

# 2024 Lent Study



ELCA  
World Hunger



# Dear friends in Christ,

This Lent we continue to explore people's experiences encountering God, as we did in ELCA World Hunger's study for Advent earlier this year. The theme for both studies comes from the prophet Isaiah, who, in speaking to God, remembers "when you did awesome deeds that we did not expect" (Isaiah 64:3). As the seasons passed, these "awesome deeds" came to look less like the quaking mountains Isaiah described and more like Christian communities doing what they are called to do — meet our neighbors and one another amid our need, mourning, journeying and hoping together.

Lent is a perfect season for reflecting on this. It is, after all, a season of journeying. In it we accompany the Hebrews as they set off toward the Promised Land; we follow Jesus during his temptation in the wilderness and, finally, on his march to the cross at Calvary. It is a journey fraught with memories of the pain and grief we have both suffered and caused, individually and collectively. Yet it is also a journey undertaken in hope and trust.

Along the way we will reflect on what it means to encounter God in experiences of reconciliation, transfiguration, crucifixion, restoration and resurrection. Stories from communities we accompany through ELCA World Hunger will be guideposts along the way, inspiring us to think more deeply about the baptismal covenant to which we are called, "to strive for justice and peace in all the earth," and reminding us how far we have to go toward that promised future.

Hunger is on the rise. Post-pandemic poverty has become more entrenched. This is the reality into which the church is called to live. During Lent we journey not away from this world but more deeply into it, into those spaces where God is present and active, even as need grows and violence and disaster threaten. Here, in this space, in this tension, we are not only called but invited to be church together.

Here, in this space, in this tension, those "awesome deeds" really do happen. May your Lenten journey bring you and this church into that space.

## In Christ,

*Ryan P. Cumming*

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# LENT

## Week 1 – Reconciliation

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-10

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15



During Advent we reflected together on what it means to encounter God. We contemplated the spaces where God is revealed to us, the invitation to be part of God's work in history, the vocation to which the church is called today and what it means to be grasped by the proclamation of Christ's birth. Now, during Lent, we return to this journey, exploring the many ways we encounter God as we respond to hunger, poverty and need today. In this first session we will explore the act of **reconciliation**, the restoration of wholeness to relationships and to people when injustice makes the fullness of life in community impossible.

Jerri Eliano de Quevedo and his wife, Sirlei Eloí, live in the Kilombo Monjolo, a community in the municipality of São Lourenço do Sul in Brazil. Like many *kilombola* – descendants of the 4.5 million enslaved Africans brought to Brazil between 1570 and 1857 –

they support themselves and their children principally through farming a plot of land in the kilombo. The plot is small, about 2 hectares. Given the frequent droughts, inadequate infrastructure and insufficient legal or political protections, making a living in this community can be incredibly difficult. In the past Jerri and Sirlei have tried to find work in urban centers outside the kilombo, but they have no access to education, so few jobs are available to them.

For Jerri, finding a way to stay on the land while feeding his family is not just a matter of finances but also of kilombola cultural identity. “The kilombolas always had to grow their food in small spaces, all together, because they didn’t have much land,” he explains. “This, for us, is cultural, and working in another way is out of our custom.”

A cultural relationship with and ecological knowledge of the land are central to kilombola history. From Africa the kilombola brought seeds and extensive knowledge of crops, which helped some of them to develop sophisticated agroforestry and farming systems. Yet access to sufficient land has always been a challenge for kilombolas, whose communities sprang from their resistance to slavery. As Edward Shore describes in the *Texas Law Review*, “Wherever there was slavery, there was also resistance — which assumed many forms. One such form of resistance was the formation of communities by [people who had escaped enslavement], known in Brazil as *mocambos* and *kilombolas*, demonyms of Kimbundu (Angolan) origin that signified ‘hideouts’ and ‘encampments.’”<sup>1</sup> Kilombolas in Brazil are similar to maroon communities in the United States, where self-liberated enslaved people formed isolated or hidden settlements.

