
From
Ashes to Life

A Lenten Revelation of Hope

By Rev. Sandy Jacobs
for
Outreach for Hope
of the Greater Milwaukee Synod

In conjunction with
A Dollar a Day for Poverty
An awareness and support building project of
OUTREACH FOR HOPE through the season of Lent.

OUTREACH FOR HOPE gathers financial support
for ministries of the Greater Milwaukee Synod
working in communities of poverty
within the Synod.

Lenten Devotions — OUTREACH FOR HOPE


Origins of Lent Lent was designed as a forty (40) day journey to Easter Sunday. Since Sundays were not to be included as days of penitence, the ancients counted backwards from Easter, excluded Sundays, and ended on Ash Wednesday – thus LENT. It is a season of reflection and anticipation, self-examination and social awareness. It may be thought of as a mirror of the 40 days Jesus spent in the Wilderness being tempted by Satan, or the 40 years of wandering of the people of God in the Sinai.

Central themes One central theme is “Death to Life,” reflected in the origin of the word “Lent:” “lencten” in old English, “Lenz” in German. Both mean “Spring,” a time of the lengthening of the days from darkness to more light. Another theme is “Destruction to Transformation,” a constant biblical pattern from Genesis and Flood, through Exodus from slavery, through Exile to New Jerusalem, through Crucifixion to Resurrection.

Destruction to Transformation is powerfully present in the book of Revelation, which will be the textual foundation for these Lenten reflections. Revelation is as much a “visual” text as it is a “written” text. The words of W. H. Auden come to mind: “I look at what I write so that I can see what I think.”

Purpose of Revelation Contrary to popular fiction, this book is not about the rapture and the end of the world. Rather, it is focused on the present, and the need for faithfulness, patience and, most of all, hope in the face of suffering, anxiety and despair. It is addressed to the church, to God’s people who are witnesses to the promise of God in a troubled and violent world – but still God’s world.

Rev. Alexander (Sandy) Jacobs



What you need to know about these devotions

The devotions in this resource are part of a Lenten program called **A Dollar a Day for Poverty**. The program’s purpose is to raise an awareness of the issues of poverty around us and to highlight the twenty-one ministries of **OUTREACH FOR HOPE that minister in communities of poverty in the Greater Milwaukee Synod—ELCA**.

Consider giving a Dollar a Day for Poverty as you read and contemplate on the devotions for each day. If you can give more, consider what might be a sacrificial offering each day to remind you of the great sacrifice that Christ made for us. It will also serve to remind us of those for whom every dollar counts, as they struggle each day with the oppression of poverty.

At the end of Lent please turn in your collected gifts to your church’s treasurer, with any checks made out to your church and earmarked for ‘OUTREACH FOR HOPE.’ If that is not possible you are welcome to send the offering directly to **OUTREACH FOR HOPE, 1212 S. Layton Blvd., Milwaukee, WI 53215. Checks sent can be made out to ‘OUTREACH FOR HOPE.’**

Thank you to Rev. Sandy Jacobs for writing this year’s devotions on behalf of OUTREACH FOR HOPE. Sandy is a former ELCA campus pastor at the University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee, and continues to serve as an interim pastor in congregations throughout the Greater Milwaukee Synod. Sandy is a poet and a modern day prophet, connecting current events with theology and faith.

Rev. Jim Bickel — Director, OUTREACH FOR HOPE — www.outreachforhope.org



Greetings!

+++ Ash Wednesday, Day 1 – Revelation 1: 4-5 +++

“John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.”

*Ring – a – ring o’ Rosies
A pockets full of Posies,
Ashes, ashes, we all fall down*

Children still sing this rhyme and play the circle game that is centuries old. One tale of its origin goes back to the time of the Plague in the early Middle Ages. The ring of roses may refer to the red discoloration of the face and neck and hands. The pocket of posies may refer to the flowers that may have dispelled the odor of death. The reference to ashes may depict the mass cremations, or the dark color of the skin of plague victims. The point is that death is a constant, present reality in our world. Marking our foreheads with ashes then is not morbid, but truthful: “You are dust and to dust you will return.”

