

Power *made* Perfect *in* Weakness

2020 Lenten Guide

God does not look for perfection in God's disciples. Instead, God only looks for openness to God's grace, which is all God needs to turn weakness into something great.

This Lenten season the Council invites you to journey toward the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday with the Apostle Paul's words in your heart: Power Made Perfect in Weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

We hope this guide will provide an opportunity for prayerful reflection within your faith community, your family, and on

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



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.

Going Through the Motions

Certainly, these words from Isaiah are not the first time we've been called to account for going through the motions and not taking to heart the faith we proclaim.

“ . . . as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God . . . ” (v. 2).

The issue, of course, is righteousness. Is Isaiah talking about personal righteousness or systems of righteousness? My personal righteousness involves my daily contest to “do good.” I do this by picking up the trash on my way from the parking lot to the office; smiling at the strangers I pass on the sidewalk; remembering the birthdays of my staff; giving away 10% of my income, etc.

Systemic righteousness involves the structures in place that dictate the things around us—the economy, the courts, the schools, etc. This sermon from Isaiah deals with the economy and the results of *Runaway Inequality* (I recommend Les Leopold's book by this name). Comparatively, our current economic system:

- Supports a wage structure where workers work, but many never make enough money to make ends meet.
- Underwrites an agribusiness behemoth that contributes to 673,000 tons of wasted food every year in N.C., while one in five children in N.C. go to bed each night without knowing where their food will come from tomorrow.
- Boasts the best health care in the world, but our average life span is going down while the money we spend for this excellence goes mainly to insurance companies and pharmaceutical companies.

Yes, there is a direct correlation between low wages and the ability to access food for our families. Yes, there is a direct correlation between poverty and wellness. In these days of runaway inequality, with the wealth gap in the U.S. greater than it's ever been in the history of recorded civilization, much of what Isaiah says hits home for us. It is our system and it should be personal.

It takes little imagination to connect glaring statistics to the truth that we do not practice what we preach, at least in so far as God's ordinances are preached through scripture. Most of us who are paying attention already know systemic racism has denied people the chance to buy homes and build wealth that could be passed on to their children; we understand that investment capitalism has engineered a rapid flow of wealth from the workers to the 1%; and we see that the longest continuous war in our nation's history has drained our coffers while the tax structure does nothing to replenish it.

Because we know all this, our energy is better spent imagining how to get to a better place. Isaiah offers a checklist of activities that can move us in the right direction, but he's short on detail. Of course we should "loose the bonds of injustice . . . let the oppressed go free . . . share our bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into our homes . . ." (vv. 6-7), but how do we do that in a system that seems to be rigged against the very people Isaiah is telling us God wants us to privilege? Let's agree in the spirit of the scriptures that oppression, hunger, and homelessness are a community problem and not an individual burden. Next, let's consider the hurdles faced by those struggling to survive in our current economic system and imagine how we might dismantle those systems to allow upward mobility. And finally, let's elect lawmakers who see the big picture and not just their next big donor.

Here's the place where the system gets personal. We generally vote for candidates who promise us something that will benefit us personally, whether it's a local zoning ordinance or a national tax break. What if we entered the voting booth focused on what is best for our neighbors, using the definition of neighbor Jesus drew out of the lawyer with the story of the Good Samaritan—"Which of these, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" (Luke 10:36).

Lent is upon us. Ash Wednesday is here. The N.C. primary is six days later. Six days to consider which candidate will make the best choices for my neighbor—the one in the ditch. During Lent there are six weeks to consider the economic changes needed so that "light shall break forth like the dawn, and healing shall spring up quickly . . ." (v. 8).

My Lenten discipline this year will be to consider one economic issue each week. I am choosing: mortgages, minimum wage, public school funding, cash bail, health care, income taxes. I want to

understand how I benefit from each system and how each system impacts my neighbor. I want to know how this system can be structured to ensure my neighbor's well-being because, if we can believe Isaiah, my neighbor's well-being will contribute to my own righteousness.

“. . . you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (v. 12).

That is how I plan to vote next November.

Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director

First Sunday in Lent – Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written,

*"One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

*"He will command his angels concerning you",
and "On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '*

Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

*"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him." '*

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

In this famous passage from Matthew, Satan asks Jesus to make his power known. The devil tempts Jesus by asking him to prove himself and his identity as the Son of God by showing his power over the elements in addition to his power of will. Though Jesus denies the devil each time, responding with Scripture and the teachings of faith, the power dynamics of the passage remain interesting.

