



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

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Ash Wednesday – Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs 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? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Fat Tuesday’s revelers, if they are serious about faith observances, traditionally wake from indulgence in food and drink to face the cold water splash of Ash Wednesday. A serious punctuation mark to the morning after parades and parties, the ashes ground from last year’s palms that celebrated Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem are then ground into the foreheads of the faithful, in the form of a cross, by the thumb of one who has already received them. “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

What is this dust? Nothing less than your life and how you choose to live it. Choices and opportunities come and go. The consequences of your decisions line up and make a difference in your own life and in the lives of those whom God places in your path. Private choices show up in public and add value to, or detract from, the essence of a community.

Children in the last century loved the book series, "Choose Your Own Adventure," because it offered multiple choices for the characters at the end of each page. Children could make decisions right in the middle of reading the story. And the consequences of those choices showed up immediately on the next page. In our cultural context, the ability to choose for oneself is given as a right and a promise. Each person and each congregation express their choices both internally, as belief and faith, and externally, as action and speech. Those consequences also can show up immediately, in a Facebook, Instagram, or other social media post.

Having a choice is a privilege for those who have opportunities. While we often overlook our own opportunities, we are adept at pointing out the poor decisions made by the unprivileged. That cold water splash heralding the dawn of Ash Wednesday brings one face to face with one's own choices and their consequences. The season of Lent that it hails offers the opportunity to make new choices, new decisions, and to line up our thoughts in a different direction as we unfold our own adventures.

Belief and action become intermingled to create in each person the ability to live, love, think, pray, and worship. The call to love both enemies and friends by Jesus sometimes stirs up anxiety, fear, confusion, and anger in its universal demand for both sharing ourselves, our possessions and sharing the intimacy of relationship with both God and neighbor.

How do we share possessions in an unconditional way within a culture of plenty while scarcity is claimed? How do we share intimacy within a culture that feeds on conflicts in values, politics, and plenty? How do we share a space with each other, both friend and foe, when names are lashed out, untruths are manufactured, and social media is rife with unsocial discourse?

In the lectionary of scriptures for Ash Wednesday, we find in the call of God an emergent appeal to the prophets, Isaiah and Joel, to point out the choices that were being made by God's people. God tells Isaiah to use his loud voice to speak to the people; their devotion and worship, both fastidious and false are being observed, "as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God." (Isaiah 58:2)

God tells Joel, "Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain!" (Joel 2:1) It is a call to the community to sanctify the congregation.

The call in Isaiah's time was to deny themselves, fasting not for the reward they sought from God but as an act of repentance from their unjust ways. God observes, "Look you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to strike with a wicked fist." (Isaiah 58:3) God observes that broken boundaries are also physically violent.

The Rev. Lauren Winner, an Episcopal priest and Duke Divinity professor, writes of the material nature of the dust being placed on the foreheads of those who bring themselves to a place of repentance and prayer:

What ministers with their ashes are offering is a bodily marker of God's entry into our death. The ashes... let me name truths that most days I cannot or will not name -- that I have sinned; also, that I have a body, and I am going to die. To walk around all day with a cross on your head is to walk around in a body inscribed with death. It is also, oddly, to walk around inscribed with hope -- the hope that comes through Jesus' having joined us in our mortality.

(Winner, Lauren F.: *Sojourners Magazine*, Why Ash Wednesday Belongs Out of the Church and Out on the Streets, 2-22-2012)

David's Psalm prepares us to receive the ashes by giving us the words to pray, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love... wash me thoroughly... and cleanse me from my sin... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." (Psalm 51:1-17)

If you choose, in your faith adventure, to accept the cold water splash of Ash Wednesday, you will confess, repent, and begin again, with the forgiveness and grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. As the ashes are placed upon your forehead, remember you are dust, and to dust, you shall return.

Choose your own adventure, turning toward God's vision of love, justice, and mercy not only for yourself, but for those you judge offensive, heart-breaking, and despicable. Live into the consequences of living and loving those whom God puts before you, with the grace and mercy of God within your heart and mind.

May you find courage and strength for the journey as you accept the invitation from God to return to God this Lent in prayer and reflection. As the scripture asks, "Will you share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when

you see the naked, will you cover them, and not hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isaiah 58:7). Will you accept the invitation to go into the public places to stand and work for justice and equity so that "your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday?" (Isaiah 58:10).

