

Called to Repair the Breach

A Lenten Study of the Revised Common Lectionary

ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING

SPECIAL OFFERINGS

HUNGER • DISASTER • DEVELOPMENT



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Common Abbreviations:

PC(USA)	Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
PDA	Presbyterian Disaster Assistance
PHP	Presbyterian Hunger Program
PMA	Presbyterian Mission Agency
SDOP	Committee for the Self-Development of People

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One Great Hour of Sharing is one of four annual special offerings. The four church-wide Special Offerings of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—One Great Hour of Sharing, Pentecost Offering, Peace & Global Witness Offering, and Christmas Joy Offering—play an important role in defining what it means to be a connectional church. Over the years these offerings have provided ways for individuals and congregations to join together with each other and in partnership with other Christians in responding to a variety of concerns; and offer opportunities for partnership, learning, and witness that profoundly affect the life of the Church as a collective witness to Jesus Christ’s love for the whole world.

This resource was produced by the staff of the Special Offerings of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in partnership with directors and coordinators of the ministries of One Great Hour of Sharing. The office of Special Offerings is a ministry of Mission Engagement & Support for Presbyterian Mission, an agency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Much of the content of this resource was developed by the named contributors; any borrowed resources include external links or bibliographical information, when possible. No permission necessary for reproduction of this resource if used by any Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)-affiliated congregation or ministry.



Introduction

In Isaiah 58, the author is addressing a people who have returned to Jerusalem, where the Temple—God’s house—was in shambles. It must have been a heartbreaking scene. And amidst that rubble, the prophet challenges the people, not to rebuild the building or to restore their religious rituals, but to care for the hungry, the weak and the vulnerable—the prophet called the people to become the house of God.

We are the house of God, too. We are called to become, as Isaiah promised long ago, “repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in.” Together, we become the household of God. Through One Great Hour of Sharing, we extend shelter to those who have no place to stay, offer compassion to those who have pain—be it physical, emotional or spiritual—and we set a feast, with God, for those who lack access to enough food to eat.

The season of Lent is a time for attending to our spiritual lives and refocusing on our relationship with God. As we reflect on our faith lives, we will eventually come to the question of how we are living out our faith. How are we—or, how do we become—“repairers of the breach”? What we do, individually and communally, is the visible expression and physical fulfillment of our spiritual lives. Taking time to integrate our understanding of our faith with our actions, as individuals, and our ministry, as congregations, is central to journeying through Lent.

This study is meant to help Presbyterians understand the way One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS) can be the aid in making the turn from internalized faith understanding to practical theological integration. In short, it’s how we live out our faith through OGHS. These things that we do as the house of God—extending shelter, offering compassion, and providing food—are embodied by the ministries of One Great Hour of Sharing and by every person and congregation who joins in them.

These reflections follow the readings of Scripture in the Revised Common Lectionary (Year A) with reflections that drive the reader to consider the weekly scripture readings with an eye on building the house of God as we address hunger, disaster, and development as the Church. Each reflection is written by a different staff member and will have the following elements:

LECTIONARY TEXTS

The Scripture readings from each Sunday’s lectionary readings, following the [Revised Common Lectionary \(Year A\)](#)[©], are listed with clickable links for easy reference.

INTERPRETING THE TEXT

Each reflection will begin with a deeper look at the texts themselves to help understand more about when it was written, to whom it was written, and why it was written. This can be helpful in a more significant study of the texts (exegesis, for example) or it can provide good learning material for a bible study.

CONTEXTUAL REFLECTIONS

As the focus shifts from theological reflection toward practical embodiment, the writers turn to consider what meaning the readings have for the lives of God’s people—then and today.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM OUR MINISTRIES

The focus on the week’s Scripture is then refocused using a handful of illustrations and stories from the ministries of One Great Hour of Sharing—stories that resulted from God’s people *being* the house of God through this Offering.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Questions to consider during your personal study or to pose to a group during a group study of the passages.

RESOURCES

A variety of pieces that may be helpful, informative, or inspiring for those participating in or leading reflections on the week's studies.

You will notice that this study only includes five weeks of content, leaving Palm Sunday and Holy Week without a reflection. The intent is to create space for your own time of reflection and interpretation of the season's lessons in your own way. How each of us and how each community of faith embodies our faith is different. We have included a host of resources for your consideration—everything from paintings to videos and children's stories to mission opportunities. We pray that this may be a helpful push to consider how our actions, individually and communally, express our faith.

Regarding the resources in this guide, most (if not all) are available online for digital use. For your convenience, any underlined text followed by a link icon (🔗) has an embedded clickable link. Should any of those links not work, try re-downloading the document from our website (pcusa.org/oghs-bible-study) or contact us (SpecialOfferings@pcusa.org) for a full list of the links.

Thank you for taking time to use this resource and for joining us as we consider our calling to be “repairers of the breach”. We hope this is as encouraging and enlightening for you and your community as it was for us.

If you have questions about this study, the resources mentioned therein, the ministries of One Great Hour of Sharing or the other Special Offerings of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we welcome them.

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Lent I | March 1, 2020 (PDA “Blue Shirt” Sunday)

Reverend Edwin Gonzáles-Castillo, Associate for Disaster Response and Refugee Ministry—Latin America
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LECTIONARY TEXTS

First Reading [Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7](#)[℣]

Psalm [Psalm 32](#)[℣]

Second Reading [Romans 5:12-19](#)[℣]

Gospel [Matthew 4:1-11](#)[℣]

INTERPRETING THE TEXT

The season of Lent is a great opportunity for the church to carry out a time of reflection, individually and collectively, on the way we are living. This week’s texts, as well as those for the coming weeks, provide us with a wonderful opportunity to examine our testimony as Christians and the way we embody being the Church.

