

LARGE PRINT VERSION

ELCA World Hunger's
40 DAYS
of Giving

Lent
2022
STUDY

A *way* **in the**
wilderness.



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



Dear friends in Christ,

I can hardly believe two years have passed since COVID-19 was first declared a global pandemic. In those early days of 2020, many of us hoped that taking immediate action would limit the spread of infection and contain the virus. At many points during the last two years, we found our hopes challenged by new outbreaks, new variants and increasing numbers of neighbors homebound or hospitalized. How often has it seemed that we could see the end but then the end moved further away?

Perhaps our ancestors, liberated by God from slavery in Egypt, felt similarly as they journeyed toward the Promised Land. They fled the violence of Pharaoh only to find new threats in the wilderness. Their wandering lasted for a generation. Many of those who originally left Egypt didn't live to see the end of the journey. Scripture recalls for us today their sense of frustration and dashed hopes as the end to their wandering seemed constantly to move further away.

The season of Lent grounds us in a time in the wilderness. In Lent, we wander with our ancestors, longing for new life in a land of promise and opportunity. We are reminded of our dependence on God and the many ways that sin separates us from one another, from God and from the future we are promised.



Yet we are reminded that, even as we journey toward that promised ending, we are not alone. **We cling to God’s promise: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (Isaiah 43:19).**

This promise is the Lenten theme for ELCA World Hunger’s 40 Days of Giving. Through the sessions of this study, stories from companions and partners and other resources, we will have the chance to reflect on the ways God’s promise sustains and challenges us and our church. We will hear neighbors, near and far, reveal the ways God is at work in our world, making a way in the wilderness still.

We invite you to journey with us and to reflect on how far we have come and how far we still have to go. This Lent, we long together for a future of rest from our labors, a future of wholeness and fullness — a future when all will be fed. And this Lent, we trust together that — even now — God is making a way in the wilderness, leading us toward that future and inviting us to inspire hope and courage along the way.

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***"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor"
(Deuteronomy 26:5).***

**Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9
-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13**

We have a curious set of readings for this first Sunday of Lent. Biblical scholars believe that Deuteronomy 26:5-10 is a script for someone making an offering of what was called the "first fruits," a religious practice for farming communities. Following the first harvest that the Israelites reaped in the Promised Land, they were to gather a basket of select produce from the fields and carry it to the priest. When the priest laid the basket at the altar, the person making the offering would then say the following:

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me (Deuteronomy 26:5-10).

These verses fit well with this somber season. Lent is, if nothing else, a time of looking backward and a time of looking forward. In its 40 days, we remember how far we have fallen short of the glory of God. In it, too, we look ahead with longing to the breaking of the Easter dawn and the unveiling of the promise of God, who by grace offers us a future we could never earn.

With Lenten memory, we recall the journey of our biblical ancestors, the Hebrews led by God from slavery to freedom through generations in the wilderness, and we too reflect on what being descendants of oppressed slaves whom the Lord brought “out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” means for us today. The formulaic verses of Deuteronomy recall this history, reminding the worshiper with their produce just how far God has carried God’s people, from the “wandering Aramean,” Jacob, through Egypt, and to a new life and new covenant with God.

The danger inherent in this journey from Egypt to the Promised Land is difficult for us to capture today. Even without the threat of Pharaoh’s army, to wander in the wilderness without permanent shelter, a stable source of fresh water or the means to grow food meant risking death from all sides. The lament of the people is understandable. They cry out to Moses, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt ... for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Exodus 16:3). The Hebrews, led by Moses, were dependent on God’s response to their complaint: manna, a bread-like substance, rained down at night to fill them.

For our ancestors, the wilderness may have seemed like a trial to be endured and, if lucky, survived.

Perhaps that trial isn't as hard for us to relate to that trial as it might seem. How often do we experience life as having more risks than rewards or more trials than triumphs? With rates of hunger around the world skyrocketing during the COVID-19 pandemic, natural and unnatural disasters wreaking havoc, and conflict uprooting lives, the world can often feel like a wilderness to be endured and, if lucky, survived.

The witness of our biblical ancestors is critical for us during Lent. The history recalled in the ceremony of the offering of the “first fruits” in Deuteronomy reminds us of two important truths as we begin this season.