The power that the devil asks Jesus to display is domineering. It is the power of the dictator. The power of the never-satisfied, driven by the bottom line, CEO. The power of the bully yearning for a fight. The power called on by the devil in this passage demands no signs of weakness. Ultimately, it is this kind of power that nails Jesus to the cross.

The power of Christ is not domineering. It is the kind of power that turns expectations, and unjust systems, on their head. In a just and compassionate whisper, this sort of power shakes the world. It is for this reason that Christ's subversive power is loathed by the tyrannical. Love, justice, and reconciliation truly are stronger than hatred and fear. And somewhere, deep down, they know it.

In this season of Lent, as we make our way to Golgotha, that hill called Calvary, may we remember the subversive power of Jesus. May we remember that Jesus came into the world not as an established king but as a newborn—that his dinner guests of choice were not the social elite but the marginalized. May we remember that the power of Christ looks different from the powerful and oppressive systems harming the most vulnerable in our world today. May we do something about it.

Prayer: God of love, help me see the opportunities in my life to live into your subversive power. Help me see your way clearly, and move through your world with compassion. Amen.

Sarah Ogletree
Program Coordinator, NC Interfaith Power and Light

Second Sunday in Lent – Psalm 121

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*

*He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

*The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.*

Our deepest belief as a person of faith is the spiritual assurance of the power and protection of God. In Psalm 121 we are given the vision of strength in the long lasting hills, and the support of the Creator of Heaven and Earth. We are reminded that God is constantly awake, watching, helping and guiding as we learn to navigate this world and experience all that life has to offer, for better or for worse. Our knowing that this divine reality exists gives us permission to be humble, gentle and meek.

On the 2nd Sunday in Lent, we are still beginning our journey and we look to the hills as a way to focus our intentions and affirm our needs will be met through our convictions in God. In these Lenten days, we are reflecting, repenting, and preparing to be ready to receive the blessings of Easter. We trust that God's power is revealed by acknowledging our own weaknesses. God's love for Jesus allows him to suffer, with the all-knowingness that his soul is forever protected and preserved. When we are most vulnerable, our faith protects us.

In today's world of corruption and deceit, lies and fake news, our sensibilities are being attacked and our kind hearts tormented. We are tempted by evil forces to be self-centered and curse our opponents, but instead we must experience our own inner-strength through penance and denial of ego. Our confidence must not come from artificial sources of power but instead from our trust in facts and science, truth and justice. Our Lenten meditations must be focused on the inspired affirmation of God keeping "our going out and our coming in" day and night.

Caring for God's Creation and recognizing we are of that same Creation is our most significant way of proving our faith and to be assured that the promises of God are reliable and worthy of our gratitude. We have pushed this planet to the brink of ecological destruction and we must understand that we too

will be destroyed as we are one with the earth. The Sun and Moon cannot hurt us and our love for this world, God's Creation, is what we are called to cherish and protect.

On this 2nd Sunday in Lent let us "lift our eyes to the hills" knowing that God is here to help. We just need to show our love by tending to the garden, because God is watching.

Prayer

Through the light of faith, help us to see this world, our common home, not as a resource to dominate and exploit, but as a gift to be cherished by all generations. May we be humbled by the power of God's Creation and may we protect it with all our might. Amen.

Susannah Tuttle

Director, NC Interfaith Power and Light

Third Sunday in Lent – John 4:5-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.'

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with

them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'

It's one thing to feel guilty, and quite another to feel shame. Guilty is what you feel when you've done something wrong and you are remorseful. You know you can't fix it so you take a deep breath and say: "I know I've done this despicable thing. I can't escape that I've done it. All I can do is say I'm sorry, and I'll try never to do it again."

Shame is a horse of a different color. Shame says that it's not what you've done that counts, it's that you were bad enough to do it in the first place. Shame says that you can be as sorry as you please, but it doesn't matter because even if this fix passes by it's only a matter of time before you find yourself right smack in the middle of another one. Shame says, it's you that's bad, not what you've done. Shame makes you want to run and hide from anyone and everything that reminds you of your shame. Shame chides you into thinking that running and hiding will protect you from feeling.

If we are ashamed because all our life we have been made to feel incompetent, then all the success in the world will never convince us that we are able people. If we are ashamed because our family heritage is one of poverty and ignorance, then all the wealth and education in the world will not change our feeling of never being good enough. If we are ashamed because a family member drinks to excess, then all the sobriety in the world will not alleviate the fear that we brought this fate to our own doorsteps.

