



THE YEAR OF THE *Lord*

2025 Lenten Guide

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





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Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice

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THE YEAR OF THE LORD

AN INTRODUCTION

Throughout his life, Jesus moved in the midst of sorrow and suffering, not necessarily because he was a woe-seeker, but because there was woe all around him. No doubt, this intentionality flows from the words he read aloud from Isaiah during his first recorded public appearance, words written in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus told us then: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recover of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

While each of the lectionary scriptures (Year C) for Lent and Holy Week guide our devotional writings, our reflections are composed against the backdrop of Jesus' first recorded public pronouncement. He clearly identifies the categories of sorrow and suffering he intends to alleviate, which raises important questions for us:

- *Who are the poor among us, the captives, the blind, the oppressed?*
- *What are the mechanisms we can use to bring them good news?*
- *What does it mean to proclaim the year of the Lord?*

Traditionally, the Year of the Lord offers a counter-narrative to the fear and greed dominating our world and creating much of the sorrow and suffering Jesus means to alleviate. In this new reality, the year of the Lord, the Lord will restore economic balance, insure safety, and protect the vulnerable. This is the Good News Jesus offers and the Good News we hope you will find in these devotions.

Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director

ASH WEDNESDAY

Isaiah 58: 1-12



Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, historically a season of fasting and repentance. Fasting during Lent is often seen as a time to give something up—whether it’s a treat, a bad habit, or something we feel is holding us back from the flourishing life God wants us to have. As a teenager, I often gave up soda for Lent since it was good for my health during soccer season and also a tangible way to feel like a “devout” Christian. Fasting, however, that is self-focused is different from the fast that God chooses. Isaiah’s words for us today are a powerful reminder of the fasting God desires.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

These verses critique fasting that is merely ritualistic and outwardly performed, fasting that lacks a corresponding commitment to justice, compassion, and community care. The people addressed by Isaiah are food fasting while they continue their oppression and unjust behavior. They may be abstaining from certain foods for particular time periods, but they are not

addressing systemic issues of injustice or showing compassion to anyone else.

This Ash Wednesday and through the following season of Lent, may our fasting not be a self-improvement exercise, but instead a time of turning toward activities that loose the bonds of injustice and set the oppressed go free.

Consider fasting from Amazon purchases and, instead, shop locally. Fast from spending money with companies who use exploitative labor practices and, instead, support businesses accredited as Fair Trade, B-Corp, or part of the Fair Labor Association. Fast from social media platforms that are profiting from division, misinformation, and exploitation and, instead, invest in personal relationships with neighbors both new and old.

When the people repent and turn toward justice, God promises healing, restoration, and a renewed relationship. There will be light in the darkness, and God will guide and strengthen us. Let's embrace that fast.

Carrilea Hall
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director

FIRST SUNDAY

Luke 4:1-13



The setup for the sermon on which our Lenten devotions are based occurs when the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, today's Gospel reading. We shouldn't get hung up on the supporting actor in these scenes. That character's role is to verbalize the temptations and serve as a foil for the righteousness Jesus displays. The temptations and Jesus' responses are the main act. As we know so well, Jesus is offered bread when he's been fasting for forty days, fame when he's been alone for forty days, and safety when he's been unhoused for forty days. The hunger and homelessness—suffering—and loneliness—sorrow, Jesus experiences during these days set the tone for his ministry. He will always point to God's call to serve the least of these. He will always take the side of the vulnerable. He will never use violence to further his goals.

Jesus has blazed a clear path for all of us who encounter suffering and sorrow with his response to the offers presented to him. By deciding how he would alleviate suffering and sorrow, he showed us what kind of community we will be—people who serve; what kind of life we will live—people who care; and what kind of faith we will possess—people who pursue peace. Because Jesus faced down the temptations, the difficult choices have already been made. The only decision we have to make is whether or not to join a community eagerly pursuing the Year of the Lord.