These communities quickly became an important and visible part of Brazilian life but remained frequent targets of vilification and violence, both during and after slavery. Kilombolas were often forcibly removed from their land, and laws were passed in

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Shore, “A Dream Deferred: The Emergence and Fitful Enforcement of the Quilombo Law in Brazil,” *Texas Law Review* 101:3, notes 24-25, [texaslawreview.org/a-dream-deferred-the-emergence-and-fitful-enforcement-of-the-quilombo-law-in-brazil/](http://texaslawreview.org/a-dream-deferred-the-emergence-and-fitful-enforcement-of-the-quilombo-law-in-brazil/)

the 19th century that prevented them from owning land without official government titles, something most kilombolas were unable to obtain. In the century after Brazilian slavery ended in 1888, kilombolas faced significant obstacles to legal protection, education and economic opportunities.

In 1988 a new constitution in Brazil promised to protect Afro-Brazilians' rights, especially the right to land. Shore writes, "Brazil, the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery (in 1888) became the first country to constitutionally guarantee the collective land rights of the descendants of enslaved people."<sup>2</sup> Though there is work to be done to fully guarantee kilombola rights, kilombolas across Brazil have joined together to grow local economies and defend their constitutional right to land. The oppression of kilombolas testifies to the need for full reconciliation, to bring full opportunity for dignity and life to a people the world actively marginalizes.

The Igreja Evangélica de Confissão Luterana no Brasil (IECLB) and its diaconal arm, the Fundação Luterana de Diaconia (FLD), have journeyed with Jerri, Sirlei and the Kilombo Monjolo in this work, in partnership with the Center for Support and Promotion of Agroecology (CAPA) in the southern region of the Rio Grande do Sul state. This work is supported in part by ELCA World Hunger. Through the project, kilombola farmers joined together in cooperatives to gain access to seeds, training and new opportunities. "The community started to change," Jerri says. Over time, other entities, including universities, began working with the community. "We began to have support, and life got better."

"The work of CAPA within the community is about accompaniment, partnership and joint construction, and with open dialogue, creating the farming projects and other activities," Jerri says. The kilombola communities, which practice their own ancestral spirituality, have worked with CAPA/Lutheran Foundation of Diakonia for decades.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, note 18.



In addition to the farming projects, the partnership has helped as the kilombola market handicrafts, share technical advice, and acquire legal documentation, housing and access to spaces for public policy advocacy.

The most important work, though, according to Jerri, has been winning recognition of the community as a kilombola. “In my understanding,” he says, “the work of CAPA so that we were recognized as a kilombola community was fundamental, so that today we could be in spaces of discussion, commercialization and seeking our rights.”

The project has helped Jerri and Sirlei diversify their crops, access markets and increase their income. Through it all they have been recognized for their identity, dignity and rich history. “When we came to Brazil, it was not to be merchants but to be traded,” says Jerri. “So this has brought us a big change, bringing respect and visibility.”

Jerri and Sirlei’s story shows how historic and ongoing injustices leave families vulnerable to hunger. Hunger is not incidental or accidental. In the case of Brazilian kilombolas it is the direct result of oppression and injustice — slavery, racism, discrimination, inequity, violence. Yet their story also reveals their witness of courage, strength and resilience as we work together toward a just world where all are fed.

In the Bible readings for this first week of Lent, the author of 1 Peter reminds us of Jesus’ death and resurrection, the cost of the sacrifice and the consequences. Jesus, who was executed by an unjust occupying political power in Jerusalem, gives his life and, in doing so, makes possible our reconciliation with God. Whereas sin estranges us from God and one another, Jesus restores us to fellowship with God, so that we may be restored in fellowship to one another.

This reconciliation is more than just a good feeling, more even than the experience of forgiveness. It is a radical restoration of

relationship with the One who knows us. Reconciliation has its roots in a Latin term meaning “to overcome feelings of distrust or hostility” or, in another form, “to bring together, unite in feelings, make friendly.” To be reconciled is to overcome conflict and transform a broken relationship — to be restored, often in a new way. For the writer of 1 Peter, this is the work of Christ.

As the author writes of baptism, this is not merely the removal of offending “dirt from the body” but a more profound transformation of relationship.

