

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 1

**Date:** Wed, Feb 26th

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 13:20

**Prayer:**

God of Justice,  
Help us to see your  
divine presence,  
especially in those who  
have wronged us, so  
that we may forgive as  
you have forgiven us.  
Grant that we all may  
soar together again  
someday.  
Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:**

The US incarcerates  
more people per capita  
than any other nation.

**Action:**

Share this devotion  
booklet with a friend!  
Let them know you are  
spending lent  
reflecting on criminal  
justice reform. Follow  
the PA Council of  
Churches on FB,  
Twitter, or Instagram  
for updates.

**Ezekiel 13:20** "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against your magic charms with which you ensnare people like birds and I will tear them from your arms; I will set free the people that you ensnare like birds"

**by Linda Watkins, Episcopal Network for Economic Justice**

God created us all with wings! Like the angels, each wonderfully-made human being is meant to soar. But can any of us soar when some fly and some are shackled? Can we be the angels we are meant to be while we are all captive to sin? Sin that builds walls of hatred and violence. Sin that leads us to assumptions and judgements made without the mercy and compassion God requires.

So we build prisons - systems meant to hold each other down, meant so that we can avoid seeing the face of Jesus Christ in every person we encounter. And then we call this justice - all the traps that prevent us from seeing in each other the face of Jesus Christ. We build endless walls of retribution, punishment - forgetting God's call to justice and mercy.

Thank goodness for the prophet's reminders that there can be no justice while some fly freely, while others are chained down with systems that labels them not as children of God, but as something "other" - something to be feared, put away, forgotten. There can be no justice as long as there are those who long to be restored to community and are denied that chance.

We do God's work when we break through our own bonds of prejudice and fear - when we practice compassion; daring to forgive even those who have hurt us the most - when we strive to do our part in helping to overturn all systems that prevent humans from flying as they ought - free to be the angels we all are.

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## Day 2

**Date:** Thu, Feb 27th

**Scripture:** James 2:5

**Prayer:**

When we are searching for your Kingdom, may we turn to face those whom our society considers the last and least. May we see your face in the stranger asking for help and may we be brave enough to offer it.

Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** It is estimated that anywhere from 80,000 to 100,000 people are in solitary confinement in prisons throughout the United States at any given time.

**Action:** Subscribe to the PA Council of Churches' News and Action Summary to stay up to date on events and important political actions.

[http://org2.salsalabs.com/o/5415/p/salsa/web/common/public/signup?signup\\_page\\_KEY=531](http://org2.salsalabs.com/o/5415/p/salsa/web/common/public/signup?signup_page_KEY=531)

**James 2:5** Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

**by Faith Neece, Sycamore House Service Corps Member**

As I sit down to write this reflection, it's the end of awards season. I have to admit I love the glitz and glam. And I love to see the hard work of artists recognized. But while the awards are fun to watch, they also remind me of whom our culture chooses. We choose the rich and famous. We choose the strong and mighty. We choose the glamorous and accomplished. But that's not whom God chooses.

James writes "Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" God chooses the poor, the forgotten, the outcasts for God's kingdom.

I'm struck by the fact that if the Beatitudes were written based on our cultural values, they would be the exact opposite of what Jesus says. Our Beatitudes might say, "Blessed are the successful. Blessed are those who do what it takes to get to the top. Blessed are those who look out for themselves."

But Jesus blesses the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers. Jesus chooses the vulnerable and broken parts of us. Today, I encourage you to think about whom you choose. If I'm honest with myself, I'm much more inclined to choose the powerful. I need the Spirit to remind me what and who really matters.

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## Day 3

**Date:** Fri, Feb 28th

**Scripture:** Psalm  
146:7

**Prayer:**

Almighty God,  
Help us to see the  
love of your world,  
even in the midst of  
the evil of our  
invented world. Grant  
that we may bring  
your love to this  
world more and more  
each day.  
Amen.

**Criminal Justice**

**Fact:** The average  
length of stay in  
solitary confinement  
for an inmate in a PA  
prison is 30-90 days.

**Action:**

Visit your local  
bookstore, or head to  
the library to check  
out a book on the  
criminal justice  
system. Check out  
the Council of  
Churches website for  
recommendations.

**Psalm 146:7** "...The Lord executes Justice for the oppressed..."

**by The Rev. Canon Andrew France Archdeacon Emeritus,  
Episcopal Diocese, Central Pennsylvania Chaplain, Lycoming  
County Prison**

There are two worlds: the real world which we cannot see and the invented world from which we cannot escape. We live in the world that humankind has created. We live outside of God's garden. Yet that which gives us life and hope is the presence of the living God who is in truth the real world.

There is a story from 1943 in one of the Nazi extermination camps in which millions of Jews and others were gassed to death. A group of men held a mock trial with judge, jury, prosecution and defense attorneys. The defendant was God. The charge was that God allowed evil and injustice to exist. The attorneys presented their arguments. The jury was sent into seclusion and returned with a "guilty" verdict. The judge then stood up and declared loudly, "now let us stand and praise the Lord".

The judge tells us that the truth of who we are and how we live has its source in the one who is the author of the real world. It is that presence that blesses us with true freedom of spirit and soul no matter the circumstances of our invented world. The God of the real world is one who gives and faithfully keeps the promise to be here 24/7 even when we cannot find that presence.

Evil has no place in God's created order, yet it is here in so many forms. It is a violation of God's righteousness, mercy, and justice. St. Augustine said God endured evil in order to overcome it. God acted to give us Himself and in so doing gives to us the gift of the death of injustice and even of death itself. As we live in our invented world, God provides hope.

May we each morning arise and greet the new day with the heart felt prayer "now let me praise the Lord," trusting that the real love coming from the real world will permeate the totality of us and the specifics of our invented world, for this is stronger than all else that comes our way.

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## Day 4

**Date:** Sat, Feb 29th

**Scripture:** Matt 5:7

**Prayer:** God of Light and Love, grant that we may forget ourselves and show mercy to others, just as you have shown mercy to us. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** PA ranks 8th in the nation for the number of inmates who have spent 3 or more years in solitary confinement.

**Action:** Sign our open letter to PA government officials calling for reducing the use of solitary confinement in PA's prisons.

[http://org2.salsalabs.com/o/5415/p/dia/action4/common/public/?action\\_KEY=26889](http://org2.salsalabs.com/o/5415/p/dia/action4/common/public/?action_KEY=26889)

**Matthew 5:7** - "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

**by Anthony Alexander, Union of Black Episcopalians**

As I prepare myself to celebrate a Holy Lent, it should be noted that I have a running feud with Lent. You see, I am extremely uncomfortable with Lent. Some years ago, I came to understand that I am complicit in the events that lead up to Holy Week and Resurrection Sunday. At this point, any rational, sane, and intelligent person would say, "What do you mean? You were not alive two thousand years ago. How are you complicit?" And that is when all my "stuff" comes stumbling out my neat little storage shed.