Today's scene ends when Jesus goes home. But where Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness forty days earlier, he is now entering his public ministry "filled with the power of the Spirit" (v. 14). May we all be so filled with the power of the Spirit that the Year of the Lord rings through all our actions.

Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director

SECOND SUNDAY

Psalm 27; Luke 9:27-36



The Second Sunday in Lent brings us the story of Jesus' Transfiguration, taking us quickly from the temptations Jesus faced in the desert, through the sermon delivered in his hometown, and now to the revelation of his divine glory. Shown to a private audience of only three disciples, the Transfiguration offers a glimpse of the current reality of Jesus' identity and a foretaste of what that identity means. Through it we have the opportunity to reflect on the identity of Christ and consider the call to discipleship placed before us in the knowledge of that identity. In other words, now that we know who Jesus is, God's beloved chosen one (v. 35), we can choose to follow or not. But we can no longer say, we didn't know.

In these times of uncertainty, a bit of surety can be a good thing. It can be a further good thing to remember that many of the arbitrary choices we face in life are decided for us once we make the preeminent choice to become a disciple. Such a choice ensures that God will be with us through the course of life's events. Such presence does not guarantee a life without struggle or disappointment, but it does provide hope for the outcome. When we chose to live into God's hope-filled future, we are empowered to stand against injustice, comfort the afflicted, and seek peace for all God's people. Such power might even give us the courage to

call our elected officials and share with them the need to pursue equitable justice and fair legislation. Fear can no longer deny us the fullness of the life God offers.

Prayer:

*God of the covenant,
you call us to be fruitful servants within creation,
and to offer our lives
as the foundation of your realm.
We lay before you the desires of our hearts,
that we may be transformed by their fulfillment.*

*Grant, O God, that the prayers we offer
may be your channel for new and abundant life
not only hoped for,
but worked for,
through faithful word and deed. Amen.¹*

*Donna Parks Hill
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director*

1. <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayer/?y=384&season=lent&d=lent3>, accessed 2/13/2025.

THIRD SUNDAY

Isaiah 55:1-9



“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters . . .”
With these words from Isaiah, God calls us to a table of abundance, with “wine and milk” and “bread” for all. There is more than enough—enough drink, enough food, enough seats for everyone.

We read this invitation to share in God’s abundance against the backdrop of Jesus words in the synagogue of Nazareth as he reads from a later passage in Isaiah reaffirming these promises are for everyone, especially the poor, the captive, and the oppressed (Luke 4: 18-19).

Meanwhile, here in North Carolina and across the country, many are struggling and going without the basic necessities of life Isaiah outlines. A growing narrative insists resources are scarce and not everyone belongs—especially immigrants and LGBTQ+ people. Ideas are being censored, especially efforts to increase diversity and inclusion. Instead of Isaiah’s invitation to abundance, many are hearing: There isn’t enough. You aren’t welcome.

Lent calls us to repent—not just as individuals, but as a society. If we believe in the abundant life God promises, are we challenging the systems that hoard resources and deny dignity? Are we extending welcome to those pushed to the margins? Are we truly working

to create communities reflecting God's promise of abundant life? If not, repentance might be turning in a different direction more indicative of abundant life.

Lent is most often about reflection, but eventually we must act on that which we see reflected in the truth of scripture. We can use these 40 days to imagine turning away from a culture of fear and scarcity toward God's hope-filled world—where abundance is boundless and everyone is welcome. In a world that tries to tell us there isn't enough, we are called to live as people know that there is enough. "Ho, everyone . . . come!"

Rachel Baker
Communications Director

FOURTH SUNDAY

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32b



The parable of the prodigal son follows two other parables about losing and finding. With this story, being lost is about being far from who we really are and who we are meant to be, both for the younger brother far from home and the older brother angry about his father's overjoyed reception of the brother who was "lost and has been found."

