



**ELCA World Hunger**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

8765 W. Higgins Rd.  
Chicago, IL 60631-4101  
800-638-3522, ext. 2616  
hunger@elca.org  
**ELCA.org/Hunger**

ELCAMA1404

# *Lenten* **STUDY GUIDE**



ELCA World Hunger's  
**40 DAYS**  
*of Giving*



**ELCA World Hunger**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.





## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What steps can your church, community or family take to care for creation?
2. In what ways does your church or community foster appreciation for the abundance of God's creation?
3. Where in your community do you find God breathing new life into "dry bones"?

## PRAYER

Creator God, we give thanks for the diversity with which you have created our world — plants and animals, seas and deserts, mountains and valleys. Inspire us to view with reverence and admiration the beauty of the world around us — and to care for it as you intend. Bless Carlos, Anita and their communities as they sow, reap and learn together. Amen.

Lent is a time of reflection and repentance, of sacrifice and self-examination. But Lent is also a season of *hope* — *hope* in the work God is doing in the world, even in the most challenging times. This Lent, join ELCA World Hunger's 40 Days of Giving as we journey with our neighbors in hope for a just world where all are fed.

This study was designed to deepen your devotional time during this season, and can be used individually or in a group.

**Find more resources to engage in the 40 Days of Giving at [ELCA.org/40Days](https://www.elca.org/40Days).**

**ELCA World Hunger**

organization Red COMAL (the Alternative Community Markets Network, in English) is helping farmers such as Carlos and Anita learn new techniques and strategies that will help reduce their vulnerability to food insecurity while protecting the land on which they rely.

Through a project implemented by Red COMAL, Carlos was trained in agroecology, an approach that focuses on food production and sustainable management of resources. Carlos has learned to diversify his crops and helped establish a system of stockpiling corn for times of scarcity and emergency. He also learned how to select, rescue, reproduce and store native seeds, which has helped him plant new crops for his family and help other farmers in his community.

Through the program, Carlos, Anita and other farmers are learning new ways to care for the land and themselves, to breathe new life into the dry corridor of Santa Ana.

And perhaps that's a good way to think of the season of Lent. Even as we journey with Christ toward the cross on Good Friday, even as drought, death, hunger and poverty continue to confront our communities, God is at work in, through and among us and our neighbors, breathing new life just when we think all is lost.

That has been our journey these 40 days. From a hotel in North Carolina to a dilapidated thatch house in Malawi, from a Kenyan school to a Bay Area restaurant — we have walked alongside Manhal, Mrs. Kamela, Evelyne, Jamie, Carlos and Anita as they challenge us and invite us to hope together for a just world where all are fed.

Farmers such as Carlos and Anita know the importance of water. "Currently, our biggest issue is the scarcity of water for human consumption, for our animals and for crop irrigation," says Anita. "This problem forces women to work even harder in order to collect water. ... Here, we do not sleep during the summer months, in order to grab a little water; we need to wait several hours by the well." Without access to water, maintaining a farm can become nearly impossible. In some regions of the world, such as the dry corridor of the Santa Ana community, farmers may risk losing their way of life because of drought and other climate-related events.

Farmers and others who make their living working the land know the intimate relationship between humans and the rest of God's good creation. Dependent on soil, water, sunlight and more, farming reminds us of both God's abundant provision and the interconnections between humans and the rest of creation. Scripture, too, reminds us of these connections. As the ancient Hebrews journey from Egypt, they do so in hopes of a fertile land from which they will be able to draw sustenance. In many of the parables of Jesus, creation serves as an illustration for God and God's coming reign.

Despite how far we have come in knowledge and technological advancement, this remains true: we will not survive without the rest of creation. All of creation rises and falls together. For some, such as Carlos and Anita, that truth is lived every day. For others, it may be easier to forget our dependence on the creation God has provided — and the responsible stewardship of it to which we are called.

As we journey in hope toward Easter, we are reminded in Holy Scripture of God's promise that salvation is not for humans alone but for all of creation, which "groans" until God's reign shall come in fullness. Our hope is an active hope, though, and we know that God has called us to work now, tending to both human communities and all of creation.

