing to stop. Pilate

watched the crowd go thumbs down
and weary, signed the order.
So centurions laid Jesus flat

on a long beam, arms run along the crosspiece.
In each palm a long spike was centered,
a stone chosen to drive it. (Skin

tears; the bones start to split.)
Once the cross got propped up,
the body hung heavy, a carcass—

in carne, the Latin poets say, in meat.
(—The breastbone a ship's prow . . .)
At the end the man cried out

as men cry. (Tears that fill the eyes
grow dark drop and by drop: One
cries out.) On the third day,

the stone rolled back, to reveal
no corpse. History is rife
with such hoaxes. (Look at Herodotus.)

As to whether he multiplied
loaves and fishes, that's common enough.

Poke seed-corn in a hole and see if more corn

doesn't grow. Two fish in a pond
make more fishes. The altar of reason
supports such extravagance. (I don't even know

how electricity works, but put trust
in light switches.) And the prospect
of love cheers me up, as gospel.

That some creator might strap on
an animal mask to travel our path between birth
and ignominious death—now that

makes me less lonely. And the rising up
at the end into glory—the white circle of bread
on the meat of each tongue that God

might enter us. For 2000-near years
my tribe has lined up at various altars,
so dumbly I open this mouth for bread and song.

Mary Karr, "The Grand Miracle" from *Viper Rum*. Copyright © 1998 by Mary Karr.

Address to the Lord

By John Berryman

1

Master of beauty, craftsman of the snowflake,
inimitable contriver,
endower of Earth so gorgeous & different from the boring Moon,
thank you for such as it is my gift.

I have made up a morning prayer to you
containing with precision everything that most matters.
'According to Thy will' the thing begins.
It took me off & on two days. It does not aim at eloquence.

You have come to my rescue again & again
in my impassable, sometimes despairing years.
You have allowed my brilliant friends to destroy themselves
and I am still here, severely damaged, but functioning.

Unknowable, as I am unknown to my guinea pigs:
How can I 'love' you?
I only as far as gratitude & awe
confidently & absolutely go.

I have no idea whether we live again.
It doesn't seem likely
from either the scientific or the philosophical point of view
but certainly all things are possible to you,

and I believe as fixedly in the Resurrection-appearances to Peter and
to Paul

as I believe I sit in this blue chair.
Only that may have been a special case
to establish their initiatory faith.

Whatever your end may be, accept my amazement.
May I stand until death forever at attention
for any your least instruction or enlightenment.
I even feel sure you will assist me again, Master of insight & beauty.

Water Song

By Joy Kogawa

That once
On singing water walked
On water still
Walks he
In atmosphere
So dense in miracle
We here find fins
For flying