As we are reconciled to God, God calls us to reconcile with one another. Lent invites us to think more deeply about what that means. Grace assures us that we need not worry about our relationship with God; Christ has reconciled us. But grace also impels us into the world, to be witnesses of reconciliation in every relationship.

This is not easy work. It will take confronting the brokenness in relationships marred by racism, oppression, exclusion and injustice. Nor is it quick work. To be reconciled isn’t merely to apologize and be forgiven for past wrongs but to do the work of building together a new, shared world where each of us will be recognized and respected for the fullness of dignity we have from God, who created us.

# REFLECTION

## *Questions*

What does it mean to be reconciled? Where have you experienced reconciliation through your own faith?

How can hunger ministry be seen as an expression of our reconciliation to God, the world and each other?

How does the story of kilombolas in Brazil demonstrate that reconciliation must mean more than apology and forgiveness?

What relationships in society, the church and the world need to be transformed to end hunger?



# LENT

## Week 2 – Transfiguration

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:23-31

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38 or Mark 9:2-9



This week in Lent we continue exploring the places and moments in which we encounter God, reflecting on transfiguration as recounted in Mark 9:2-9. Here God’s manifest presence before the disciples demonstrates God’s presence in the life of creation, especially in times of injustice.

“Transfiguration” is an odd word telling an odd story. The word comes from two Latin roots — “*trans*,” meaning “across,” and “*figura*,” meaning “shape” — so it indicates a change in shape or form. Its occurrence in this week’s reading from Mark is one of the few times it appears in the Christian Scriptures.

The story is a little strange. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain. There he is revealed in all his glory, in dazzling clothes, with the spirits of Elijah and Moses beside him and God claiming him as God’s own son. Curiously, this experience of Jesus’ divine glory occurs immediately after his long speech about the suffering

he will soon endure on the cross. Is it any wonder the disciples are depicted as confused?

Peter is often portrayed in the gospels as well-intentioned but foolish, a far cry from the confident leader he will become in the early church. In Mark's story, Peter just doesn't get it. Amid this mystical experience on a mountaintop, Peter, like some rabid suburban developer, suggests, "Hey, let's build some houses and just stay."

But Peter may not be quite as dense as we readers first assume. Peter is the one who reminds us that, even during a mountaintop experience, we never cease to be human. Peter is the one who says, "Jesus, I know your clothes are all shiny, and it looks like you got some ghosts with you, and yeah, I hear God talking, too, but we're all up on top of a mountain right now, and if we're going to spend any time here, we're going to need some shelter." Peter's reaction isn't one of fear or stupidity. It's the reaction of a human being who can't forget the physical realities that continually impinge on even the deepest spiritual moments.

Like Peter, we are confronted by physical realities that we cannot ignore, even as we experience a profound spiritual crisis of yearning for the day when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Like Peter on the mountain, we need to be brought into that ecstatic reality where the presence of God among us is revealed. But also like Peter, we can't just stay in that moment, ignoring the reality of lived, physical need. We must have a different kind of faith, a faith that refuses to separate transfiguration from transformation, to ignore people around us who are assailed by injustice, disease and violence. We need a faith that captivates, motivates and activates us to respond boldly and recklessly when God invites us to be part of the transformation being enacted for all creation.

In the event of transfiguration we encounter God where the physical and the spiritual intersect. New Testament scholar Dorothy Lee puts it well:

[T]he transfiguration is not an other-worldly narrative, disconnected from the body and ordinary human experience. On the contrary, it is precisely Jesus' transfigured body that *discloses the face of God and the hope of God's future. ... The transfiguration on the mountain is the meeting-place between human beings and God, between the temporal and the eternal ... between everyday human life — with all its hopes and fears — and the mystery of God.*<sup>3</sup>

Peter's suggestion of building shelters doesn't seem all that far-fetched when we recognize that Jesus never ceases to be a physical human being, even as the transfiguration discloses him as also divine. Peter isn't missing the story. According to Lee, the story is really about him — and us.