For then the ancient promise of God will become real, "The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail" (Isaiah 58:10-11).

Prayer: Ever loving and forgiving God, you draw us to yourself that we would find new life and hope. Open our hearts and minds, that we would fearlessly seek those thoughts and actions pulling us away from you so that we confess those things and ask forgiveness from you, and from those we have harmed. Enable us to accept your grace, love, and freedom that you have granted to us through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

~Para Drake
NC No Torture Project Coordinator

First Sunday in Lent - Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

A decade ago I read a fascinating article on a "wilderness experiment" conducted by German researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics. The researchers had a group of subjects trek several hours through one of two wilderness sites: heavy forest in Germany or the southern Sahara. They were given a single instruction: to walk as straight a line as possible.

The results? Despite their best attempts at walking the straight line, most of the trekkers ended up walking in circles, completely unaware that they were doing so. But there was an interesting exception. Those who could see the light of the sun or the moon were able to walk fairly straight.

Luke 4:1-13 is the classic "Jesus tested in the wilderness" story, the scriptural doorway through which we enter the Lenten season year after year. It was during Lent that I read the article about the wilderness circle walkers, and my first thought was, yes, of course—by following the light of the Son, we ourselves will find the straight path forward, through whatever spiritual wilderness we might be immersed in. After all, Jesus' time in the wilderness was marked by a perfectly straight walk through the

demonic testing to which he was subjected, by keeping an unwavering gaze on the One Light that sustained and led him.

The problem was, my tidy conclusion was just that: a bit too neat—too much of a straight line—to fit into my own circular wilderness “experiments,” and those of my friends and loved ones. Keeping our eyes on the Son didn’t always lead to the money to buy groceries for our kids, or prevent a diagnosis that we’d been dreading, or that loss that cut life into a jagged wound of before and after. And sometimes, the Son simply wasn’t visible. At all.

Yet, the more I thought about the wilderness experiment and straight lines and stumbling over one’s own path, the more I realized: Yes, we might end up going in a circle, but the circle brings us to the place of return, the place where it’s possible to get our bearings and begin anew on the journey. And isn’t that the holy ground where God is found?

T.S. Eliot once wrote: “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” That place, ultimately, is God.

In this Lenten season, we may find ourselves tripping over our own feet in what seems an endless circle through the wilderness, or perhaps we’ll walk straight through, head held high and eyes on the prize. Whatever our journey, let us remember that God is not only with us as we make our way, God is the journey itself.

**~Karen Richardson Dunn
PHW Regional Coordinator**

Second Sunday in Lent – Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” But the word of the Lord came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Then he said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.” But he said, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates”

Genesis 15 tells the story of God calling Abram and Sarai to leave behind their current understanding of what seems acceptable for their lives and embark on a journey to a new place for building community based on trust and faith. God’s directions further confirm that the false comfort of staying put in a place is self-defeating, especially when others are being exploited and hurt. This evokes some uncertainty and anxiety in Abram as he has been confident in the structures that have developed around him. But God calls upon Abram, Sarai, and their descendants to overcome fear and have faith in a vision to pursue a new way of living.

The scripture passage refers to a land offered as more of a space than a place, a beloved community built by just and compassionate relationships. It conveys a vision of “the promised land” that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., portrayed in his “I have been to the Mountaintop” speech. King referenced President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s eloquent cry at his first inaugural address that “we have nothing to fear but fear itself.” To move into the unknown, with little direction other than faith in God’s will is the ultimate journey towards trust.

Like all of us, Abram questions the details of how to get from where he is to where he is called to be. He asks what good will come of any gifts bestowed into the future since he has been given no offspring of his own. In response, God draws Abram out of the trappings of this confined way of seeing by taking him outside and saying “Look up at the sky and count the stars if you can, just so shall your descendants be.” This too directs us to reflect on Dr. King’s statement, “only when it is dark enough can you see the stars.” Our ability to dream the impossible dream reminds us of the unlimited potential which exists in God’s fullness of creation.

