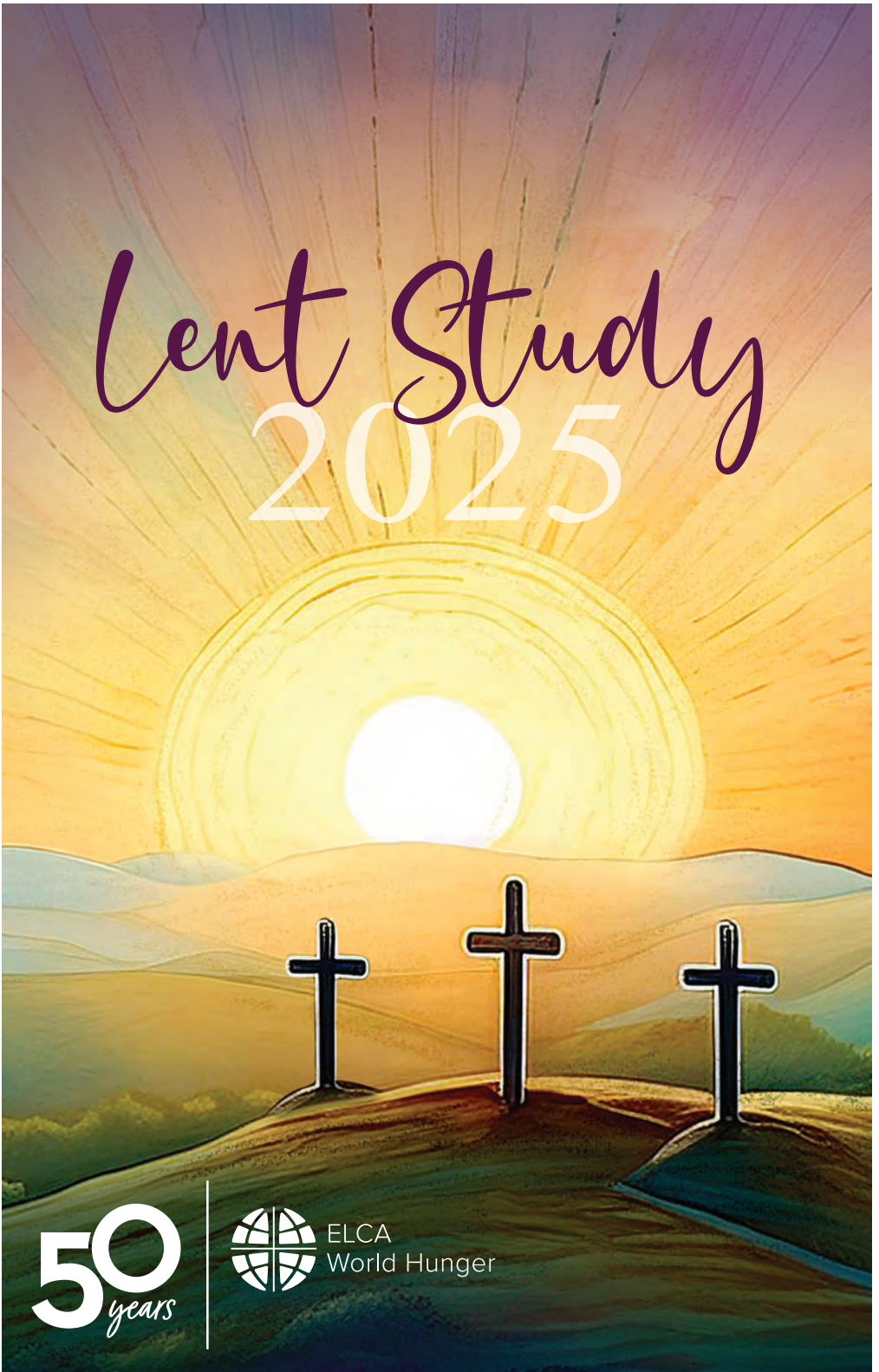


Lent Study 2025



50
years



ELCA
World Hunger

Dear siblings in Christ,

You are not alone. This Lent, we invite you to return from whatever lonesome wilderness you find yourself in to life in a community of faith that cares for its members and for creation, because we are all children of God. To that end, this Lenten study reflects on the work of social ministry organizations (SMOs) dedicated to ending hunger at its roots. These SMOs are all members of Lutheran Services in America (LSA), an alliance of over 250 health and human service organizations working together to care for communities and shift social imbalances. ELCA World Hunger partners with LSA in supporting both SMOs and other hunger ministries that address the main drivers of systemic injustices in their communities. These partners serve more than 6 million people each year, convinced that no person should experience the loneliness of the wilderness.