To encounter God in transfiguration is to experience those moments when our perception is opened up radically to the presence of God in our midst. Jesus' transfigured body births a transfigured faith — a faith that holds in tension the holy and the ordinary, the spiritual and the physical. The story of the transfiguration in Mark isn't the story of Jesus experiencing his own divinity. Nor is it the story of some important consultation Jesus had with Moses and Elijah. We don't even know what they said! Rather it is the story of the disciples encountering God in their own physical midst, represented by Jesus' body and clothing, and in their own history, as represented by Moses and Elijah. It is the story of a faith that opens them to encounter God in their past, present and future, as Lee suggests.

What does this mean for us today? What does it mean to live with a transfigured faith?

For over three years Church World Service (CWS), with support from ELCA World Hunger, has provided child protection services to unaccompanied children in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Living in a foreign land without parents or relatives by their side, these vulnerable children are on a difficult journey, trying to reach a better

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<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Lee, *Transfiguration* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 2.

future. Many of them have come to live by a simple but devastating principle: “Do not trust people.” They build walls around themselves to keep safe from those who would take advantage of them, but these walls also bring anxiety, depression and a deep skepticism of adults or agencies trying to help them.

One of the youth helped by CWS is Ahmed (name changed for privacy). Ahmed left his home in Burundi two years ago, relying on money his parents had raised for him to travel to Croatia. When CWS met him, he had been living in Bosnia and Herzegovina for almost a year. “I left with six friends, all from Burundi,” he says. “We watched hungry people every day [in Burundi], and we were among them. I am the oldest, so I am responsible for my brothers. My father is sick, so he cannot work. I need to help them.”

Along the way Ahmed faced steep challenges, including physical violence and intimidation by police at the Croatian border. “Go back where you came from!” they yelled as they pushed him. “How can I go back,” Ahmed says, “when my family’s survival depends on me going forward?”

Ahmed’s story is, tragically, not unique. Like many others, he carries the weight of his journey, his yearning for home and his frustrated hope for a future in Europe. By the time CWS staff met him, Ahmed was making his ninth attempt to enter Croatia. After providing him with whatever help they could, they watched him go, hoping that, this time, the journey would be successful.

A transfigured faith — shaped by an encounter with the God who transforms our world and our perspective — changes us. To encounter Jesus transfigured is to remember that God has entered human history, that God plays a role in the story of unaccompanied children. But encountering Jesus transfigured also means remembering the physical as well as the spiritual, to say, with Peter, “We should build some shelter here.” Ahmed’s fears and disappointment don’t vanish just because God is part of his story. Nor are Ahmed’s tired feet miraculously soothed.

To carry a transfigured faith into the world, to bear witness to our encounter with God in transfiguration, impels us radically outward to seek God in the real people and events around us. This faith is grounded in the belief that God is present with us through the Galilean carpenter — and through a Burundian child. All too often, migrants such as Ahmed are viewed as nothing more than a burden or an intrusion: “Go back where you came from!” he was told. Yet a transfigured faith reminds us that our neighbors are more than burdens or disturbances, more than even their own need; to us they are the presence of God, just as we are to one another.

Encountering God in transfiguration is more than an odd event on a mountaintop 2,000 years ago. God transfigures our faith and perception, opening us to recognize God in our neighbors and to perceive God active in our history. After Peter, James and John reach the mountaintop, there is no going back. Jesus is no ordinary teacher they are following. This is something new, something miraculously and wonderfully different. Here is the unveiling of divinity, transforming their lives and how they view the world.

As we journey together spiritually through Lent, let us do so with a transfigured faith, remembering the difficult, dangerous, physical journeys so many of our neighbors are on and remembering our call to be present with them and one another, to be changed by the presence of God within them.

# REFLECTION

## *Questions*

How would you have reacted if you were on the mountain with Peter, James and John?

With the transfiguration of Jesus, the disciples come to see Christ's divinity. How might this have changed their understanding of what it meant to be a disciple?

How does a transfigured faith, recognizing the ways God is present in our world and one another, change us?

How can the church confront and change people's negative perception of neighbors such as Ahmed? What difference might this make?