The lectionary texts for this first Sunday of Lent lead us through the disparity between the bounty of the Garden of Eden and the scarcity of the desert. The texts are well-known and have been preached from our pulpits many times. These two events present temptation in two contrasting places with two very different responses. On the one hand, we find the story of “the fall” where Adam and Eve, in the midst of abundance and in the privileged position of having access to everything they needed, are tempted to have something else. The temptation does not occur in the midst of a shortage or a need; on the contrary, according to the text, both human beings have access to all the fruits of the garden—indeed, everything they could need, *except* . . . And it is this exception that led them to “fall.”

On the other hand, the Gospel of Matthew shares a different response in the midst of an extremely precarious situation. The scene, contrasting what Adam and Eve experienced in Eden, is set in the desert. It is a scene of scarcity, lack of resources, suffering and loss. Unlike in Eden, the desert is the absence of what is necessary to survive, where need becomes the order of the day. There, Jesus is facing the reality of the desert: hunger, thirst, burning sun and disorientation. The desert is a place of temptation. Before the encounter with the tempter, Jesus faced the temptation of the desert. The desert’s temptations cause despair, greed, sadness, loneliness and fear. In the midst of this desert, Jesus is tempted.

Jesus is tempted to turn the stones into bread, throw himself into the void from the pinnacle of the temple, and bow before the tempter. These temptations are even more significant given where Jesus is—physically, emotionally, spiritually and socially.

CONTEXTUAL REFLECTIONS

Both places, the desert full of despair and the garden vacant of need, are experiences not far from our own reality. In the United States, both life circumstances can be seen side by side. Terms like food deserts, educational deserts, employment deserts and wage deserts, refer to the life situation of millions of people in our states and territories.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, in 2015, about 23.5 million people live in food deserts. Nearly half of them are also low-income, and approximately 2.3 million people (2.2 percent of all US households) live in low-income rural areas more than 10 miles from a supermarket.¹ Contrasting these desert-like statistics is the reality that, according to Federal Reserve Board in 2018, the top 10 percent of U.S. households controlled 70 percent of the total household wealth.²

It is not a secret that this disparity and scarcity are due, in large part, to how the greatest economic interests respond to a specific (i.e., wealthier) sector of society and not to the needs of those communities in precarious

¹ United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. (2009). “Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences.” United States Department of Agriculture, from www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/42711/12716_ap036_1_.pdf[℣].

² Batty, M, Bricker, J., et al. (2019). *Introducing the Distributional Financial Accounts of the United States*, Finance and Economics Discussion Series 2019-017. Washington: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, <https://doi.org/10.17016/FEDS.2019.017>[℣].

situations. It is no coincidence that the communities where these “deserts” occur most frequently are communities with a high concentration of people of color, immigrants and communities with low economic resources.

In Puerto Rico, as a result of the economic depression of the 1930s, a large number of people living in the rural areas of the island were forced to move to the metropolitan area in search of jobs. Sectors such as Barrio Obrero, el Fanguito, las Monjas, and several others developed on government land around a canal, Caño Martín Peña. People who found work began to build houses on whatever land they found available. Today these communities are among the most vulnerable in the San Juan area. The lack of care and attention from the government and the economic interests of some sectors close to the canal, as well as gentrification, have contributed to the lack of development of these sectors and further impoverished its residents.

The Caño community, like many others around United States, lacks many of the services and resources that those with greater economic income enjoy. For example, just a few miles away, in the eastern region of Puerto Rico, the island municipality of Vieques faced a lack of food and water for several weeks after Hurricane María. Today, Vieques has no hospital, several schools are still closed and many homes, most owned by the elderly, still show the storm’s damage. “Deserts” are everywhere, and the vast majority of their victims are the most vulnerable.

Today, those who live in Eden continue to fall under the temptation of greed, always wanting more. At the same time, millions of people continue to walk in endless “deserts” with scarce resources, where the promises of improvements and aid are like mirages.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM OUR MINISTRIES

As the Church, we are called to see beyond our walls and see the deserts around us. We are called to be confronted with the question of what we are doing to turn deserts into Eden. How do we contribute to the perpetuity of these “deserts” by being complicit through our silence?

Through different programs, the PC(USA) has established projects to create an oasis in the deserts, draw attention to the injustices of those deserts and seek to eradicate them. The Presbyterian Hunger Program (PHP), Committee for the Self-Development of People (SDOP), Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) and other ministries of our Church are identifying these “deserts” and fostering partnerships with ministries to change the reality of communities in need, like Caño Martín Peña, Vieques, Flint and many others.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1) Today’s gospel reading ends with Jesus still in the desert, attended by angels who are caring for his needs. How might we, as a community of faith, be angels (messengers of God) in the deserts within and around our own neighborhoods and communities? What can we do on our own or with our families? How can we serve those nearby and far away?

2) As the Church, we are called to see beyond our walls and see the deserts around us. We are called to be confronted with the question of what we are doing to turn deserts into Eden. How do we contribute to the perpetuity of these “deserts” (consider, too, that holding silent is the equivalent of affirming the status quo; complicity through silence is still complicity)?

RESOURCES

In the wilderness of God

by Andrés Contreras, Chile; translation by Reverend Edwin González-Castillo

*In the wilderness of God, I looked for water,
but it was hard for me to drink it since the rain fell only by drops . . .*

*In the wilderness of God, I looked for food,
and I only found a snake that kept hindering my walking . . .*

*In the wilderness of God, I sought shade to protect myself from heat and not die,
and I realized that there were only cactus that didn’t help so much . . .*



*In the wilderness of God, I looked for a place to live,
and I only found thousands of kilometers of sand and dunes
where it was impossible to build a home . . .*

*In the wilderness of God, I looked for human beings with whom to talk,
and everyone was away in the city,
busy in their personal projects without having time for anything . . .*

*In the wilderness of God, I looked for work,
and I only found notices and papers that the trade winds of the desert took them . . .*

*In the wilderness of God, I looked for a church,
and I found a rocky desert where there was a large construction with the smell of oil,
it had large pillars where there was a warning that said:
prohibited to enter with desert sand on the feet . . .*