Trust is not something we collect and stash away for a time when we need it. Trust in God’s will is a relationship we must constantly regenerate. Every day is a new day, with new uncertainties, new questions, and new fears. Even when everything seems to be falling apart and we don’t have a clear picture of what comes next, the life-giving theology of creation calls us to trust God’s promises offering hope for the future. Each day we wake, we are invited to redeem our faith in God’s covenant and journey forth in trust. We must do this through our personal spiritual practices, in our shared worship, and by living in right relationships. The gift of God’s love is not limited to us, it exists as a continuum between our ancestors and future generations yet to come.

As we move through the wilderness of Lent, may we trust in the promise of justice announced in the resurrection of Jesus. Let us bravely take each step forward with faithful trust, because God is with us on this journey.

~Susannah Tuttle
NC Interfaith Power & Light Director

Third Sunday in Lent - Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Lent and Advent have always been parallel seasons to me, both times of waiting. They are, however, two different versions of waiting. Advent is a season of anticipation, hope, excitement for the birth of Jesus. Lent is a time of patience, a complicated time full of the knowledge that Jesus will die in a great miscarriage of justice. himself for us. I have always struggled with Lent because it seems so dark, compared to Advent. Lent traditions include not singing "Hallelujahs" or giving up a favorite vice. Both of these practices remind us that Lent is a time of seriousness and repentance.

In Luke's passage this week Jesus gives us two examples of repentance: one of the Galileans and the other a parable of the barren tree. The parable holds the tension of patiently waiting for the tree to bear fruit verses giving up and cutting it down. The landowner wants to cut the tree down because it is not bearing fruit, but the caretaker begs for patience and barter a deal that if the tree does not bear fruit after one more year, he will cut it down. The parable makes clear that the landowner/God is patient and that patience is a demonstration of God's love and grace.

Viewing patience as an act of love and grace seems revolutionary in 2019 and Lent. The past few years have seen an increase in hatred and tempers always on the rise to the point it seems we cannot be patient with each other anymore.

Instead of focusing on repentance as a thing we must do I would like to spend this Lent concentrating on how God is patient with us as we struggle through this world. God is

willing to wait for us, and that is one way that God shows God's everlasting love and grace.

I would also challenge us all to be revolutionary to each other and show each other patience and practicing love for our neighbors.

**~Elizabeth Brewington
Opioid Response Coordinator**

Fourth Sunday in Lent - 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Whatever the condition of my heart and mind during a typical worship service one often repeated prayer both challenges and centers me, “. . . by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.”

Like many, I sometimes enter worship with a mind overloaded with responsibilities. On the occasion that singing hymns and hearing scripture fails to focus me, reciting the Confession of Sin from my faith tradition always brings me back. Growing up, the sins I confessed were pretty specific and followed by earnest promises to do better. As I've grown older (maybe wiser?) I find the things I've done and left undone much more difficult to define. The world I see every day is filled with injustice. The injustices I read about as a teenager, were thought to be over and done with and not repeated. Now my sins tend to be more relational. How are the things I choose to do with my time and the things I don't do hurting others?

The things I leave undone every week lie heavy on my heart. My mind still swirls but instead of thinking of my to-do list, I think of all the people who are suffering. I know as a follower of Christ, I have a responsibility not only to care, but to act. I suddenly realize that as a white, straight, employed, able, woman, I walk into worship with no thought of whether I fit in, how I will get home, or whether I will have enough food for dinner. There is so much to do in a world where injustice is not only present, but

appears to be growing in acceptance. Every time I pray these words, “the things I have left undone,” I become overwhelmed with all the need in our world. And then I remember, I am a participant in God’s good work. It is God’s work to accomplish and I have the privilege of stepping into that stream for the time that I am able. My hard work is a response to God’s gifts to me.

Into that work, God offers hope and determination. *“Have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways.”* As I move from confession into the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, I find peace by naming my sins and knowing God’s forgiveness. I am renewed for the next day.

As we all move through the season of Lent, let us acknowledge our communal sins, repent, and claim the forgiveness freely given by Christ, as we join God’s work for a more just society and peace for God’s people.

~Chris Pernell
Partners in Health and Whole Director

Fifth Sunday in Lent – John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

The Gospel of John offers intimate details of life with Jesus—insights on the range of emotions and tensions experienced throughout Jesus' ministry are shared to humanize the story. A unique aspect of this Gospel are its dichotomies and paradoxes, resulting in multi-layered meanings about Jesus.