# LENT

## Week 3 – Crucifixion

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22



*“We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” —1 Corinthians 1:23*

In this week of Lent, having reflected on encountering God in reconciliation and in transfiguration, we turn toward Paul’s message of “Christ crucified” and reflect on what it means to encounter God in **crucifixion**, to be confronted with our own participation in systemic oppression.

Founded in 1888, Bethlehem Lutheran Church in the Central City neighborhood of New Orleans, La., is the oldest historically Black ELCA congregation in the continental United States. The church has a long legacy of responding to the needs of its members and neighbors. One way Bethlehem carries on that legacy is through the Community Table, a feeding ministry that provides free, no-questions-asked gourmet meals every week. This ministry, which is supported by ELCA World Hunger, helps to meet the need for

food in Central City. The median household income in Bethlehem's ZIP code is slightly more than \$26,189, less than one-third of the median household income in the United States (\$69,021 at the time of writing). More than 15% of the people in Orleans Parish are food-insecure.

With so many workers relying on the city's tourism and hospitality industry, Bethlehem Lutheran saw a rapid increase in the number of people needing food during the COVID-19 pandemic. Working with partners, the Community Table was able to expand, and by this spring it was providing a free lunch four times a week, serving over 600 meals weekly. As the need has increased, Bethlehem Lutheran has been able to meet it.

A key leader in helping the Community Table and Bethlehem respond during and after the pandemic was Chef De, who planned, coordinated, supervised, cooked and served hundreds of meals for people who came to the Table. "I don't think Bethlehem would have made it through the pandemic if it were not for Chef De," says the Rev. Ben Groth, pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran. "And I also believe it to be true that many of our neighbors would not have made it without her, too."

As noted by Mike Scott, a writer for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the Central City neighborhood has a long, rich history: it is home to New Zion Baptist Church, where the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was formally incorporated. Yet, as Scott also writes, by the early 2000s, Central City had become "defined [by some people] by its crime rate" and its "crushing poverty."<sup>4</sup>

Some people might easily let the community's present challenges define its future. We see this often when cities are dealing with statistically high rates of poverty, food insecurity or crime. Outsiders looking in dismiss such neighborhoods as nothing more

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<sup>4</sup> Mike Scott, "A Brief History of Central City, the Forsaken Heart of New Orleans," Nola.com, July 12, 2019, [tinyurl.com/mpks2x8m](https://www.nola.com/story/news/local/central-city-history-2019-07-12).

than their statistics or decide they must be “saved” by the decisive action of political leaders.

Journeying together through Lent, we are invited to consider what it means for us today that God’s son was crucified 2,000 years ago. Lent has often been a season for us to take stock of our own sinfulness and need for repentance. In many ways the cross is a mirror, reflecting back to us our entanglement in sin. Yet the cross is also a lens, a way of perceiving and apprehending the world. All too frequently during Lent, we lose sight of the latter aspect.

As a lens, the cross shapes how we understand ourselves, our world and our communities. It reminds us that God is present in Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross. This doesn’t mean that suffering or death are God’s work or that there is something redemptive in suffering or death. Quite the contrary: a cross-shaped (cruciform) lens compels us to recognize suffering for what it is, to name it and confront it.

This is the foolishness Paul describes in his letter to the Corinthians. Who would ever recognize God in the broken, pierced and dying body of Christ? Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, upon seeing a painting of a dead Christ, is reported to have remarked to his wife that such a painting could cause one to lose their faith. This is what Paul means, in part, by the “foolishness” of the message of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:18). To preach the message of Christ crucified is foolishness to those who cannot fathom the presence of divinity within frailty or weakness, who cannot comprehend God as both actor and victim.

Yet that is precisely what the cross demands of us. To preach Christ crucified, to journey through Lent to the cross, is to bind ourselves to honesty, to the sort of truth-telling that names suffering and injustice for what they are yet still affirms the presence of God. For Central City and Bethlehem Lutheran Church, the message of Christ crucified affirms that stories of poverty or hunger aren’t the only stories being written or told

in the community. It may be foolishness to those on the outside looking in, but it is gospel truth for those who encounter God at a community table where neighbors prepare, provide and share meals.