My anger towards those who are different. My intolerance for those who do not speak like me, dress like me, and don't believe as I do. The ugly part that I try to keep hidden from others sticks its head out and causes me to spit on Jesus, to deny him as my Savior, and causes him to be whipped in my stead. Each year during Lent, I am reminded of how I had part in the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. Therein lies my discomfort. I have sinned against God in Christ and there is nothing beautiful about my sins.

As I journey through Lent feeling unworthy of God's grace, I am struck by Matthew 5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, they shall obtain mercy." But Lord, when did I show you mercy? Especially when I was doing my own thing? As I pondered those words, my mind's eye traveled to the AIDS patients I once visited. I thought about all the men and women I visited in the prisons in Central Pennsylvania. I even thought about the number of families that were returning to society whom we provided temporary housing. Then I knew, the times I forgot about myself and ignored my pride, that I showed mercy to Christ. Thanks be to God!

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## Day 5

**Date:** Mon, Mar 2nd

**Scripture:** Matt 12:18

**Prayer:** God, may we hear your voice today, reminding us that we are loved, that you delight in us. Help us follow your call to proclaim a holistic justice, sharing your love and healing in order to restore relationships and build communities of shalom. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** 85% of prisoners placed in restrictive housing units in PA were written up for something as simple as "failure to obey an order."

**Action:** Read this article about a woman who was placed in solitary confinement for having two onions in her cell:

<https://www.publicsource.org/i-spent-17-days-in-solitary-for-having-two-onions-in-my-cell-the-isolation-changed-me/>

**Matthew 12:18** "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations."

**by Darrel Reinford, Executive Director  
Christian Churches United**

We who are God's servants are called to proclaim justice. But what is the justice that we are proclaiming? There are many voices claiming to proclaim God's justice in our time. If we look at what Jesus and his disciples were doing immediately prior to when Matthew uses this quote from Isaiah, we get a sense of what justice meant to him. Both Jesus and his disciples broke the Sabbath laws of the Pharisees, harvesting grain when they were hungry and healing a man with a wounded hand – so justice is not just about following or enforcing the law.

The justice that Jesus is proclaiming calls us to meet the basic needs of those who are hungry and to bring healing to those who are hurting. It is a holistic justice.

God has given his Spirit to us, and he calls us to proclaim his holistic justice. This can be done by working towards making the secular system of justice a more restorative system, but also by reaching out to the individuals affected by the system, and finding ways to make our communities of faith more supportive places for those seeking a fresh start. We know that supportive relationships are essential for successful reentry and reducing recidivism. How is God calling you to offer support to someone seeking restoration and hope today?

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**Date:** Tue, Mar 3rd

**Scripture:** Colossians 1: 21-22

**Prayer:** Jesus teach us to forgive so we can be forgiven. Teach us to forget sorrow and pain,. Teach us not to hold onto what you have died for. Father forgive us, for we know not why we hold onto what we cannot change.

Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:**

2,314 prisoners were being held in solitary confinement in PA as of Feb 2019, according to the PA Department of Corrections.

**Action:** Attend or set up a screening of the film [True Justice](#), which tells the story of Human Rights Activist Bryan Stevenson. PA Council of Churches will be hosting a screening at St. Stephen's Episcopal Cathedral today at 6:30 PM! For more info visit the **FB event page:**

<https://www.facebook.com/events/638769953524589/>

**To set up a screening of your own visit:** <https://eji.org/projects/true-justice/>

**Colossians 1:21-22** "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation."

**by Destiny Brown, Total Deliverence Ministries**

Looking towards the season of Lent, my heart remembers a dear lesson learned from a group I facilitated. The program gave inmates a day of reflection. A day to look inward and take responsibility for their actions. A day to ask God, along with their family members, to forgive them.

One particular inmate stood out in the group. He began to weep and weep. Then, he stated, "I've been incarcerated for 15 years and I've never admitted to the crime which I've committed. Not knowing that Jesus died on the cross for my sins..."

He said his mother was by his side the entire time and had asked him on several occasions if he had committed the crime for which he was charged. He said he would always say no. That day, he realized he no longer had to lie or carry guilt because Jesus carried it all to the cross. He now knows that God is a forgiver of all. He is reconciled back to the Father with his sins forgiven. He knows that he is loved and was able to forgive himself as well.

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## Day 7

**Date:** Wed, Mar 4rd

**Scripture:** Proverbs 31:8-9

**Prayer:** Precious Father in heaven, we humbly come before your throne of grace asking that you strip us of all fear and allow us to stand in the face of adversity for those who cannot.  
Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** Over 400 people per year were released directly from solitary confinement to their communities in PA between 2008 and 2014.

**Action:**

Look up who your legislators are and familiarize yourself with their policy positions. You can use this legislator lookup tool to find your US Senators, Reps, and local officials:

<https://org2.salsalabs.com/o/5415/getLocal.jsp>

**Proverbs 31:8-9** "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

**by Douglas Hollis, Sound Community Solutions**

Too often our voices are silent and we are remiss of the voiceless. Our hearts lack empathy and compassion for those who are less fortunate. However, God calls us to stand up and speak for those who cannot. It is our responsibility to give voice to their stories, that others may hear and know the level of their suffrage. We cannot ignore the call of God.

In 1999, while I was incarcerated at SCI Coal Township, a Deputy Superintendent named Johnson sought to change a policy that gave inmates the opportunity to go to yard or the day room. He sent out the memo for the change. I sent a correspondence to the Superintendent asking why this change was necessary, when there had been no problems with the practice. The Superintendent rescinded the Deputy's memo and restored the policy. I was, of course, transferred to another prison as a result of giving voice to the voiceless, but that was what God had called me to do.

In the book of Jonah, God called Jonah to speak to the people of Nineveh. He refused and ran to flee, but God caused a storm to arise and the crew became fearful; ultimately they cast him to the sea where he was swallowed by the large fish. He prayed to the Lord who restored him and sent him where He had called him to go. Our call, like Jonah's, cannot be ignored. We must have compassion for the poor and care for the needy. And, yes, speak up, out, and for the voiceless. This is our calling.

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## Day 8

**Date:** Thur, Mar 5th

**Scripture:** Luke 22:33

**Prayer:** Dear God, Help us to become ready to follow you to prison and to death. Help us not to be afraid, but encourage us to make bold statements of faith and belief in the pursuit of justice. When we inevitably fail and deny you, guide us back in your direction. Help us to keep moving forward. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** It costs nearly 75K to house a prisoner in solitary confinement for a year, nearly 3X as much as housing them in general population.