The first truth is that God is not the source of suffering. Even as the wandering Hebrews saw their time in the wilderness, at times, as a grueling test administered by an exacting God, it was God who journeyed with them. God responded to their cries with sustenance and protection that enabled them to survive.

The second truth might best be summed up in the popular quote from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*: “Not all those who wander are lost.” Even when the way seemed uncertain for Jacob, the “wandering Aramean,” he was never alone as he sought a land to call his own. God was leading him somewhere as surely as God had greater things in store for the Hebrews than a mere flight from Egypt.

These truths lie at the foundation of the church's witness today — even as so many of our neighbors face the uncertainty of survival in a world where as many as 811 million people are undernourished. In the Chiredzi District of Zimbabwe, Emma Mangwende gives voice to this uncertainty when she wonders, in her words, “how to survive as an old lady looking after seven grandchildren.”

What would being grounded in these truths look like for us — a church accompanying neighbors with challenges like Emma's?

We can start by responding to the realities of hunger and poverty now and working with companions and partners with a vision for the future. In Zimbabwe, Lutheran Development Services (LDS) embodies this vision, working with Emma and other residents of the Chiredzi District to implement new models of farming that conserve water, preserve soil and increase yields. This work reflects the LDS vision of "transformed, robust and resilient communities living a just, peaceful and dignified life manifesting God's love." It is a testament to the two truths revealed in the story of God's journey with God's people in the readings for this Lent.

As we respond to hunger in the world, we do so knowing that God has provided abundantly to meet our every need, even as inequities and injustice prevent so many of our neighbors from enjoying the fruits of God's creation. Our response — and our Lenten confession of the ways we have fallen short in responding — bear witness to the truth that inequities ought not to be. Amid risk and uncertainty, the work of neighbors such as Emma and LDS and of congregations in the United States and around the world is a testament that, even now, God is giving life to a promise of "a land flowing with milk and honey," a world in which hunger and poverty will be no more.

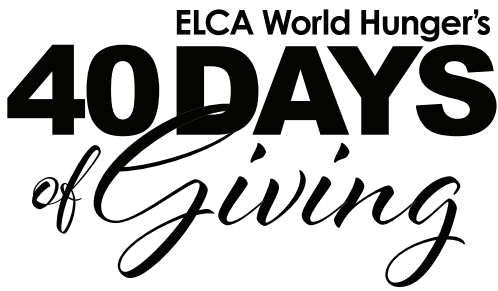
This Lent we look back, remembering the ways God has been with us in our journey, and we look forward, longing for the fulfillment of God's Easter promise. And we work, trusting that the God of our wandering ancestors is being revealed still today in our neighbors as we find our way through the wilderness together.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1)** Think of a time when a situation seemed particularly uncertain or challenging. In what ways was God present with you?
- 2)** How might the church's work alongside people facing hunger and poverty bear witness to God's promise for the future?
- 3)** Imagine you had to rewrite the offering prayer from Deuteronomy 26:5-10. What would you include? What moments or events from your life or the life of your community would be part of your prayer?
- 4)** How does (or should) being descendants of "a wandering Aramean" such as Jacob shape the work of the church today?

PRAYER

God of our yesterdays and tomorrows, you guided our ancestors through the wilderness to freedom, a new home and a future with promise. Turn our hearts toward our neighbors who face uncertainty, insecurity and risk today. Inspire within us compassion for their needs, gratitude for their gifts and a holy yearning for justice, that all may experience safety, security and hope in our world today. In your name, we pray, amen.



WEEK 2

Wandering in the Wilderness

"I must be on my way" (Luke 13:33).

**Readings: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1;
Luke 12:31-35**

As we saw in the reflection for Week 1, Lent is a story of the journey of God's people. It is our story, or more appropriately the story of "God with us." During Lent, we remember the ancient Hebrews' journey from slavery in Egypt and a generation spent wandering in the wilderness, as recounted in the offering of the "first fruits" in Deuteronomy. We also reenact, in our own small ways, Jesus' journey into the wilderness as it was described in the Gospel of Luke in the first week of Lent. The fast that many Christians commit to during Lent reflects Jesus' own fast in the wilderness.

