

FEATURE

Poetry gives new life to Lent's familiar readings

Praying the Gospel through Poetry: Lent to Easter by Peggy Rosenthal. St. Anthony Messenger Press (2002). 86 pages. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Julianne Palma
Guest contributor

Lent begins next Wednesday. What will we do to renew our spirituality during these 44 days — or 40 days, excluding Sundays in pre-conciliar style? The Big Three demand our attention: Fasting, which gets all the press; almsgiving (do we do enough?); and prayer (sometimes just a treadmill of comfortable phrases.)

A popular form of Lenten prayer is reflection on the Scriptures. But the Sunday readings of Lent are among the most familiar passages of the year: the raising of Lazarus, the temptation in the desert and, of course, the Passion. If you're anything like me, you sometimes struggle to discover new meaning in these seminal readings.

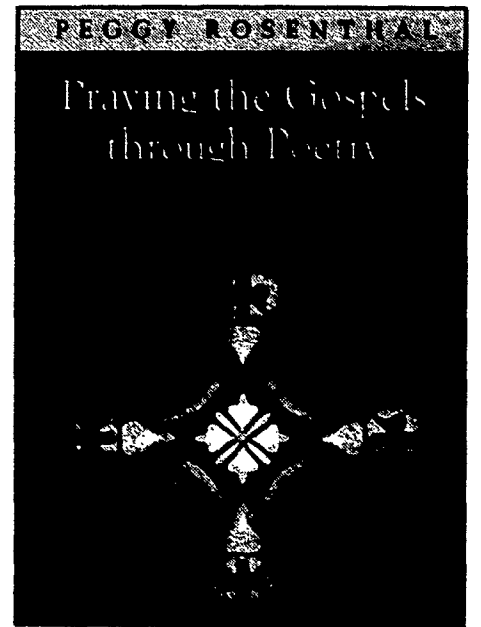
This Lent, fortunately, we have another pair of eyes to help us see them anew. And I am encouraged when this deeply spiritual woman admits that the passages can become "over-familiar." In these 86 pages, Dr. Peggy Rosenthal reanimates the Gospel readings for Ash Wednesday, the Cycle A Sunday Gospels for Lent, Palm Sunday, the Triduum and Easter Sunday.

She does this by pairing each reading with a poem or an excerpt from a poem. The selections are all by contemporary poets, except for her longtime favorite, "Love" by George Herbert, and all treat either the story of the Gospel reading or its theme.

The chapters follow the same sequence in their examinations. Gospel readings are indicated by a Scripture citation rather than reprinted in full. Then, in a brief summary, the author highlights the aspects of the reading that will be treated in the poem that follows.

The pace of the reflection process is leisurely. Rosenthal suggests that we re-read the poem. In the preface she says, "I don't want readers to rush." And, in fact, because the author layers so many opportunities for pause and reflection on top of each other, it is impossible to hurry through any chapter.

Rosenthal calls the next step "my stroll through the poem," in which she reveals some more subtle meanings and techniques. "My goal is to offer guidance while also leaving imaginative space for the reader to move in other directions as well," she says. On this "stroll," Rosenthal candidly shares her emotional reactions to individual words and phrases, and readers will feel as if she is accompanying them as they wend their ways through both po-



em and Gospel.

The greatest potential for spiritual enrichment, I feel, comes in the fourth section of each chapter which contains three or four "wonderings." These include technical aspects of the poem's construction: "I love the way the poet teases out a double meaning from that colloquial line." But there are also challenging questions for reflection: "I wonder about whether I could ... face up to my sharing the evil of a mocking glare, without the aid of the poets."

Again, in these reflections, the author shares herself intimately, making the reader aware of (and perhaps comforted by) what puzzles, challenges and occasionally unnerves her. We are privileged to walk with her, seeing old images from new perspectives and hearing familiar phrases with fresh ears.

Each chapter ends with the suggestion that we memorize a line as a "mantra for the day or the week." This practice promises much for me personally, for the poems selected by Rosenthal contain the kind of sumptuous imagery in which I can easily immerse myself.

My favorite poem in the book is "Christ as a Gardener" by Andrew Hudgins — the piece paired with the Easter Sunday Gospel. Truly, this is an example of when "word meets Word in new ways of seeing and knowing," as the author promises in her preface.

Knowing that this gloriously celebratory reading awaits me at the end of Lent makes me almost eager to begin the journey of those days. I know I will be greatly enriched by the companionship of Dr. Peggy Rosenthal along the way.

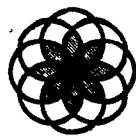
Palma is an adjunct instructor of English at Monroe Community College.

YOUR SPOUSE NEEDS YOU.
THE KIDS NEED YOU.
A PARENT NEEDS YOU.



Looks like you need us.

Finding time to meet the needs of an older adult or person with disabilities can be difficult. To help, St. Ann's Community offers two levels of adult day services at three convenient locations. Home & Heart provides nutritious meals, recreational activities and a variety of support services. For those in need of skilled medical care there's Home Connection with everything from physical therapy to dietary counseling. Even transportation. To learn more and register for a complimentary day, call 697-6361 or visit www.stannscommunity.com.



ST. ANN'S
ADULT DAY SERVICES
Full of Life

\$5

USED
CDs

EVERY SATURDAY

we buy and sell used
CDs, videos and DVDs

Record
Archive

1394 Mt. Hope Ave.
473 3870
1880 East Ave.
514 1210
recordarchive.com