Our reflection for the first Sunday in Lent opens with a discussion of Jesus' trials in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-15), the experience of living outside community and the condition of being alone. "Alone" is where challenges and injustices can overwhelm us; community is where our gifts and presence are celebrated. This is why we decided to focus on the impact your gifts to ELCA World Hunger make to organizations across the United States. LSA builds the capacity of SMOs to make anti-poverty change for their neighbors.

Social ministries are as diverse as the communities they serve and the people who staff them, from direct-feeding ministries to older-adult housing and education to community centers in small towns.

We hope that, during your Lenten journey, these stories of ELCA World Hunger's partner organizations working to strengthen community will help you to celebrate your place in your own community. If you want to support the sort of community fostered by SMOs, you can give to ELCA World Hunger or look for volunteer opportunities at a ministry near you by visiting lutheranservices.org.

Until all are fed,

Peter McLellan

Peter McLellan
Program Director, Hunger Education

Naomi Sonne

Naomi Sonne
Program Manager, Social Ministry
Organization Engagement

LENT

Week 1—Grove Community Center

Luke 4:1-15



SMO Partner: Grove Community Center, Mazomanie, Wis.

The real problem of this passage from Luke is that Jesus is alone. The wilderness is rough; this is a place of separation, the sort of desert climate early Judeans would have found familiar. We know that Jesus is hungry (2), and this contributes to the sense of desperation. The devil's temptations only exacerbate the situation, offering Jesus instant relief from his hunger (3-4), his low emotional state (5-8) and his mortal frailty (9-12). But none of these temptations, or even the harshness of the wilderness, have the same power without Jesus' lonesome condition. We see Jesus in the "wilderness," but the condition of being alone can be found anywhere: in the biblical wilderness, in our cities and suburbs, and in small-town Wisconsin, where we will travel later in this reflection.

"Alone" is where temptation happens, where injustice lurks. Jesus' loneliness is where he is presented with the opportunity to dominate "kingdoms" (5). Alone, Jesus is tempted with the power to create bread out of a rock, to defy God's created order for only himself

(3-4). Aside from the devil, Jesus is alone through this entire passage. What Satan offers are quick, easy solutions to intractable problems that can never be addressed alone.

Isolation brings temptation and the devil; community brings mission, meaning and celebration of our gifts. Indeed, in verses 14-15, Jesus returns to Galilee, to community, to opportunities to teach and be “praised.” We are featuring stories from the ELCA’s partners in social ministry precisely because they chronicle bold responses to community-based problems, responses that were determined and executed by those very communities. Indeed, those responses were made possible by gifts to ELCA World Hunger.

In Mazomanie, Wis., the members of Grove Community Center, a mission of New Heights Lutheran Church, refuse to see themselves as alone in their small town. Faith Fehlen, director of strategy and community life for “the Grove,” describes her “call to live in community” in the most open terms possible: “My job isn’t to judge you; it’s to love you.” In fact, this ethos of love and community is essential to the Grove’s vision of a place where people in a small town that “needs community” can find essential services, recreation and belonging. The Grove has opened itself to its community to show love for its people. It offers a social worker, a clothing and food pantry (Heights Unlimited, led by Deacon Francine Rask), tutoring services, a fiber arts group, a walking loop, a worship space used by New Heights, and many other open meeting spaces. All these services and ministries are the result of the Grove’s intentional outreach to the town.

The Grove is one example of our church working so that no one walks in the wilderness. The Rev. Rob Nelson, pastor of New Heights, explains that, with SMO status, the Grove can shed the baggage of the institutional church yet still carry out the congregation’s mission of radical welcome and love for its community.

REFLECT



What has “alone” looked like in your life? Where have you turned during those moments?

Where in your neighborhood or in the world might people need community? What can you do about it?