In this sacred season, we turn inward, reflecting on our dependence on God's grace. Marked by ashes at the start, we enter the 40 days of Lent with penitent hearts and awareness of our need for God's mercy. Repentance and self-reflection are important practices, but it's easy to stay here, forgetting that the season is about so much more than our own self-examination.

Martin Luther captured this well. Luther defined repentance in two ways: "contrition...and in taking hold of the promise." Certainly, confession of the many ways we have fallen short is a key part of the

spiritual practice of Lent. But the season of Lent also leads us to turn outward, as Luther wrote, “taking hold of the promise” of God as we both yearn for and proclaim Jesus’ words that define his time in the wilderness: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because [the Lord] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ... [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

The promise of good news is the gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ, a promise of new life in the fullness of God’s reign. It is the promise of the Gospels and the prophets, the promise clung to by our ancestors in faith and the promise that sustains the people of God today in communities around the world who accompany one another amid staggering challenges of poverty, hunger and injustice.

Jesus not only proclaims the promise but lives it. He shows us what it means to live according to the promise — boldly, courageously and with faith unceasing — from Galilee to Calvary. In the face of religious and political persecution, Jesus lives the daring life of faith in God’s grace.

While his trial before Pilate gets more attention, Jesus’ unrelenting march toward Jerusalem is one of the clearest examples of how to “take hold of the promise.” He travels from town to town, “teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem” (Luke 13:22). At one stop, a group of Pharisees warns him that he must flee because Herod wants to kill him. Jesus responds: “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work’” (Luke 13:31-32).

Herod is coming for him, and Jesus responds, “I have work to do.” Jesus demonstrates a daring confidence that not even death can stop the work of God in the world. People of faith bring Jesus’ daring, grace-formed confidence to the calling of the church: seeing — even amid the threat of death — that there is work to be done.

In Indonesia, the threat from HIV and AIDS is very real. The island country is currently experiencing one of the fastest-growing HIV epidemics in the world. In 2018 (the most recent year for which data are available), 38,000 people died from an AIDS-related illness, an increase of 60% from 2010. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 640,000 people in the country were living with HIV as of 2018, but WHO estimates that only about half of people infected with HIV are aware that they have it.

The Batak Christian Protestant Church (HKBP), a companion church of the ELCA in Indonesia, is helping people throughout the country confront the deathly disease with courage, hope and the resources they need to survive.

Arjen first came to HKBP’s AIDS Ministry (HAM) when he was 12 years old, but he was born with HIV. By the time he came to HAM, he had contracted pulmonary tuberculosis and was malnourished and very sick. His father passed away, and Arjen’s mother couldn’t afford the cost of transportation to the nearest hospital or the expensive treatments for her son. With the help of HKBP, the family was able to have Arjen evaluated at a hospital and to start him on antiretroviral medication to keep him healthy. HAM workers regularly check in on the family, helping Arjen’s mother meet his nutritional and medical needs. Seeing

the mother's financial situation, HAM also provided a revolving fund for business capital that has allowed her to secure a more stable income to support her family.

A year into Arjen's work with HAM, his health is improving and his mother's business is growing. Amid poverty, hunger and a deadly epidemic, God is at work through families such as Arjen's to bring about a future with hope.

In Lent, we remember Jesus' long walk to Jerusalem and to Calvary. And in faith, we know that nothing can stop the work of God. Together we "take hold of the promise" with confidence, knowing that, even out of death, God will bring new life and hope to the world.

Herod wants us dead? "I am casting out demons and performing cures" (Luke 13:32).

The shadow of the cross looms ahead of us? "I must be on my way" (Luke 13:33).

Poverty, hunger and disease threaten our community? Go and tell that fox that God isn't done with us yet.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1)** Think of a time when fear impacted your ministry. How does Christ encourage us to venture outside our comfort zone to love and serve our neighbors?
- 2)** What does it mean for you and your congregation to “take hold of the promise” in your community?
- 3)** How can programs such as the HKBP AIDS Ministry (HAM) help us learn about what it means to be the people of God in the world? What does Arjen’s story mean for your own ministry and life?
- 4)** In the face of death, disease and poverty, God continues to bring new life and hope. How do you, your family and your congregation bear witness to courage and hope in an uncertain world?

