

TERROR

— and —

*Amazement*



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



## INTRODUCTION

Most of us are responsible, productive people. We head off at the start of the day to do what is expected of us. At the start of a new school year, fiscal year, or calendar year, we lay out a course and proceed accordingly, doing what is expected of us. So, it is with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, who rise early on the first day of the week to do what is expected when someone dies. They are expected to anoint the body for burial. Only the body is not there. The tomb is unexpectedly empty. Now what?

Truth be told, more of life is filled with the unexpected than the daily occurrences we've come to expect. How we respond to the unexpected is what defines us. In the Easter gospel (Mark 16:1-8), we will read at the end of these six weeks of Lent, Mary, Mary, and Salome meet the unexpected with terror and amazement. They seem to be experiencing, simultaneously, the emotions, "How can this happen!" and, "Wow, would you look at that?"

The work of the North Carolina Council of Churches often swings between the poles of terror and amazement as we absorb waves of the unexpected. We strive to meet the terrible by telling the truth. No, we do not have adequate public school funding in spite of the surplus in the N.C. budget—that's terrifying. No, the Department of Environmental Quality does not have adequate funding (there's that surplus again) to staff the work of protecting our water and air from the toxins regularly emitted by industry—that's terrifying.

As terrifying as truth telling can be, it creates the possibility for amazement. When the schools are adequately funded, we will be amazed. When the water is once again safe to drink, we

will be amazed. And therein lies the miracle of Easter. When we've lost hope, God offers a way forward, reminding us that our task is to move through the unexpected as people of hope always ready to be amazed.

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## ASH WEDNESDAY – JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, a day on which we are called to remember our mortality. We speak the truth, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Currently, the world surrounds us with reminders of our mortality. With the rising death toll in Gaza, the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Sudan, and the daily gun violence that plagues our country, death dominates the headlines.

We could say it's similar to the terror named by the prophet Joel:

*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come (v. 1-2).*

Joel then exhorts the community to turn to God in the hopes that God will intervene. Lest we think that Lenten disciplines are an opportunity to showcase personal piety, we are challenged to seek sincere inward change. As we sit in the ashes of world turmoil, Joel instructs us to do so "with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning" (v. 12). In so doing, our hearts can become fertile ground for God's transformative grace.

In the midst of a world confronting daily terrors, our Lenten discipline can be a testament to our longing for God's intervention. Through prayer, fasting, acts of kindness, and other intentional practices, we create space for disciplines that cultivate compassion, justice, and love. When we respond to God's call with our whole hearts, seeking grace and mercy, we might be amazed at what we find.

*Carrilea Hall*  
*Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director*

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## **FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT - PSALM 25:1-10**

### The Terror and Amazement of Humility

Like everyone who has ever lived, I have been grappling with the aging process. As with all things, aging is a balance of loss and gain. What we lose in physical "beauty" or "strength" is balanced with the wisdom and knowledge gained from simply having lived through some things. The older I get, however, supposedly growing in knowledge and wisdom, the more I realize I don't actually know very much. Furthermore, most of what I know about the world has been filtered through someone else's perspective.

This realization is terrifying and humbling. If we have competing narratives of what is true or right, how can we take a stand on anything? Perhaps, a bit of humility can help. Believing we know the answer to all the world's problems could be a problem in itself. Such self-assurance shuts down conversation and actually closes us off to information and ideas that might be useful. Furthermore, maybe it is not our job always to "know" what is true. While it is terrifying to accept the idea that we don't have all the answers, the

humility to admit this can be our best hope of finding answers, some of which can be amazing.

As we seek truth for ourselves, we must remember we all have a version of truth based on the variables that have influenced our lives. The bits and pieces from all of our truths can help us find the best way forward if we are humble enough to listen to one another. Finding truth from those around us—especially those who have experienced the world differently from our own experiences—can be the most amazing gift of all.

*Stephenie Sanders  
Partners in Health and Wholeness  
Program and Engagement Administrator*

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## **SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT - MARK 9:2-9**

In the rhythm of our daily lives, where we often follow our expected routines, the unexpected pushes us into a world of both fear and wonder. Life is full of unexpected surprises that can catch us off guard and leave us feeling a mix of terror and amazement. But it's in these moments that we truly connect with the essence of our faith.

These feelings are similar to the surprise that Peter, James, and John encountered in this story from Mark's gospel, where they experienced the extraordinary amid the ordinary. The three disciples were hiking with Jesus, something that was very ordinary for them. What they experienced next was both terrifying and amazing—the Transfiguration—a fracture in time where Jesus' divine nature is revealed.

In this passage, the disciples' reactions mirror what we might feel in the face of the unexpected—terror and amazement.

Peter's proclamation, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here," betrays how surprised he is by this unexpected occurrence. He recognizes how amazing this moment is in spite of his fear. His words encourage us to welcome the goodness and potential in our own unexpected experiences and to trust that these experiences can enrich our lives.