With support from ELCA World Hunger and the Lutheran World Federation's World Service/Central America program, local

ELCA World Hunger's  
**40 DAYS**  
*of Giving*

**WEEK 1**  
**SAFETY AND STABILITY**

*"You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame" (Joel 2:26).*

**"WHAT ARE YOU GIVING UP FOR LENT?"**

As the church begins the 40-day journey of the season, this question will be repeated in many a coffee-hour conversation. The question reflects some of the central themes of Lent: self-sacrifice, repentance and humility. In Lent, the church enters into Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness and the ancient Hebrews' time of trial in the migration from Egypt to the promised land. It is an austere season of self-reflection on sin, death and fallibility. Sandwiched between the bright lights of Christmas and the glowing pastels of Easter, Lent is a somber reminder of the distance yet between the world as it is and the world as we know, by faith, that it one day will be.

That may be why it seems odd for this year's 40 Days of Giving theme to be "Hope." Even the lectionary readings to start this season offer little help in connecting to this theme. The Ash Wednesday reading from Joel illustrates this:

*"Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near —  
a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread upon the mountains  
a great and powerful army comes;  
their like has never been from of old,  
nor will be again after them  
in ages to come" (Joel 2:1b-2).*

As the author probably intended, the prophecy fosters a sense of urgency for repentance, and perhaps even terror, for the "day of the Lord."

But there is another side to this, even within the same chapter of the book of Joel. After all the dire warnings and unsettling forecasts, the prophet reassures the people of God that all is not lost: "You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame" (Joel 2:26).

Lent, certainly, is a season for reflection on temptation, sin and loss. But it is also a season for reflecting on hope. What else but God-given hope could have sustained the spirits of the ancient Hebrews wandering in the wilderness? What else but hope could have nourished Jesus' resistance to temptation and comforted him on his march to the cross?

The season is not merely about what we may give up but also what we may take on. Lent concerns both the past for which we repent and the future to which God is inviting us. We journey with our ancestors and with Jesus through darkness, uncertainty and even death in Lent. But we journey in hope. Lent is more than a story of how far we have journeyed away from God; it is also a story of how far God has gone to draw near to us, even when the way seems unclear or threatening (as it did for the ancient Hebrews) or when hunger and isolation threaten to undo us (as with Jesus in the wilderness).

Early Christians understood the fasting of Lent as preparation for the hopeful celebration of Easter, but they also taught that the spiritual practices of Lent encouraged Christians to open their eyes to the world around them, particularly to the lives of neighbors who still today face uncertainty, vulnerability, hunger and isolation.

Manhal Mohamed knows about walking with hope through times of uncertainty. As director of housekeeping at Embassy Suites, Manhal is responsible for hiring and supervising other employees. His journey to this job in the Carolinas began more

ELCA World Hunger's  
**40 DAYS**  
*of Giving*

**WEEK 5**  
**RENEWAL OF EARTH**

*"The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know'" (Ezekiel 37:1-3).*

Carlos German López and his wife, Anita Aguirre, live in the municipality of Concepción de María in Honduras. The municipality lies in a region that is part of the "dry corridor" of the Santa Ana community. In this area, farmers face difficult challenges accessing water for their households and farms. Rain comes in only four months of the year, and residents face long periods of drought. The dry conditions mean Carlos, Anita and their neighbors are at heightened risk of food crises and hunger.

The valley of "dry bones" could be a metaphor for many regions of the world. As changes in the world's climate continue, drought is an increasingly serious problem. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations found that for 36% of the countries that experienced an increase in hunger between 2005 and 2017, the increase in hunger coincided with a drought. In 2017 alone, 51 low- or middle-income countries experienced early or delayed onsets of growing seasons, 29 experienced shorter seasons, and 28 experienced both. The scarcity of freshwater worldwide is expected to contribute to significant negative outcomes, including increased hunger and increased violence as communities vie for the scarce resource.