PRAYER

Gracious God, amid the challenges our world faces, you remind us of your promise for the future of our world. Draw near to us and draw us near to our neighbors, that we may be inspired with hope, courage and audacious faith to be the people you are calling us to be. Be present with our companions and partners around the world as we work together toward a just world where all are fed. In your holy name, amen.

“O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1).

**Readings: Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13;
Luke 13:1-9**

The Gospel reading for the third Sunday of Lent is challenging. Jesus is speaking at a large gathering (of “thousands,” we read in Luke 12) and is covering a lot of theological ground. In Chapter 13, a group from the crowd shares with him news of “the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices” (13:1). The event warrants no further description from Luke, but the picture the Gospel writer paints in just a few words is horrific. While performing a religious ceremony, a group of Galilean Jews have been slaughtered by Pilate’s soldiers.

We have no record of the event in other sources, but we do know that, tragically, it would not have been out of character for Pilate. Indeed, the end of Pilate’s rule in Judea came about from a similar incident, when Pilate ordered his soldiers to massacre a group of Samaritans on Mount Gerizim as they gathered for a religious ceremony.

Perhaps by naming the event to Jesus, the people were trying to trick him, as so many others had tried before. Or perhaps they were feeling

him out, seeing if Jesus would say anything rebellious against Pilate or Rome. Either way, Jesus doesn't take the bait. As we see so often in the Gospels, Jesus instead uses the opportunity to challenge what the people think they know about God and themselves.

At the time, the people believed that tragedies such as the massacre of the Galileans or the deadly collapse of "the tower of Siloam" (v. 4) that killed 18 people were not mere accidents; they were, as one biblical scholar writes, "the wages of sin." The violence of tyrants, the human cost of disasters, the ravages of disease — all these were viewed as the intentional consequences meted out by God because the victims had sinned. In short, they believed those who died had gotten what they deserved.

That same theological mentality persists today. A 2017 survey of Americans found Christians to be nearly twice as likely to believe that poverty results from the personal moral failings of individuals.

The biblical witness in Luke paints a different perspective. Jesus pointedly asks the crowd if the Galileans killed by Pilate and the people killed by the falling tower were worse sinners or offenders than others. It's a rhetorical question that Jesus turns to his audience. Of course, they were neither worse sinners nor more egregious offenders. The unjust rule of tyrants is not reserved for the worst of sinners, nor do disasters wait until the most immoral people are at risk.

Thus far in this season of Lent, we have been reflecting on what it means to be in the wilderness, journeying toward the promise God has in store. This encounter between Jesus and the crowd,

which began in Luke 12 and continues in Luke 13, is a poignant opportunity to continue this reflection. Jesus' rhetorical questions about violence and disaster challenge us to consider our own vulnerability and responsibility as we make our way in the world.

Jesus' question reminds the crowd that tragedy and trauma don't wait for morally upright people to get out of harm's way; we are all vulnerable as we traverse a wilderness fraught with injustice, violence, hunger and poverty. The superiority we may feel over others is neither true nor significant. In Luke, Jesus reminds us that we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And, importantly, neither Pilate nor the tower of Siloam waited to make sure the most unworthy were at risk before dealing death to the crowd.

We might say the same about hunger and poverty today: no amount of hard work can ultimately overcome an unjust system. As research has shown, even the most qualified candidates for jobs can find themselves locked out by systems rooted in prejudice. Neither moral purity nor a clean conscience can undo the damaging impact of housing discrimination that leaves some communities more vulnerable to flooding or storms than others. Hunger is not the result of personal moral failings but a risk we all take in a world still yearning for God to fulfill the promise that all will be fed.

Yet research shows clear patterns in the distribution of hunger and poverty in the United States and around the world. The reality is that not all of us are equally vulnerable to hunger or poverty, nor are we vulnerable in the same ways. Employment discrimination makes securing jobs harder for candidates of color, even if they are more qualified than candidates who are white. Gender discrimination

makes controlling land and securing loans to start a business harder for women. Public funding is often diverted to communities that are already financially secure and away from communities that are at risk. Each of these inequities deepens a person's vulnerability, shifting hunger from an incidental situation to an entrenched reality.

As we reflect on our vulnerability in the wilderness, Jesus' message in the Gospel reading drives us to reflect on our own responsibility, calling us to examine what "fruit," if any, we are producing. Is the work we do in the world reducing our shared vulnerability or increasing it? How are our laws, policies and practices making the "wilderness" a less dangerous place for ourselves and our neighbors?