*In the wilderness of God, I looked for God and I did not find him,
there was only one phrase in a rock from which a lot of water came out:*

*“I created the wilderness,
God.”*



Lent II | March 8, 2020

Reverend Rebecca Barnes, Coordinator, Presbyterian Hunger Program (PHP), Presbyterian Mission

LECTIONARY TEXTS

First Reading.....[Genesis 12:1-4a](#)[℣]

Psalms.....[Psalm 121](#)[℣]

Second Reading.....[Romans 4:1-5,13-17](#)[℣]

Gospel.....[John 3:1-17](#)[℣]

INTERPRETING THE TEXT

In the texts of the second Sunday of Lent, we hear that God's promises, God's presence, God's love and God's grace are what keep us and save us. In newness, in difficulty, in chaos or in confusing times, God is actively involved in the flourishing, birthing and guarding of life. When people leave home and kindred (like Abraham), God promises to accompany them. When people feel isolated and helpless (like the psalmist), God is present there beside them. When people don't understand how to live in God's kin-dom (like Nicodemus), we have a Savior who reminds us that God loves the world and seeks to redeem it. When there is a threat that people might misunderstand their own deeds as attracting power, privilege and justification (the audience in Romans), we are called back to remember that all good things come from God's grace.

For those on the move, God is part of unfamiliar and difficult journeys. For those looking to the hills crying for help, God is nearby guarding them. For those who misunderstand how to apply religious instruction to daily life, God reminds us that it was love that came to save the world and we must emerge in a new life bathed in that love. For those exhausting themselves trying to do good deeds to earn reputation or power in human society, we are reminded that it is God's grace and our faithful response to that grace that are our inheritance and our salvation.

CONTEXTUAL REFLECTIONS AND ILLUSTRATIONS FROM OUR MINISTRIES

In Lent, we slow down and reflect. We mimic the earth's natural rhythm of using darker, longer days this time of year, to be productive in less showy, obvious ways. We claim a little quiet, fertile time to stir up the promise of life that has not yet come. We know that God's gifts and abundance are all around us, yet the world's hardships and people's pain also are evident. Like our ancestors of faith in all these scripture passages, we come with great need before God. How do we hear God's Word and use it to reshape and inform our discipleship?

Like Abraham and other ancestors of faith, people all around the world are still migrating. For various reasons, all along a spectrum of hope to despair, people move. In many places, people are displaced by famine, violence, conflict or climate-change-caused natural disasters. In other places, people are forced to flee because of hunger, poverty, political upheaval or the lack of sustainable livelihoods. One Great Hour of Sharing programs walk alongside people on the move. From internally displaced persons in the Cameroonian conflict to displaced persons living in famine in South Sudan, the Presbyterian Hunger Program stands with global partners to address needs. From asylum seekers and refugees crossing the U.S.-Mexico border to immigrants who already live in community and church with us, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance provides resources and assistance and welcome. From immigrants in the Southwest to undocumented community members in New York, Self-Development of People is involved in local communities who are solving their own challenges creatively. Through OGHS, we feel God's presence and witness in those who are on the move in the world. Likewise, we hope to ourselves convey God's presence and promise with those on the move, through our partnerships and solidarity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) When we think about Abraham's call by God to migrate ([Gen. 12:1-4a](#)[℣]), how might we understand migration as an answer to a call or the idea of being forced to flee? What factors are causing global migration today?
- 2) What does the assurance of God's gracious protection and constant presence ([Ps. 121](#)[℣]) mean in these anxious times and for people on anxious journeys?
- 3) Jesus compares God's mysterious ways to the way we can't know where the wind will blow ([John 3:1-17](#)[℣]). How might God be using current events to bring new life and love to the world?



4) If God comes to us through Jesus Christ in saving love ([John 3:16-17](#)[Ⓞ]), what would it mean for the church to be a place not of condemnation but of saving love for the world, particularly for migrating populations?

5) God created a way to create a multitude of descendants for Abraham and Sarah, although originally they were not able to have children ([Rom. 4:1-5,13-17](#)[Ⓞ]). How might God be working in your life to make a way out of what seems like a dead end?

6) Because we are justified by faith and never by our own works ([Rom. 4:1-5,13-17](#)[Ⓞ]), how do we act so that our actions are thankful responses to God's grace (rather than deeds we think will earn approval from the world around us)? What would grace-filled, grateful actions look like in our time and place, related to immigrants, internally displaced people, refugees and asylum-seekers?

RESOURCES

For worship resources, visit <https://pda.pcusa.org/pda/resource/WRD-worship-resources/>[Ⓞ]

Learn more about the root causes of migration through a viewing of the Office of the General Assembly's film *The Genesis of Exodus*[Ⓞ] and its study resources.

Learn more about the PCUSA's response to immigration through advocacy from the [Office of Immigration Issues](#)[Ⓞ], through [PDA's humanitarian aid at the U.S.-Mexico border](#)[Ⓞ] and through [climate change discussions led by PHP](#)[Ⓞ].

See what federal lawmakers are currently discussing that impact the ministries of the PC(USA) and learn about how your voice as an American Citizen can be heard on the [PC\(USA\) Action Alert](#)[Ⓞ] site.

[World Refugee Day Prayer](#)³

God of life, in whose image all humankind has been created, the sacred stories of our ancestors tell us that, from Eden onward, we have always been people on the move. We have fled in fear from despots, been driven from our homelands by conquering powers, sent into exile and enslavement. We have packed up our children and our lives, turning our back on drought, famine and pestilence, seeking lands of milk and honey, restoration and new hope. We have crossed rivers and wandered through wastelands, we have listened to the thunder from mountains and watched by night for signs and portents; and we have believed it was You, calling us into a different future; You, walking beside us on hard and dangerous paths; You, incarnate in the strangers who welcomed us along the way, making room for us to begin new lives in their midst.