This passage is one of those. In these eight verses we see the contrast between true and false discipleship, true and false faith, or even true and false love. The characters, Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and Judas, represent various perspectives about and relationships with Jesus. While an entire relationship can never be understood in one verse, this passage does offer incredible insights.

Lazarus' presence is a living reminder that faith offers life, symbolic of the difference between life and death. This dinner takes place shortly after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. The presence of Lazarus symbolizes that Jesus can defeat death, a foreshadowing of his own upcoming defeat of death.

Mary and Martha's roles are pivotal because their show of faith offers a lived-out expression of discipleship. Martha serves Jesus dinner after witnessing the raising of Lazarus. Mary also serves Jesus by cleaning his feet with her own hair and anointing Jesus with costly perfume. Mary cleans Jesus' feet not knowing that Jesus would soon do the very same for his own disciples. The perfume can be read as a strong contrast to both Lazarus' death as well as Jesus' upcoming crucifixion. We read that "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (v. 3). Perfume dominating a space is

much different than the smell of death—in all senses—of staleness, decaying, or lackluster energy. The smell of perfume represents the overall liveliness of the presence of Jesus that dominates death.

Many readers are already familiar with Judas Iscariot, but regardless, his cavalier approach to stealing in the story can still surprise us. It is unabashedly deceptive and elementary to steal from shared funds, but all the while it is a reminder that no betrayal was too small for Judas. I also want to humanize Judas because he serves as a great testament of our own self-serving motives. It is important to note that Jesus was not focused on Judas' intent to steal, but rather on his misdirected energy on time. Jesus understood his death was coming; he wanted the attention on that, not earthly matters like money and valuable perfumes. With this, we can see the comparison of true and false love contrasted through Judas and Mary.

As I read this passage, I can imagine being at the dinner table with this group. The Gospel writer offers simple, but helpful, descriptors about this meal. We are given profound insight on the intimacy that Jesus shared with his followers, as well as the betrayal that occurred in his inner-circle. We read about a clear model of service and discipleship. We are given the opportunity to share in this life with Jesus, a life that is full of healing and transparency, not fraught with hidden motives for fleeting treasures such as money, a life rich in eternal virtues like generosity and service. The perfume overcoming the staleness of death anchors the disciples' perspectives, as they are about to enter despair like no other.

~Jessica Stokes
PHW Regional Coordinator

Palm Sunday – Luke 19:28-40

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.” Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Acting on behalf of freedom is a dangerous undertaking. A fact that Jesus surely knew as he was traveling with his disciples toward the city of Jerusalem. When they arrive at a place called the Mount of Olives just outside of the village of Bethany, Jesus sends two disciples into the city to fetch him a colt. When they return they set their teacher upon its back and travel the approximately two miles between the Mount of Olives and the city gates of Jerusalem. As they do so a crowd begins to form, steadily growing with each step the colt takes along the dusty road. But they’re not just watching and silently staring at the site to behold. They’re laying their cloaks down along the road and as they do, still more gather. They begin to shout, “blessed is the king” and “glory in the highest heaven!”

Luke is careful here to make sure we take notice of who is gathered in the crowd. It is not fickle fans, eager to be a part of “the next big thing” and likely to quickly abandon Jesus for the next rising star. Those gathering, joyfully praising God at the sight of this person on the back of a colt, are disciples of Jesus. This is a multitude of people who have bought into the dream Jesus has been preaching about good news to the poor,

release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. They are ready and willing to act on behalf of freedom.

But acting on behalf of freedom is a dangerous undertaking. As the size of the crowd intensifies, so too does the desire of Jesus' enemies to kill him. Those familiar with the story know he will soon be sentenced to death. This story reminds me of another person who acted on behalf of freedom, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As Dr. King became more visible he began to attract larger and larger crowds wherever he went. As those crowds began to praise God for his prophetic witness, those who wanted to harm him began to pursue him. The desire among his enemies intensified until April 4, 1968, when Dr. King was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee. Acting on behalf of freedom is a dangerous undertaking.