**Action:** The primaries are coming up, make sure you are registered to vote! The deadline to register to vote in the PA presidential primaries is **April 22nd**. You can find all the voting information you need here: <https://www.votespa.com/Pages/default.aspx>

**Luke 22:33** "Peter said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.'"

**by Emily Schmid, Advocacy Programs Associate,  
PA Council of Churches**

I am struck by how bold of a statement Peter makes in this moment. When he decided to follow Jesus, I don't think Peter knew what he signed up for. I think he meant this statement with his whole heart, but he didn't realize just how hard it would be to actually go with Jesus into prison and death. Immediately following this verse, Jesus rebukes Peter saying that before the end of the day Peter will deny three times that he knows Jesus.

I am ready to be arrested peacefully protesting a cause I care about. I am ready to face ostracism from my peers for taking a stand. I am ready to have difficult yet necessary conversations with my family.

But then... Thanksgiving comes around and it is easier to pick at the mashed potatoes on my plate than pick an argument with my uncle about prison reform. The protest is happening, but it is raining outside and I'd rather not get wet. I am tempted to take the easy way out. I fall short and deny Jesus in my words and actions on a daily basis.

There are days I question what I signed up for. Advocacy work It is tiring and draining, and I'm not sure I'm even making a difference. There are days where activism feels like a feeble attempt to stand up for justice. To follow Jesus into the resurrection means first to follow him into his death. So I ask myself, am I ready? In the face of death and despair, can I keep moving forward? Can I afford not to?

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## Day 9

**Date:** Fri, Mar 6th

**Scripture:** Zechariah 9:11

**Prayer:** Dear God,  
We know that you have sent us out to bear witness to your love. Give us strength and courage to proclaim the everlasting freedom that your love brings.  
Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** HB 497 and SB 832 would place limitations on the practice of solitary confinement. They would prohibit solitary for certain vulnerable populations and create a max sentence to solitary of 15 days. Both bills are currently sitting in committee.

**Action:** Visit the PA General Assembly website to read a summary of HB 497 and SB 832.

<https://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/home/bills/>

**Zechariah 9:11** "As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I have set your prisoners free from the waterless pit."

**by Rev. Grant Ambrose, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church York, PA**

The word translated as "set free" is from a Hebrew word that means "to send" and it occurs 847 times in the Old Testament. I'm not sure we often think of being "set free" as being "sent out". However, consider the Exodus of the children of Israel out of Egypt. Certainly they were set free, at the same time, and most importantly, they were sent out – sent to the mountain of God, sent to set in motion the establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth.

In this season of Lent, we are well served to spend some time thinking of the many ways in which we are sent out to bear witness to the love of Christ in the world. Jesus sends us out to seek to live the life that he lived: a life "to bring good news to the poor [...] to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18b-19). If we truly wish to be free then we have to work to bring about Christ's love to all areas of life. If we truly wish to be free we have to work to establish regenerative justice and confront injustice wherever we encounter it.

To be set free is to be sent in the name of Christ to help all know the freedom that is found in the unwavering Love of Christ.

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## Day 10

**Date:** Sat, Mar 7th

**Scripture:** Luke 4:18-19

**Prayer:** God of justice and liberation, loose us from whatever bonds are tying us down, and equip and empower us to share your good news with all who need it.  
Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:**

Over 50% of people housed in solitary confinement are NOT believed to be there because they pose a safety risk.

**Action:**

Write a letter to your local representatives asking them to sign on to HB 497 and SB 832 to limit the practice of solitary confinement in PA. View our handout with tips for contacting your legislators here:

[https://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/advocacy\\_contact\\_tips-1.pdf](https://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/advocacy_contact_tips-1.pdf)

**Luke 4:18-19** “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

**by Ben White, Pastor, Circle of Hope**

Before Jesus began his ministry he experienced two rites of passage. At Jesus' baptism God said, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” In his wilderness temptation Jesus demonstrated his beloved-ness by trusting his Father in extreme circumstance. Luke 4:18 is the inauguration of the movement Jesus was sent to incite. Jesus came to bring freedom. He had been prepared for a specific sort of good news – a good news that was especially good for the poor and the oppressed. He declared this in “the power of the Spirit.”

Today, dehumanizing encounters with police, and incarceration are another sort of rite of passage. In the power of the spirit of racism, predominantly poor, black, and brown communities can be tempted to expect mistreatment by the criminal justice system. The policies, laws, and officials that perform these rites upon guilty and innocent alike are the anti-beloved-ness. Could they be hell-bent on saying “You are my un-beloved sons, with you we will never be pleased”?

We are deeply in need for Jesus’ movement to realize his good news for the poor -- actualize his liberty for the captives. Even those young people who make it through these systems without being swallowed by them have all received a message of emotional and spiritual captivity. We must counter that lie with real alternatives. To undo the dehumanizing inevitability of our criminal justice system we must commit to beloved-ness; but not in its sentimentality. Real freedom requires reconciliation and reparation. Once we see this, let us not pretend we are blind.

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## Day 11

**Date:** Mon, Mar 9th

**Scripture:** Jer. 30:8

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, in tough times, help us hold on to the promise of a new day when your Justice will reign supreme. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** People placed in solitary confinement have limited to no access to prison resources and programs that have been shown to reduce recidivism.

**Action:** Consider becoming a pen pal with a person in prison. Contact Friends over Fences to see how you can get involved in their pen pal program.

<http://www.friendsoverfences.org/FriendsOverFences/YouCanHelp/PenPals.aspx>

**Jeremiah 30:8** "In that day," declares the LORD Almighty, "I will break the yoke off their necks and will tear off their bonds; no longer will foreigners enslave them."

**by Jane Miron, Deacon, Episcopal Diocese of Central PA**

In the passage of the Bible for today, the prophet Jeremiah is addressing the people of Israel, a people who have long endured captivity, desolation, despair, and loss of hope. Some of their experience was a result of their own doing; sometimes they had moments of joy in their relationship with God. Jeremiah is very familiar with the ups and downs of becoming a people who follow God. In addressing his people, Jeremiah uses two different voices—at times he is encouraging them by bringing news of God's promise of freedom, and at other times admonishing them for forgetting to follow God. The passage today speaks of God's promise to bring about a day of setting things right, as my grandmother used to say. God promised them, and God promises us now, that freedom and redemption will happen.

