

Lent Devotions

A Season of Renewal



A Lenten Guide for Lectionary Year A
from the North Carolina Council of Churches

Introduction

Years ago I preached for a friend in a “high church,” Lutheran Church in Washington, D.C.’s Capital District. As an aside, my students and I also were treated to a private tour of the House of Representatives because my friend was friends with the Chaplain to the House. Yes, that was me waving from the Capital Building balcony in 1998.

As we were robing for worship that Second Sunday of Lent my friend said something to the effect, “I’m sorry our sanctuary is not adorned in its typical fashion and the music will all be in a minor key. Plus, we won’t have any rousing hymns, not even the Alleluias for the doxology.” I reminded my friend that Methodists also observe Lent and, as a matter of fact, these 6 weeks are some of my favorite of the entire Christian year. “I can’t think of a better time to preach,” I concluded as we headed to the back of the choir lineup where we processed into the sanctuary in silence.

Indeed, Lent is the time of year set aside by the Church for us to be introspective, contemplative, and some would say, maudlin. When so much of the world expects us to be optimistic, cheerful, and confident regardless of what is going on around us, Lent gives us permission to be realistic. Some of us intentionally tune our worship to reflect the truth that the world is not as God would have it be. For six weeks we enter a sparse sanctuary, calling to mind the reality that while God provides abundant resources to ensure each person can flourish, those resources are not fairly distributed in ways that allow each person to flourish. For six weeks we refrain from singing “Alleluia,” reminding us that we are not among the heavenly chorus, but working each day on earth that “[God’s] will be done on earth as in heaven.”

The staff of the North Carolina Council of Churches offer these devotions in gratitude for the work you enable us to do in pursuit of God’s good world. And we offer them knowing that you are right here with us in the work. Together we face reality during Lent and live in the hope that Easter brings.

Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director

Ash Wednesday – Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” These words echo in my head each year on Ash Wednesday. A time when we receive our ashes, reflect on our lives, and bare our truest selves to God – the beautiful, the lost, the joyful, the conflicted – every version of ourselves. From the moment we receive our ashes, God sees us for who we were, who we are, and who we will become. Today is the time to reflect on who exactly we are and how we can truly live into our faith.



As I read over these verses from Matthew, I think about going into the world with a renewed sense of hope, generosity, and humility. This passage directs us to act humbly, and, if we do, we shall be rewarded. What exactly is humility? What is our reward? Humility, simply put, is truth. Humility is living in and accepting the truth. So, what does that mean for us? By living as our most authentic selves, we are able to act humbly through God and our faith. Isn't that our reward as well? To be as we are.

Today, as we receive our ashes, let us go with the intention of making a promise to God and ourselves to face the world as our most authentic selves, promising to learn from our successes and mistakes, and to continue to grow within ourselves and with others in pursuit of the world God wants for each of us.

Prayer:

God, be with me this Ash Wednesday as I promise to live as my most authentic self, to act humbly through my faith and your word. Grant that I may go into the world and do your will. Amen.

Rachel Baker
Director of Communications

First Sunday in Lent - Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7;

We could call the Garden of Eden the story "original" sin in the sense that this story tries to account for the origin and pervasiveness of sin in our lives. But in our more common definition of the word, this sin is hardly "original" at all. It's common to every one of us: the temptation to be God.

This story has puzzled me for a long time: why would God not want the humans to have the knowledge of good and evil? How would we know what to do; the right choices to make? Why would God not want for God's first children to have that knowledge?

I think there are two pieces to the answer to that question. One is theological and the other is experiential. So let's start with the theological. When God created the world, God kept affirming that all was "good." Nowhere do we hear God reflect and say, "that's bad," or even, "oops, that didn't turn out so well." Even the serpent is described as "crafty," or "subtle," but never as "evil." Since evil had no place in the original creation, there was no need for the humans to know about it. Everything they knew, or learned from the creation, would be good. That's the theological part of the answer.

The other piece has to do with how we use the knowledge once we get it. Given that humans now have the knowledge of good and evil, however imperfectly, the problem is what we do with that knowledge. If we used it only on ourselves, to make our own decisions and set our own priorities, that would be no problem. In fact, it would be wonderful. The problem is, that's not what we do. At least, that's not all that we do.