As Jesus approached the gates of Jerusalem some of the Pharisees in the crowd order him to make his disciples cease their praise and disperse. To this Jesus responds, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." In other words, some things simply must be said. The disciples are expressing what we know to be—in the end God's reign of peace and justice will prevail. Or as Dr. King put it, "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Acting on behalf of freedom is a dangerous undertaking. Yet we must continue to participate in God's work for peace and justice. Jesus realized it. Martin Luther King realized it. We too must realize it. Are you prepared to act on behalf of freedom?

~Andrew Hudgins
Program Associate for Operations

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

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Water, towel, basin, and dirty feet: these are the raw ingredients for a powerful act that transforms both the traveling guest and the host. Foot washing is a sacramental act that many Christians still observe, particularly on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week. This ritual carries layers of meanings. It is a sign of hospitality. It is a true act of humility. The water evokes the cleansing waters of baptism. Not only is it representative of all these meanings, it is an act that allows us to witness a compassionate deed, a rejection of status norms, and a barrier-shattering justice. Jesus stands up in order to kneel down;

takes something off in order to put something on; takes the faces of pride and turns them into faces of humility.

After a day of walking the dirt roads with open sandals on the same paths that are traveled by other people and animals, we can only imagine how much dust and dirt collects on our feet. Once entering a house, a pitcher of water and basin was provided for those who were guests of the home. It was typical for a servant of the host to wash the feet of all who entered. This act of hospitality was common in every household where guests were welcomed in from their journeys.

On his final night with his closest friends, Jesus himself performed this act of hospitality. Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking form of the servant” (Philippians 2:6-7) knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples. What if we were to follow in Jesus’ footsteps? What if we dare to take off the outer robes of exploitation and contempt and instead wrap ourselves in towels of service, compassion, humility, and hospitality?

Since I coordinate the Immigration Program at the Council, I feel it is necessary to recognize the stories that Christians remember on this night before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. These stories are intimately tied to the stories of our sisters and brothers being traumatized at our border. For months, even years, we have witnessed the great pain and disorder that is surrounding our unjust immigration system. Instead of erecting barriers, we should be removing them—particularly the unseen ones that grip our hearts. Maybe, just maybe, the raw ingredients for building something new near our southern border is not metal slats or massive amounts of concrete, but simple things like water, towel, basin, and a willingness to get our hands dirty.

Prayer: Lord, help us learn to take off the outer layers of apathy and indifference so that we might put on the towel of service and take on the humbling task of welcoming, washing, and serving the travelers you bring to our door. Amen.

~Rachel Baker
Immigration Advocacy Program Coordinator

Good Friday – Hebrews 10:16-25

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,” He also adds, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The question is often posed, “What’s so good about Good Friday?” For those who work a five-day schedule, every Friday is good; Good Friday is just another good Friday. Those attentive to the liturgical calendar consider Good Friday a high and holy day and mark it by gathering to worship on “God’s Friday.”

Germany continues to hold Good Friday sacred for all, regardless of personal practice or belief, legally forbidding dancing and partying on Karfreitag, the day of mourning for Christ’s death. Scoffers may think this is a pointless, anachronistic law; others may welcome the freedom to practice something meaningful.

Karfreitag gives time and space to those who make the time to engage with the biblical witness of the life and death of Jesus. For those of us who believe this torture accomplished salvation on our behalf, it is a Good Friday. Jesus, whose words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” haunt anyone who can identify with the abandonment his words express.

When my children were out of school on Good Friday, we would sometimes visit Duke Chapel which provided an informal program of music and readings from noon until 3:00PM, following the stations of the cross. The biblical account of Jesus’ arrest, suffering, and death were marked with solemn readings and hymns. As we walked out of the chapel following the bells that marked the traditional time of Jesus’ death at three o’clock in the afternoon, the silence was deafening.

Confronting the feeling of profound abandonment expressed in the hymns and readings was not easy for this young mother of three children. Facing that feeling left me with my own primitive maternal fears of leaving them as orphans. Good Friday was not so good for me, but it was a time of observance teeming with life and meaning as I absorbed the hymns and contemplated the readings during the three hours.