In my life I have experienced times of feeling separated from God, times of hopelessness as well as times when I simply knew that Truth and Justice can and do prevail. In my work in prison ministry I have seen both hopelessness and joy. The first time I entered a prison it was a very different experience for me. I heard the doors slam shut behind me and realized I had no power on my own to open them. I was a captive at the control of an unseen force or being. In here, we sit together and share each other's fear, anger, hopelessness, restlessness and fatigue of endless waiting. But that is not all we share. We also share voices of hope and freedom with each other. I have seen the face and work of God as women reach out and lovingly care for each other. I have seen women truly grab hold and hang onto the promise that they are worthy and loved by God; women who hang onto the news that God knows and cares that life can be relentless with difficulties. Women who believe that justice and mercy are not just abstract dreams, and that God will someday remove the yokes of captivity of our own or other's doings; that true freedom to live as we were intended to live will really happen. It's like seeing Jeremiah come to life. So today, who needs to hear from you that things will be different "on that day?" and who do you need to remind to follow God?

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## Day 12

**Date:** Tue, Mar 10th

**Scripture:** Matt 5:14

**Prayer:** God, help us to recognize your light shining in those in whom we least expect it, and empower us to share your light with others as well. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** The use of solitary confinement has grown substantially in recent years, by as much as 42% between 1995 and 2005 according to estimates.

**Action:** Write an Op-Ed to your local newspaper about the need to reduce the practice of solitary confinement in PA. For resources to help you craft an op-ed, visit:

[https://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Letters\\_to\\_the\\_Editor.pdf](https://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Letters_to_the_Editor.pdf)

**Matthew 5:14** "You are the light of the world."

**by Jennifer Mattson, Rector, St. Thomas Episcopal Church Lancaster, PA**

When is the last time you saw God's light shine? When is the last time you stood in the presence of something so holy it took your breath away? For me, it happened during a memorial service in prison. A mother had requested a memorial service for her son that had died from opioid overdose.

During the service, we sang a song that the women loved called "I Can Only Imagine", by Mercy Me. This song imagines what it will be like to stand before God one day: "I can only imagine what it will be like when I walk by your side. I can only imagine what my eyes will see when your face is before me. I can only imagine." We played this song after reading the words of the gospel of John, where Jesus describes a house with many rooms, a place of peace and welcome for his children.

As the music softly played, the mother started to sob uncontrollably. And as her body literally shook with grief, the woman next to her reached out her arm and placed it around her shoulders. Then the woman on the other side did the same thing. And then another woman walked across the room, got down on her knees and held the grieving mother's hands as she sang along to this song, loudly singing while looking into her eyes. But instead of singing "When I stand in your presence, when I walk by your side" she sang "When Tyler stands in your presence, When Tyler walks by your side." She sang the entire song using the name Tyler, the name of the young man who had overdosed.

This group of women- all of whom have been labeled criminals, all struggling with addiction, poverty, and for most, chronic homelessness- these women, known by a number and not by a name- shone with the light of Christ's love and it was holy. It was holy ground, and if I had been wearing sandals I would have taken them off.

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## Day 13

**Date:** Wed, Mar 11th

**Scripture:** Micah 6:8

**Prayer:** Loving God, I'm grateful for your boundless mercy. Guide my heart, hands and feet to walk humbly, love mercy, and act justly. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** The conditions in solitary confinement vary from prison to prison but are characterized as 23-24 hours confined to a single cell.

**Action:** Read the following report from the Vera Institute of Justice to gain a better understanding of the scope of solitary in the US.

[https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/solitary-confinement-misconceptions-safe-alternatives-report\\_1.pdf](https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/solitary-confinement-misconceptions-safe-alternatives-report_1.pdf)

**Micah 6:8** "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"

**by Melanie G Snyder, Author, *Grace Goes to Prison: An Inspiring Story of Hope & Humanity* (Brethren Press)**

Every Wednesday evening, in a church basement in Lancaster, PA, about thirty men and women meet to support, encourage, and offer each other hope. This peer-led group, called "Successful Returning Citizens" is made up of formerly incarcerated people and their volunteer mentors. They've taught me so much. The most humbling lesson they've taught me is that, as "Just Mercy" author Bryan Stevenson says, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."

These returning citizens face numerous barriers due to their criminal records. Many are unemployed or work at low-wage jobs that leave them unable to afford basic necessities like food, clothing, medication, or healthcare. Many live in unhealthy, unstable, and unsafe places. Some are homeless. They are judged, labeled, and rejected by employers, landlords, and the community. Many are estranged from their families. They carry haunting memories and trauma from the rampant violence and toxic culture in our prisons and jails. And they carry deep shame about their past, and a pervasive sense of being "unworthy" and "less than".

Yet, they start every Wednesday night meeting by sharing what they're grateful for. It's humbling to listen to, as I'm reminded of all that I take for granted. They talk about their struggles too. And I'm in awe at what they have to carry day after day. Then, they lift one another up with the sweet healing balm of encouragement and hope. They are real and tender and candid with each other. In the brave space they create together, anyone who's hurting can say so, knowing that here, at least, they'll find compassion and acceptance, not judgment. I am in awe at the generous, caring, merciful ways they connect with each other. Their volunteer mentors provide tangible supports like transportation to appointments and help accessing community resources. But more important are the "intangibles" the mentors provide: A warm welcome. Unconditional dignity. Compassionate listening. Acknowledgement of each person's humanity. Affirmation of each person's worth. Imagine if every house of worship offered this kind of compassion, hope, and mercy to society's most marginalized and ostracized children of God: returning citizens. What a just and merciful world we could help to create.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 14

**Date:** Thur, Mar 12th

**Scripture:** Acts 12:7-10

**Prayer:** Almighty God, whose blessed son was led by the spirit to be tempted by Satan, make speed to help your servants who are also assaulted by manifold temptations, and let each of us find you mighty to save through Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:**

The continued use of long term punitive solitary confinement in the US is in direct conflict with international standards, including recommendations made by the UN Committee Against Torture.

**Action:** Sign the National Religious Campaign Against Torture's statement of conscience "Torture is a Moral Issue" and share why you signed with your friends.

<http://www.nrcat.org/get-involved/sign-the-statement-of-conscience>

**Acts 12:7-10** "And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, 'Get up quickly' And his chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, 'Gird yourself and put on your sandals.' And he did so."

**by Rev. Michelle Bodle, Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church**

Peter was arrested during the celebration of the festival of Unleavened Bread. Herod was on a rampage, killing James by the sword. But the Church still fervently prayed in the face of oppression and the unknown for Peter, even as he was thrown in jail. And their prayers were answered in a powerful way. Before Peter was going to be brought before Herod, probably to face the same fate as James, the angel of the Lord comes and breaks him out of prison. Even when he was bound in chains. Even with a guard on either side of him. Only Peter thought what he was experiencing was actually a dream - a vision. Not real. It wasn't until he cleared the two gates of the prison and found himself standing in front of the city gate that he realized that he had been rescued by the Lord.