Shame makes us think running and hiding will protect us from these hollow feelings. But running and hiding doesn't work—that's the nature of shame. What we think causes it, doesn't. What we think will cure it, won't.

"Give me this water," demanded the woman at the well, of Jesus, "so that I will never be thirsty again and never have to come here to draw water." "Give me this water," so that I never have to face myself reflected in the eyes of the women who gather here again. "Give me this water," so that I can hide from my lifestyle issues and pretend that deep down everything is just fine. "Certainly," Jesus implied, "But go and get your husband first."

Jesus knew all about the Samaritan woman. He knew the triple whammy applied against her, an outsider by race, by gender, and by class. He knew that all those who held debates about the proper places and ways to worship would never lower themselves to debate with her, but Jesus did. He wouldn't let her run and hide. He wouldn't protect her from herself. He knew that all the water in the world wouldn't release her from the sense of shame she held so deep inside. Instead he asked her to face herself by revealing the shame she felt and to face him.

"The hour is coming," Jesus told her, when worship will be true. "The hour is coming" when the spirit of God will not reside on any given mountain top but in the hearts and minds of worshippers. "The hour is coming..."

Oh, I know you mean "when the Messiah comes," and all is set right, when salvation is here, interrupted the woman. I know about that far in the future time when we will be restored from evil to good, from war to peace, from despair to hope. That's what you mean. But not here, not now.

"The hour is coming and is now here"; Jesus tells her. "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Jesus gave the woman more than she ever asked. He gave her what she needed when she least expected it. He gave her what she didn't deserve. In spite of her shortcomings, because of her shortcomings, Jesus gave the woman at the well himself. He gave her the water of life welling up inside her eternally. He gave her himself and he gave her herself, as well. Jesus gave her the freedom to be all that she was originally created to be. He released her from her shame, by facing it and transforming it. Jesus will do the same for us.

After all, which one of us doesn't own at least one water jar that we lug empty, day after day, in the hot noon sun hoping to find a little water in the well? Our water jars are the "can'ts" and "ought tos" and "should haves" of our lives. The times we let our family down, the times we let ourselves down, the times we let God down. Or they are the parts of ourselves we keep hidden, our handicaps and insecurities, our quiet fears and loud but unnecessary embellishments. Our water jars are those times we failed, and those times we didn't try hard enough to succeed. And we, like the woman at the well, want to run and hide from the woven web of a thousand humiliations which make up our shame.

But Jesus says to us: Go and get your secrets and bring them to me. "The hour is coming and is now here," for you to face this...but you do not face it alone. You face it with me.

Jesus gives us more that we have ever asked. For Jesus takes even those things of which we are ashamed and blesses them and says: These are the ways of grace in your life. All that is you, even the hidden parts, are redeemed in my light, washed clean in my water, made whole in my kingdom. All that you are is loved by me. No matter what you have done you are worthy—to know me, to worship me, and to be known by me. Here, have it, living water, welling up inside you into eternal life. All those secret shames can now be used for a purpose to let my strength be known in your life.

The Samaritan woman got more than she came for that day at Jacob's well. And what else could she do but go to the people of her city, her own kind, the ones who knew her shame, telling them to come and see the one who had filled her to overflowing. We are told "many believed because of the woman's testimony."

In the process she seems to have forgotten the water jar, leaving it behind at the well. Perhaps she was so excited she no longer had time for the everyday things of life. Or perhaps not. Maybe she left it behind on purpose so that later, in the cool of the evening, she could return to fill it with the water her home would need the next day. Maybe she left it there on purpose, so that when she did come back, she would meet at the well the women who had judged her so harshly. Then she could say to them, quietly, with dignity: Let me tell you how my life has been transformed. Let me tell you about the "One who knew everything I ever did."

Sean Allen
Director of Finance and Administration

Fourth Sunday in Lent – Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

Psalm 23 are words of trust that many of us are familiar with. This psalm is so prevalent in our lives because it is comforting, while challenging us, and continues to teach us new ways of seeing God's presence in our lives. Perhaps one of the most utilized psalms since its origin, and the most referenced psalm in suffering, this psalm is a beautiful reminder of God's care for us. And it also serves as a tune-up for where we actually put our trust. Psalm 23 empowers us, to not live in fear, and challenges us to live fully into who we are created to be.