And now, our faith stories have strayed from their sacred roots. Sixty-eight million children of God are on the move, just as our ancestors were. Families fleeing violence crowd our borders. Millions wait with scant hope in refugee camps across the globe. The whole creation groans in pain with these, your people, who suffer abandonment, unjust judgment, and the indifference of those who could help but will not.

Forgive us, God of the traveler, Christ the Stranger, Spirit of Welcome: We have forgotten our history, becoming captive to doctrines of fear and division; we have neglected to visit those imprisoned; we have turned away from neighbors in need and the stranger in our midst. . . . But not all.

We pray in profound thanksgiving for communities, congregations and people who see the face of God in the face of a wanderer, an asylum seeker, a refugee. We give thanks for those along the U.S. border who offer hospitality to newcomers, provide advice and resources, speak a prophetic word, open their homes and their hearts, make waters flow in the desert. . . . grant them sustaining grace, resilience and the capacity to continue to care. We give thanks for those who sit in courthouses, bearing witness during asylum and deportation hearings. We give thanks for those offering sanctuary and visiting the detained; for communities receiving those on the road and supporting those who wait; for neighbors in Latin America who provide hospitality to travelers and hope to those who were turned away. We pray for courage, generous provision and grace.

Help us, God of grace, to work with those who do your holy work of hospitality; to walk alongside those who seek safe harbor and new beginnings; to bear witness with our words and our lives to your vision of a time when tears will be no more, every nation and tribe and language will sing praise together and all will be welcome in your Holy City, shaded by the Tree of Life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. Amen.

³ Kraus, L. (2019). *Prayer for World Refugee Day*, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (<https://pda.pcusa.org/pda/resource/wrd-prayer-19/>)

Lent III | March 15, 2020 (SDOP Sunday)

Reverend Dr. Alonzo Johnson, Coordinator, Committee for the Self-Development of People (SDOP), Presbyterian Mission

LECTIONARY TEXTS

First ReadingExodus 17:1-7

PsalmPsalm 95

Second Reading.....Romans 5:1-11

GospelJohn 4:5-42

INTERPRETING THE TEXT

Lent is about power, the power to look both inward and towards transformation. The lectionary texts are also powerful. They point to the power of provision, hope and transformation in times of distress and division. With water as a central motif, the Exodus, John and Psalm (to some extent) passages give us intriguing stories about finding transformation, redemption and hope in seemingly hopeless situations. Whether it be thirsty and cantankerous Israelites grumbling and arguing in the desert, historical enemies encountered at a well, or early Christians facing a world of hostility and unwelcome, these passages convey that water is affirming, nourishing and life-giving especially when the living God is at its source.

The simpler message is that even in this time of Lent where spiritual parchedness—suffering, distress and solemnity—become central motifs in our contemporary times, God provides waters of hope and quenches and nourishes parched souls. These waters are liberating, healing and transforming. In at least three of today's lectionary texts, water also functions as a catalyst for witness. For the Israelites stuck in the wilderness, it is a grand symbol of freedom, nourishment and hope which, as a community, informs their witness to, and enlivens their praise of God's salvific power. In the case of the woman of Samaria, through the living water Jesus provides, she, despite all odds, no longer bears the identity of a despised religious enemy; conversely, she becomes one of the first missional witnesses of God's great power.

In reflecting on today's lectionary texts, I am reminded of the increasingly popular slogan "water is life." For us, I believe these texts directly point to the concern about access to water as access to new life! In our texts, God is the source, the one who provides hope through water. Through its powerful baptismal imagery of "pouring love in our hearts through the Holy Spirit," the Romans text (5:5) also buttresses this motif of God being the source of hope through the provision of water. In each scriptural motif, one sees that all who are hurt, traumatized, tired, oppressed, heavy-laden, outcast, othered, etc., have spiritual and physical access to God's replenishing gift of water. With water as the *leitmotif*, we are reminded that God radically transforms people, places and situations where conflict and division thrive, thus turning them into sites of communal restoration and nurture. As a symbol, water motifs in these texts also convey to us that water is not only connected to life, water is also connected to power! But a challenging question arises: What happens when people feel powerless and disconnected?

CONTEXTUAL REFLECTIONS

Nigerian Afrobeat musician and activist Fela Anikulapo Kuti has an intriguing song titled *Water No Get Enemy* (Pidgin English for "Water has no rival") that attests to the formidable power, necessity and indispensability of water. It is almost proverbial—like water, we as communities of faith can be representatives of great strength, power and indispensability for others. It is also a metaphor for flow and harmony—water moves as one and drops move and flow together, maybe even the flowing together of life in the Spirit.

In thinking about the issue of water accessibility, it is important that we understand that the Israelites, the psalmist, the Samaritan woman at the well and the admonitions of hope from Paul's letter to the Romans remind us that God cares and provides for all who thirst for hope, peace and justice. Having stated that, there is a great need for the community of faith to show great strength in addressing justice issues centered around water rights and accessibility. According to Water.Org, 785 million people worldwide live without access to clean and safe water.⁴

⁴ Water.org, (2020) "Water Crisis—Learn About The Global Water Crisis," Water.org, last modified January 2020, <https://www.water.org/our-impact/water-crisis/>.

According to the United Nations and its intention to address the issue of water as one of its Sustainable Development Goals, water scarcity affects more than 40 percent of the global population. Women worldwide are disproportionately affected, and the lack of safe water and sanitation directly and negatively impacts food security, health, livelihood and educational opportunities for poor families worldwide.⁵ In the context of the United States, cities like Flint, Michigan, and now more recently Newark, New Jersey, remind us about the suffering of those who live without access to clean and safe water.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM OUR MINISTRIES

The third Sunday in Lent is also Self-Development of People (SDOP) Sunday. In celebration of this OGHS ministry and its 50 years of anti-poverty work, there are two SDOP-funded projects that embody the strength and power that communities have in advocating for access to clean water. These projects are We The People of Detroit and The Women's Committee and Water Council at Villa Nueva, Panama.

