

“In the Wilderness”

2018 Lenten Reflections By the Penn West Conference Justice and Witness Team

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Reflections for Each Wednesday of Lent (not including Holy Week)

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Introduction: February 14
By the Rev. Dr. Alexa Smith

Well, it's Lent again.

And Jesus is sitting in the wilderness for 40 days, with wild beasts and a demon for company. A few angels, too, thank heavens, who, Mark tells us, minister to him in a place that might otherwise be considered God-forsaken.

True to form, the author of Mark gives us a pithy narrative. So we have to fill in details.

The Judean desert is dry. Hot in the day, cold at night. Grit cakes your skin and turns it beige, the color of the rocks and the sand. Even your clothes get crusty, as it hardens like silt in the creases. In a world without Chap Stick, lips turn dry and raw. Eyes go teary from the wind.

Yet, the text says that the Spirit drives Jesus there, just after being soaked in the Jordan by John. Just after the sky cracks and a dove slips to earth and a voice calls Jesus his own, a beloved Son, with whom God could not be more pleased.

What exactly goes on in the desert is mystery. Mark only gives us a bare outline of what is detailed in Matthew and Luke. Jesus is tempted and tried, and then, somehow, comes out refreshed. Ready to preach in synagogues in the Galilee, and to heal and teach and cast out demons that distract people like us from what's most important.

The truth is: Those of us in churches often feel like we're in the wilderness much of the time. And not by choice.

We are faced daily with what seem like insurmountable problems, often the same ole ones. Too many hungry. Too few jobs. A shortage of hope. We're riddled by questions with no simple answers. And congregations grow more anxious. Budgets plunge. There are more funerals than baptisms. It is easy to be tempted to get all wrapped up in ourselves, our fears and our losses, and, hunker down: To say that we're just too small and it's just too overwhelming out there.

But Mark's Gospel suggests that it's only after struggle that we are ready to step back into the harsh realities of the world. That without the hard stuff, we're unprepared for what we're up against, a society where wild beasts still prowl and demons lurk.

The Justice & Witness Team of the Penn West Conference is doing its own share of struggling with the enormous economic and social questions that determine much about our lives, and, the context in which we live and minister. We're asking you to struggle with us this Lent. Let us know where your struggle takes you. We need each other in this time.

- * How might we offer radical hospitality in our neighborhoods and across the wider world?
- * How might we offer spiritual healing in an economy intent on always having more – no matter who it leaves behind?

* How we engage a food system that is increasingly industrialized, consigning some to low-wage jobs?

* How we stand with farm workers who want fast-food chains – like Wendy's – to come to the table so human rights may be protected in the fields? Or face boycott.

* How we really feed people, rather than just give them food?

* How might we reach out to those who have disabilities in our congregations and communities?

Perhaps, it's our baptisms that offer us renewal when we step into unknown or over-worn territory. Somehow those droplets of water sink deep into our souls, so that, no matter how parched we may feel, or how tired we get, there is a source of renewal, deep within, replenished by the Spirit when we need it. We just get too distracted to notice. So this time is set aside to pay attention.

The writer of Mark seems to be telling us that there's good news even in the wilderness, even in turmoil and trial. That we're not alone there, that God knows the geography well. Abraham walked through it. Others, too. (See *Mark: Interpretation*, Lamar Williamson, Jr.) What's more, there are even angels afoot.

We know the wilderness is a place of wild beasts and demons. They're around most days. We know them well. We recognize them. But this Lent, let's face them together.

Hunger: February 21
By the Rev. Linda Lawson

Where do we begin to address the subject of hunger? I think Ron Pedersen is right when he says that the subjects of our justice issues all stem from our lopsided economy. Both Jesus and the prophets have been alerting us to that for thousands of years. It is sad but true that hearts and minds must change before any balance of power or wealth is achieved. While justice-seeking people work on that, people are hungry now. There is a tendency to believe that people are hungry because they do not wish to work or they brought it on themselves because they did not know how to handle their finances. Most scorn is directed to people of color, but hunger knows no color.