"The best place to start is at the table, breaking bread together," he says. "That's where you learn about one another — our needs, our hopes and dreams, our past and future — that kinship and camaraderie, the actual practice of those things. Jesus is the best example in history of this, how you create those opportunities for everyone to be a leader in their own way."

In a world where many images of leaders show people of power and resolve, brusquely making decisions and increasing the value of their organizations, Jamie shares a vision of an older, more authentic understanding of what it means to lead.



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Where did you learn what it means to be a leader? What leaders inspired you along the way?
2. How does Jamie's story of Farming Hope challenge what we think it means to be "church"?
3. When have your preconceptions been challenged or refined by God? How is God calling you to rethink your perspective on the world this Lent?

## PRAYER

Inspiring God, we give thanks for the leaders you lift up in our midst. Open our hearts to your inspiration, that we may welcome the leaders you send to us — and respond when you call us ourselves. Bless the work of Farming Hope this Lent. May the participants continue to be inspired by your presence in their community. Amen.

than 6,000 miles away, in his home country of Iraq. Manhal came to the U.S. as a refugee and was met by staff from Lutheran Services Carolinas (LSC).

LSC was able to help Manhal secure housing and a job, but he knew starting over in a new country would not be easy. At first, he would come home from work and cry at night. But he kept working and hoping, and his determination paid off, first with a promotion to supervisor and later with a promotion to his current job. Now, he is able to support himself and provide employment for other LSC clients. Despite the challenges of leaving Iraq, applying for status as a refugee and settling in a new country, Manhal's hope has refused to flag: "I will never stop dreaming about my future," he says.

The hope for safety and stability drives people around the world to face the uncertainty and fear that accompany leaving home. Each refugee's story is unique, but the stories often told by people fleeing their homes share common elements — threats of violence, lack of opportunities and social upheaval. Knowing this, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2019 declared the ELCA to be a "sanctuary denomination," offering support to neighbors around the world as they journey in hope to a brighter future. To be a "sanctuary denomination" means that the ELCA will continue to accompany refugees, migrants and immigrants as they seek new opportunities for safety, stability and security.

Being a "sanctuary" is about more than remembering the immigrant past of many ELCA members. It is also about journeying together with a shared hope to the future God has promised. To be a "sanctuary" church is to be a community of Lent, a living reminder of God's journey with us during times of uncertainty, hunger and isolation, in the past and in the present.

The invitation to reflection for this Lent is not "What will you give up in repentance for your past?" but "What will you take on in hope for our future?" In Lent, we confront even the darkest of

times with Manhal's bold assertion "I will never stop dreaming about my future."



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In times of challenge, uncertainty or fear, what helps inspire your hope?
2. What do you hope for the world, for your community and for yourself?
3. How is your church inspiring hope in your world and in your community?

## PRAYER

Guiding God, you led the Hebrews out of Egypt and walked with them in their long journey from slavery to new life and freedom in the promised land. Walk with us in our times of uncertainty, fear and hunger, that we may walk with one another in hope. Bless our journey this Lent, that we may ever be open to your presence among us, and bless the work of Manhal and Lutheran Services Carolinas, that they may continue to welcome and accompany the neighbors in their midst. Amen.

## NOTES

---

---

---

---

they took up the mantle of leadership, difficult and unexpected though it might have been.

The hope fostered in the season of Lent is a challenging hope that demands much from us. It calls us to let go of our prejudgments and preconceptions. It invites us to see as God sees, to give ourselves over in hope and trust to the role God has called us to play.

For Jamie Stark, a lay mission developer in the Bay Area of California, that call to play a role in God's plan began when he first learned about Holy Communion and the idea of "food as a gateway to God." Inspired by the work he saw in El Salvador, Jamie moved to the Bay Area and co-founded Farming Hope, a farm-to-table job-training nonprofit organization, which is supported by ELCA World Hunger and the Sierra Pacific Synod of the ELCA. Farming Hope provides transitional employment and job training to unhoused and low-income people in the community. As part of the program, participants learn to farm, grow and cook food — job skills and life skills that can help them earn a living to support themselves and their families. Farming Hope works with hiring partners to hire graduates of the program after they complete it.