We The People of Detroit is a community organization that provides education about clean water rights and advocates access to clean water through research, organizing, and community activism. Based in Detroit, Michigan, We The People of Detroit is a diverse community of activists, scholars, educators and neighbors dedicated to community coalition building and to the provision of resources that inform, train and mobilize the citizens of Detroit and beyond to improve their quality of life.

The Women's Committee and Water Council at Villa Nueva, Panama is composed of indigenous women from the remote community of Embera, Darien province, who are building a rural aqueduct which includes a 1500-gallon cement tank, with connections being made from the tank through several supply routes providing each house with a spigot. Fifty-two houses and a school will gain access to clean water. The project will significantly reduce dangerous waterborne illnesses in the entire village.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) As you read the Exodus Passage, thinking both metaphorically and physically, do you think that people still “thirst” for water? What contemporary issues facing the church constitutes people being “thirsty?”
- 2) The Psalm passage profoundly celebrates God's good creation, but also has some admonitions in verses 8-11 which refer to the groaning of the Israelites in the Exodus passage. In what ways do we “groan?” In reference to verses 9 and 10, In what way do we see God's liberating work at hand in our church and our world? Also, in reference to verse 10, what do you think the “ways of the LORD” are, and have our “hearts” in the contemporary church “gone astray?” If so, how and why?
- 3) In reading the Romans passage, what do you think Paul means by “boasting in our sufferings?” Also, what do you think Paul means when he says that we have been “reconciled?” What does reconciliation mean to you?
- 4) The John text is provocative in its mention of opposing groups Jews and Samaritans. How does this correlate with divisions we see happening around us? Metaphorically, what do you think “living water” looks like in a time of deep divisions? In what ways do you think that, like the Samaritan woman, we can “testify” to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a way that leads to change in our world?
- 5) A friend of mine once asked, “How can one do baptisms with polluted water?” How does baptism inform our sense of justice? Is there something about baptism in the reformed faith that calls us to action in addressing social ills?

RESOURCES

To learn more about the purpose and resources available for SDOP Sunday, watch [What is SDOP Sunday?](#) (2:08), with Alonzo, and visit the [SDOP Sunday Resource](#)²⁰ page.

⁵ United Nations, “Water and Sanitation—United Nations Sustainable Development Goals,” United Nations, Last Accessed 02/01/2020, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/water-and-sanitation/>²⁰.

Check out the [news release](#) and website for the documentary, [Flint: The Poisoning of an American City](#), a powerful review of the Flint Water Crisis that exceeds any news coverage, displaying underlying problems and attempts to correct the systemic issues that have surfaced.

Download the [Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations Study and Devotional Guide](#) that encourages congregations to learn about and reflect on the [United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals](#).

Lent IV | March 22, 2020

Reverend Dr. Laurie A. Kraus, Director, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA), Presbyterian Mission

LECTIONARY TEXTS

First Reading.....1 Samuel 16:1-13[℣]

Psalm.....Psalm 23[℣]

Second Reading.....Ephesians 5:8-14[℣]

Gospel.....John 9:1-41[℣]

INTERPRETING THE TEXT

Lent is long; the way of the cross is long; lament takes time. Anyone who has experienced loss and endured the valley of the shadow of grief can bear witness to this. The psalmist says, *yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil*. There is no rushing through that valley, no circumventing those hard journeys, no way over it but through it. That is the witness of the Lenten season and the work of the way of the cross. Still, the psalmist insists that even in the midst of fear and darkness and loss, *I will fear no evil, for You are with me*.

What does it mean to live as those who “fear no evil” in the midst of threat, in the face of loss, suffering or death? Two stories in this week’s lectionary illuminate a path through shadow, and the characters in them show us a way to be and to bear witness to the steadfast love of God that is always with us, even when we cannot perceive it.

The story from 1 Samuel marks a pivotal moment in the narrative of Israel’s emerging experiment with monarchy. King Saul has broken faith with the people, factions have put the young nation at the brink of civil war. The narrator tells us that God has rejected the anointed king, so Samuel the prophet has been ordered to choose a new monarch, one he will find in Bethlehem. When Samuel comes to the city, its elders meet him at the gates, trembling with fear, asking, *do you come in peace?* While Samuel assures them he does, the shadow of the power of the angry Saul hangs over this community as an almost visible threat. Danger is in the air, and it is an act of treason to sanctify a new king while the old one still lives. The elders of Bethlehem are being dragged into a conflict that they have not sought, and they are afraid. If Samuel must anoint a new king, let it be done quickly and in secret. But the story takes its time winding through the threats and the fearful unknown future. It lingers over the paths that might be taken, moving with excruciating slowness through each of the seven sons of Jesse, none of whom is the right one.

While many preachers, and the story itself, focus on the unexpected grace of the unfavored, extra child being the chosen of God, let our attention this time linger: on those who stand by while this holy drama unfolds—they are trying to manage their fear and anxiety while they wait and wonder—and on Samuel, who even though his own grief is great, finds a way to be still, to remain present to hope, even in the midst of uncertainty and grave threat. *Are all your sons here?* he asks, and on learning there is still one remaining, *Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here*. Somehow, in the midst of a knee-weakening terror, gripped by soul-sapping grief, weary of searching and not finding, Samuel finds the strength to stand, and to stand without fear . . . and more than that, to inspire the elders of the city who surround him to stand with him.

The gospel story of the man born blind gives us another way to learn to be present in the valley of the shadow—in this case, in the valley of the shadow of the silence of God and of questions that cannot be answered. *Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?* In the world of Jesus, the question was not as bad as it sounds. Maybe the disciple who asked hoped there would be, for such an apparently difficult reality, a somehow simple answer, hidden in the knowledge and the mercy of God. Like most of us, the disciples apparently believed that their ability to tolerate suffering would be enhanced by understanding the cause of suffering, by being able to assign blame, thus escaping the awful randomness of bad things happening to good people, and good things happening to bad. They also believed, apparently, that Jesus—or the God in him—both had an answer, and, more importantly, might be willing to share it.

