

EUGENE H. PETERSON



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A MONTH OF SUNDAYS

THIRTY-ONE DAYS OF WRESTLING WITH
MATTHEW, MARK, LUKE, AND JOHN

EUGENE H. PETERSON

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A MONTH OF SUNDAYS

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Introduction

Eugene Peterson was quite concerned about the language we use between Sundays. He insisted on a continuity of language between the words we use in Bible studies and the words we use when we are out, for example, fishing for rainbow trout. He constantly urged others “to counter the reduction of language to god-talk—language that is severed from a God-created and God-saved world, language that is depersonalized and functionalized. The dreaded god-talk.”* Yes, dreaded indeed. Lucky for us, Reverend Peterson led by example not simply between Sundays but on Sundays, too, in his preaching.

We were beyond fortunate to have acquired a considerable chunk of Eugene Peterson’s writings, including a portion clearly labeled “sermons.” Most of this content reflects his long tenure as pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland. Some of this was organized and arranged into one of his last books published before his death—*As Kingfishers Catch Fire*. Some of this content, but not all. What you hold in your hands is a sampling of the “but not all.”

A Month of Sundays is exactly that—a Sunday sermon or

* Eugene Peterson, “What Are Writers Good For?” (lecture, Tattered Cover, Denver, CO, July 9, 2006).

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homily or message or whatever you'd like to call them, for every day of the month, drawn from the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Common sense in the current world of publishing would caution against a collection of sermons, especially thirty-one of them, even if in abbreviated form. Such an offering could easily end up nothing more than a bound bunch of depersonalized and functionalized language. But remember, these are sermons from a man allergic to the dreaded god-talk.

A Month of Sundays is also the title of a work of fiction by author John Updike. His is the story of the Reverend Tom Marshfield, guilty of sexual sins, sent west from his midwestern parish to a desert retreat dedicated to spiritual renewal. As part of his rehabilitation, Marshfield is required to keep a monthlong journal, where he lays bare his soul, his past, and at times his present. Updike's work of fiction and Peterson's bundle of sermons couldn't be further apart. Yet, dedicating thirty-one days to reading and pondering and possibly even journaling around these perspectives on the Gospels could be a form of personal spiritual renewal, maybe even rehabilitation of the soul on some level. After a month of Sundays, it is within the realm of possibilities that you might find yourself in a state of mind similar to Reverend Marshfield's at the conclusion of his stay: "Gratitude is the way He gets us, when we have gnawed off a leg to escape His other snares."*

* John Updike, *A Month of Sundays: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1975).

Gratitude. A frame of mind and heart far removed from the dreaded god-talk.

Finally, a word about structure. Many of these sermons are spread out over more than one day. When you encounter an opening Scripture passage, that's where things begin. When you arrive, a day or so later, at the word *amen*, that's where the particular reflection ends. This was in an attempt to make the content manageable for a daily reading, and in each case, we believe it did not dilute the strength of the message in any way. In fact, we found each day's portion was, like grace, sufficient. You will also notice a strange rhythm in the first two entries from Matthew—they're short, almost clipped, outline-like. That reflects the documents used to create this collection. In other words, that's what Eugene Peterson's sermon notes reflect. After those two "days," the other entries slow down and take their sweet time. You'll see.

—the WaterBrook Editorial Team

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Matthew

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Day 1

Transition

The family tree of Jesus Christ, David's son, Abraham's son:

Abraham had Isaac,

Isaac had Jacob,

Jacob had Judah and his brothers,

Judah had Perez and Zerah (the mother was Tamar),

Perez had Hezron,

Hezron had Aram,

Aram had Amminadab,

Amminadab had Nahshon,

Nahshon had Salmon,

Salmon had Boaz (his mother was Rahab),

Boaz had Obed (Ruth was the mother),

Obed had Jesse,

Jesse had David,

and David became king.