Ash Wednesday is appropriately the first day of Lent as we begin our journey with humility and candor about who we are and how we fit into this world. Around us, in every newscast and TV show, death is a regular feature of our life together. Around us, in every holiday letter, every family gathering, death and loss are our constant companions. Our Lenten journey begins with death but does not end there. Our Lenten journey begins with the imposition of ashes, but ends with the imposition of new life.

Ponderings

1. Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa once said, “Death is not the worst thing that can happen to a Christian.” What do you think he meant?
2. Find a newspaper and read the stories of death. Read the obituary page and pray for those mentioned.

Prayer God of ashes and hope, help us to not take life for granted. Help us to be ever aware that we are dust and to dust we will return, and to know that we will also return to you. Mark us with the ashes of life. Amen.

Partnership Pause with OUTREACH FOR HOPE

Pray for OFH congregation, **Lutheran Church of the Great Spirit** in Milwaukee, a community and cultural ministry of the American Indian population in the south Milwaukee area. It provides worship with a blend of traditional Lutheran and traditional native dimensions, working together in programming with several other Indian community groups.

Purple

+++ Day 2 — Revelation 1: 7 +++

“Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.”

“Naw, she say. God made it. Listen, God love everything you love – and a mess of stuff you don’t. But more than anything else, God love admiration.

You sayin’ God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say, not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it p_____ God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.”

from The Color Purple, by Alice Walker

Purple is the traditional liturgical color of Lent. Tradition tells us that it was the color of the robe placed on Jesus’ shoulders during his mockery by the Roman soldiers. There is deep irony here because it was the color that only Roman Senators were permitted to wear on their togas – a symbol of high office and importance. Without realizing it, the soldiers were investing this poor, Palestinian peasant with a high honor that only later proved to be authentic. “He is not here – He is risen – Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. “

We are called, during Lent, to pay attention, to appreciate, to honor the ironies of life that God calls forth: “every eye will see him, even those (Roman soldiers) who pierced him.”

Without realizing, we often invest far too much loyalty and authority in the powers of this world; the same powers who would hold us hostage to their demands, who would require ultimate obedience. We are called, during Lent, to examine our priorities, to question our loyalties, and to give in to the joy of wonder of the color “Purple.”

Ponderings

1. Look around your home and notice something you have previously missed. Admire it.
2. Pray for people in the “crowds at a sporting event or a political rally.”
3. Notice something unique in a spouse, child, colleague or friend – Give thanks.

Prayer

Maker of all things, give us a sense of awe and delight in the world around us and the world within us. Help us to see you at work in all creation. Amen.

Partnership Pause with OUTREACH FOR HOPE

Pray for the **Lutheran Office on Public Policy—Wisconsin**, a Partner of the Greater Milwaukee Synod, that advocates amid the halls of government in Madison for justice and human rights. LOPP-W seeks to ensure the responsible stewardship of God’s creation, to put emphasis on hunger and poverty, and to reconcile the estranged by speaking for those who have little or no power.

Community

+++ Day 3 – Revelation 1: 9 -11a +++

“I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, ‘Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches. . . .’”

“Joey wished that there were another world in which everyone could lead the good life without it being at someone else’s expense.”

from FREEDOM, by Jonathan Franzen

Lent is a time when we are invited into a community marked by “persecution” and “endurance.” It may not be apparent to us if we live in a safe and comfortable and secure neighborhood or nation, but we are members of a community that suffers. Douglas Jon Hall puts it this way: “The church does not have to suffer, as if there were no other possibility. However, whenever the church has made good its claim to Christ’s discipleship, it has at least known the call to suffer...called to suffer, not because suffering is good or beneficial or ultimately rewarding, but called to suffer because there is suffering – that is, because God’s creatures, including human beings, are already suffering, because ‘the whole creation groans.’ The point is: the suffering of the church is not the goal but the consequence of faith.”

We are called to be aware of suffering: to name it and to engage it. We are called to seek to stop it. One way is to listen to the voices of our churches in places of violence. One way is to pray for an end to violence. One way is to admit our own capacity for violence. Gandhi says that the only way to non-violence is to go through our own violence.