It is my hope and prayer that as Christians we are in the business of bringing freedom. Of liberating the captive. Of seeking justice. Of praying both with our hearts and our feet. Only at times, I fear that we choose a life of comfort for ourselves over a life marked by righteousness and justice. In fact, in seeking that self-comfort at times we end up being the people who are putting chains on folks, through systemic oppression. Still other times, we can become so discouraged in seeking to bring freedom in the face of so much brokenness and evil in our world, that we think we are simply chasing after a dream. But as Peter reminds us in today's scripture passage, what seems like a far-off vision or distant dream, can actually become reality when the people of God pray and respond to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Church, it's time to get up and put on our sandals- we are chasing after the light of Christ and moving towards freedom.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 15

**Date:** Fri, Mar 13th

**Scripture:** Isaiah 61:1

**Prayer:** Almighty God, Guide the people of this land, and of all nations, in the ways of justice and peace; that we may honor one another and serve the common good. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** 1/3 to 1/2 of all incarcerated people in segregated housing have some form of mental illness, which can exacerbate the negative psychological affects of isolation.

**Action:** Familiarize yourself with local organizations working towards criminal justice reform in your area. See if you can volunteer or donate to help their mission.

**Isaiah 61:1** "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners."

**by Rev. Rick Bauer, Associate Rector, St. James Episcopal Church, Lancaster, PA**

The voice of a prophet is a voice of defiance. To stare into the twisted countenance of injustice, empathically embracing the weight of a world crying out, calls for an almost reckless courage rarely found in our midst these days. Most of us protectively settle for the conditions that we see before us with a faint echo in the back of our minds repeating in relief: "thank God it's not me." The stock market is doing well, we're armed to the teeth, and the fierce spirit of our individualism tells us that we all ought to be able to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps in this life. Our dominant, collective, complacent voice declares: "Some people make bad choices, and there's a reason for everything." It welcomes the question: Is there something in our DNA as modern Americans that biases us toward a blindness to the suffering of others? Are we so well-off that we inevitably collude to hold back God's vision for justice and peace in the world in order to rest in the way that things are?

Perhaps a prophet would dare to remind us that we simply cannot find satisfaction in any status quo, because to proclaim the cruciform shape of reality necessarily entails our leaning in toward a narrative of total transformation. In light of God's own story, the bonds of oppression, broken heartedness, and captivity should peel away from the collective soul of humankind in the tide of a Trinitarian force making all things new. But, if God's people are responsible in any way for aiding in that Divine enterprise, then perhaps we of good faith shoulder significant blame for the brokenness in our midst. Maybe we have ignored the call to look around us and to be uncomfortable. Maybe we can only bring the good news after we have committed ourselves to accounting for the roles that we play in the suffering of others. May we be so moved.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 16

**Date:** Sat, Mar 14th

**Scripture:** 2 Corinth 5:18

**Prayer:** God of love and reconciliation, guide me to love all of my neighbors, including those in prison. Remind me that you call your people to work for restoration and reconciliation for our incarcerated neighbors that we all might reflect your face of love and peace in the world. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** In PA the county jail population has increased over 260% since 1980 despite a decline in overall crime rates.

**Action:** Watch the 2016 Netflix documentary 13th which analyzes the growth in US prisons. Discuss what you learned with friends.

**2 Corinthians 5:18** "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

**by Sandy Strauss, Director of Advocacy, PA Council of Churches**

Wikipedia defines reconciliation as “the end of the estrangement, caused by original sin, between God and humanity.” Paul, the first real Christian theologian, appears to have placed reconciliation at the center of his writings, and this passage from 2 Corinthians is a prime example. It’s interesting that the term reconciliation never actually appears in the gospels, though Jesus’ ministry was all about reconciliation, and Paul appears to recognize it.

Jesus sought to bring those he encountered into right relationship with God and neighbor. Take Zacchaeus, the “wee little” tax collector who profited from the Roman’s oppressive taxation on occupied Jewish communities. Jesus called Zacchaeus down from his tree perch, announcing his intention to stay with him, despite grumbling from the crowds who despised tax collectors and thought Jesus was wrong for associating with him. Zacchaeus, who recognized what Jesus was doing, then voluntarily announced that he would give half of his wealth to the poor, and would restore fourfold to anyone he had defrauded. In that action, Jesus helped Zacchaeus to be reconciled with both God and his neighbors—unlike the wealthy man who walked away when Jesus told him that obeying the law meant sharing his riches with the poor.

Paul understands that reconciliation must extend beyond God and us as individuals, just as Jesus demonstrated. Indeed, in the following verses Paul elaborates by saying that God is “entrusting the message of reconciliation to us,” calling on us to be “ambassadors for Christ.” Are not our neighbors in prison, as people created in the image of God, deserving of love—and deserving of reconciliation? As people of God, and for Christians called to be “ambassadors for Christ,” we should think of prisons as places of reconciliation, not simply punishment. God still loves persons in prison, regardless of what they may have done, and we must do likewise. We are called to work toward seeking restoration, reconciliation, and right relationship with God and neighbor for our brothers and sisters in prison. Unless we do so, we ourselves cannot claim to be right with God.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



**Date:** Mon, Mar 16th

**Scripture:** Psalm 146:7

**Prayer:** Lord,

You made a promise to provide for us. Remind us, when times get rough and we can only see the struggling, that You are there providing for us. Show us Your love through the helping stranger or the neighbor that opens their doors.

Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** Solitary Confinement started in PA at Eastern State Penitentiary in 1829.

**Action:** Attend our event Solidarity not Solitary at the Metropolitan Community Church in Harrisburg this evening from 6-8pm. If you can't attend, share the event with friends who are local and contact Emily Schmid at [e.schmid@pachurches.org](mailto:e.schmid@pachurches.org) to schedule an event for your local community. Below is the link to our Facebook Event:

<https://www.facebook.com/events/189838229109496/>

**Psalm 146:7** "Who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free."

**by Shelby Mancell, Sycamore House Service Corps Member**

My time working for CONTACT Helpline/PA 211 as a housing specialist I came to see that everyone's struggling in different ways. Some people need help with rent because they couldn't pay because of health reasons, disability, rent going up, getting laid off, etc. Some people have nowhere to go for shelter, they need help finding a place to stay. Some need help with finding food, diapers, formula, clothes, etc. Everyone's situation is different with every phone call.

But I have also seen the good out of the bad. So many churches and organizations are trying so hard to help these people. Some of food pantries/soup kitchens. Some open their doors to give them a place to stay for the night and/or day. Some help people to stay at a motel/hotel for a night or two. Getting clothes, formula, diapers for those whose family is in need. There are those who even help with finding jobs, learning more about landlord/tenant agreements, help with free or cheap legal services. There are many more areas these places try to help with for those in need.