As we remember the Transfiguration story as we enter our Lenten journey, it can be a gentle reminder that our lives are full of the unexpected. In those moments, we are invited to approach them with openness and a sense of wonder, recognizing that, even in the midst of uncertainty, something amazing lies ahead.

*Rachel Baker*  
*Communications Director*

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### **THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT - PSALM 19**

Ask yourself: When was the last time I felt truly alive?

In a world filled with distractions, both those we seek and those that come unbidden, it's easy to mistake over-stimulation for self-importance and productivity while we gradually lose touch with what really matters. The multiple distractions block the realization that we have lost touch with ourselves and the communities around us. When we allow this incessant noise into our lives, other words that might provide refuge and comfort are drowned out. "There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard..." (v. 3).

The problem may stem from our fear of the unknown. We attempt to drown out this fear by distraction or dissociation, often limiting our information sources to what is familiar and

routine. In truth, the only way to overcome our fear of the unknown is to strengthen our relationships with others, especially others who may think differently than we do.

We can do this by trusting that God reconciles our differences even as God reconciles God's self to humanity. When we pause the static and listen for God, we see ". . . the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;" (v. 8).

The Psalmist tells us that heavens are pouring forth God's speech "their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (v. 4). By creating moments of silent reflection, we can reconnect with God's speech and ultimately with ourselves. We can begin to drown out the deafening sounds of a busy life and hear God's call for us and for the world. As our fear of the unknown slips away, we may find ourselves more willing to sit in stillness. We may become more at ease with ourselves and more open to new possibilities. Some of the most important times to welcome the stillness are when we least believe we have the time to do so. Making time to sit still and welcome the unknown builds the strength to live life to its fullest, no longer controlled by fear.

May our souls experience revival in this Lenten season as we discover God's wisdom in the quiet spaces in between the busy times of our daily lives. In so doing, may we join the communion of saints who confess, "let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (v. 14).

*Ren Martin*  
*Eco-Justice Connection Program Coordinator*

## **FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT - PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22**

The Fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally called *Laetare* Sunday, Latin for "rejoice." Six weeks can be a long time without a little reprieve. The Gospel explains the reason for our joy: God's great love for us has been revealed in Jesus. Through His Passion, Death, and Resurrection, Christ has reconciled us with God and one another.

The Lenten practice of reflection and renewal continues to hold sway, but on this fourth Sunday, we slightly shift our focus to reflect more wholly on the goodness of the Lord. Such reflection necessarily moves us to rejoice in the knowledge of God's steadfast love, redemptive actions, and healing deliverance. In these tumultuous days bringing alternating news of both terror and amazement. Some days we face things we've never seen before, and other, days we face things that make us feel we are repeating the past. Finding reasons to rejoice can be elusive, nevertheless, the assurance of God's redemptive power provides occasions for joy.

Unlike those who first moved with Jesus toward Jerusalem and lived through the events of the last weeks before Holy Week, we have the benefit of knowing how it ends. This fourth week of Lent is a reminder for us in the course of these six weeks, but it is also a reminder for us in the course of daily events, to move ahead joyfully as we cling to God's promise of reconciliation. Such sure and certain knowledge empowers us to seek justice, promote peace, and love our neighbors. In this week, we are invited to take a moment to rejoice and renew ourselves for the journey.

Consider these words from The Faith We Sing, No. 2219, "Goodness is Stronger than Evil":



*Victory is Ours  
Goodness is stronger than evil;  
Love is stronger than hate;  
Light is stronger than darkness;  
Life is stronger than death;  
Victory is ours through Him who loves us.*

**Prayer:** *God of the living, remain with us and give us hope so that, rejoicing in the gift of the Spirit who gives life to our mortal flesh, we may be clothed with the garment of immortality, through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.*

*Donna Parks Hill  
Partners in Health and Wholeness Project Coordinator*

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## **FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT - JOHN 12:20-33**

In order to have eternal life, one must die. That sounds like a flat-out contradiction, doesn't it? Like saying, if you want to get out of debt, you need to start spending more money. It just doesn't make sense.

Jesus uses a pretty good example, especially for the mainly agrarian society where he lived: a grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die before it can bear fruit. If a grain of wheat had a choice in the matter, I wonder if it would choose to give up its own life so that new life could arise. That is the dilemma and the choice that we face.

We are told we must die in order to truly live. You could say we must "die to sin." But this phrase is used so often it's lost its punch. Maybe a better way to put it is, we must die to self. Give up putting first our own interests, our own concerns, our own lives.

And while this is true, it leaves out the most crucial element of the whole equation: God. We die to self because God says it is necessary, not because we dreamt it up on our own. And when God asks us to do something, as terrifying as it might be, God is faithful. God can be trusted when we are surrounded by the unknown. If we can suspend our fears just long enough to say “yes” to God and to the future God has in mind for us, even though it is unknown and frightening, we are assured we will bear fruit.

God is for us, none can be against us, not even death, not anything at all (re: Romans 8:31ff). Though it might be terrifying, let us choose death, and so live as God intends for us to live into the amazing unknown. Amen.