Wouldn’t that have been something? For God to tell us **why**? For Jesus just to have answered the question for once—the man; or his folks. It doesn’t really matter which one is guilty, just that someone is—so that the painful scandal of God’s defenseless tolerance of undeserved suffering could be laid to rest at last.

The healing of the man born blind confronted neighbors, family and religious leaders with an undesirable gift. It was more than the restoration of sight to a blind man: It restored an excluded person to a place of dignity. It turned a



silent, disregarded “other” into an eloquent, self-determining, challenging equal. It healed long-standing ruptures in the neighborhood, in the blind man’s family, in the faith community, *without even bothering to ask whether those who were separated wanted to be reconciled*. What Jesus did was an act of forgiveness so radical its giver failed to even ask the question *whose fault is it, anyway?* Some people got more than they hoped for and others, less than they believed they deserved.

CONTEXTUAL REFLECTIONS

We will not sit down until he comes here. In how many struggles of faith and culture are those words being spoken, as fierce and passionate justice workers refuse to give up or go away or yield their conviction in the face of hatred and threats? Indigenous Americans standing against the appropriation of their land for pipelines. Young climate activists enjoining their elders to wake up and save the planet before it is too late. The students of Parkland, Sandy Hook, Columbine and more who will not allow us to give up efforts for legal reform of gun laws in the face of an epidemic of gun violence. *We will not sit down until . . .*

We will not sit down . . . Five years after it became public that the drinking water of the people of Flint, Michigan, had been poisoned and the crisis had been made worse through malfeasance and government neglect, the people of Flint have not sat down. They continue to work for the renewal of their city. They continue to protest the injustice of being ordered to pay for water they cannot drink or bathe in, even when their homes are threatened with liens. They lift up the troubling reality of environmental racism at work in their neighborhoods, threatening the lives of their children. They have told their story, and keep telling it not just for themselves, but for Newark, and Detroit, and hundreds of other places where the crumbling infrastructure of aging cities is not being addressed because the people who still live in those cities’ core neighborhoods are predominately people of color, without political influence and mostly living in poverty, survivors of a system of privilege that values other peoples’ well-being more than theirs. *We will not sit down until . . .*

The story in the Gospel of John invites us to consider how it might have been different for the man born blind, his family and his community of faith if, instead of working so hard to make God make things make sense, they had just gotten down into the mud with Jesus, and stayed there without anxiety or expectation until the unfolding possibility of a miracle of grace let them all get up and move on.

No one sinned, said Jesus, but, let the work of God be made visible. No one sinned. When these things happen—to a man born blind, to a young man born angry, to a mother, a child, a family, a father, or a friend—when these things happen to us and to others, there is no easy answer, but there is a simple solution: don’t run away, but get down in the mud with whoever in your world is brave enough and messy enough to join you; and make a healing paste of the dry dust and the dirt of your life . . . apply it to your own eyes, and try to see the world a little differently. *No one sinned—but, let the work of God be manifest.* Where is God, or where can God be, through us, in the life of a crying refugee child, an angry town, a disgruntled worker, a hopeless situation, an answerless question? What can we make in the mud that is beautiful, healing, transforming or even merely useful?

Lent is about being in our lives—and in our lives’ questions—for the long haul.

The interminable story, the twisting plot, the lack of clean resolution, the sudden, blinding experience of grace that somehow points us in a new and unforeseen direction without ever quite wrapping up our loose ends. We don’t control how God shows up to save us, or someone else. We don’t get to have all the answers. But we do get to choose whether we are willing to receive our sight, and what we will do with the knowledge that seeing gives us.

ILLUSTRATION FROM OUR MINISTRIES

Across the way from the now-demolished Cole Hall on the campus of Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois, six foam-core crosses were erected on what came to be known as Snow Hill. Five crosses were inscribed with the names of the students killed during the Valentine’s Day shootings in 2008, a sixth was turned the other way, its stark white façade blank. Like the man whose suicide it commemorated, its presence offered neither answers nor explanations.

But even that much ambiguity was too painful a burden for the violated university community to bear: within a day or so, the sixth cross was taken down, an action which honored the justified raw anger of the families and friends

of the shooter's victims . . . but left unaddressed the problem and the possibility presented by the life and death of Stephen Kazmierczak, the shooter. But there was another place on campus where six crosses still stood: they were draped in Lenten purple and red, and like their neighbors on Snow Hill, surrounded by flowers and gifts.

None of the six crosses bore names; all of the six were covered with words of sorrow, compassion, forgiveness, love and hope. Ryanne, Gloria, Juliana, Catalina, Daniel AND Stephen were being remembered there; six children of God whose lives were ended by violence, and whose souls are in God's keeping. It will, I hope, surprise no one reading this story to learn that the place of six crosses, and the place of prayer where six names are always spoken, was the Church—the brave and fragile community of the baffled, the broken, and the believers: willing to bear witness that, even in the valley of the shadow of death, there need be no fear, for God is with us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) What does it mean to live as those who “fear no evil” in the midst of threat, in the face of loss, suffering or death?
- 2) Jesus noted that no one was to blame for a certain man's blindness. Why is it so hard to comprehend that terrible things happen and no one is to blame? Besides satisfaction or closure, what gain does “blame” provide?
- 3) Where is God, or where can God be through us, in the life of a crying refugee child, an angry town, a disgruntled worker, a hopeless situation, an answerless question? What can we make in the mud that is beautiful, healing, transforming or even merely useful?

RESOURCES

PDA's [Worship Resources Following Public Violence](#)[℥]

[Faith in the Midst of Community Disaster](#)[℥]: a Bible study on Disaster Preparedness, by Rev. Joan LeRoy Abell.

[God With Us](#)[℥]: Worship and Christian Education Resources for Congregational Use After a Local Disaster

[Hymn suggestions](#)[℥] for recognizing and praying for tragedies and disasters.