The Psalmist offers grounding for life's most challenging seasons. This psalm is referenced by those that are in the pits of life, needing reassurance that we can, in fact, trust God. And that we do not have to fear evil, because God is with us, and we lack nothing. However, we do not have to be near death for this passage to remind us of God's presence in our lives, neither does it have to only be reserved for seasons of fear and anguish

The Psalmist offers insight on what stress, worry, fear, sadness, grief might look like when we turn to God in our pain. It is hard to look comparatively at a psalm, against how we each deal with our own pain, but this psalm serves a model and reminder of what life can be, even in most troubling seasons, if we trust God.

While this psalm is often used to treat or address sadness and fear, it also serves as a reminder that one cannot avoid hardship on earth, which is why we need God. Even though God is our shepherd, leading us to rest in green pastures and calm waters for respite, we are reminded by the Psalmist that God has prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies (v. 5). This is symbolic for provisions, giving us what we need, because there will be enemies. That is a certainty of life: that there will be seasons, even people, that hurt us. But God gives us the tools to make it through the valleys of life; we read in verse 1 that "I shall not want" meaning that I lack nothing.

In our consumerist culture that is also driven by a scarcity-model and anxiety. It feels unfathomable that we already possess everything that we need to trust God. With this, the psalm reminds us that God will restore our souls (v. 3), God leads us (v.3), and that God is always with us (v. 4). The hard part of acknowledging this is that all of these tools are not any of our doing, but rather God's presence in our life. Our participation is trusting this so that we can be helped. This takes humility and trust.

The Psalmist's words "I shall not want" (v. 1), meaning that we lack nothing, does not mean that there are faithful people in our world, who are severely marginalized, and lack dignity from oppressors and unjust systems, and they have everything they need in life to prosper. There is radical harm and evil that happens in our world through corruption, and insidious sins, like racism and economic inequality that constantly strip people from what they need. This verse might be incredibly hard to hear, for those living on the front-lines of trauma – that we all lack nothing. And any preacher or well-meaning person using this psalm should hold that difficulty. The Psalmist does not mean that the reader is not hungry, silenced, sick, deported, or have what they need, and they should automatically not worry. Rather, the Psalmist is saying that God is with us, even in the inevitable pain of this world, steering us through the darkest valleys, sustaining us to the next meal and point of hope. We may not have all that the world requires of us, but God is always with us, and we can trust, that despite all of life's pains, God offers wholeness and "goodness and mercy" (v.6) that may not be what the world calls "good" but it is a presence that actually sustains and comforts.

The theme for this year's Lenten Guide is "power made perfect in weakness". This theme goes with all of the readings of Lent but especially Psalm 23. I read this psalm and it emphasizes what trust in God is; that God is always with me, and that I lack nothing. But to have a faith like the Psalmist requires forfeiting control and avoidance of anything that might be inconvenient or hard. In giving God our trust, we are then empowered. We are empowered to live more fully into the persons we were created to be. This psalm invites us to channel our worries into living in the moment, be present, and trust that even though pain will come in this life, that pain is not the destroyer of our lives. We can be empowered to not be paralyzed and instead seek therapy, find the right medication for mental health concerns, hike the Appalachian Trail, or take that job in a different part of the country because we won't let fear rule. When we turn to God, we are empowered in our weakness. It is then, in our humility and trust, that we fully live. Amen.

Jessica Stokes
Regional Coordinator, Partners in Health and Wholeness

Fifth Sunday in Lent – Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

On the 5th Sunday in Lent, 2020, we are living out a time when many of us are crying out from the depths. Today, our personal lives, our communities, our state, our nation, and even our world are being upended by the global outbreak of the novel coronavirus. People of faith, and I dare say, some who don't normally proclaim faith, are asking God to hear our supplications. Fear and anxiety are present in our homes and in our communities. For the first time in my lifetime, non-essential businesses are shuttered. Schools are empty. The usual grind of 5-o'clock traffic is almost non-existent. Grocery store shelves are bare, and even most church doors are closed for in-person worship. In most states, people are being asked to shelter at home and avoid physical contact. A comment I've heard recently seems to resonate with those who have only read about the global impact of World War II, "I wonder if this is how it felt."

How can this be preparation for Easter, my favorite time of the year. While growing up, I often heard hope-filled hymns in our home and our church family came together in our Sunday best, (sometimes new) clothing. We enthusiastically worshipped together as we celebrated the resurrection of Christ. Spring was in the air, flowers were popping up, children enjoyed treats from brightly colored Easter baskets, and families sat down together for a home-cooked meal. What meaning can we take away from this dichotomy in the season of Lent 2020 and today?