When you hear of a church doing ministry in its community without labeling itself a church, how does that make you feel? How would that affect your faith community’s ministry in your neighborhood?

LENT

Week 2 – The Healing Center

Luke 9:37-43



SMO Partner: The Healing Center, New York, N.Y.

The church bears responsibility for centuries of harm done in its name. Among the harms perpetrated by the church is spiritual abuse, in which people have their faith used against them to control, violate or exploit them. The Healing Center in Brooklyn has begun the hard work of calling the “faithless generations” of the church to account through its faithful care for older adults who have survived spiritual abuse.

Jesus, too, confronts the limits of spiritual care. The demon that possesses the boy in the Gospel of Luke is an all-consuming entity. Possession implies that the demon does spiritual harm to him; it also does physical harm, “convulsing” and “mauling” the boy, and causing him to “shriek” (Luke 9:39). We do not know where this creature comes from, but for the first- or second-century authors of this text, demonic spirits were everywhere; they were part of the world, a peril of simply existing. Spiritual harm was everywhere and, as this story shows, could do severe damage to one’s entire person.

Jesus laments the prevalence of this embodied suffering by calling the boy's entire society to task: "You faithless and perverse generation" (41). No one is spared Jesus' scolding. Abuse is the responsibility of all — those who abuse, those who let it happen and those who create a world where abuse goes unseen and survivors go unheard. The word "generation" does the heavy lifting here, because generations are an identity marker from which we cannot escape: we belong to our generation for no other reason than the date of our birth. Jesus' complaint calls all members of his generation to account for the boy's spiritual and physical malady.

The Healing Center challenges our own generation to accompany survivors of spiritual abuse, especially older adults who have lived with spiritual pain for their entire lives. Their work poses the question: if older adults have experienced spiritual abuse throughout their lives, where is it happening for younger folks *today*? For the Healing Center, the need to address spiritual abuse among older adults in the community was unknown at first. In fact, what mattered was that it intentionally created a space for healing, for older adults in particular. By making room for people to express themselves genuinely and openly, the Healing Center learned that spiritual harm was an unaddressed reality.

In the year since the Healing Center began its spiritual abuse workshops, it has reached 149 people who have lived with that trauma, many of them people of color. This is real impact, facilitated in part by support from generous donors and the ELCA's Lutheran Services for the Elderly Endowment. By remaining open to the stories of older adults in the community and making intentional space for them, the Healing Center is rectifying the abuse of generations.

REFLECT

REFLECT

Name one injustice you see your generation perpetrating.
How have you participated?

What has spiritual abuse looked like to your generation?

What would it take to make intergenerational reparation for
those injustices in your community?

LENT

Week 3 – Living Water Ministries

Luke 13:1-9



SMO Partner: Living Water Ministries, New Era, Mich.

Each summer, high-school-age youth gather at an ELCA camp, Living Water Ministries, for Bridge Builders, a program that offers team-building, swimming, games, worship and devotions. What makes this program different from other ELCA outdoor ministries? Since its inception in 2016, 41% of those attending have been people of color. For the ELCA, the whitest denomination in the United States, this is a big deal.¹ More specifically, Bridge Builders is a big deal because its ambitious goal is to accompany young campers who will forge a more racially just church and world through relationship-building with their racially diverse peers.

As today's Gospel demonstrates, making societal change on the scale envisioned by Living Water Ministries is hard, because we are effectively asked as Christians to challenge — and maybe

¹ Michael Lipka, "The Most and Least Racially Diverse U.S. Religious Groups," Pew Research Center, July 27, 2015, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/ (accessed October 3, 2024).

sacrifice — much of what we hold dear. Bridge Builders confronts the contradiction of racism today: we can overcome it only through genuine relationships with those who look and live differently from us, yet such relationships are complicated by that same racism. In Luke, Jesus raises the stakes of not turning from destructive ways: we must repent or we “will all perish” (13:3, 5). If we fail to make change, the fig tree of Jesus’ parable will be cut down (6-9).

Though the United States maintains a racial status quo that actively harms communities of color, Living Water Ministries has made space for healing and sees the people it serves as children of God first. Policing is certainly a high-profile data point in the U.S. discourse on race, but those data tell a critical story about how a democratic society treats all its people: between 2015 and 2020, 35% of all unarmed police-shooting victims were Black,² though Black people constitute only 14% of the U.S. population.³ Moreover, the percentage of Black and Indigenous people incarcerated in the U.S. is more than double their share of the national population.⁴ These facts remind us not only of inequities in the U.S. criminal justice system but of the broader story they tell: our society limits the humane treatment of others because of their racial identity.