Farming Hope might not look like a church, but as Jamie describes it, "it is a holy place," a place where relationships are formed and community is nurtured while basic vocational needs are met. Jamie's vision of food as a gateway to God and the restoration of relationships that God intends is at the core of Farming Hope's work. "When I sit at the table at Farming Hope's restaurant in San Francisco (Manny's), if I open my eyes, I see communion exactly as Jesus of Nazareth intended it to be — friends, eating intentionally ... we're all welcome."

For Jamie, seeing communion for what it is — a table at which all are welcome — and being inspired by the work he witnessed in El Salvador fostered hope that, by focusing on relationships built through food, Farming Hope could create opportunities for both jobs and community in San Francisco.

Is hope “the thing with feathers” when we’re confronted with such circumstances? Certainly, hope and trust in God inspired and encouraged Samuel. In hope, he undermined Saul by traveling with intent to Jesse’s house. In hope, he listened to the voice of God in seeing in David the leader God had chosen. Samuel’s hope was obviously “perched” deep in his soul, but it was far from an undemanding, free gift. The hope of Samuel was a challenge, forcing him to confront his fears of Saul and his own preconceptions about what a leader ought to look like. His hope for the future of Israel demanded that he let go of his own safety and his own perspective and see the world as God sees it: “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

Hoping is an act of trust, and it’s a dangerous sort of thing, with all due respect to Dickinson. Who hasn’t felt the sharp pang of a dashed hope? To hope is to trust that we are committing ourselves to something worthwhile, and to hope in the future God has promised is to give oneself over to a promise that so often seems unlikely or unexpected.

The fasting that so often accompanies Lent is, in some ways, training in learning to hope. In fasting, we are reminded of the many challenges that confront us and our world. Seeing these, we are inspired with ideas about what a fully reconciled future might look like in the reign of God. Yet, the story of salvation in the Bible is often the story of God challenging human preconceptions. For Samuel, as for Jesse, the idea that God’s chosen one would be not the oldest, strongest or most important of the seven sons but instead the youngest, smallest and least likely, David, challenged their ideas about what it takes to be a leader. Yet, in hope and trust, Samuel anoints David, and so begins a new era in the history of their people.

Hope and trust were not easy, either, for David or other leaders called by God to play important roles in the unfolding of God’s will for the people. Yet, hoping for the future promised by God,

ELCA World Hunger's  
**40 DAYS**  
*of Giving*

**WEEK 2**  
**LIVELIHOODS**

*“Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’” (Matthew 17:4-5).*

Mrs. Kamela is a mother in Malawi, living with and supporting her three children on her own. Her husband used to support the family, but after he left, Mrs. Kamela and her children fell into deep poverty. Without access to job opportunities, Mrs. Kamela had to ask neighbors for help with basic necessities such as food and clothing for her children. The family lived in a dilapidated thatch house that leaked during rains. Without money for their most basic needs, fixing the house was out of the question.

Mrs. Kamela’s situation is, unfortunately, not out of the ordinary for many people around the world. As of 2015 (the most recent year we have data for), 736 million people were living in poverty, defined by the World Bank as surviving on less than \$1.90 per day. Though the rate of poverty has gone down considerably over the last three decades, the number of people experiencing hunger has increased, from 777 million in 2015 to 821 million in 2017. There are a number of reasons for these changes, but at a minimum, the numbers make clear that, for many of our neighbors, ensuring there is food on the table, school supplies in children’s hands and money for emergencies is a persistent challenge.

Being church means entering into situations of hunger and poverty and accompanying one another in their midst. The story of the Transfiguration is an interesting entry point for thinking about this, particularly during the season of Lent.

In the story, Jesus goes with Peter, James and John up to a high mountain. While there, Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white" (Matthew 17:2). Moses and Elijah show up, and the first thing Peter suggests is that they build dwellings for Jesus and the two patriarchs of Jewish history. He is more or less ignored as God's voice resounds, claiming Jesus as God's son and enjoining the disciples to follow him (Matthew 17:5).