Maybe some answers are found thinking about the theme of this year's Lenten guide "Power Made Perfect in Weakness." This theme was chosen months ago with no knowledge of what was to come with the virus now threatening our health and livelihoods. It was chosen to lift up the powerful impact God's people can make in a world ruled by the wealth, title, and privilege that are often mistaken for power. In the richest country on the planet, we are fighting over whether everyone deserves healthcare, we have

entire families sleeping in their cars or on the streets, and millions of people more go to bed each night hungry. For many, this Lenten season isn't really so different. Marginalized groups in our society have been crying out in supplication for decades.

Psalm 130 is one of the most straightforward and direct of all the richly worded psalms. When we are crying out from the depths, whether as individuals or in community, God hears our supplications whether we believe we are worthy or not. God's word gives hope and the promise of mercy.

On this 5th Sunday of Lent, let us examine what it means to celebrate the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. While we wait out this current crisis in ways that are very different for so many of us, let us embrace the power made perfect by this example. True power comes in the form of kindness, compassion, sharing, and in sacrifice.

Prayer:

Lord, hear our prayer. Whether we come to you as a supplicant new to this level of fear and confusion, or whether we have been struggling through the depths for some time, may we hear your voice and receive your peace. For those of us who are able, may we follow your example and live into your commands to care for each other as you care for us.

Christine Pernel

Director, Partners in Health and Wholeness

Palm Sunday – Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Palm Sunday has always seemed like a paradox to me. We are celebrating the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, while knowing in a few days he is going to be crucified. We have just spent the past five weeks reflecting on what is to come, but now we need to switch gears and celebrate for a day. Holy Week is one of the most somber times in the Christian year, yet it begins with the paradox of a celebration.

There are paradoxes in the story as well. The entry into Jerusalem celebrates Jesus as king with people laying down palm fronds and coats for him to ride over, yet he is riding a donkey, the symbol of humility. He is being treated like a king while being surrounded by symbols of peace. The juxtaposition of power and weakness is jarring.

In my faith community, we celebrate Palm Sunday by recreating Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. We process around the church singing and waving palm fronds in a joyous celebration. People bring flowers and we even throw down coats for everyone to walk on before entering the church. We process around an image of Jesus painted by artist for our congregation.

Throughout the service, however, we grow more somber. There is less singing. We end by reading the passion narrative and depart in silence. Every other Sunday, we have a meal together after the service, but on this day we don't eat together. The dramatic dichotomy of celebration and silence is a lot to hold in one day. But it points us to the truth of Jesus' life and teachings.

His miracles showed us that the smallest gift of food—five loaves of bread and two fish—could become an abundance and feed everyone. His teachings showed us that love and help could come from someone we thought was an enemy. He explained that searching for one sheep, even though you still had ninety-nine, was using your time wisely. These juxtapositions of power and privilege teach us the truth about the power of service and humility. Jesus shows us, through his life and teachings, the way the world can be, a world of justice and full of abundance. It's fitting that in this final week before Easter, we focus on the tension of worldly power and the power of God made perfect in the weakness of the cross.

Elizabeth Brewington
Opioid Response Program Coordinator

Maundy Thursday – John 13:31b-35

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.'

When we think back on things loved ones have told us, it's often the last thing they say that seems to have the strongest impact. We remember their stories and thoughts, but if their words included a direct request, we often feel obligated to act on it. I imagine the same was true for those hearing Jesus' final words. Much like our loved one would do with us, Jesus sat with those who had surrounded him with love and support, to explain what was coming. His time with them was coming to an end and they couldn't go with him. This surely left his disciples feeling confused and insecure. They would be losing, not only the friend they loved, but also their identity. When they were seen with Jesus, it was easy for others to understand who they were. But without his presence, how could they continue to be known as Jesus' disciples? This gives a great deal of power to Jesus' new commandment, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." This certainly falls into the easier said than done category!

On this Maundy Thursday (which literally means "day of the commandment"), how do we begin to live into this commandment. We are in a time in the world's history that we've become newly aware of the level of our connection. We've been called upon to make global sacrifices for the good of others. The actions, if done out of love, would certainly be an example of loving as Jesus loved during his time on earth. But what about in our everyday, ordinary life? How do we live into this commandment? I think we sometimes forget the many ways we can love. Of course romantic love is a common conversation and theme around us, but what does it truly mean to love as Jesus loved? I believe this is both simple and complicated, simple to explain but extremely complicated to live. Sometimes it's easier to love that person or community that isn't in our daily life. To truly live into loving as Jesus commanded, we must begin at home.