God has shown through my own personal experiences and those that I help that He provides. He provides with love: Love from neighbors and strangers to neighbors and strangers. He loves us and has promised to provide for us. He keeps that promise in many ways, from a stranger helping a stranger to churches and organizations that provide for those in need.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 18

**Date:** Tues, Mar 17th

**Scripture:** Eph. 4:32

**Prayer:** Dear God,  
Grant us the courage  
to forgive one another  
as you have forgiven  
us through your son,  
our savior, Jesus  
Christ. Help us to  
cultivate the courage,  
grace, and agency  
required to forgive.  
Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:**  
As of 2016, PA had  
more prisoners in  
solitary confinement  
than all but four other  
states.

**Action:** Get together a  
group of friends and  
host a staged reading  
of the play "If the SHU  
Fits" developed by  
NRCAT incorporating  
voices of those who  
have spent time in  
solitary. The play can  
be downloaded here:  
<http://nrcat.org/storage/documents/if-the-shu-fits-script.pdf>

**Ephesians 4:32** "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

**by Rev. Tabitha Ssonko, Pastor, Monumental AME Church, Steelton PA**

Forgiveness is hard! When we are wronged, we want to exact vengeance, or ensure that perpetrators receive their due. We don't like to talk about forgiveness, it is uncomfortable and messy. Forgiveness requires sacrifice, the ability to move beyond our need to blame and shame. Somehow we have convinced ourselves that blame, shame, and anger have no place in the process of forgiveness. Yet ask anyone who has endured any type of trauma or crime, there is a lot of time attending to blame, shame, and anger. Victims and victimizers struggle with these issues, and whether or not they will be forgiven, or even more exercise forgiveness.

Our modern criminal justice system is particularly complicated. There are constant reminders of how systemic racism, classism, and lack of agency contribute to the absence of fairness for many persons. Certain communities are always plagued with certain violence or problems, even more, certain persons always seem to over populate prisons or are wrongly accused for crimes, or receive unfair sentencing. Stigma, bias, and accusation become the identifying markers of not just the victimized, but also the presumed victimizers. Both are left broken by the same system.

This verse offers simple yet profound solace to all committed to repairing this and other breaches within our community. The call to kindness, compassion, and forgiveness is no trifling thing. It requires courage, grace, and agency. Courage is the strength to persevere beyond our fears. Grace is a gift given by God identifying favor. Agency is freedom, to make choices independent of others. Together these three attributes can lead all who are broken towards a path of redemption and reconciliation. Forgiveness is important in the process of redemption and reconciliation. The Lenten season is a time of evaluation, an opportunity to reflect on forgiveness, and remember that we are forgiven. This forgiveness is not bound to systems, but is given freely to us by God who exists beyond systems. Even more, this God desires that we freely live with courage, compassion, and agency so that we are truly free.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 19

**Date:** Wed, Mar 18th

**Scripture:** Psalm 142:7

**Prayer:** Dear God, May we recognize Your presence as we each struggle through our own journeys. We thank you for your abundant blessings and for setting our souls free. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** As of 2005, at least 40 states operate super max or control unit prisons, created exclusively to house inmates in solitary confinement.

**Action:** Listen to this interview with Public Interest Lawyer Bryan Stevenson, originally aired on NPR's Fresh Air January 20th, 2020.

<https://www.npr.org/2020/01/20/796234496/just-mercy-attorney-asks-u-s-to-reckon-with-its-racist-past-and-present>

**Psalm 142:7** "Bring my soul out of prison, So that I may give thanks to Your name; The righteous will surround me, For You will deal bountifully with me."

**by Chris Kimmenez, Director of Advocacy at Healing Communities USA**

For an incarcerated, justice involved, or returning citizen, the scripture can have so many different levels of meaning. Whether it speaks to us about our personal spiritual freedom while our bodies may still be incarcerated or under supervision, or the various ways our mind or soul is still imprisoned after we are released, either way, just like deliverance is more than just our circumstances, God is capable of much more than just our physical deliverance. Incarceration leaves sometimes unspeakable trauma, but God is capable of healing and restoring our broken past, present and future. He is capable of healing us all the way down to our bone marrow and into the places between our atoms and into the darkest places in our spirit and psyche if we let Him.

There is healing, forgiveness, restoration, and deliverance regardless of where we are on our journey with the criminal justice system. It does not matter if we are awaiting trial, sentencing, serving our sentence, pre-release, under supervision, fully returned or even pardoned. God is capable of finding us and meeting us where we are, changing our lives and our situations, and bringing us to a new level of freedom. Regardless of where we are on our faith journey or our involvement with the justice system, God is waiting to do what only He can do, imparting His righteousness, and blessing our socks off. Freedom is waiting for us on so many levels. Nothing and nobody are too hard for our God. All He wants us to do is ask.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 20

**Date:** Thur, Mar 19th

**Scripture:** Isaiah 61:1

**Prayer:**

Lord, grant us the courage, the creativity and the perseverance to persist in the “power of the Spirit” which “sets at liberty those who are oppressed.”

Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:**

Persons housed in solitary confinement can be subjected to sensory deprivation, constant light and noise, threats of violence, extremely hot or cold temperatures, hog tying and physical restraint, stun guns, tear gas, and pepper spray.

**Action:** Read this report from the Prison Policy Initiative in order to gain a better understanding of mass incarceration in the United States:

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2019.html>

**Isaiah 61:1** "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners."

**By Sandy Strauss, Director of Advocacy, PA Council of Churches**

References to people in captivity often play a central role when it comes to what God’s people are called to do. Jesus echoes the words of Isaiah in this passage from Luke; Isaiah says he has been anointed “to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” (61:1). Throughout scripture, God is often revealed as liberator. A well known story is of the Exodus, the deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Jesus appears to have been sent to play a role similar to Moses. With these words from Luke, Jesus reveals himself to have been sent by God to help the Jewish people under Roman control to find freedom from the oppression that almost certainly felt like captivity for those who experienced it. Like Moses, and then Jesus, Isaiah makes it clear that we also have a responsibility to serve as co-laborers with God in the work of liberating the captives.

While Jesus is referring to himself in this passage, his words and deeds suggest that this is to be the work of all of his followers—indeed, all human beings. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount helps to spell this out, particularly when he says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” He calls us to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves—and these two commandments cannot stand separately. He tells us to treat others as we would wish to be treated. Presumably, we would not want to be imprisoned without the chance of redemption. Lent is a time for holding all who are in captivity in our hearts—whether it is the physical captivity of incarceration, the mental or emotional captivity of depression, anger, pain, or addiction, or the societal captivity of poverty or labeling our neighbors as other. It is a time to reflect on how we are anointed by God to follow in the footsteps of Jesus by sharing the good news of liberation with our neighbors.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 21

**Date:** Fri, Mar 20th

**Scripture:** Isaiah 40:29

**Prayer:** Dear God,  
May we find courage, comfort,  
and strength in one another  
as we struggle for justice.  
Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:**  
Solitary Confinement goes by  
many names such as: Special  
Housing Units (SHU), The  
Hole, Segregation/Isolation  
(Seg), Restrictive Housing  
Units (RHU), Management  
control units (MCU),  
Supermax,  
Permanent Lockdown, or  
Special Needs Units.