The teachings Jesus offers in Luke 12 and 13 are grounded in themes of anticipation and watchfulness. The practices of repentance and reconciliation he encourages (see Luke 12:13-15 and 57-58) are part of the identity of a people looking to the coming reign of God, preparing for a world that is no longer a wilderness but a full expression of God's promise.

As the church, we are called to anticipate this promised future. In our confession, we confront the distance between where and who we are now and where and who we are called to be. In our commission, we bear witness to what we know by faith: that the death-dealing realities of a violent Pilate, crashing towers and hunger-causing injustices ought not to be. These realities are no more part of God's plan for us now than they are part of God's plan for our future.

As we journey together in the wilderness this Lent, Jesus' words remind us of what it means to be vulnerable, to be responsible and to bear witness to the future we know God has in store.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1)** What situations or circumstances have left you or your community feeling vulnerable? How does faith in God help you navigate times when you feel powerless or at risk?
- 2)** Consider some of the observations about hunger and poverty in the study session for this week. What are some of the factors that make us and our neighbors vulnerable to hunger and poverty?
- 3)** In this week's readings, what is Jesus saying about what it means to be the people of God?
- 4)** As Lutherans, we believe we are saved by grace despite our own sin. How does the truth of grace change how we relate to our neighbors, especially our neighbors facing hunger or poverty?

PRAYER

Loving God, you sent your Son to save us when we could not save ourselves. Yet we still strive to save ourselves. Forgive us for the ways we have divided your world of grace according to our own false ideas of worth. Remind us of the gracious love that creates, saves and sustains us. Move us to be witnesses of your grace in the world and to seek new ways of sharing that with our neighbors. In your loving name we pray, amen.

“They ate the crops of the land” (Joshua 5:12).

**Readings: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21;
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32.**

The reading from Joshua for this week is brief, but it recounts the time the Hebrews, who left Egypt under God’s care, had so longed to see: the end of their exodus and the beginning of their life in the Promised Land of Canaan. No longer would their food rain down from the heavens; now, they would be fed by their own produce:

The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year (Joshua 5:12).

Certainly the people’s entrance into the Promised Land is not the end of their dependence on God. Their food may no longer miraculously fall from the sky, but a new miracle springs from the land God created and is nurtured by farmers who embody God’s creative care. Settling in Canaan is just the beginning of the story of God’s people — not the end.

But there is a transformation in the now-settled people, evident in the difference between manna from heaven and “the crops of the land.” In the common language of today’s world, we might call this the difference between charity and self-sufficiency.

The church has been involved in responding to human need, especially hunger, since its very beginning. The sacrament of Holy Communion began as a full meal in the Christian community, particularly for those who otherwise might not have been able to feed themselves. By the second and third centuries, care for people who were hungry or poor was so central to the church's identity that bishops, whose roles included managing the church's social ministries, were sometimes called "lovers of the poor."

Feeding people who hunger is still crucial to the church's identity. Our latest survey data show that well over 70% of ELCA congregations participate in direct-feeding ministries. Early numbers indicate that over 95% of congregations participate in some form of response to hunger. Feeding ministries can be crucial lifelines for the more than 38 million people in the United States who are uncertain of their next meal. During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with sudden job loss and supply chain shortages, feeding ministries such as these swiftly adapted to meet the exploding need. This was critical support, particularly for those neighbors unable to access social safety-net programs such as SNAP or the federal stimulus payments.

Feeding ministries stand at the forefront of hunger work, providing opportunities for neighbors to build relationships and for communities to draw together toward effective solutions. But ending hunger requires more. As theologian Samuel Torvend has written, "In addition to charitable response is discerning why people ... are suffering in the first place. And that moves us from charitable giving ... into asking the larger question, which is, 'Why is there injustice?'"

What is it within the larger system in which people live that produces this kind of suffering?"

Behind the long lines at food pantries and the pallets of goods at food banks lies the reality that ending hunger will require more than food. There are some times when we must focus our efforts together on meeting immediate need. But at all times, the church is called to something more.