Sometimes, Peter is portrayed as the foolish foil here. While he is worried about dwellings, so much more is happening. Why can't he see that heavenly experience for what it is? At other times, Peter represents that great desire of many people of faith to remain forever within the "mountaintop experience" of faith. He just doesn't understand that you can't stay on the mountain, the preachers will say.

It's worth spending a bit more time thinking about Peter and those dwellings, though. Peter's suggestion is intriguing in part because it is so, well, human. His suggestion has something to teach the church about what it means to be human and what it means to be a follower of Christ. In the midst of one of the most glorious heavenly experiences in the Bible, Peter reminds us of the mundane, everyday concerns of humans. Your clothes are dazzling? Dead patriarchs are now living? God is speaking? That's all well and good, but we need shelter. The body of Jesus may be transfigured, but we still have bodies, and these bodies have needs.

Spirituality is important, but spiritual experiences won't put food in the mouths of Mrs. Kamela's children or repair leaks in her home. Being church means attending to spiritual needs and inspiring the deep sort of hope that can keep us going in the most difficult of times. But being church also means responding to the needs of the bodies that God has created

ELCA World Hunger's  
**40 DAYS**  
*of Giving*

**WEEK 4**  
**LEADERSHIP**

*"The Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one'"*  
*(1 Samuel 16:12b).*

In 1862, Emily Dickinson penned the poem "Hope Is the Thing With Feathers." Like much of her poetry, the poem is both imaginative and evocative, comparing hope to a bird that perches in one's soul. For Dickinson, hope continues singing and "never stops — at all" despite the tumult of life. In the last stanza of the poem, she describes this great gift that inspires her freely, without demanding "a crumb" from the one who hopes:

*I've heard it in the chilliest land  
And on the strangest Sea —  
Yet — never — in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb — of me.*

Hope continues to sing in the difficult, most chaotic of times and, in so doing, strengthens the poet's resolve to keep moving, despite what life may throw at her. It demands nothing but sweetly sings and keeps one "warm" in the bitter cold.

One wonders if Samuel felt the same about his hope. In the reading from 1 Samuel for this week in Lent, Samuel is sent by God to anoint a new king after Saul has been found wanting. Fearing Saul's vengeance but hoping that God has a new plan for his own safety and the safety of his people, Samuel journeys to the house of Jesse, where God reveals the young boy David to be the chosen one.

## NOTES

and fostering hope for meeting physical needs that press on us here and now. The early church understood this well. The meal that we know as Holy Communion fed believers spiritually and physically, providing nourishment for the people in body and spirit. Traditionally, it involved the standard elements of bread and wine in addition to a whole meal for the people present. In this way, hunger was addressed, whether it was spiritual or physical.

The hope for sufficient livelihood that could provide for her family inspired Mrs. Kamela to join a village savings and loan group through Evangelical Lutheran Development Service (ELDS), which is supported by ELCA World Hunger. With the combined savings of the group and additional training in business management, Mrs. Kamela was able to start a small business. The income she earned through her hard work and the support of ELDS and ELCA World Hunger helped her provide for her children and improve her home. Now, instead of a dilapidated thatch house, she has a brick home with iron roofing — a safe and secure dwelling that will withstand the rains.

Because of the project, Mrs. Kamela experienced her own "transfiguration." "This project has changed my life from a nobody to a somebody," she says. "My life has changed from the worst to the better, and there is a bright future for me and my children."

This is church. Mrs. Kamela's hope is grounded in knowing that she is not alone, that the future can be bright for her and her children because of the community and church that walk with her.

As we continue our journey through Lent, the practices of the season are reminders that, even as we pray and attend to our spiritual needs, the mundane needs of the body press on us and our neighbors. Meeting these needs can help inspire hope, even in challenging times. Meeting these needs is part of what it means to be church, sharing the news of a brighter future with neighbors near and far.