To be a community as Christ would have us be is to be open to the world in new and sometimes frightening ways.

Ponderings

1. In 2011, the Racine County coroner reported that there were 12 bodies that were never claimed by family or friends. How can the church respond to this loss of community?
2. How do I participate in the world’s violence? Reflect on what I do not do as well as on what I do.

Prayer

Break our reliance on ourselves so that we can rely on you and on others. Bring us into a new commitment to community so that we can find joy and peace in each other. Amen.

Partnership Pause with OUTREACH FOR HOPE

Pray for OFH congregation, **All Peoples Church** in Milwaukee, that uses youth programming to raise up new leaders for the church and community. Emerging leaders participate in Kids Working To Succeed and empowering events like summer and family camp and the ELCA Multicultural Youth Leadership Event.

Reflection

+++ Day 4 — Revelation 1: 19-20 +++

“Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

*We dance around in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.
Robert Frost*

For most of us the word “mystery” means a problem to be solved. The biblical witness treats “mystery” more as a divine secret of which to stand in awe – an unknowable depth at which to pondered and wonder. We are uncomfortable with mystery. We are like kids in a game of CLUE; we want answers, proof, evidence – we want to solve the issue. Once the poet Robert Frost was giving a reading at a college and had just finished a poem. A student, probably a sophomore, asked, “But, what does it mean?” Frost read the poem again.

In its wisdom, the church has responded the same way to the question of the Cross: “But what does it mean?” And we read the story again, and again, and again. For many of us, the stories, the readings we hear and reflect on during Lent, are not new, nor are they surprising, or even mysterious. But we are different. Our context, our relationships are different. The world is different.

Lent is a time for reflection: to look deeply inside ourselves, not to find answers, but to find questions. Rilke’s advice to a young poet friend is “to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Live the questions now.” Lent is a time for reflection on our interior self that all too frequently is ignored. Lent is a time for silence and listening.

Ponderings

1. Physicists tell us that the universe is expanding. Into what, or whom, or where?
2. If you could ask God three questions, what would they be?

Prayer

Deliver us from the distractions of life around us. Deliver us into the hands of silence and solitude. Deliver us from our own inner voices of worry and “what if.” Hold us still and be our quiet place. Amen.

Partnership Pause with OUTREACH FOR HOPE

Pray for people of the **Third World** who are far more than two thirds of the world’s population. Many in the poorest countries are forced to live on less than a dollar a day. Pray for wisdom and humility among nations of wealth to seek solutions that are more than hand-outs, but bring about economic justice and equity.

Ephesus

+++ First Sunday in Lent — Revelation 2:1-7 +++

“I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

“It would appear that the angel (of the church) is not something separate from the congregation, but must somehow represent it as a totality...(I)t is more than a mere personification of the church, but the actual spirituality of the congregation as a single entity...in, with and under the material expression of the church’s life as its interiority.”

from Unmasking the Powers, by Walter Wink

It is important to note that the “Seven Letters” of Revelation 2-3 are addressed NOT to the churches, but to the “angels” of the churches. To us this may seem curious or even weird, but to the ancients it made perfect sense: every church (indeed, every institution) had its angel. Walter Wink defines these angels as the “interiority,” the inner strength or weakness of the church. In the case of Ephesus, the inner strength is a patient endurance and tireless witness – its weakness is a loss of love. We are called to look not only at our budgets and our properties and our programs, but also at our inner spirit. We are called to look not only at how we respond to the needs around us, but also at how we think about the world around us.

Each week our house is inundated with requests for support for a myriad of causes: world hunger, civil rights, humane society, Habitat for Humanity, etc., etc. How can one try to love everyone everywhere? How can one respond to all of these causes and maintain sanity? Just thinking about it gives me a headache – but at least I am thinking about it.

Patience and love can be practiced only in a community, never alone. Our call is not only to discern the angel of our church, but to pray for and strengthen the angel so that we can be a faithful and loving community of Christ in our neighborhood, city and world.