It's worth asking where we find ourselves in this story. Are we the angry son and, if so, what are we angry about? Are we the lost son who eventually comes home and, if so, what compels us to stay away? Regardless of the anger or the abandonment, God welcomes us in and welcomes us back. This story offers an image of what it really means to be found. It's a story of radical inclusion, unbounded generosity, and abundant hospitality. The father's welcome is almost unimaginable in its extravagance, summoning us to release resentments, forego ego, and live into God's Love. We might also consider ways we can mirror the generous Father.

Against the backdrop of Jesus' recitation from Luke 4, the parable of the prodigal son illustrates tangible ways to live into those aims "bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free" (vv.18-19). This mission of restorative justice is mirrored in the divine acceptance of the prodigal son.

These extravagant and even radical displays of restoration also belong to us. Reconciled through God to ourselves and one another, we become those who now promote the claims of the gospel. Many of us live out this welcome by working to protect the vulnerable or expose injustice. Examples include challenging predatory lending and freeing families from medical debt. Others of us answer the call by supporting the justice seeking people in our midst who face the consequences of speaking out. Whether we are frontline activists or behind the scenes supporters, the promise of unwavering acceptance empowers the work.

*John Dempsey Parker
Partnerships and Development Director*

FIFTH SUNDAY

Isaiah 43:16-21



The fifth Sunday in Lent invites reflection on the themes of renewal, redemption, and transformation. This connection is powerfully linked to Jesus' first sermon in Luke 4 with the declaration to bring spiritual and physical liberation, healing, and restoration to our world.

Just as Jesus proclaimed freedom and healing for God's people, it is we who are now called to care for the environment, address the suffering of creation, and restore what has been broken by human neglect and exploitation. As polluting industries are given more leeway, the long-term effects of environmental degradation are becoming more apparent, urging us to act with urgency to protect the places and people we love.

As people of faith we must overcome fear mongering and shift the conversation to what IS possible. We must be cowed by limits, but work to change our future and ensure a better present. We must recognize the truth that local communities have real solutions to the overlapping crises that affect them and support their work. We must adopt a shared narrative about the environment and climate change that will move us toward the future God envisions.

This Sunday scripture calls us to take action, not only in

our spiritual lives, but also in the physical ways we interact with the world. This includes how we care for creation, support the vulnerable, and work for peace. We are part of a larger story and the times we live in demand our steadfast engagement, action, and hope.

Susannah Tuttle
Eco-Justice Connection Director

PALM SUNDAY

Luke 19:28-40



Modern-day parades are electrifying experiences for both attendees and participants. Bands, school groups, churches, and floats transport participants and the designated parade marshals. But extensive preparations must take place before any movement can occur.

In the pageantry of Palm Sunday, there are many symbols and signs to watch as Jesus triumphantly enters Jerusalem. But before the festivities begin, Jesus tells the disciples his most immediate need is a colt. He would not enter with a carriage or chariot, as expected for the one declaring himself King of Israel. Instead, his reign will be framed by peace and all will be invited to bring this reign to fruition on earth.

In a time when political rhetoric leaves people feeling powerless and, more tragically, voiceless, and some feel their voices cannot compete against the digital discourse and shouts of the crowds, today's story reminds us that Christ-bearers of all sizes and from all stations in life are still needed.

What have you been holding onto that God now needs?

Maybe there's the gift of persuasion that you've preserved that is needed to challenge politicians who proclaim to walk with God but choose party loyalty over

justice. Maybe God needs you to be "untied" to run for the school board or even in a statewide race. Can Jesus depend on you to be a Christ-bearer in spaces where crucifixion will overshadow celebration?

What does the Lord require that is now in your possession?

Arlecia Simmons
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director

GOOD FRIDAY

John 18:1-19:42



Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah in Luke 4. He declares he has come to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy to bring liberation and good news to all people. With this proclamation, Jesus acknowledges a new way of being and living in God's kingdom. This new Christ ethic is counter to the powerful Roman empire and is Jesus' fulfillment and embodiment of the prophet Isaiah's words, eventually leading to his arrest and crucifixion at the hands of the Roman government.