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to “hunger”? How might physical needs make it more difficult to attend to spiritual needs?
2. What are your hopes for the future of your family or community?
3. In what ways are you fed — spiritually and physically — in your congregation?

### PRAYER

Sustaining God, we give thanks for your abundant creation and for the body you have created, with all its needs and possibilities. Bless us this season, that our eyes may be open to the many forms hunger takes in our community. We give thanks for the work of Evangelical Lutheran Development Services in Malawi and for Mrs. Kamela. Continue to guide their hands and feet as they journey toward the future you have in store. Bless your church, that we may inspire hope among our neighbors in need — and be inspired likewise by them. Amen.

## NOTES

---

---

---

---

---

---

but a gift that equips her to carry Jesus' message outside the Jewish community, predating even Paul's great missionary journeys.

Her story reminds us of the many women in Holy Scripture who are called to be important leaders in the community despite the ways cultural traditions and legal practices inhibited their rights and made them vulnerable. Her story also calls our attention to the many ways that gender injustice impacts our church and our world. Evelyne's story, too, illustrates this. Yet both also show hope for a time when justice will open new opportunities for communities to flourish.

And so, our Lenten journey continues, in repentance for the sin of gender injustice and in hope for the just world God is creating in our midst.



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do your community and church help foster gender justice? In what ways do your community and church fall short?
2. How is God calling you to be a leader in your community? In what ways does your church create fair, open opportunities for everyone to participate and lead?
3. What story of a woman leader in the Bible inspires you? In what ways was the leader part of God's plan for the people?

### PRAYER

Gracious God, you created the world in rich diversity and provide for our every need. Bless your church, that we might seek justice for all and see in every neighbor the reflection of your love and grace. Bless Evelyne and the Kenya Evangelical Lutheran Church. Strengthen them as they continue to work for justice for all. Keep us during our Lenten journey, that we may look forward to your promised future together. Amen.

arranged for her to join the Ng'ombeni Secondary School in Kilifi County, where she would be safe and could continue her education. The KELC's Women's Literacy Program, supported in part by ELCA World Hunger, helped Evelyne with school fees and other needed resources so that she could continue her studies.

Evelyne is now in her last year of secondary school. She has been thriving in her classes, and this year she was selected to be "head girl" for her class. Her teachers praise Evelyne for her hard work and good grades; they are sure that Evelyne has a bright future ahead of her. Evelyne wants to continue on to university to study accounting so that she can find a good job and be a role model for other Maasai girls who are struggling to break free from harmful practices, like early marriage.

After many discussions with church leaders that helped to change his mind, Evelyne's father invited her back home so that he could see how she had grown and changed in the years since she had left. When Evelyne arrived home, her father could see the strong, intelligent woman she had become. Upon seeing her, he was convinced that education was the right life for her. Evelyne's father gave her a traditional blessing to encourage her to succeed in school, and he told her that she was welcome back home whenever she could visit. The scholarship and support received through the KELC Women's Literacy Program has truly changed the community, including developments for Evelyne that will open paths for other girls.

"The program has given a sense of joy and fulfillment that I can give hope to the hopeless girls who are being oppressed," Evelyne says. "It has given me a reason to work hard and improve somebody's life."

The encounter with Jesus inspired the Samaritan woman's hope that her people, too, would be saved. Yet, it is her own story that inspires the hope for us today. In the encounter, Jesus sees her, really sees her, and values her as she is — Samaritan, woman, unmarried. Despite all that has been written about her over the centuries, in the Gospel, her identity is not a burden

ELCA World Hunger's  
**40 DAYS**  
*of Giving*

**WEEK 3**  
**JUSTICE FOR ALL**

*"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (John 4:29).*

Thus far in Lent, we have been reflecting on the theme of hope. This week, our Lenten journey takes us to Jacob's well and the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The story is a clash of contexts — Samaritan, Jew; woman, man. One with physical water to offer, the other with living water on tap. They are drawn together by their mutual thirst. For the reader who doesn't grasp the significance of these contrasts, the gospel author makes it clear: "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans." This is a strange encounter. And the woman knows it: "How is it that you ask a drink of me?" she inquires.