Indeed, as the Gospel passage reminds us, the consequences of dehumanizing our neighbors are a matter of life and death. To stay the course is to “perish just as they did” (5).

The anti-racist reconciliation advocated by Bridge Builders calls on Christians to account for the sin of racism through love of neighbor. It uses the assets at its disposal — a camp setting — to build intentional community. Whereas the U.S. criminal justice

² Julie A. Ward et al., “National Burden of Injury and Deaths From Shootings by Police in the United States, 2015-2020,” *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 114, no. 4 (April 2024), [ajphonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(24\)00180-6/fulltext](http://ajphonline.org/article/S0749-3797(24)00180-6/fulltext).

³ United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts, www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US (accessed October 7, 2024).

⁴ Federal Bureau of Prisons, Inmate Race, www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_race.jsp (accessed October 7, 2024).

system starts with an assumption that the Other is not to be trusted, Bridge Builders knows that any genuine relationship starts with trust. Finally, after spending time at camp, campers are called to action for a more just church and world. When we give to ELCA World Hunger, we might easily assume that the work our partners do is strictly food-related, but Bridge Builders shows that food is never separate from race — just as justice is never separate from Christian mission. Ministries such as Living Water are supported by your donations and other resources stewarded by the ELCA, including the Lutheran Services for Children Endowment.

Jesus' admonition to repent or face death might easily come across to readers as a violent shock to the system, and the imagery of this passage is certainly violent. But the actual act of repentance need not be, and should not be, violent. As Living Water Ministries demonstrates, change in our hearts, church and world starts with trust and life together.

REFLECT

Identify one relationship in your life where you have a significant difference with the other person — in identity, life experience or opinion. Those differences do not need to be racial. How have you continued to foster that relationship?

What has been most difficult in maintaining relationships across lines of difference?

What is the biggest gift you've received through relationships with people who are different from you?

LENT

Week 4 – Care Connections Network

Luke 15:11-32



SMO Partner: Care Connections Network, Huntington Beach, Calif.

Feelings of isolation, loneliness and grief are common for adults as they age. This is where many of Lutheran Services in America's (LSA) partners, such as the Care Connections Network (CCN), step in: they support older adults as they create community to address the spiritual hunger that isolation can cause, with negative effects on mental health. Specifically, CCN's brand of accompaniment is called a "village," where older adults can live in their homes throughout the entire aging process, remaining active, learning together and growing with their community. CCN's ministry exists at a tension point: those who are aging may feel the impending isolation of death, yet CCN chooses to celebrate and empower the lives that older adults are living right now.

This Sunday's Gospel text, the parable of the "Prodigal Son," speaks to similar tensions that arise at unexpected celebrations. The parable can be broken into three acts: the younger son's decision to ask for his inheritance early and the immediate consequences (Luke 15:11-17), his decision to return and his father's welcome (18-24), and the older

son's angry reaction to the father's welcome, followed by the father's response (25-32). The first two acts center on the younger son's decisions alone: his decision to take the inheritance, his decision to run, his decision to return and ask forgiveness. But the father's joy in the third act has nothing to do with his younger son's decisions. Instead the father chooses to celebrate his child's return. He is happy for no other reason than his son being with him.

Celebrating people as members of our community gives us the power to do something miraculous. The father concludes this parable by saying, "This brother of yours was dead and has come to life" (32). The invitation to celebrate someone for their very status as a "child of God" is an invitation to resurrection. We preclude that resurrection when we predicate their worthiness to participate in community on their ability to pay for services, on their past life decisions or on their language of origin.

No doubt, this celebration is not easy. This parable asks us to do two things simultaneously: (1) recognize ourselves in the older son, as people who see the unfairness of the moment, and (2) identify with the rest of the characters in the third act, who celebrate the younger son. Because, at the end of the day, the gospel calls us to celebrate all people as beloved children of God.