The church's work in hunger responds not only to a problem but to a promise. We know by faith that hunger is not what God intends, that the One who created and sustains us is leading us to a future in which all will be fed, as surely as God led our ancestors through the desert to the Promised Land. The response of the church is rooted in the larger witness of faith holding that the systems and conditions that create scarcity are wrong, and that we can still create a life of security and sufficiency, even on this side of the fullness of God's reign.

In Pueblo County, Colo., Posada accompanies neighbors who experience homelessness as they work together toward this vision. With support from ELCA World Hunger, Posada aspires to provide for the immediate needs of people who lack stable housing while enabling them to address the problems that have led to their situation. Daniel is one of many people Posada has worked with to secure housing. Assisted by Posada, Daniel was able to transition from a long-term care facility to stable housing that he can call his own. Posada continues to work with him so that he can pay for utilities.

Posada helps neighbors meet their most immediate needs, connecting them to programs that offer funds for food and shelter. But the work doesn't stop there; Posada works with neighbors to secure the housing, support and stability they will need to thrive in the future.

As Moses and the Hebrews left Egypt, they were sustained by God's gift of manna. This food from heaven satisfied their hunger and helped them survive their time in the wilderness. But God had more in store for them — not just an end to their hunger but a new life and hope, a future as a people renewed in their relationship to God, to each other and to a land they could call their own. Eating their fill of manna was not the end but the means, allowing them to reach a place where they would thrive on “the crops of the land.”

Amid our own trial and challenge during a pandemic that stretched our food systems and charitable ministries to near-capacity, we might forget the vision that inspires the church's hunger ministries in the first place. But during Lent, a season of self-reflection and renewal, the crossing over of the Hebrews from the wilderness to Gilgal, where they would become the nation Israel, reminds us of that vision. We cling to this promise that God will provide not just manna today but “crops of the land” tomorrow, granting us a new opportunity to build community and share in God's journey toward a just world where all are fed.

This is the vision that inspires, motivates and shapes the many ways this church is active in the world, responding not just to the problem of hunger but to the promise of God for a future in which all who are weary — from journeying, from struggling, from working, from waiting — will find rest.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) What does “home” mean to you? What do you think it meant for the Israelites to settle in their new home and to eat the crops of their own land?
- 2) How might uncertainty about housing impact other aspects of someone’s life?
- 3) What might Posada’s ministry say about what it means to be the people of God? How does addressing housing insecurity reflect the church’s calling to be the people of God?
- 4) Consider your community. What housing issues do you and your neighbors face? How might your congregation be part of addressing these issues?

PRAYER

God of our wanderings and our settling, you guided your people through the wilderness with gifts of manna and water to sustain them. Be with us in our own times of uncertainty and fear. Send your Spirit among us, that your church may be a sign of welcome in the world. When we are comfortable, open our hearts to our neighbors' discomfort. When we are uncomfortable, sustain us with hope and courage. Bless us, that we may be blessings to one another. In your name we pray, amen.

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WEEK 5
**A Way in the
Wilderness**

“Do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19).

**Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14,
John 12:1-8**

Each of the sessions of this Lenten study has been grounded in a verse from this week’s readings:

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert (Isaiah 43:19).

From the first-fruits offering of Deuteronomy to the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, our reflections have pointed to how God continues to “make a way in the wilderness” and calls us to be part of that journey for ourselves and our neighbors. The Scripture readings this season remind us of the promise of new life in Canaan for our ancestors and new life in Christ for us all.

We have imagined a world without hunger, heard of God’s abundant provision of manna and seen the ways the church has worked tirelessly, in the past and today, to end hunger.

Now we reach the culmination of this movement toward the fulfillment of God’s promise, wherein Jesus announces: “You will always have the poor among you” (John 12:8 NIV).

It's not the most encouraging verse in the Bible.

How often have people twisted these words into an excuse for passivity or a sneering retort to proclamations of hope that hunger and poverty can, one day, end? Along with its partner in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 ("Anyone unwilling to work should not eat"), it's one of the "hard passages" for people of faith eager to inspire others to respond to hunger and poverty. These troublesome verses are often used to support restrictive, counterintuitive policies and practices that inhibit real progress against hunger and poverty. Why try harder to end hunger and poverty if even Jesus says poverty isn't going away?