**Action:** On the 23rd of each  
month throughout the nation  
activists have come together  
to host community actions to  
raise awareness for  
individuals who spend 23  
hours a day inside a cell. Take  
some time today to think  
about what you could do on  
the 23rd. For inspiration visit  
NRCAT's website:

<http://nrcat.org/torture-in-us-prisons/take-action/together-campaign>

**Isaiah 40:29** "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak."

**By Micalagh Moritz, Director, Sycamore House Service Corps**

In a world that often seems to value strength, power, and money; that seems to give value to these things above all, these words seem strange, inaccurate even. Sometimes it feels that the ones in power are winning. What do these words mean to those of us who struggle for justice daily, who sometimes feel weak, or feel like giving up hope? What do these words mean to someone in prison, in solitary confinement, to someone who feels powerless to do anything about their own situation?

I imagine these words from Isaiah were comforting to an oppressed people, a people in captivity. Isaiah 40 speaks of comfort and the hope of delivery to the Israelites. As people of faith, we can find solace in these promises for ourselves as well. As people called to seek justice in the world, we "wait on God to renew our strength." And yet, we must do more than just wait. We may feel weak as individuals, but collectively, when we work together, we gain strength and our power is increased. Maybe that is sometimes how God fulfills this promise, by giving strength to us through one another.

To those of us who work on various justice issues, may we give encouragement and strength to those who are oppressed by persevering in this work. To those of us who struggle for justice and are tired of the seemingly uphill battle, may we be encouraged by the many who struggle alongside us. When we feel weary, may we be given strength, and when we feel weak, may our power increase through collective action.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 22

**Date:** Sat, Mar 21th

**Scripture:** Revelation 2:10

**Prayer:** Dear God,  
Be with us as we struggle to live counter culturally as Jesus did. Deliver us from the temptation to live closeted, comfortable faith lives and instead encourage us to live out the gospel boldly.  
Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** Not only are people of color over-represented in the general prison population, they are also over-represented in the solitary confinement population.

**Action:** Listen to this episode of NPR's Throughline on the history of Mass Incarceration.

<https://www.npr.org/2019/08/14/751126384/mass-incarceration>

**Revelation 2:10** "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."

**By Michael Nailor, Deacon, Diocese of Central PA**

Revelation speaks to Christians in Smyrna. Smyrna was a center of the imperial cult worshiping the Roman Emperor as God's only son. In addition, there was a community of Jews who reported Christians to the authorities as having a King that they revered above Caesar (true!) and who were rebellious and dangerous (false!). Not exactly an easy place to live out the Christian faith! Suffering and testing come naturally to any human living differently from the crowd. Remember the Japanese proverb "the nail that sticks out is the one that gets hammered."

When facing a secular world – whether it is ancient Smyrna or our own friends and workplace – it is easier to stay safe and comfortable in the confines of our personal faith. Keeping it to ourselves equals no opposition. Maybe our one hour in church each week is enough. We don't need to sow the seeds of conflict in those other 167 hours of the week. If "the authorities" (hopefully, not Roman Imperial soldiers!) came to investigate our lives, would they find enough evidence of our Christian faith to convict us?

Jesus notes that "for ten days you will have tribulation." I am not sure that he was speaking of exactly ten days – but of a short, defined time. Suffering does not last if we are focused on the love of God and the "crown of life" that is offered to those who live in that love. Lent asks us to contemplate how far our conduct strays from the way God offers through Christ. In Luke 9:60 Jesus is clear when he tells us, "Go and spread the news of God's kingdom." Are we content in our comfortable closet, or are we willing to follow the clear instructions of Jesus Christ and share God's love and grace with everyone?

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 23

**Date:** Mon, Mar 23rd

**Scripture:** Isaiah 40:28-31

**Prayer:** Dear God,  
We pray for our elected officials, those who work in corrections, and for the most vulnerable populations among us. May our leadership be guided to restoration and redemption instead of vindication and vengeance.

Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:**

After lowering their solitary confinement population by 85% Colorado reported their lowest rate of prisoner on staff assaults in 9 years.

**Action:** Consider hosting a "chalk in." Draw a 6x9 ft box with chalk and sit in it, symbolizing the average dimensions of a cell people spend 23 hours a day for months, years, and even decades in solitary. Invite your friends to join you, take pictures, and share on social media.

**Isaiah 40:28-31** "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable."

**Bill Lockhard, DeafCAN! program director**

I am Program Director for a variety of human services under Christ the King Deaf Church. Our services are totally non-discriminatory, do not proselytize, or refer to any of our work a "ministry," as we reach out to serve those of any or no faith and don't want even a perceived barrier. Our work focuses on those who are Deaf or hard of hearing, AND something else that makes them doubly or triply isolated, including homeless, immigrants/refugees, Deaf & blind, and inmates & returning citizens.

I have worked at Graterford/Phoenix State Prison, along with multiple county jails for the last 23 years. The intentional mass incarceration cruelty of the last 40 years has ravaged many individuals & families and communities of color. To add to the cruelty, there is a significant population of aging, slowly dying, physically disabled, blind, and deaf or hard of hearing inmates. The mere size of the prison population has given the Dept of Corrections the 'rationale' to ignore the special needs of most of these mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, sisters, and brothers. Those who have family behind bars or who are working to improve the respect, dignity, & humanity of those inside are often blocked from knowing what goes on due to "security reasons," which only increases the cruelty.

The inmate populations we work with are rarely granted access to call family and friends and cannot participate in programs that bring light and hope inside. If they are lucky enough to win early release, they are more prone to re-arrest parole or probation violations they didn't understand in the first place. Our Lutheran Church tries to live "God's Work Our Hands." Our Voices and Hands must insist on, and invest in, alternatives to prisons. When prisons are the answer, they must be prisons focused on and built for forgiveness, rehabilitation, and hope.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 24

**Date:** Tues, Mar 24rd

**Scripture:** James 2:13

**Prayer:** Lord,  
Open our ears and our hearts to the stories of others and grant that we may balance judgement with needed mercy. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** The UN guidelines for the treatment of prisoners released in 2015, prohibits the use of solitary confinement for more than 15 consecutive days, prohibits solitary for women, children, and prisoners with physical or mental disabilities, and states that solitary should only be used as a last resort.