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David had Solomon (Uriah's wife was the mother),
Solomon had Rehoboam,
Rehoboam had Abijah,
Abijah had Asa,
Asa had Jehoshaphat,
Jehoshaphat had Joram,
Joram had Uzziah,
Uzziah had Jotham,
Jotham had Ahaz,
Ahaz had Hezekiah,
Hezekiah had Manasseh,
Manasseh had Amon,
Amon had Josiah,
Josiah had Jehoiachin and his brothers,
and then the people were taken into the Babylonian exile.

When the Babylonian exile ended,
Jeconiah had Shealtiel,
Shealtiel had Zerubbabel,
Zerubbabel had Abiud,
Abiud had Eliakim,
Eliakim had Azor,
Azor had Zadok,
Zadok had Achim,
Achim had Eliud,

Eliud had Eleazar,
Eleazar had Matthan,
Matthan had Jacob,
Jacob had Joseph, Mary's husband,
the Mary who gave birth to Jesus,
the Jesus who was called Christ.

There were fourteen generations from Abraham to David,
another fourteen from David to the Babylonian exile,
and yet another fourteen from the Babylonian exile to
Christ.

MATTHEW 1:1–17

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Matthew summarizes close to two thousand years of history, vividly and succinctly, in the opening verses of his gospel. His method is to simply call the roll of significant names. To a people familiar with the names, it was a highly effective method for reviewing a rich history. History, for the gospel writers, was not the scholarly pursuit of determining dates and listing events. It was a personal genealogy, a remembering of their ancestors, God's people.

Matthew arranges the names in three groups, outlining history in three parts.

From Abraham to David (verses 2–6). This is a period of formation. God establishes the nation of Israel in Abraham and the fathers, delivers them from Egyptian bondage in Moses, leads them into a land of promise in Joshua and the Judges, and demonstrates his kingship sovereign rule over them in David.

From David to the deportation to Babylon (verses 6–11). This represents a period of rebellion. God's rule is disputed. The nation becomes divided, the kings fail to demonstrate God's rule, and the people go after other gods. The prophets attempt to call the people back to their origins.

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From the deportation to Babylon to the Christ (verses 12–16).

This reflects a period of waiting. The Hebrew people lose their political identity and become people in waiting. They understand themselves as God's people more accurately, and their expectancy for the Messiah grows and matures. However, in many ways this is an obscure and dark time—still, we know enough about it to know that it was full of intense longing for God's coming again.


So, a question for you. If you could use a time machine to place yourself back into Hebrew history, which of the three periods would you choose to live in? Why?

Amen.

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Day 2

Birth

The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—'God saves'—because he will save his people from their sins."

MATTHEW 1:18–21

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The birth of Jesus Christ is the nerve center of history, a kind of ganglion that connects all the fibers of mankind's nervous system. His birth brings the past experiences (summarized in Matthew 1:1–17) and the future expectations (“he shall save his people from their sins”) into conjunction.

I want to draw your attention to three things:

1. *The fact of the birth.* “[Mary] was found to be with child” (verse 18). There was a real mother and an actual pregnancy. Matthew (and Luke) tells the story in such a way that there is no doubt that it was a physical birth, not a “god-myth.” Salvation did not operate outside the process of history.
2. *The manner of the birth.* “. . . found to be with child of the Holy Spirit” (verse 18). God is the initiator and creator of salvation, and Mary's virginity is evidence that God entered history. Salvation was not caused by the processes of history. Incidentally, Joseph's resolve “to divorce her quietly” (verse 19) corroborated Mary's virginity. The first person to believe in the Virgin Birth was not a pious waif but an intelligent skeptic, who knew something about “the birds and the bees.”

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3. *The meaning of the birth.* “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (verse 21). The birth was not a splendid pageant to brighten the long nights of winter or a sentimental myth to divert us from the sordid and the dull. It was a ministry that would redeem all creation.

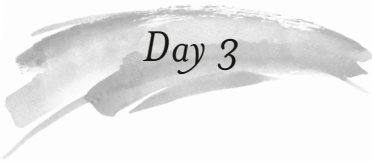
So, a question for you: Why is Christmas an important time to you personally?