When I read these words of Brene Brown, they took me to a deeper understanding:

"We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection.

Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of them – we can only love others as much as we love ourselves.

Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can only survive these injuries if they are acknowledged, healed and rare."

My prayer for you as we experience the darkness of Friday and the Hallelujahs of Sunday, is that you will find the depth of love for yourself that allows you to truly love as Jesus commanded.

Vanna Fox
Development Director

Good Friday – Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

The theme of our Lenten Guide, “Power made Perfect in Weakness,” is amplified throughout this passage from Hebrews and is especially potent on this day, the day of Christ’s crucifixion.

The untouchable, all-knowing deity, is actually one of us, who had struggles and suffered times of weakness. He was nailed to the cross, crowned with thorns, and spat upon in mockery. Through all this, he stayed true to his calling. Knowing that Christ has struggled and overcome, we can carry our own struggles and weaknesses to him, confident that we will be received.

The power of Christ in us is made perfect in our weaknesses. A paradox that rings true in each and every one of us. Our society looks down upon weakness, even as we have all suffered and been weak. The culture teaches us to be strong and completely independent. When our young children stumble and fall, we tell them to tough it out and not to cry. When a family member dies, we tell ourselves to get through it and stay strong. When we speak about hard times with friends or family, each person in the room grows visibly uncomfortable.

Our faith teaches us, we should not only accept our weaknesses, we should embrace them recognizing that it was in weakness that Christ was made perfect. If we remain true to ourselves, we will become strong enough to understand that weakness does not mean imperfection. We know that when we embrace that part of ourselves which is weakest, we reveal our strongest, truest selves.

Prayer:

Lord, guide me in my time of need. Receive me and help me to find grace when I am weak. Give me the strength to reveal my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Amen.

Rachel Baker

Communications and Immigration Advocacy Program Coordinator

Easter Sunday – Colossians 3:1-4

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Colossians 3:1-4 is just right for Easter Sunday, proclaiming resurrection and glory and the lofty injunction that we set our hearts and minds on “things above” rather than those of this earthly realm.

Yet, even as we crave this renewal of life, Christ within us, most of us have never had firsthand experience of the realm of “above.” We’re poor earthbound creatures, tied to this world and its often troubling doings. Where is that junction to be found between “right here” and “above”? And how do we follow the injunction of setting our hearts and minds on “things above” while “dying” to the things of this world, so as to access this new life, this glory?

I think the junction--this place where the Divine meets us--might just be blessing. And I think following this injunction is simply a matter of knowing how to recognize blessing. Those things that drench us in God’s love, in life – rather than those things we drench *ourselves* in, that make us look good, which we mistakenly call blessing.

I once lived on a barrier island off the South Carolina coast where vacation homes were christened with whimsical names: Conch Shell, All Dunn Inn, The Great Escape – and just a mile or so down from the dirt road where my family lived, The Blessing. The Blessing was majestic, a perfect work of architecture perched upon that piece of coveted real estate known as a deep-water lot. Each time I drove by The Blessing, I couldn’t help but admire its beauty and grandeur. Yet it also made me uneasy.

Just another mile down the road, in stark contrast to The Blessing, was a Gullah settlement of tiny, shotgun, un-air-conditioned cottages. The Gullah people were the descendants of the island’s original slaves, who despite a history of violence and oppression, of ongoing racism and intergenerational poverty, were the resilient heart and soul of the island. I couldn’t help but wonder, if any of the Gullah folk ever wandered up toward The Blessing, what would they think of it? If this grand house was a blessing, what would they make of their own impoverished homes? If The Blessing was just that, were they then cursed?

And one day, it happened. As I was driving toward The Blessing, in the opposite direction I saw two young Gullah boys about ten years old approaching on their ramshackle bicycles. It was a perfect spring day, and the air was sweet with the scent of jasmine and pine resin, the earth greening and stirring with new life. I slowed for the boys’ passing, and as they whisked by The Blessing, they – unlike me – didn’t look toward it at all, not for a moment. They only rode on, their heads thrown back with joy, laughing and shouting to one another, filled with life, filled with glory.

Knowing, perhaps, that in their perfect moment of freedom, in this intersection of above and below so filled with the grace and beauty of God’s hand, they were both blessed and blessing.

They were Easter.

Karen Richardson Dunn
Regional Coordinator, Partners in Health and Wholeness