In 2025 America, we are also noticing God's beloved children arrested, detained, deported, stripped of their rights and human dignity, and executed by the state. Jesus was no stranger to oppressive governments. Rather, amidst the threat of the Roman government, he showed up, healed, listened, loved, taught, prayed, wept, and showed compassion. Jesus' life illustrates for us an ethic of love that transcends our culture, political climate, or even the "American Dream." These are the very reasons he threatened the powers and principalities around him.

Not only did Jesus recognize he was a threat, so did his disciples. When Jesus was arrested, a young woman turned to Peter and asked him if he was one of Jesus' disciples. Peter denied it, afraid to be associated with someone who was about to suffer the consequences of threatening the powerful. In the midst of the chaos and

darkness we might encounter, how will we respond if someone asks us, “Are you not one of Christ’s disciples?”

Acknowledging such possibilities raises the question of our own complicity in remaining silent in turbulent times. Is this our time to stand together as Jesus’ followers in spite of the consequences? What must occur before we can answer “yes” and follow Jesus into the world to stand with our neighbors who fear being deported or who fear losing their rights because of their identity?

How might the Holy Spirit be nudging us to speak up and speak out against oppression? Where can we use our voices to lift the voiceless? How can we leverage our power on behalf of the powerless? What does it look like to say “yes, I am a disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ” this Easter in 2025? May we be empowered by the Spirit of God to be the Church in our hurting world.

*Meredith Rawls
Partners in Health and Wholeness Program Engagement
Coordinator*

EASTER SUNDAY

Luke 24:1-12



Remember. It is a curious directive from the dazzling duo told to the women who were the first to visit Jesus' tomb on Easter morning. Remember.

They remember the song Mary sang to them after her visit from the angel, the stories Mary told them about Jesus' birth in a manger. They remember when Jesus disappeared as a teenager and they found him teaching in the temple, as if that were perfectly normal. They remember Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. They remember when the heavens opened, and the Spirit descended on him while a voice from heaven called him the beloved Son. Remember.

They remember what it was like to join Jesus' band of followers, to hear him teach and be so compelled by his vision for the world that they abandoned their work and their lives as they knew them and left everything to follow him. They remember the miracles, the healings, the nets full of fish, the meal for thousands made from a meager lunch. They remember the time he ate at the home of a despised tax collector, the conversations with prostitutes, and other contacts with impure, ostracized members of society. Remember.

They remember what Jesus said, taught, who he was. They remember how Jesus loved them, included them, changed everything, is still changing things. Jesus is not here. He has risen. Remember.

And suddenly, just as quickly as those sequined messengers appeared, they were gone, and the women remember. They remember and their remembering compels them to bear witness to the other disciples. And we remember too. We weren't there that first Easter morning, but we have our own stories which bear witness to the power and wonder of resurrection. We remember.

We remember the time we received grace and mercy when we were expecting judgment. We remember the time when a near stranger sent a card, delivered a casserole, offered support or encouragement the moment we needed it most. We remember the people who taught our Sunday School classes, with their flannel board stories of Jesus. We remember the feeling of presence in the quiet of a hospital room, giving us strength to sit vigil through the night at a loved one's side. We remember the many realities of resurrection life breaking through in our lives. We remember and, like the women, we should be compelled to bear witness to this reality to all of God's creation.

We remember the immigrant. We remember the LGBTQ+ community. We remember the disproportionate number of men of color who inhabit our prisons. We remember the children who don't have the same access to education simply because of their

address. We remember our sick, dying, and hurting who don't have access to healthcare. We remember and we should bear witness, just like the women on that first Easter morning.

As you live into this Easter season and the wonder of resurrection life, remember and bear witness. God will take care of the rest. Alleluia. Amen.

Sean Allen
Finance and Administration Director



North Carolina Council of Churches

Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice

The North Carolina Council of Churches represents 27 distinct judicatories from 19 denominations. We have a proven record of moving ahead of the curve on the social issues of the 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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