In this way, CCN is a gospel organization, a ministry that, thanks in part to gifts to ELCA World Hunger, asks nothing of the people it accompanies except their continued relationship with their communities. CCN's educational programming focuses on older adults' desire to learn, not their knowledge deficits. From Japanese language seminars to technology tutorials, that programming celebrates older adults for their intellect and enthusiasm. By providing workshops on senior scams, CCN recognizes this population as worthy of justice. By helping older adults to stay in their homes, CCN sees them as integral to their communities — as children of God, created for their neighbor.

REFLECT

Make a list of the people you see throughout your week. Choose three people from that list and let them know — in person, on the phone or by text — that you are grateful for them. Celebrate your community!

Make a list of your gifts, qualities you are proud of. Acknowledge those gifts by writing one or two sentences about why they deserve to be celebrated.

Which of these two reflective practices was more difficult: celebrating yourself or celebrating others? Why do you think that is?

LENT

Week 5 – Lutheran Services in Iowa

John 12:1-8



SMO Partner: Lutheran Services in Iowa

In the Gospel of John, when Judas admonishes Jesus for allowing Mary to anoint him with perfume, Jesus replies, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (12:7-8).

The above passage is as confusing as it is troubling. What is Jesus even talking about? Is he saying we should stop accompanying the poor to memorialize him? Are they not children of God? Or, perhaps more frustrating, is Jesus saying that service to him is somehow at odds with our work on behalf of those who are suffering? As ever, context matters. Jesus is facing up to his own impending death (11:45-57) and knows that his disciples have little time to take up his work of healing people, feeding people and explaining God’s justice (5:1-9; 6:1-21; 8:1-11; 9:1-41; 11:17-44). Might we read this passage as a *commission* to do the work of Jesus wherever and whenever it is needed, as a response born out of grief and faithfulness to the gospel? In short, John’s Gospel shows how grief can inspire the work of gospel justice.

Similarly, Lutheran Services in Iowa (LSI), an ELCA World Hunger partner through Lutheran Services in America (LSA), works at the intersection of grief and the gospel through its refugee resettlement programs. Refugees flee horrific situations, displaced from their homes by war and persecution. LSI leads migrant justice efforts by providing trauma-informed case management for the refugees it accompanies. It focuses its work on the whole person, building relationships with its clients and providing support for mental and physical health services, language and job support, and help navigating government bureaucracies. The results speak for themselves: over this past year, LSI has resettled about 300 refugees, almost all of whom have passed their naturalization exams and speak of improved mental and physical health. A former refugee from Bhutan shared his story of moving from deep depression and grief to a sense of hope, social connectedness and emotional well-being with LSI's support. The data emerging from LSI's work is part of a larger story of community-forming amid trauma and grief.

The *fragrance* (12:3) of grief fills this passage as Mary mourns Jesus in advance of his death. Appropriately, when Jesus rebukes Judas for his criticism of Mary, he also mentions that he will soon be gone ("you do not always have me"). Indeed, we are without Jesus' physical presence in our moment, which makes his preceding statement more prescient: "You always have the poor with you." We miss the point if we restrict Jesus' scolding to Judas. Because the poor are still with us, Jesus' words read like a call to do justice work alongside those who demand it. We see these injustices all the time — they are "always" with us. War rages in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, persecution based on sexuality and gender identity forces migration throughout the world, and gang violence and political instability drive people north from Latin America.

We always have the poor with us. They and their trauma are part of Jesus' call to serve them.

The refugees that LSI accompanies have experienced unique traumas and grief from conflicts beyond their control; they also live through the same story as we Lutherans do: grief and violence met with communion and justice. John's Gospel certainly calls us to act on behalf of migrants, but it is up to us to accompany them. Because of your generosity, LSI and other LSA partners across the ELCA World Hunger network have been taking action on behalf of refugees for decades. We can join them; we've been called to, after all!

REFLECT

What do you regularly hear about in global, national or local news that makes you sad? Why do you feel that way?

The passage from John involves a “grief fragrance.” What physical manifestations of grief have you experienced?

Visit [ELCA.org/advocacy](https://www.elca.org/advocacy) to see if that issue is part of the ELCA’s advocacy work. Are there ways you might get involved?

When you feel sad about injustice, what barriers discourage you from taking action? Can you identify steps to surmount those barriers? Do you have any neighbors who might start that conversation?



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