Lent V | March 29, 2020

Reverend Dr. Jon H. Reinink, Associate for Church Support, Special Offerings, Presbyterian Mission

LECTIONARY TEXTS

First Reading.....Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm.....Psalm 130

Second Reading.....Romans 8:6-11

Gospel.....John 11:1-45

INTERPRETING THE TEXT

Each of these four texts comes from a completely different context, yet the process of setting the scene for each quickly turns into a practice of word-association: dry, lifeless, bleak, hopeless, despair, sorrow, grief . . .

Ezekiel's writings were to a people who were all but dead: exiled and without homes or hope. His vision is set in a valley that perfectly described how the people felt: secluded, in a valley far from home, together, yet lifeless, without hope, like dry, dry bones in a wilderness.

As the family and friends of Lazarus gathered around his dead body, preparing him for burial, surely similar feelings were settling in for them. As sick as Lazarus was, there was always hope he would recover, be healed. But as his body released his final breath, with it went their hope of a miracle: despair, death, sorrow took hold. When Jesus Christ, the Son of God, arrived and gathered with those he loved, even the Son of Man felt the pain of hopelessness take over, and he wept.

Even Paul, in a letter to the struggling church of Rome that is otherwise laden with encouragement and direction for those wrestling with spiritual troubles, acknowledges the bodily death and physical pain that is inevitable for all.

The psalmist speaks out of a place of pain and despair that must have been felt by those either in each text or to whom each text was written: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! . . . Lord, hear my voice!" (Ps. 130:1-2) And as surely as those phrases are a mere summary of many unwritten words of sorrow, a key turn from hopeless despair is made toward despair-laden hope.

The psalmist recognizes that the omniscience and holiness of God surpass any human mind and writes, "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits . . ." (vv. 5-6)

Paul assures the Roman Christians who are struggling with physical struggles and ever-present danger that no matter the physical struggle, no matter the spiritual warfare, no matter the condition of their heart on the day they move from this world into the next, if one lives wrestling with sin, one's life is with the one whose power is so great he was resurrected. One's life is "with him who has great power to redeem . . ." (Ps. 130:7)

While Jesus had been speaking words of hope, words of assurance, words of promise to those who gathered around him as he approached and arrived in Bethany to see Lazarus and his family, he was nonetheless overcome by the grief and despair of the death of his friend. But in his words were hope, and in his acts came fulfillment.

Simply by the words of Jesus, a dead man was given breath and life again. "In his word, I hope . . ." (Ps. 130:5)

As Ezekiel preached the words he was given by God, the power of the Spirit moved and the valley of death came to life, bringing hope to even those dry, dry bones, snapping them together into skeletons, then bodies, then people. Preaching more, God's breath of life came through, finishing the work of bringing dust and bones together to become living, breathing, people. To God's lifeless, exiled people, Ezekiel told them that even dry bones can become people of new life. To these utterly hopeless people who expected nothing but despair, Ezekiel gives hope of life filled with promise and expectation of thriving again once more. They need not live as a people grieving rejection: "O Israel, hope in the Lord!" (Ps. 130:7)

CONTEXTUAL REFLECTIONS

The logical theme to glean from these passages is that seasons of despair, death, and hopelessness are inevitable, but salvation and eternal life in Christ give us a sense of eternal optimism which directs us to lift our eyes

to God as our source of life, hope and faith. However, what cannot be missed here is that each passage recalls God's people to spend time in the hopelessness and despair experienced by all in this broken world.

I wait for the Lord . . . Ezekiel prophesied of new life that will come to that which was very, very dry, but the people of God received no timeline and no expectation for that promise to be fulfilled.

My soul waits . . . Despite having the ability to save Lazarus from his illness, Jesus waited to come and be with his friends in Bethany. While he could have raised Lazarus from the dead without witnesses or with less weeping, he didn't. In fact, he was moved to tears and dwelt in that pain with the others.

. . . In his word I hope . . . Paul reminds us that our hope is in the spiritual salvation and eternal spiritual life that will come to those who live a life wrestling against sin and evil. Subtextually, he also writes that it is not granted immediately or without struggle, rather it is in God's Word that we are told this and in God's Word that we find hope.

We are undoubtedly a people of hope who live with eyes set toward eternal life and wholeness in God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. However, being a people of hope requires us to be in situations where hope is needed. Dwelling with people in their brokenness and despair is the way we bear that hope into their lives. Hope sweeps most powerfully in the dark fog of sorrow and grief.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM OUR MINISTRIES

In 2017, Hurricane Maria laid waste vast portions of Puerto Rico, leaving many in a state of despair: homes, clean water and sources of electricity were destroyed; infrastructure that would otherwise expedite recovery was so damaged that parts of the island required demolition and reconstruction to simply provide access to healthcare, food and water and even power and communication; crops and livestock which would have provided income and food for coming months were reduced to unrecoverable or negligible remains. What many had was taken from them. What plans and preparations they had made had vanished. What hope lay in recesses of their minds while the storm blew through was all but gone as the post-storm sunshine exposed what devastation remained.

For Mimita Nieves, the storm's passing was the beginning of over 70 weeks of recovery. Those 18 months without electricity meant that she had to cook over a small propane stove, eat canned food, powdered milk and, occasionally, fresh vegetables. Her home was in need of major repairs, and the debris from the storm in her yard became a daily reminder of that storm that destroyed her home and upended her life.