The passage yields more when we dig a little deeper. Jesus may actually be referring to an earlier part of the Bible here, and in that earlier verse the words are no statement of fact but a challenge to the people of God. The verse appears in a section of Deuteronomy about the Jubilee Year, a time every seven years when debts were forgiven. That earlier passage sheds new light on the verse from John:

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:11).

Far from resigning us to poverty in the world, the verse challenges followers of Christ. In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Martin Luther writes, "'The poor you always have with you,' just as you will have all other evils. But constant care should be taken that, since these evils are always in evidence, they are always opposed."

For Luther, to “always have the poor among you” meant to be confronted always by God’s call to respond to human suffering and oppose the evil that creates it. This is not resignation but activation of the people of God in the service of the neighbor.

What’s more, we may find in Jesus’ words a lesson for our identity as church together. “You will always have the poor among you.” If we are truly the people of God, then we are called to be in community with neighbors who have been marginalized, excluded, oppressed and impoverished by the world’s injustice.

As church, our calling is not merely to minister to our neighbors but to bear witness to the “new thing” God is doing in our world, a new community God is making possible. This is not easy work. Confronting hunger and poverty alongside our neighbors means facing the dangerous realities that impact our neighbors.

In Palestine, Defense of Children International–Palestine (DCIP), supported by ELCA World Hunger, works with children and families to protect their rights and give them the care and support they need. Settlement expansion in the West Bank and increased military presence in daily life put children at risk of negative encounters with Israeli forces. Children detained for violating the often-discriminatory laws of Israeli occupation risk abuse from both Israeli and Palestinian forces. Despite significant legal reform in recent years, DCIP has found that practices have yet to fully align with domestic or international legal frameworks for juvenile justice and that children are paying the price, navigating a military legal system that fails to meet the minimum international standards, particularly for juveniles.

DCIP provides both legal and social support for children accused of crimes, and it works with their families, many of whom live in poverty, to improve their situations emotionally, socially and financially through vocational training, the support of social workers and more. This support is critical to addressing the root causes of hunger and poverty in Palestine.

Responding to hunger means accompanying neighbors as they confront the systems of injustice that create hunger. It means facing harsh realities with realistic perspectives. This is not the false “realism” that twists Jesus’ words in the Gospel but the realistic acknowledgement that we face our own journey in the wilderness before we reach the fullness of God’s promise. Friends, we have a long way to go.

And yet ... and yet ...

As we have seen throughout our Lenten journey, we are not going it alone. God is with us along the way, inspiring hope and courage and revealing Godself in the neighbors we encounter along the way. We know that this Lenten journey is not the end. The season’s fasting, praying and self-reflecting spiritual disciplines prepare us for the road ahead, the road that leads to the cross — and beyond, to a new community God makes possible.

This is not an easy road to travel. But we know that, even amid the challenges ahead, the “new thing” God is doing “springs forth,” that God is even now working to “make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (Isaiah 43:19).

Do you not perceive it?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1)** What does it mean for the church to “always have the poor” with us? How might we rethink Jesus’ words in light of the study session for this week?
- 2)** In what ways does your congregation act as a neighbor toward people in need in your community?
- 3)** Why is the church called to work for justice in the world? What might the work of DCI-Palestine teach us about being the people of God?
- 4)** How can the church inspire hope when the promised future can seem so far away?
- 5)** Where is God calling you and your congregation to be today? How can or will you be part of the “new thing” God is calling forth?

PRAYER

God of the poor widow, the lost sheep,
and the wandering Aramean,
God of the hungry, the thirsty, and the stranger,
God of the naked, the ill, and the imprisoned,

We confess before you that the church has not always been where you have called us to be. We have failed to seek your face in our neighbors in need. We have allowed despair to bind our hands and feet. Change us, O God. Free us to act with hope and courage.

Open our hearts to perceive your presence in and among our neighbors. Inflammate us with holy passion for the work you invite us to in the world. Breathe new life into your church, that we may be the people you call us to be in the world you call into being:

A church of the poor widow, the lost sheep
and the wandering Aramean.

A church of the hungry, the thirsty and the stranger.

A church of the naked, the ill and the imprisoned.

Do a "new thing" with us and through us, that we may be a community of hope, comfort and welcome — a living sign of the way you are making in the wilderness. Amen.

NOTES



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