My friend Ceinwen King-Smith and I have volunteered several times at Pittsburgh Food Bank substations representing Community of Reconciliation. These stations are located in different parts of the city and dispense primarily fresh produce and dairy products. People of all colors line up early and the line becomes quite long. Although blind, Ceinwen loves to help out. She speaks several languages and enjoys speaking Spanish, Russian, Polish, or Chinese to the people she serves. Many are noticeably ashamed to be there. They do not like accepting charity. But they and their families are hungry. So they come with open bags and downcast eyes, moving on quickly to the next stand. Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* wrote that hungry people cannot concentrate on God. They can only concentrate on obtaining food. If they cannot concentrate on God, how can they even begin to think about the imbalance of power and wealth and discuss what can be done to solve these issues.

Hungry people must eat. Unfortunately they must often depend on the kindness of those who are only one step above them financially.

So, how do we address this problem of empty stomachs and no hope? How do we separate the truly needy from those who, as someone once said, have a welfare gene? To me, the answer is to feed people. The stomach is more important than judgment. After feeding them, our next task is to direct those people who are able to attend training programs where they can receive some form of instruction to at least earn a living. Those with mental, physical, or drug issues need special direction and care that are best handled by professionals trained in these areas.

First and foremost, however, we have a mandate to feed people. When people are nourished they can heal, think, and move on with proper direction. Jesus taught us, in so many words, that people are valuable and have purpose. As we are God's hands and feet in this world, together, we can minimize hunger and allow people to become the persons they were born to be.

1. What are we doing in our communities to address issues of hunger?
2. Are there times when we been guilty of placing judgment over compassion?
3. Have we ignored the systemic factors that cause hunger in favor of short-term solutions, or have we focused on the systemic to the immediate detriment of hungry neighbors?
4. How can we help to feed people in our society, both in the short and long-term?

Radical Hospitality: February 28

By Julia Hines

Looking at hunger in our local churches, and even hunger nationwide, we can all acknowledge how many people are starving, hungry, and need to be fed. Many of our churches nationwide are doing an amazing job at feeding people, but I think we need to look at a deeper level of hunger that exists and is difficult to acknowledge or discuss. This aspect of hunger speaks to where we as a church have great opportunity to grow and develop, and it is something we often neglect in our efforts to follow God's commands to feed those in need. There is a hunger in our world these days for the discipline, gift, and blessing of hospitality.

Hospitality in and of itself is something that is challenging with churches, especially when we spend countless hours building our walls of policy and procedures to keep God's house safe from harm. Sometimes I believe that we get so caught up in worrying about those policies and procedures that we fail to see that they can hinder us from doing all that God calls us to do as the church. When we get overly concerned about who we let in, or how we let them in, or how closely we let them in, we have now made a decision to keep all of God's children at a distance. In doing so, we fail to feed the hungry due to a lack of hospitality.

Here is the challenge: we are not just called to hospitality, but to Radical Hospitality. Jesus never offered the usual understanding of hospitality. In both the Old and New Testaments, God speaks of hospitality. Many, as we all know, use the story Sodom in Genesis as an excuse to persecute the LGBTQ community. Yet at the core of this teaching is God's expectation of hospitality (Ezekiel 16:49). The "symptoms" when hospitality is lacking are the very things the Word of God screams at us about: pride, gluttony, arrogance, and selfishness, to name a few. Instead, when Radical Hospitality is expressed, it is a sign of Radical Love. We need to keep in mind that God was so passionate about this that God destroyed a city when it failed to be hospitable. There are more than 21 areas in Scripture that speak on this topic. A bible scholar and friend of mine, T.C. Ham says, "When the bible shouts, you shout." In other words, where God is passionate, we also need to be passionate.

What is Radical Hospitality, and what does it look like compared to what we are already doing? When we feed those who hunger, is this enough? Many of us say that we are doing what we can with what we have, but are we? When Rev. Ackerman asked, "What do we see in our churches that we need to work on?" my heart's first cry was, "Radical Hospitality!" So, what more can be done to "feed" those in need?

I believe that the idea of RELATIONSHIP is at the core of God's existence with humanity. When we have diligently prepared and served a buffet for hungry people, how many of us will go and sit down and have a conversation with them? People in general, are hungry in the core of their being for human companionship, especially when they are poor. I often think of the leper Christ healed in Matthew 8:2-3: *And there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand and touched*

him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately his leprosy was cleansed (NRSV).