Ponderings

1. What is the interiority of the ELCA? of our Synod? of your congregation?
2. For one week chart your instances of loss of patience. Why, when and with whom does it happen? How does it make you feel inside?

Prayer

We know how hard it is to love the way you ask us to love. Grant us the courage to risk loving others knowing we may not be loved in return. Strengthen our inner spirit that our outer lives may witness to your presence. Amen.

Sunday Pause for OUTREACH FOR HOPE

If your church has partners with other congregations, picture your partners in worship today. Give thanks for their faith and for what they have shared and taught. If your church does not have a partnership, explore how one can be formed.

Smyrna

+++ Day 5 — Revelation 2:9a,10 +++

“I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich...Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested.”

*“Don’t let the car fool you.
My treasure is in heaven”
Bumper sticker on beat up van.*

After the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1944, the Nazis rounded up all of the Polish resistance leaders and one by one broke their will by threatening to expose all of their past wrongdoings. One man they could not break.

- “We know that you cheated on your university exams”
 - “Yes, that is true – and more than once.”
- “We will tell everyone that you were unfaithful to your wife.”
 - “Yes. Sadly it happened two times.”
- “We know that you did not report a colleague who had committed fraud.”
 - “Yes, because I, too, was guilty of committing fraud.”

With many accusations, the Nazis threatened. But to no avail. After the war, when asked about this, the man simply said: “Since I had already confessed all of this and more to God, there was nothing that the Nazis could hold over my head. God’s grace and forgiveness are far more powerful than torture, or even death.”

Ponderings

1. Of what are you most afraid? What is the source of the fear?
2. Is there someone to whom you can tell your deepest, darkest secrets? Give thanks for that person. Tell them how grateful you are.
3. Make a list of “grace-moments” in your life, marriage, workplace – a time when you were forgiven or blessed without deserving it.

Prayer

You know our deepest and darkest secrets and fears. Turn us inside out so that we may find relief in your forgiveness and grace. Amen

Partnership Pause with OUTREACH FOR HOPE

Pray for OFH congregation, **Our Savior’s Lutheran Church** in Racine. It puts an emphasis on a Thursday night youth program called, *Spark: Fanning the Flames of Faith*, which includes food, games, learning, and teen leadership mentoring, with a growing team of volunteers from the congregation and community to provide the help and leadership.

Pergamum

+++ Day 6 — Revelation 2:12-17 +++

“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you all did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives.”

“Will anyone say, ‘Where are those who worship Satan under the Name of God?’ Where are they? Listen! Every Religion that Preaches Vengeance for Sin is the Religion of the Enemy and Avenger and not the Forgiver of Sin, and their God is Satan, Named by the Divine Name.”

William Blake

One of the usual questions asked when meeting a new person or friend is, “Where do you live?” We believe we can learn a lot about people by discovering where they live: socio-economic status, class, liberal or conservative, Packer or Viking fan, etc.

When I tell people that I live in Milwaukee, they sometimes say, “You mean – really – IN Milwaukee?” I say “Yes – for 26 years.” This is sometimes followed by an uncomfortable silence, or by “Is it safe?” or “Aren’t you afraid?” If I wanted to be sarcastic I might say, “Yes, just like the Christians at Pergamum, we live where Satan’s throne is.”

Satan’s throne is anywhere that fear and anxiety win out over love and hope. Satan’s throne is anywhere that prejudice prevails over hospitality, where violence overcomes peace, where the demand for revenge is greater than the demand for mercy.

So – where do you live?

Ponderings

1. Do you believe that “open housing” is a reality in SE Wisconsin? Why or why not?
2. What can you do to make your neighborhood more safe, more friendly?

Prayer

You who came to dwell among us, to live in the places we call home, grant us the courage to open our doors and our hearts to our neighbors and our enemies. Amen

Partnership Pause with OUTREACH FOR HOPE

Pray with thanksgiving for the **Parish Nurses** within our Synod who speak to the value our churches hold, that health care is not a privilege but part of a caring and holistic community. Pray for the 47 million in our country who have **no health insurance**, and the many more who have minimal health insurance, and for the ministry of our Parish Nurses who are often in the front line of care for the uninsured in our communities.