*Sean O. Allen*  
*Finance and Administration Director*

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**PALM SUNDAY - MARK 1:1-11**

“Hosanna!”

“Save us now!”

These were the cries of a suffering people seeking deliverance—a people who tossed their cloaks and palm branches in Jesus’s path, symbolically anointing the one they believed would redeem them from Roman oppression. Such an anointing, bestowed as it was by the common people and not those with earthly authority, meant not the establishment of a kingdom of ostentatious wealth and prestige or of military might, but one of justice and liberation.

Two thousand years on, the Palm Sunday story challenges us to turn traditional expectations of power and might on their head in order to answer the cries of the oppressed. The story

challenges us to seek an anointing that empowers us to accompany others amid their suffering, working to ease that suffering rather than to exploit or rejoice in it. The story challenges us to openly and unapologetically advocate for the liberation of the marginalized in our midst, even (and especially) in the face of political pushback and public scrutiny.

**Prayer:** *Spirit of liberation, Redeemer of the oppressed, we pray that as our communities place the palm branches of trust at our feet, you will anoint us to meet that trust with grace and humility, persevering in the midst of uncertainty. We pray that those we serve "in the name of the Lord" will find our service to be a blessing and that we may be faithful stewards of our faith as we unite in the work of compassion, justice, and equity. Amen.*

*Krista Westervelt  
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director*

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## **MAUNDY THURSDAY - PSALM 116:1-2, 12-19**

I still gasp for air recalling the terror of being on pilgrimage in Uganda and being stuck on a bus entombed in mud at Bujagali Falls near Jinja. The American pilgrims were instructed to get off while the male Ugandan sojourners rushed to help bystanders attempting to free the bus stuck on a ledge. Although afraid, I remained with our bus driver John, and Ugandans Esther and Rosemary, because the bus needed to maintain weight to get unstuck.

"Lawd, I didn't come here to die in the Nile River," I thought to myself as I sat back down.

As the men pushed with might, we began to sing on the bus.

“May the spirit of the lord come down; Amen, may the spirit of the Lord come down,” we sang between one-word prayers. I had learned the song upon our arrival. “May the power of the Lord from heaven come down.”

The terror of the unknown gripped us with each note, yet we cried and sang, believing God would rescue us. On that rainy day more than a decade ago, the psalmist’s words were confirmed as the Lord heard and responded.

*Arlecia Simmons*

*Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director*



## **GOOD FRIDAY - HEBREWS 10:16-25**

Good Friday is the day we pause to meditate on the death of Jesus. This year’s theme of “Terror and Amazement” is well aligned with today’s reading from the letter to the Hebrews offering guidance through the misery and lamentation of Good Friday.

It should be impossible these days not to include in our prayers all those who are directly and indirectly impacted by the hateful attacks of war and genocide that overwhelm our planet. Our trust in God is being tested, especially when we are told with such unwavering conviction that the end (peace) will justify the means (violence). Scripture says otherwise and so these times of terror are precisely when we are reminded of “the new and living way that [Christ] opened for us through the curtain” and implored, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for [the one] who has promised is faithful.”

The terror of scorn, despise, insult, and brutal murder is balanced by the promise that we will be able to make sense later of what we do not understand now as hope for the amazement of the faithful journey unfolds. As we “see the Day

approaching,” may we be inspired to “provoke one another to love and good deeds” and demand a global cease-fire to the multiple terrors that plague us. May we be inspired so that devotions to peace-making signify our eternal faithfulness.

*Susannah Tuttle*  
*Eco-Justice Connection Director*

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## **EASTER SUNDAY – ISAIAH 25:6-9**

How much imagination do we have? Can we imagine “a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear” (v. 6)? Some of us have probably sat at a table resembling this image. But can we imagine enough rich food and well-aged wine for every single person in the world? We know there is enough food in the world to feed everyone, although distribution chains keep it from getting to some of the places where it is needed. That said, it’s not much of a stretch to imagine everyone at a table filled with food. It could be done.

Now, let’s take it one step further. Can we imagine everyone at the same table? Clearly, that would be an impossibly large table, but for the sake of imagination, can we imagine sitting down with the whole world. Would we sit down with those we’ve locked away in solitary confinement or sentenced to death row? Would we sit down with the refugees driven from their homes by war or the immigrants waiting in Ciudad Juarez to enter “the land of the free”? Would we sit down at a table of red hats and blue hats laughing and eating together?

This is the vision of Easter, the promise of the resurrection, a table for everyone. But not just a table for everyone sequestered into their own interest groups with their partisan policy agendas. No, a table for everyone together.

The promise of Easter is the promise of reconciliation. It begins with the resurrection, showing us the assurance of God reconciling God's self with humanity, once and for all. Within this assurance, we are equipped to begin the work of reconciliation with others. Simply put, that means God sets the table and provides "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear" (v. 6). All we have to do is sit down with all the others invited by God to sit with us. Can we imagine that?

*Jennifer Copeland  
Executive Director*



# North Carolina Council of Churches

*Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice*

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 on the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament gospels. 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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