Amen.

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Day 3

Fear

A student doesn't get a better desk than her teacher. A laborer doesn't make more money than his boss. Be content—pleased, even—when you, my students, my harvest hands, get the same treatment I get. If they call me, the Master, “Dungface,” what can the workers expect?

Don't be intimidated. Eventually everything is going to be out in the open, and everyone will know how things really are. So don't hesitate to go public now.

Don't be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. There's nothing they can do to your soul, your core being. Save your fear for God, who holds your entire life—body and soul—in his hands.

What's the price of a pet canary? Some loose change, right? And God cares what happens to it even more than you do. He pays even greater attention to you, down to the

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last detail—even numbering the hairs on your head! So don't be intimidated by all this bully talk. You're worth more than a million canaries.

Stand up for me against world opinion and I'll stand up for you before my Father in heaven. If you turn tail and run, do you think I'll cover for you?

MATTHEW 10:24–33

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They were scared. All twelve of them. You know their names: Peter, Andrew, James, John, Thaddaeus, Bartholomew, Thomas, Philip, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Canaanite, and Judas Iscariot. Twelve lucky men—lucky to have been called to be with Jesus. And they were scared.

It is odd, really. Puzzling. They had come to realize the most wonderful good news: that God was with them, that God was on their side, and that each of their lives was significant, noticed, valuable, and loved. Everything they had hoped in their deepest hearts might be true, and it even looked like it very much might be true. Being with Jesus had convinced them. And Jesus had called them to accompany him in living out this life and sharing it with the people who didn't know of it.

And now they were scared.

One of my main tasks as your pastor is to keep the image of the Christ-life before you clear and focused and to urge and guide you in its acceptance and practice. I do that in two ways: I tell and then remind you of Jesus's words that bring this life into being, and I listen and understand and pray with you and for you so that it is your lives that are addressed. The underlying conviction of the work of the pastor is that the words of Jesus are as true now as when

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first spoken, and that every named life in this congregation is as important as those twelve named disciples.

Today I am going back to the story in the middle of Matthew's gospel that shows Jesus first calling the twelve disciples, how they reacted, and how Jesus responded. Jesus called them by name, as he calls us. Every time we baptize an adult or an infant, we recover that glory—that each of us is absolutely unique, chosen for salvation, and infinitely valuable. There is no company or organization that can afford to pay us what we are worth. We are incredibly precious.

But as Jesus continued to talk with them, they realized the dimensions of life that they were being drawn into and began to get nervous. They, in fact, were being called into a fullness and extravagance that they were not used to and were not prepared for. Jesus realized what they were feeling and interrupted their growing apprehension: “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered that will not be revealed. . . . And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. . . . Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:26, 28, 31).

Have no fear. Do not fear. Fear not. Three times Jesus told his twelve disciples not to be afraid.

When we listen, really listen, to the words of Jesus, we know they are for us and that this life has deep, eternal significance. And we are delighted. But we also realize that it is going to demand that we grow up, that we be fully human before God, and that for rea-

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sons that we will never quite comprehend, the majority of people around us won't be enthusiastic. We know, deep in our bones, that we are called to be disciples and there is no second-rate person among us. Yet the opposition unnerves us. But Jesus interrupts and says, "Don't be afraid. Don't let what you suppose to be dangerous frighten you. Don't let your minority status bother you. God does not run the world by majority vote. Don't be afraid."

About a year ago, on a clear, blue-sky summer day, my wife, Jan, and I were in a little Piper Cub flying over the Rocky Mountains. We then flew between them, following a river valley, and landed in a remote area called the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. As we came down out of the skies and approached this meadow, there was no landing strip—just a field of grass, sprinkled with daisies and Indian paintbrushes. I was a little scared. The grass was a foot, maybe a foot and a half, high. There could have been a dead coyote in the grass that we would hit or a large rock or a deep hole. And we were a long way from anyone, with fifty miles of ten-thousand-foot peaks separating us from a hospital emergency room or a mechanic who could repair a crumpled strut.