We use our imperfect knowledge of good and evil to judge other people. And because our knowledge is imperfect, we usually end up judging ourselves good and others, who aren't

like us, as evil. We sit in judgment on our fellow human beings. And that responsibility belongs only to God. We appropriate it, but it is not ours. None of us is alone in this; we all do it. Our sin is not very original; we learn it from each other; we repeat it, again and again, generation after generation. We don't just want to be like God; we want to be God.



The lectionary readings for the first Sunday in Lent hold the Eden story alongside Jesus' temptation in the desert. During his temptation in the desert, even though he is God, Jesus chose to be fully human. He did not perform divine stunts or miracles, but hung on against temptation, when he could have given in.

That is what we have to do. Whether we believe the Eden story literally or symbolically doesn't really matter because it is true that we all have a beginner's knowledge of good and evil. The question is, what will we do with it? Will we use it to judge others and to crush them, pretending to play God? Or will we use it to become the most fully human humans that we can be? Now that would be original.

Sean O. Allen
Director of Finance and Administration

Second Sunday in Lent - Genesis 12:1-4a

“I have never met an addict,” our workshop leader said to the crowd at the Gaston Clergy Breakfast. “I have met [and she proceeded to rattle off a list of first names].” It was a clergy breakfast where the Council was offering information about the overdose crisis and the many ways that faith communities



can become involved in harm reduction. Our leader was pointing out to those in the room the role stigma plays as a barrier to care. One way to eliminate stigma is to call someone by his or her name.

In the Genesis reading this week, God tells Abram, “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (v.2). In this verse and subsequent verses, the words bless and blessing are repeated five times. This repetition is meant to stand out because God wants Abram to know the importance of his name and the families who will come from him.

Imagine if this was the reality for people who use drugs, people who live with HIV, people who live with mental health concerns. Imagine that our friends, neighbors, and family know that their names are greater than a stigmatizing label and that they are blessed. This Lent, I encourage all of us to eliminate stigmatizing language around substance use, HIV, and mental health. Call people by their names. Tell them they are blessed.

Elizabeth Brewington
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director

Third Sunday in Lent - Psalm 95

Times of great joy and sorrow have often defined my faith. But in the sweet moments of silent reflection and in the heat of powerful spiritual gatherings, I have been able to open up my heart and see God in all things. As recorded by Psalm 95, God is present in all of the world, much as I imagine it was when God “created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Psalm 95 reminds us we are called to cherish our relationship with God. I would add this extends to cherishing the beautiful world God has created.



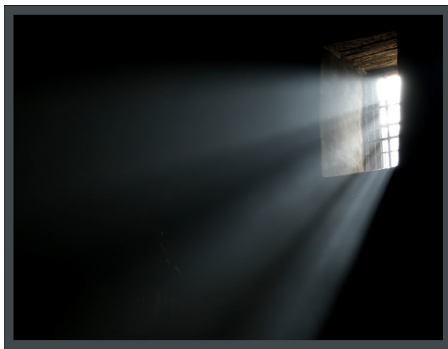
Lent is typically a time of reflection and self-giving. During Lent we turn to God in repentance and seek forgiveness for the ways we have fallen short of what God has willed for our lives. In this season of confession and repentance, we are preparing for the Easter celebration and the resurrection of Jesus. Each Sunday provides a little Easter, a time of joy in the midst of

Lenten reflection. In our joy, we hear God’s call on our lives and give thanks for the strength to live into that call. In our reflection we resolve to change our behavior and participate with God in making the world a better place. When we worship the One who Created the world that sustains us, we open up our hearts and embrace salvation. There is no better time than Lent to reflect upon our relationship with God and care for God’s creation. The Earth is from God’s hands and with God we must work to protect it. Will we answer the call?

Ren Martin
Eco-Justice Connection Program Coordinator

Fourth Sunday in Lent - Ephesians 5:8-14

We depend on light to exist. Physical and metaphorical light offers us safety. Lent is a time to examine the dark aspects of our lives. This passage of Ephesians reminds us of the importance of revealing the darkness in our lives- what keeps us from God and each other. We are invited to expose what keeps our communities from flourishing.



One way that faith communities can bring abundant light and hope is by addressing religious trauma. Brooks Baer, a specialist in mental health counseling, writes that “religious trauma occurs when a person’s religious experience is stressful, degrading, dangerous, abusive, or damaging. Traumatic religious experiences may harm or threaten to harm someone’s physical, emotional, mental, sexual, or spiritual health and safety” (<https://therapist.com/trauma/religious-trauma/>).