To encounter God within the crucifixion is to be reminded that we cannot ignore the truth of suffering, hunger, poverty, violence, death and injustice in a world still waiting for the fullness of the reign of God. But to encounter God in this event is to be radically open to God's presence in this same as-yet-incomplete world. It is to seek God within our communities and one another, even as the world declares this seeking to be "foolishness." It is to affirm with faithful certainty that in the stories of our neighbors and neighborhoods, God is being revealed to us in sometimes new and surprising ways.

# REFLECTION

## *Questions*

What do you think Paul means by “foolishness”?

How does your perception of Central City or your own community change when you look at them through a cross-shaped lens?

In what new or unexpected ways have you encountered God, especially as you faced your own “crosses”?

What might it mean to “bind ourselves to honesty, to the sort of truth-telling that names suffering and injustice for what they are yet still affirms the presence of God”?

# LENT

## Week 4 – Restoration

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21



The first reading for this fourth week of Lent is from the book of Numbers. The Israelites have been on their exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land for years, and the goal is nigh. They have received the law from God through Moses at Sinai and are now on the final leg of their journey. Yet rather than being hopeful and eager, they “became discouraged” (Numbers 21:4), complaining about Moses’ leadership and even their “miserable food” (21:5). God’s response is inventive, if not entirely gracious: “poisonous serpents” sent by God “bit the people, so that many Israelites died” (21:6). The people repent, Moses prays, and God grants Moses a staff that will heal all who are bitten.

It’s not the kindest of stories. Nor is it the easiest story to explore as we continue our study of encounters with God. What exactly is being encountered here, besides a seemingly devious and vengeful God who sends venomous serpents to kill people, then rescues them?



The psalmist gives the story a different spin, omitting any mention of the venomous snakes and lifting up the healing of God, who heard the cries of the people and “saved them from their distress” (107:19).

Despite the psalmist’s sanitized take, this pattern can be found throughout the story of the exodus. God rescues the people, the people turn on God, God punishes them, they repent, God shows mercy. Over and over and over.

These biblical narratives are often used to extol the merciful nature of God, who repeatedly forgives the people despite their sin. Truly, God does show mercy. But this might be cold comfort to the Israelites killed by snakebites. “Mercy” may not be the only lesson implicit in the people’s journey with God.

The exodus begins in Egypt, where God’s people are enslaved and oppressed. God seeks out Moses to lead the people, lays low the unjust Pharaoh and accompanies the people across the wilderness for generations, providing food, water and safety along the way. The people are often ungrateful and at times even spiteful, turning to idolatry in their frustration and despair. Yet God continues to lead and provide. Why?

Simply put, God is invested in this community. God has a vested interest in its future, and this faithfulness to the people the Israelites will become supplies the theme for this week’s study. Despite the violence of the story as recorded in Numbers, there is a lesson here about what it means to encounter God in the **restoration** of relationships.

The covenant between God and the people leaves both parties vulnerable to the other. By leading them from Egypt and forging a covenant with them, God has tied their futures together. God has a plan and has invested much to ensure that the people will be part of it. This people, this nation, is God’s future. The provisions God grants are not mere merciful gifts but further investments toward a future shared by God and the people who will become Israel.

Of course, the church is not God; we are spiritual descendants of the wandering Hebrews, dependent still on God's promise of this future. Yet there may be something we can learn here about what it means to pursue a promise of hope and restoration.

Often we see the virtues of mercy and grace in the church's work to end hunger. Food, clothing, shelter and cash donations are often interpreted as mercies showered on suffering people or as gifts offered to neighbors in need. But in reality our response to hunger surpasses a desire to meet immediate needs. In our Lutheran faith, meeting others' needs is a response to the grace we have received from God, the grace that restores our relationship with our Creator. We are set free from worrying about our relationship with God, from feeling as if we aren't good enough or loved enough. The grace of Jesus Christ sets us free from focusing on ourselves so that we can freely focus on others. In other words, God restores our relationship with God so that we can restore our right relationships with one another.