Jesus didn't need to touch the man. He healed people without touching them. Yet he went against the Rabbinic laws and customs in touching this unclean man to heal him. Why? I believe that the reason is that he knew this man's heart. Jesus knew how he had suffered and that he was hungry for the human touch after living a life as an outcast of society. He had been unable to be near anyone, much less be touched by anyone. We are called to this same kind of expression of Radical Hospitality. When serving, speaking, or giving to others, we are called to "feed" them in all the ways that we can. We are called to feed their stomachs and their souls. So the next time you are giving food or money to strangers, talk with them. You may learn about their identities and journeys. I believe that God calls us to reach out in the places where need exists to "feed" the hungry and that God calls us to teach others how to do this.

It is easy to feed peoples bellies, but I think it's harder to feed people's souls. It takes us out of our comfort zones. It was hard for me to do this at first, but then I said to myself, "Julia you're giving what you can, so let go of feeling like you're not doing enough." But this was a lie. I believe that God made me for more than this, and God charged me to let go of what was comfortable and be a doer of the word. I want people to experience Jesus through my work of Radical Hospitality. It may not happen in my way, but I hope it happens God's way. By God's acts, and Christ's example in scripture, I believe that we are called to Radical Hospitality. There is no greater love than Christ's shining through our acts of faith. Jesus has left us here to continue his mission to live radically like he did. So let us feed more than the belly, let us feed the soul. This way, we are feeding the hungry like Christ did.

1. What does it mean for us to practice Radical Hospitality? What does it look like?
2. Are we really doing what we can to feed not only the body but also the soul?
3. Are we passionate where God is passionate?
4. What would it look like if we focused as much on building relationships as we do on meeting people's immediate needs?

The Best Seat in the House: March 7
By Ron Pedersen

Among the things I like best about being a pastor is that I have what I call “the best seat in the house.” Imagine that the Steelers had won against that last playoff game and were in the Super Bowl. Imagine that you managed to get seats to the game. But you didn’t get just any seats. You scored seats at the fifty-yard line. Think of the view. Think of what you’d be able to see from that vantage point. Now imagine that, on top of all of that, the tickets were *free*.

If you can imagine that, you can understand my excitement about being a pastor. Every week, as I prepare for a Sunday sermon, I get the best seat in the house in another arena: a spiritual one. I get a front row seat for the Scriptural texts, with the first hand opportunity to meditate on them, wrestle with them and have them challenge me. I get to read brilliant and insightful commentary from theologians who share perspectives that I cannot see from my own particular vantage point. Every week I get to expand my spiritual horizons, becoming truly blessed before I even set foot into a pulpit. Then I get the added blessing of sharing what I’ve seen, hopefully expanding others’ spiritual horizons as well.

I’m especially thankful for these blessings during Lent. Lent is, for me, the spiritual equivalent of the Super Bowl. It’s the season of the highest spiritual challenge. And as a pastor, the seat I have is great. Because I always seem to see some spiritual gem that becomes a guiding light during this time of more intense spiritual focus.

This year I came across a quote from one George Hermanson. He writes a blog called “May the Lure be with You.” (I LOVE that title!) In a recent post, he was discussing Jesus casting an unclean spirit out of a man, and put his particular understanding of what that might mean for us in today’s world. He equated demons with the ways and/or messages of the culture around us that are not consistent with the prophetic or gospel messages of Scripture. If we’re not careful, he suggests, we may internalize those ways ourselves. This will then become an “unclean spirit” within us. He then offers the gem that became my spiritual focus this Lenten season: “Spiritual activity will drive out those ideas that are not worthy of us.”

Think of what that might mean for us. What if, this Lent, we paid more attention to our spiritual activities (that we should probably be doing more of anyway) and committed less time to what the society around us values and promotes? What ideas have we allowed the culture to put into us that are not worthy of us as God’s children?

Politically, we are a deeply divided nation. What might change within us if we Christians focused more on spiritual well-being and less on political commentary? Could we step toward healing our divisions? What if we spent more time focusing on meditation and Scripture, and less time on social media and television?