Shame, stigma, silence, and pain are often trauma markers. These experiences can also cause a culture of a shame and fear within a faith community if the community caused the trauma.

Many faith communities do not intentionally cause trauma. It occurs for different reasons ranging from unhealthy ministerial practices to a lack of boundaries and accountability. Furthermore, these abuses often happen in secret or in places that lack transparency. They happen in the darkness.

The good news, as Ephesians tells us, is that with light there is healing. When we invite light into the darkness, we welcome healing. Light exposes deep pain and injustice. When things become visible, there is accountability.

As people of faith, we can challenge our spaces to become trauma-informed. We can eliminate stigma and toxic practices. We can shine light on what is painful, to offer solidarity to those impacted. We can “live as children of light” (v. 8) to make sure our faith communities are places of safety and hope for all. Amen.

Jessica Stokes
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director

Fifth Sunday in Lent - Psalm 130

In Psalm 130, the psalmist is in a low place. Not just physically low, but it could be likened to an emotional or spiritual abyss. For some of us, a low place might be when the relationship we hoped for didn't work out. Or we might be experiencing an unplanned illness. Or we might be learning during this looming recession that our retirement investments are dwindling. It could be any of the concerns on our prayer lists.



Sometimes life gets so rough that our voices, once strong and commanding the attention of others, become muffled and we find ourselves whispering, "Hello, God? Can you hear me? Nobody will pick up their phones. I tweeted about it, but I ran out of characters. I tried to tell my friends I needed help via Instagram, but no image could convey the depth of my pain."

Often we can't even name the pain, and all we can do is cry. Yet, despite all this, the Psalmist suggests we can find inward rest despite outward circumstances. God not only listens to our prayers and responds to our lament but God also listens and responds to the community's needs. Therefore, as we continue our Lenten journey to the cross, we do so as "an Easter people" who live daily in the hope of resurrection.

Arlecia Simmons

Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director

Palm Sunday - Matthew 21:1-11

The power of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem was not because he is the King of Israel ruling over the land, but because he is "the servant and teacher" who humbled himself and became obedient even to death in order to lead with love into the kingdom of heaven.

The contrast of the first five weeks of the Lenten season to the celebration of Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week provides the opportunity for deep reflection on the differences between repentance and celebration. What does it truly mean to be humble and glorious at the same time? What does it also mean to live a life of servitude and simultaneously be crucified for exemplifying true power? Jesus shows us that we must surrender our hearts so that we may know the importance of tragic events and situations without needing to understand fully why they happen. We must completely trust in God's love.

The Scripture readings for Palm Sunday call us to meditate on how our faith is the source of our strength as we courageously carry even the heaviest of burdens. We do not suffer alone. Jesus mercifully teaches us through the journey of trusting in our faith and through the experience of suffering as we are led towards resurrection and the true celebration of life.



Susannah Tuttle
Director for Eco-Justice Connection

Maundy Thursday - John 13:1-17, 31b-35

I was around 12 years old the first time I heard about the concept of foot washing. I recoiled in my purple upholstered pew in the sanctuary of Lane Street Church of God in Kannapolis, NC. I became even more horrified when the preacher “threatened” to have us wash each other’s feet during a future service. I told my mom later that day that I never wanted to go to church again.



Fast forward 25 years and the concept still gives me pause (to put it nicely). The John passage suggests that the prevailing attitude during Jesus’ time was that the foot washer is low person on the pole and receives the raw end of the deal. I now have a different view . . . foot washing is an intimate act that requires the humility of both parties involved.

Just after Christmas last year, I took a spill in a parking lot resulting in a broken arm and sprained ankle. I suddenly found myself unable to take care of my most basic needs. My friends stepped in and took care of me—you could say they “washed my feet.” They did things for me they probably would have preferred not to do, while I struggled with the loss of independence and vulnerability of needing help. But my friends never once made me feel like a burden. On the contrary, I have never felt more loved and cared for in my life.

Though born of unfortunate circumstances and decidedly uncomfortable, the act of “foot washing” deepened my relationship with my friends. More importantly, it helped me

understand that being in need can be one of the best places to understand our own value. Each of us are worthy of having our feet washed and each of us are worthy of washing another's feet. Not only are we worthy of these things, but we must do them in order to understand what it means to love and be loved.