Yet, in true Lutheran fashion, we aren't really the ones doing the restoring; God is working within and through us, restoring our relationships with each other and all creation. That's what makes grace so complex. Grace is the "stuff" that restores our relationships with God or our neighbors.

Serving the neighbor is one step toward that restoration. In its most authentic form, service is a foretaste of the full restoration we will experience when the promise of God is fulfilled. Today we dine together as neighbors at the table of a community meal. Tomorrow we shall dine together as the beloved of God at the banquet.

There is something to be learned here about the shape service ought to take. When we understand serving our neighbor as an obligation commanded by God or as something we do because it is "right," we miss what service is really about. Responding to hunger is not about fulfilling God's law (as Lutherans, we know we can't do that anyway). Responding to hunger is about restoring our community and world.

It is as much about the future God is building through us as it is about the present needs we are meeting through each other today.

At just 14, Lalistu knows the importance of restoring community. Lalistu's family was one of the poorest in their town in Ethiopia. Both her parents are HIV-positive, and the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS isolated Lalistu's family from their community and kept them from earning enough money to feed themselves. The Central Synod Development Department of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) provided food for the family and school supplies for Lalistu and her brother. Funded in part by ELCA World Hunger, the project supports 80 orphans and vulnerable children in the Oromia region of Ethiopia, providing them with school supplies, food, clothing and other basic needs for survival. In addition, the project leaders work with communities to help them better understand the needs of people living with HIV and AIDS.

With this support Lalistu and her brother have excelled in school. Their mother has found work selling and trading goods, and the family has gotten support to start building their own home. Instead of relying on relatives for their survival, Lalistu and her family can look ahead to a time when they will have access to the things they need. The program has not only inspired their hope for a brighter economic and educational future; it has helped to change the perceptions and attitudes of people in their community. Instead of feeling isolated, Lalistu and her family now feel accepted by their neighbors.

This restoration of community relationships is critically important. The stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS, like the stigma that often accompanies hunger and poverty, can create huge obstacles for those who are stigmatized. They may be less likely to seek medical treatment or acquire nutritional support, and more likely to face hunger or poverty in the future. We experience this over and over again, whether it is the stigma faced by Lalistu's parents and other people living with HIV in countries around the world or the stigma

experienced by the clients of food pantries. Feeding someone or helping them find work can go only so far if the community in which they are fed or employed continually excludes, marginalizes or discriminates against them.

Simply put, we cannot end hunger if our communities remain places of exclusion, fear or stigma. If the ministries we support and participate in are to be meaningful and authentic, they must be what God calls them to be: sites where God is encountered through the experience of restoration. Ministry in response to hunger is ministry in response to the promise that God is drawing us all together toward a reconciled and restored future. Every meal served, every neighbor heard and every new relationship built in the context of service gives us a foretaste of the fullness of life to which God will restore us and our world. When this happens, our service will change. We will change. And our communities will change.

God makes that ongoing restoration possible by investing in a future when hunger will be no more. How might our work as church together change when we see it as not merely a “good thing” but also an investment in this shared future?

# REFLECTION

## *Questions*

How might stigma or exclusion make it more difficult for a family such as Lalistu's to overcome hunger and poverty?

What does it mean to believe that God is invested in our future?

How might our understanding of hunger ministries change when we view them as a restoration of community?

How are people experiencing hunger or poverty stigmatized in your community? What has the church done or what could it do to change this?

# LENT

## Week 5 – Resurrection

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-12

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33



*“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.” —Hebrews 5:7*

Thus far in our Lenten journey, we have considered what it means to encounter God in experiences of reconciliation, transfiguration, crucifixion and restoration. In this last session, coming just before the season ends and Holy Week begins, we look ahead to our encounter with God in the experience of **resurrection**, when God brings life out of death.

We have a long way to go before we get to that joyous event on Easter Sunday, though. As Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar reminds us, we cannot move too quickly from the crucifixion to the resurrection. We need to hang in that space between. That space between is where hunger ministry finds its identity and meaning.