In this post-modern era, time's meaning is not the same as in times past. Many do not remember when workers were given Wednesday afternoons off to conduct business and Sundays to rest, worship, and attend to family. Blue laws kept activities on Sundays to a minimum. In those past-times, children and adults played and talked on wide front porches or in yards after the shared meal called Sunday Dinner. Time was respected, not overly scheduled with multitasking. Time did seem more plentiful.

In the past, time had a different meaning. Practices did not exist that included wage theft in time cards and personal time incrementally charged to take care of children's sicknesses, doctors' appointments, or wedding planning. Vacation time was not spent on the essential private business that would come up during a year; it was allotted, not to be invaded by demands of work or personal business.

Time still has value. Time still has meaning. Sacred and secular schedules once cooperating, now conflict. Good Friday, once set apart, now jockeys for the attention of work, family, and church. For some, the observance of Karfreitag becomes an act of sacrifice. Observing Karfreitag offers the opportunity to gather with others to remember, sing, and pray in stillness.

The stillness of Karfreitag could take on the silence of a time of Sabbath rest. While Sabbath rest more often is ignored in favor of doing something considered more constructive, it also has intrinsic value. In God's vision, the work has been done. Observing Sabbath time for Good Friday readings, reflection, and prayer, while interrupting schedules of work, shopping, or travel, may grant something far more rooted in the time and space given to it.

The Holy Spirit testifies saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds,"
he also adds,

"I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

(Hebrews 10: 16)

Can you remember the things you long to forget in your own life? Can you remember the laws of God's love that God desires to write in your heart and in your mind? For time to remember, the Church has set apart Good Friday as God's Friday so that you can slip into that space of God's grace and love.

As you mark your calendar for Good Friday, imagine these words of love being spoken to you, that as God's own, you are loved, forgiven, and blessed. Your mistakes and sins are no longer known to God. Imagine a full stop of contemplation on the day of Jesus' torture and death in a Sabbath rest, a Karfreitag observance that offers time for renewal of love and grace that fills every doubt. May your time apart fill you with grace and peace.

Prayer: Compassionate God, the fullness of your divine being did not hold back the sacrifice of your Son on behalf of all of the world. Grant us the wisdom and strength to love you and your creation as you have loved us, we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

~Para Drake
NC No Torture Project Coordinator

Easter Sunday – John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

We usually think of resurrection as a spectacular, sensational event. This encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus shows us just how ordinary it really is. Here, before dawn, when the light plays tricks on our eyes, Mary sees Jesus. She cannot comprehend the truth before her. But when he says her name, her ears hear the truth her eyes failed to see. Jesus sends her off to tell the others what she has seen. And that is resurrection.

Mary tells the others, “I have seen the Lord.” Her proclamation is the foundation of our faith. As Mary well knows, seeing is not necessary for believing. Faith is a state of being, a suspension of our expectations in order to welcome the possibility of something new, something unexpected, something never before encountered. Something like resurrection.

How many times do we miss resurrection moments because we expected something else? We expect the spectacular when we should notice the voice of a friend. We expect the sensational when we should notice the familiar. We expect instant results when we should notice gradual improvement.

Resurrection could look like a group of people from Salisbury, NC, who form Actions in Faith and Justice to speak the truth in their community about the lynching of three African American men on August 6, 1906. They hold a service of confession and repentance at the site of the lynching and include a litany naming all those known to have been lynched in Rowan County from 1883-1930, seven total. They initiate a process to place a historical marker at this site memorializing those who were lynched. The marker will be dedicated on August 6, 2019—one hundred and three years after the fact . . . In their efforts, resurrection occurs.

Resurrection could look like a group of people from Johnson County who hear about planes from their local airport that are transporting torture victims. They launch an investigation, seek answers from politicians at the local, state, and federal level. Receiving no answers, they form a citizen’s commission and expose the truth from every angle. The commission tells the truth about the horror of what happened to some of those people, allowing the chance for confession. The group contacts some of those tortured (49 as far as they know), allowing for the possibility of forgiveness. In their efforts, resurrection occurs.

The descendants of those lynched decades ago probably never expected to hear anyone admit the truth about what happened to their beloved. Those lying in the belly of a cargo plane probably never expected to hear anyone apologize. In these efforts, new life can begin. There can be a way to start over, not without the scars of the past, but with hope for tomorrow. There is a reason to live. This is resurrection. Can you see the Lord?

**~Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director**