If the storm's passing was the beginning of darkness, the arrival of the Presbyterian volunteers announced the dawn of a new day. As the volunteers came and visited with Mimita, the sliver of hope that remained blossomed into reality, filling her with an overwhelming sense of gratitude. As the volunteers spent time repairing the roof and electrical system of her home and removing the debris from her yard, Mimita's healing could finally continue. She once again felt safe in her home, proud of her property, and hopeful for the future. What once was so dark and full of despair turned into a life-changing experience of healing when God's people united to become "restorers of streets to live in." (Isa. 58)

For Vilmarie Cintrón Olivieri, Co-Moderator of the 223rd General Assembly, a visit to the Mexican-U.S. border in Texas showed her just how humbling and powerful hope and faith can be. While visiting the border, the group of people with whom she was traveling took a moment to pray with some of the Central American migrants seeking to move to the USA. In one conversation, Vilmarie asked one of the migrants, a grandmother, if they had received any help—food, water, and other essentials—from volunteers and humanitarian aid organizations at the border. The woman, who was fleeing her home for the sake of her life and the lives of the grandchildren she had with her, said, "Yes, but I have everything that I need; what I need is prayer." For this woman, the physical realities of the journey she faced with grandchildren in tow were little in comparison to the hope for safety, security and peace that existed in the process of immigration to the United States. And for Vilmarie, the inspiration to step forward and advocate for a people in need was lit ever-brighter in the unlikely setting of a migrant camp at the Texas border in Mexico. It is a reminder that even in places and situations that feel like they are beyond hope—in the arid valleys of our lives that are full of dry and dusty bones—God can still do amazing things, breathing hope into those places, granting new life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1) For Ezekiel, hopelessness took the shape of a valley of dry bones. The despair at the death of a dear friend brought Jesus to weep. Brutal persecution instilled crippling fear among Roman Christians. What situations in your life experience or in our community or world expose the suffocating darkness caused by despair? What does emotional or spiritual despair look like?

2) Consider two or three of the Scripture readings or illustrations in this reflection and try to pinpoint the moment that hope began to break through. What triggers the shift from hopelessness to hope? What processes or questions could you develop for yourself to remind you to look for the hope breaking through the brokenness of the world?

3) What is the mission of the Church? (Hint: read the second paragraph of F-1.01 in the Book of Order[™]) What is the mission of your congregation? How do these statements of mission relate to what we do as the Church? The ministries of your congregation? Your actions as a Christian?

RESOURCES

A Sanctified Art *Dry Bones*: <http://bit.ly/asaDryBones>[™] (For print permissions, contact A Sanctified Art)
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) OGA, Vilmarie Cintrón Olivieri on immigration[™], video, 03:56, December 17, 2018.

Transitioning to Easter | Beginning April 5, 2020

By now you've noticed that the reflections and resources in this Lenten lectionary study stops short of Palm Sunday, the week leading up to Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. These final days were intentionally left open to encourage a period of time for reflection and integration of the themes of this season into the fabric of daily and seasonal life well past this season's end.

This week could be used to reflect on the themes of Lent, the stories and illustrations shared, the meaningful liturgical moments, and how it all speaks to you "where you are" (i.e. where you are physically, emotionally, spiritually, and relationally). Consider where God is working, what Christ is redeeming, and how the Holy Spirit has stirred. Celebrate the factors that are affirming and make note of where there is tension. Listen for God's Word, and then commit to act.

Individually, with your family or small group, or perhaps as a congregation or larger, discern how God is moving in your midst. Commit to at least one practical change that will address it, or a regular activity that will keep the topic at the forefront of your mind for the weeks and months ahead.

ACTIVITIES, RESOURCES, AND HANDS-ON MINISTRY IDEAS

Learn more about the root causes of migration through a viewing of the Office of the General Assembly's film [The Genesis of Exodus](#) and its study resources.

See what federal lawmakers are currently discussing that impact the ministries of the PC(USA) and learn about how your voice as an American Citizen can be heard on the [PC\(USA\) Action Alert](#) site.

Download the [Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations Study and Devotional Guide](#) that encourages congregations to learn about and reflect on the [United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals](#).

A Sanctified Art *Dry Bones*: <http://bit.ly/asaDryBones> (For print permissions, contact A Sanctified Art) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) OGA, [Vilmarie Cintrón Olivieri on immigration](#), video, 03:56, December 17, 2018.

One Great Hour of Sharing

[Learn more](#)

Learn more about the PCUSA's response to immigration through advocacy from the [Office of Immigration Issues](#), through [PDA's humanitarian aid at the U.S.-Mexico border](#) and through [climate change discussions led by PHP](#).

[Children's Message](#) for worship
[Curriculum](#) & [Activities](#) for young children
[Curriculum](#) & [Activities](#) for older children
[OGHS Coloring Page](#), by Illustrated Ministry
Fifteen years of [Gracie the Fish stories](#)
[Other OGHS-related resources](#)
[The other Special Offerings](#)

Self Development of People

[Learn more](#)

To learn more about the purpose and resources available for SDOP Sunday, watch [What is SDOP Sunday?](#) (2:08), with Alonzo, and visit the [SDOP Sunday Resource](#) page.

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance

[Learn more](#)

[PDA's Worship Resources Following Public Violence](#)
[Additional prayers, liturgies, hymn suggestions and worship resources](#)
[Faith in the Midst of Community Disaster](#): a Bible study on Disaster Preparedness, by Rev. Joan LeRoy Abell
[God With Us](#): Worship and Christian Education Resources for Congregational Use After a Local Disaster

Check out the [news release](#) and website for the documentary, [Flint: The Poisoning of an American City](#), a powerful review of the Flint Water Crisis that exceeds any news coverage, displaying underlying problems and attempts to correct the systemic issues that have surfaced.

In the Wilderness of God: a poem by Andrés Contreras (page 5)

[Presbyterian Hunger Program](#)

[Learn more](#)

[PHP Post: Global Hunger](#) (Fall 2019 Newsletter)

[2018 Impact Report](#)

[Tread Lightly for Lent 2020](#): Daily reflections and challenges about living out our faith in the world around us

[OGHS Engagement Map Activity](#): A Lenten calendar with daily thoughts and activities to inspire reflection, thanksgiving, generosity, and prayer.

[The Climate Care Challenge](#) commitment and community engagement resources.

[Considering Our Treasure](#) a study guide for groups on Luke 12:34 (“For where your treasure is....”)

[Earth Day Sunday 2020](#): *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, resources and worship materials.