Norval Hegland was flying the airplane. This red Piper Cub was his plane. We had met Norval and his wife, Margaret, a year ago. Norval is about seventy years old, a retired Norwegian Lutheran pastor with a passion for flying airplanes. He also has a passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was able to combine his two passions by going to Alaska and being the pastor to Eskimo

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congregations scattered over the northern and western stretches of that gigantic land. There were no roads into those villages and settlements. Norval would fly his plane, often with his wife and three children with him, landing on sandbars in rivers, on the tundra, and on any other clear space he could find. Then he would lead people in worship of God, training and encouraging them to follow Jesus.

Norval has another enthusiasm that amuses me. I don't know if *enthusiasm* is the right word to use with Norval. Norwegian Lutherans don't express a wide range of emotions—at least Norval doesn't. His voice is almost monotone. He doesn't look like the kind of person who would come up with any surprises. But in addition to living and sharing the Christian life and flying airplanes, he is fascinated with filing systems. He files everything and has a complex system that he uses carefully. He likes everything to be in the right place. Margaret, his wife, gets a little tired of it. She says that when he dies, she is going to have his gravestone inscribed with these words: "It's in the file."

Anyway, we are coming down for a landing in this lovely meadow, hoping that Margaret isn't going to have occasion to order that inscription anytime soon. We didn't hit the carcass of a coyote. We bounced along rather pleasantly and came to an easy and safe stop. After tying the plane down, we hiked to a river canyon a few miles away and admired the spectacular results of a million years of river erosion.

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There was much to enjoy that day, and we enjoyed it. But there was also much to fear, and we did our share of that. My fear was intermittent—I would see how close we were to the mountain peaks, realize the fragility of the airplane, and have an eruption of panic. But Norval was so relaxed and so experienced. He had been doing this for thirty-five years, flying his wife, children, Eskimos, missionaries, and pastors all over Alaska, North Dakota, and Montana. His confidence and pleasure in sharing all of this wilderness beauty with us was reassuring. But we were still fearful. Jan and I compared feelings later—we both had moments when we were pretty scared. But the fear didn't keep us out of the airplane, and it didn't interfere so much that we weren't able to enjoy the wonder of the day.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is sheer gift. Nothing is more certain than that. It staggers us. It amazes us. It throws us off balance, for we never expected this. But all the same, here it is—the gift of grace. “God so loved the world that he gave” (John 3:16). In the middle of such a grand gift, who can be afraid? Anyone is likely to be. The twelve disciples were. You are. I am. We are. We are afraid that we are in a country that is too large for us, too dangerous. We are afraid that we are not up to it—the love, the suffering, the patient endurance, the opposition. We are afraid that this little Piper Cub of a faith and a church is too fragile to sustain us. We are afraid that our precious egos might crash and become crippled or

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maybe even die. And our fears close us up—our fears lock the doors and shut the windows of life so that we huddle within ourselves, trying to make our lives snug and safe and predictable.

We are here, in this place, listening to Jesus's words again and realizing our identity as disciples again so that won't happen. So that our fear won't close us in. There is so much to see, so much to experience, so many people to love, such a marvelous Lord to worship. And nothing to fear.

Amen.

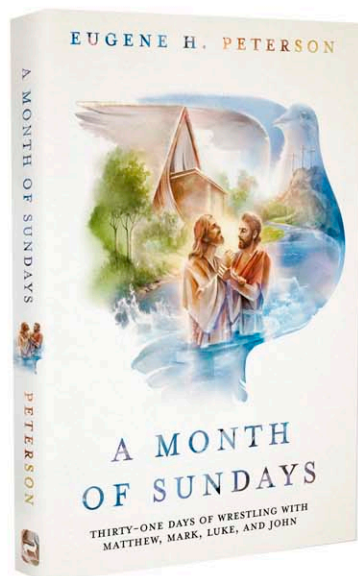
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