Stephenie Sanders
PHW Program and Engagement Administrator

Good Friday - Psalm 22

This Psalm figures prominently in the crucifixion narratives of both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark and much ink has been spilled over what Jesus meant when he began to quote this particular Psalm with his final breath. Like some, I believe it was an act of faith uttered by one who had recited those words since childhood. Others think it reveals Jesus' sense of abandonment and he never meant to utter more than the first sentence. Could be. The thing is, the first believers to hear the events of the crucifixion knew the faith claim of the entire 31 verses. The meaning is made by them and by us as we hear the story told again against the backdrop of the entire Psalm.

Indeed, Psalm 22 is the arch of justice. Despair defines much of our justice seeking work and is captured by the first two verses. Despair is often followed by the memory that we know better days when we stay the course and this is reflected in the next two verses. And so it goes, a rocking back and forth between the feeling that we seek justice against insurmountable odds followed by the reassurance that the world is moving along in God's good time even when we can't see it.



When things are particularly discouraging on the justice front, I am reminded that we are not called to win. We are called to be faithful. Whatever might have gone through Jesus' mind when he used his last breath to quote Psalm 22,

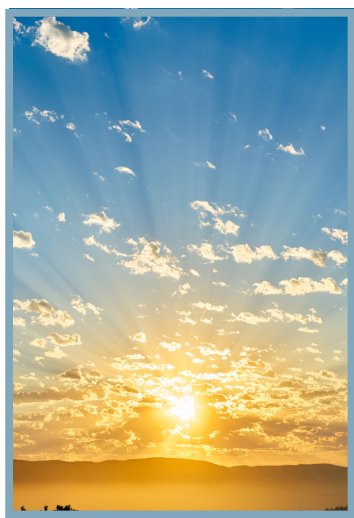
we know he stayed the course. He was faithful to God's call for justice and mercy. In that unwavering faithfulness he gathered a band of followers and they gathered a few more and so it continues through the centuries as the faithful leave a trail for other faithful followers.

“Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it”
(Psalm 22:30-31).

Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director

Easter Sunday - Matthew 28:1-10

Have you ever been afraid and bravely raced towards the very thing you were afraid of, all the while wondering why? Or have you ever been told not to be afraid, not to worry, not to be concerned and instead of being assuaged, your fears increased? Today is Easter Sunday and I acknowledge the hope we celebrate and embrace on this day; but on this Easter Sunday, I am also captured by the fact that “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary” in the story were told “Do not be afraid” (v. 5).



We usually jump to the part of this story where Mary Magdalene and the other Mary left the tomb to tell his disciples “with fear and great joy” (v. 8) what they had seen and what they had heard. What likely stands out in our minds is the part where we are told they went with great joy. Our brains jump to the good part, the part where they see Jesus and hear, “Do not be afraid” (v. 10). We skim over the part where they are afraid even as they go with joy to tell Jesus’ disciples what they have seen and heard.

Naming our fears doesn’t make them disappear, but neither does pretending our fears don’t exist. Sometimes we are the ones who have to be brave and run towards the things we fear. Sometimes we have to say the words no one else will say. Sometimes we need to speak up because the voice of many is more powerful than the voice of only one. Sometimes we

must tell the story of injustice again when everyone is ready to move on so that our fears can be met by the entire community.

I imagine Mary Magdalene and the other Mary ran with hearts beating out of their chests, minds racing about what they would say, while wondering if anyone would believe them. Maybe they considered not telling anyone at all. Maybe they considered telling a strategic few to see if anyone would believe them. Maybe they wondered why us? Like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, sometimes it is us called to face the fear. Isn't that what Easter is really about? Jesus crucified and buried even when he was afraid. Fear doesn't get to dictate our actions to us unless we allow it. We can choose courage, love, and hope in the face of injustices that would have us believe that fear, hatred, and despair are the only way open to us. This Easter season let's remember that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were afraid, but they told their story anyway.

Nicole Johnson
Director for Partners in Health and Wholeness



North Carolina Council of Churches

The North Carolina Council of Churches represents 26 distinct judicatories from 18 denominations. We have a proven record of moving ahead of the curve on the social issues of its day even when our position was not popular among the churches or the culture. With each new enterprise, the Council frequently finds itself out in front of where society and the church eventually end up.

While the issues we address mirror the attitude of most progressive organizations around us, we have a singular starting place. We refract everything through the lens of faith drawing. This starting place offers a different tenor to the conversation and can lead to different conclusions without reverting to polarizing opposites.

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