At a recent ELCA World Hunger meeting, someone lamented that the images and stories the ministry routinely shares are too “happy.” People are always smiling and easygoing, and the projects supported always work out the way they were intended. No challenge is too difficult to overcome. We know, though, that the reality of ministry in the world is sometimes far from easy. Not all projects work out the way a community hopes. Costs can increase suddenly, disasters can wipe away progress, or, as we witnessed a few years ago, a pandemic can put the brakes on work that had been progressing steadily.

As we learned in the session on crucifixion in Week 3 of this study, authentic ministry is honest ministry. It doesn’t allow us to hide ourselves from the realities of hunger or injustice or to move too quickly to the hope and joy of the resurrection. Ministry in response to hunger is ministry in response to some of our deepest pain and longing. It is ministry with and among Indigenous communities confronting systemic injustices that have continued for generations (Week 1). It is ministry with and among migrant children as they face abuse at borders (Week 2). It is ministry with and among people struggling to feed themselves and their families (Week 3). It is ministry with and among orphans and families ostracized because of their health status (Week 4). It is ministry that embodies the tension between the crucifixion and the resurrection.

The readings for this week remind us of this tension. In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes how a grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die before it can bear fruit (12:24). Yet this is no simplistic aphorism about all life involving death. There is a tension between the way Jesus describes death and the way he describes life (in this reading, “the cross” and “the glory”). Jesus doesn’t ignore death. As the writer of Hebrews describes, Jesus prayed with “loud cries and tears” (5:7). The Gospel of John softens this at times, but still Jesus says, “My soul is troubled” (12:27).

In many church services the presider will invite the congregation to pray “as Jesus taught us” before beginning the rather formal

convention of the Lord's Prayer. Certainly that is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. But to pray "as Jesus taught us" in the readings for this week is to pray with a troubled soul, with "loud cries and tears" in mourning for our own pain and for the distance our world must travel to the future God has promised.

To grieve with Ahmed as he encounters abuse at the border (Week 2), to protest with kilombolas seeking full justice (Week 1), to cry out with every hungry person who has ever been told they don't belong or haven't worked hard enough, to grit our teeth in anger as political leaders and pundits manipulate statistics to justify budget cuts to anti-hunger or anti-poverty programs — these are prayers, too, the prayers of troubled souls that shout in "loud cries and tears." These are Lenten prayers appropriate for this season of repentance, grief and memory. And they are prayers in which Christ joins us.

The readings also remind us that our encounter with God does not end here. God responds to Jesus' prayers not by rescuing him from the cross but by conquering it in the resurrection. The resurrection reveals that death and pain will not have the final word, that God is even now moving us toward a time when new life will spring forth. That doesn't let us ignore the crucifixion. The cries and tears of our prayers are not forgotten, nor are they ended yet.

To encounter God in resurrection is to live in that tension between grief and hope, between holy anger and peace. As much as we are called to cross-shaped ministry (Week 3), so too are we called to resurrection ministry. In doing ministry in the world, ministering to one another and accepting the ministry of our neighbors, we bear witness to the resurrection hope inspired by the Holy Spirit moving within us.

Perhaps the pictures are too happy. Perhaps the stories are too clean and simple. Or perhaps the pictures, the stories and the projects they represent are exactly what they are called to be — testaments to resurrection hope birthed out of the tension between life and death. Perhaps that is what our ministry and our lives are called

to be — investments in the future we know is coming and protests against the present we know falls short.

To encounter God in experiences of resurrection is to see new life springing forth amid death and longing. It is to live in that holy tension between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, knowing in our very hearts, where God has written a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:33), that it is possible to both grieve and celebrate, to both look around us with honesty and look forward with hope.

As this season comes to a close, let us pray that God will give each of us the courage, honesty and faith to live more fully in that tension. That's where authentic ministry happens, and that's where we are called to be.

# REFLECTION

## *Questions*

How do you long for your community? What experiences within your community inspire your prayers of “loud cries and tears”?

What does it mean to live in the tension between crucifixion and resurrection?

How might your ministry change if it were viewed as a witness to resurrection?

What tension in your life do you wish the church would “live into” with you?





ELCA World Hunger

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