“Spiritual activity will drive out those ideas that are not worthy of us.” What a blessing it was to see that quote from an exceptional spiritual seat before an exceptional spiritual season. The great thing about that spiritual seat is that it’s not reserved just for pastors. God offers this view to all of us! I hope others will take a few moments this Lenten season to take God up on that offer. I’m glad I did. I’d have hated to miss this spiritual gem by sitting somewhere else.

1. What if we paid more attention to our spiritual activities and committed less time to what the society around us values and promotes?
2. What ideas have we allowed the culture to put into us that are not worthy of us as God’s children?
3. What might change within us if we Christians focused more on spiritual well-being and less on political commentary? Could we step toward healing our divisions?
4. What if we spent more time focusing on meditation and Scripture, and less time on social media and television?

Disabilities Awareness: March 14
By Joshua Bridges-Emeigh

As stated in John 13:34-35 (NIV), “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Many churches believe that people with disabilities are unable to participate in activities or church services just because they have a disability. People with disabilities often feel that they will not be wanted there or treated as normal individuals. In Jesus’ time, people often assumed that if individuals were disabled that one or both of their parents had sinned. In John 9:1-3, it says that the disciples inquired as to who had sinned in order for the man to be born blind. Jesus’ responded to the disciples that neither of his parents had sinned; he was simply born that way to glorify God. Disability in our world can glorify God, just like the rest of us can in different ways. Even many families who have special needs children and who are well-versed persons in our communities feel uncomfortable navigating within the ministry of disabled individuals.

I am an individual with a disability. I regular attend my congregation and I find myself as a burden and not able to easily connect, because I view myself as different from them. But in God’s eyes, we are the same. I work with individuals within my community and local school district and find that many individuals with disabilities spend a great deal of their lives fighting to live and access the world that most of us take for granted. Many congregations find individuals wanting or asking for help be overwhelming burdens. But realistically, we can probably perform activities that others had no idea that we could do.

Although many of us do not recognize it, according the Bible, people with disabilities push us out of our comfort zones, because those individuals are able to build certain bridges that normal individuals never consider choosing. According to 1 John 4:7, we should love everyone without any thought to disability, age, gender, skin color, hair style, or clothing choice. We as humans often judge when we are not supposed to. People with special needs come into the world knowing life is not fair. They inspire us to push past our and their limits. They teach us perseverance in the face of insurmountable obstacles.

Jeremiah 1:5 says that God knew us before we were born. We are exactly who God wanted to us be. God reminded us that there are no mistakes. So, individuals with disabilities are born the way they are to hopefully to change another individual who needs a little more guidance. In God’s hand all are beautiful and perfect and a vital part of God’s kingdom. Let us throw our congregations’ doors open and welcome everyone and not just focus on them being socially awkward, unable to speak, see or walk properly. But

let us look at them as a blessing to God's land and love them no matter what disability they were born with.

For instance, an individual with a disability can bring you a brighter light on how helpful individuals with disabilities can be for your congregation. Johnny may be an expert at technology, and the congregation may be looking for someone who can help them film and record some audio for them to broadcast their services on public access channels. But the congregation is nervous that if they ask Johnny, he may somehow embarrass them. And Johnny may be afraid that if he asks to volunteer, the church may turn him down knowing that he is different. But Johnny may lead the congregation to remember that God loves everyone no matter what individual looks or sounds like. They may then ask Johnny to team up with them.

God calls us to treat one another equally and not look at them being different but an asset to society. But often in ministry, we have a hard time separating ourselves from the world and not judging people with disabilities, or allowing them to perform or organize events, or doubting them. Realistically, God is the only one that should doubt, but God does not doubt us because God loves us equally as we are to love and trust another.

In closing, disabilities in a church should be welcome and not stopped. We should welcome people with disabilities with arms and hearts wide open. They have so much that they could teach us and we have so much we could teach them. We could embrace life in a whole new way!

1. Are there ways that we set up barriers to people with disabilities that are outside of our awareness?
2. What benefits might we as a church gain if we really opened ourselves to people with disabilities within our congregations and communities? How might it transform us?
3. What does the Bible have to say about people with disabilities? Do the passages cited here give you a greater awareness into the testimony of scripture on this subject?
4. How can we really love one another, as God has loved us?