Historian Craig Farmer notes that there have been two principal ways of viewing the Samaritan woman. Ancient and medieval theologians extolled her patience and politesse, her deference to the man Jesus. She's sweet, almost shy, a real, empty vessel ready to be taught. Reformation commentators, on the other hand, are harsher in their treatment. She's all wrong. Wrong race, wrong time at the well, wrong number of spouses and partners. She is not a spiritual seeker but a "vile prostitute" who has yet to feel the pangs of her own sin. Lutheran theologian Andreas Musculus referred to her as "a sinful woman, who had been the cause of ruin to many," a rude and impertinent woman sarcastically teasing the Messiah until she is confronted by her own corruption. Farmer seems to suggest that the older views were preferable. Better that she be demure and deferential than depraved.

Could it be possible that she was neither deferential nor depraved, neither coquettish nor corrupt, but simply another human being? Could it be possible that she was less concerned about what might befall Jesus for speaking to her than she was about the consequences she might face if paramour #6 were to find she gave water to a Jewish man? Could it be possible that all she wanted to do was get some water without being bothered?

It's possible she was some of these things. Perhaps, as the ancient and medieval writers suggest, she was an eager, inferior student of Jesus who went on to become a great evangelist, his "in," as it were, among the Samaritans. Or, perhaps, she was a "moral mess," as the Reformed writers liked to think. But it's also possible that she was more than this. Being married five times is no small matter. In fact, there are few reports of historical figures at the time who had so many spouses. Perhaps she sought them out, but more than likely, she was the victim of circumstance, widowed or abandoned until finally she was living with a man who would not or could not take her as a wife.

To be a single woman or to be a widow at the time, whether Jewish or Samaritan, was to be locked out of economic, legal and social opportunity; it was to be dependent on others, particularly men, and to be vulnerable, particularly to men. There is a reason that Scripture so often enjoins concern and protection for widows, and it wasn't because the people did such a good job of it that it went without saying. It was because women who did not have the protection of a male were so often exploited, cast to the margins of the community. Perhaps she was someone who felt the everyday burdens of a patriarchal society, whose story was shaped and constrained by social mores that locked her into impossible choices and denied her the agency to control her own story, yet who refused to be cowed, even by the Son of God.

To theologians, the fact that she is a woman presents a problem. The fact that she is a Samaritan presents a problem. They focus on just enough of her story — her noontime journey

for water, her five husbands — to help them address this problem. But perhaps it is not her gender that is the problem. Perhaps it is not her religion or culture that is a problem. Perhaps it is not her family situation that is a problem. Perhaps the problem is the complex of systems, institutions and cultural norms that inequitably circumscribe who and how we must be in the world, dependent on our gender, our level of ability, and our religion, ethnicity, citizenship and class. Perhaps the problem that we should be addressing is not the fact that the person at the well is a Samaritan woman but rather that she is a Samaritan woman in a society that values neither identity and continues to define for her who, how and where she can be if she wants to be worthy of an encounter with Christ.

The hope that we might transcend boundaries based on gender is enlivened by changes worth celebrating. Yet, in many ways, overcoming the gender inequity in our day still remains a hope for the future rather than a present reality. Globally, women are less likely to be paid for their work than men, whether this is household work, such as child care, or work outside the home, such as farming. Women are more likely to face legal restrictions on land ownership and education, restrictions that prevent them from securing income or developing new skills. They are also more likely to face interpersonal violence that can prevent them from working or attending school.

Evelyne, a young woman from a Maasai community in southern Kenya, knows some of the particular challenges women often face. When Evelyne was only 14 years old, her father arranged for her to marry an elderly man rather than start high school. Her situation is not unique. Many Maasai girls are prepared by their families for marriage as young teenagers and not allowed to continue their education. Evelyne reached out to the Kenya Evangelical Lutheran Church's women's department for help. The KELC reached out to the police, who helped Evelyne move to a safe location.

The marriage was called off, but Evelyne was no longer welcome in her family's home. The KELC's women's department