Wendy's: March 21
By the Rev. Dr. Alexa Smith

In our little corner of Somerset County, four local clergy took part in a National Day of Fasting and Witness to widen a national boycott of Wendy's, the fast-food chain, and to call for the restaurant to protect farm workers in its supply chain by signing onto a program already supported by its major competitors. Corporate Wendy's has not come to the table alongside Taco Bell, McDonald's, Burger King, Subway and others. A boycott isn't undertaken lightly; in this case, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) says it is after more than four years of appeals to adhere to its fair food standards. So, Wendy's isn't being asked to do anything its major fast-food competitors aren't already doing.

The boycott is called by the CIW, an internationally recognized worker-led organization that has championed human rights protections for south Florida farm workers who pick our food. This includes more than just the tomatoes served up in fast-food chains, but, since we live on the East Coast, also many of the supermarket vegetables on our tables.

Farm workers live in a risky world of sub-standard housing, gender-based violence or harassment, and, poor wages. Reports of forced labor are not unheard of in some fields. Now they are asking the religious community to step up. We might ask ourselves how we stomach a food system that produces our food by keeping others not just poor, but at risk in other ways.

In our communities, we gather around a table for reconciliation, for healing, for forgiveness, for redemption of our always inadequate efforts at justice. Ours is a communion table, but, Jesus asks us to share those values when we gather at other tables. We want Wendy's to come to the farm workers' table. Unless they do this, we simply can't sit at tables in the restaurant chain.

In the CIW's Fair Food Program, participating retailers agree to buy produce – in Wendy's case, tomatoes – from suppliers who stick to a zero-tolerance policy for abuses in the fields, including violence, harassment and predatory sexual behavior from employers or other workers. In short, it's a farm worker-led strict Code of Conduct. Retailers also pay a penny-per-pound premium, which, the CIW says, is passed through the supply chain and paid directly to workers by their employers. To date, buyers have paid more than \$26 million into the FFP.

Deuteronomy 24: 14 (RSV) tells us: “You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns; you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it, before the sun goes down (for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it); lest he cry against you to the Lord, and it be sin in you.” Inviting local franchise owners and managers to push corporate Wendy's to sign on the FFP, encourages them to ensure that their supply chain is protected by an internationally recognized program. This helps all of us live in a world that is more just. There is still more to do, but this, at least is a beginning. If conversations aren't possible, then letter campaigns are possible. Prayer vigils, candlelight services in public areas outside the restaurants, and protests are also possible. Church conversations are important, since folks uncomfortable with being too public may quietly choose to eat in restaurants where fair food is a value.

Diverse religious groups have endorsed the boycott already, including the United Church of Christ (UCC), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), PAX Christi USA, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Catholic Rural Life, the Franciscan Action Network, Evangelicals for Social Action, T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, Pentecostals and Charismatics for Peace and Justice. The January 18 fast marked the end of a 30-day fast in 1998. Workers stopped eating until growers heard their concerns about low wages, verbal and physical violence, sexual abuse, and even forced labor. President Jimmy Carter and a Roman Catholic archbishop brokered the end of the fast and farm workers did so at a mass attended by more than 800 people.

Farm workers will be fasting March 11-15, again, during Lent, outside the Manhattan office of Wendy's Board Chair Nelson Peltz, followed by a march. Clergy and others who want to attend are welcome. Look for more ways that we may gather at the following websites: Boycott Wendy's, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and the Alliance for Fair Food. So often we find ourselves confronted with enormous issues where it is hard to intervene; the CIW's actions are concrete enough for churches to take hold. The campaign belongs to the farm workers; it's important to follow their initiatives.

1. How do our commitments to fair wages for farm workers flow from scripture?
2. When food arrives at our tables, do we give serious enough thought as to how it got there? How might our behaviors change if we did?
3. What are corporations? At times, we may be tempted to think of them as entities unto themselves. But are they really just people? If so, how might this change the way we look at them?
4. What can churches do to show corporations like Wendy's that we care about the plight of their workers? How might we respond both individually and collectively?