**Action:** Read this article in the Penn Live Patriot News about the state of solitary confinement in PA.

<https://www.pennlive.com/news/2019/09/should-prisons-use-solitary-confinement-advocates-condemn-it-officials-say-there-is-a-need.html>

**James 2:13** "Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

**Dr. Rodney D. Smalls, Pastor, Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church, Harrisburg, PA**

Being a bi-vocational pastor has afforded me many experiences. Oftentimes, these experiences force me to take a deep look at the injustices taking place in our nation. One particular encounter has been forever etched in my spirit. I was performing an exam on a late twenty something mother when we began to talk. She began to relay how anxious she was at being in the hospital. This was yet another time she was being admitted after multiple illnesses. She was concerned as to how her and her husband were going to pay for it all. Because of her medical problems she was unemployed, and her husband was underemployed. They had no medical insurance. As a result, their family of eight was homeless. They currently lived in a shelter. Sadly, as she told me, he made too much for financial assistance, yet not enough to keep a roof over their heads. To say the least, I was taken aback at her predicament.

If that wasn't bad enough, what she continued to say truly broke my heart. With tears in her eyes and angst in her voice, she relayed how she needed to be discharged as soon possible. She was concerned for her children coming home from school because they had been victims of bullying. The school bus picked them up and dropped them off at the homeless shelter and the children were bullied as a result. As I tried to absorb it all, she kept saying how she just wanted to be home for her kids. At this point, my heart sunk. I felt helpless, for all I could do was offer her an ear to bend, and the touch of my hand.

This is the reality of life for the poor in America. This is their story; a story being lived thousands of times each day by members of all races, creeds, and cultures. While it would be so easy for us to judge others for the choices they make, we would be wise to first hear their story, walk in their shoes, and see the world through their eyes. Before we judge anyone for the choices they make, we need to understand the majority of Americans are one crisis away from disaster. Our Lord never judged anyone for the predicament in which they found themselves. He only came to serve. As Scripture reminds us; "Mercy triumphs over judgment."

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Date: Wed, Mar 25th  
Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action

Scripture: Psalm 79:11

**Prayer:** Lord,

We look forward to the day when your kingdom will come on earth. Today, we struggle in a sinful world. On that day, your righteousness will prevail. Until then, we commend to you those who are in prison. We ask that you inspire us with wisdom and compassion, as we encounter the criminal justice system. Let us be humble, for justice is yours. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** There are two types of solitary confinement:

Administrative and Disciplinary.

Disciplinary Solitary Confinement comes with a set number of days per infraction, while Administrative does not.

**Action:** Consider hosting a solitary confinement cell replica in your congregation or workplace. Contact Emily Schmid at [e.schmid@pachurches.org](mailto:e.schmid@pachurches.org) for more information. See news coverage of the cell at the Capitol Building [here](#):

<https://www.erienewsnow.com/story/41647151/pa-lawmakers-advocate-for-solitary-confinement-reform>



Day 25

**Psalm 79:11** "Let the groans of the prisoners come before you; according to your great power, preserve those doomed to die!"

**Dai Morgan, United Methodist Advocacy Pennsylvania**

Today's verse is presented as three clauses. Each clause represents a separate idea. However, when formed together into one sentence they reinforce one another and become compounded. "Let the groans..." recognizes that God is omniscient. "According to your great power," God is omnipotent. "Preserve those doomed to die," God is imminent. There are many circumstances by which people become prisoners. Some prisoners are culpable and appropriately incarcerated. Some are not. Prisoners include convicted mass murderers as well as innocent children in bondage to human trafficking. In this fallen world, justice can be whimsical. There is no guarantee of fairness or humane treatment.

So, the psalmist does not abandon or heap abuse on the prisoner, but seeks the mercy and grace of God. This is especially so for "those doomed to die!" The psalmist does not differentiate guilt or innocence, but asks that the most extreme punishment be averted. There is an expression, "There for the grace of God go!" The psalmist gets it. Furthermore, the psalmist understands that prisoners matter to God! Why else write this? We who follow this tradition should remember two things. First, all people, even prisoners, are part of our broken world. And, second, God will set all things right.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 26

**Date:** Thu, Mar 26th

**Scripture:** 1 Peter 3:9

**Prayer:** Lord,  
Your form of Justice is restorative. May we be delivered from our desires for vengeance and instead yield to your restorative Justice. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:**  
Preventative Segregation, Investigative Segregation, Protective Custody, and Transitional Segregation are all forms of Administrative Solitary Confinement.

**Action:** Watch this Ted Talk about conditions at the US Federal Government's only Supermax prison, ADX

[https://www.ted.com/talks/laura\\_rovner\\_what\\_happens\\_to\\_people\\_in\\_solitary\\_confinement#t-712893](https://www.ted.com/talks/laura_rovner_what_happens_to_people_in_solitary_confinement#t-712893)

**1 Peter 3:9** "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."

### **Sue Wooley, Harrisburg Friends Meeting**

Justice. How would Jesus define that word? "An eye for an eye..."? No. Jesus tells us to "turn the other cheek" when offended. It seems clear that he meant at the very least, "do no further harm". At best, I believe he would have us love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Tall order, yes – but doable if we stop and think.

Today, our criminal justice system (from arrest to trial to incarceration to parole) is predicated on the "eye for an eye" interpretation of justice. "Do the crime, do the time" some have said. Sounds logical. Very neat. But the problem is that this understanding of justice doesn't work very well. It is very expensive (in both dollars and in lost human potential), makes us less safe, and, perhaps most importantly, entirely ignores Jesus' teaching. There's a growing trend and body of evidence which calls for something called "Restorative Justice" which replaces the emphasis on punishment with an emphasis on healing as the objective of justice. While punitive justice may provide a temporary sense of satisfaction for the victims of crime (ultimately all of us), it does not foster healing. Micah and Jesus are pointing us toward a restorative rather than a punitive model for justice.

Consider the following story to understand how Restorative Justice works. Two boys pummeled a young tree in the schoolyard with baseball bats and killed the tree. The teacher, a lover of trees, was horrified. Rather than punish them, she made them memorize Joyce Kilmer's poem "Trees", meet and apologize to the individual who donated the tree to the school, and told them they must help the original tree-giver replant a new tree. This is a simple example of restorative justice. The offenders learned something about the harm their actions caused to someone else (not just the tree) and were given an opportunity to set it right. This works neatly with crimes involving damage to property. Crimes that physically harm people are more complicated, but overwhelming evidence shows that the principle still works. Germany and Norway use restorative justice successfully for ALL crimes. The teacher in my example did justly, showed mercy to those boys, and walked humbly with her God. She made things better. Let's do that, too.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 27

**Date:** Fri, Mar 27th

**2 Timothy 2:9** "For which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!"

**Scripture:**  
2 Timothy 2:9

**Lois Griffiths, Criminal Justice System Ministry Committee of The Lower Susquehanna Synod, ELCA**

**Prayer:** Dear God, we give thanks that your words is not bound as we are to our secular laws. Amen.

This Lenten Season, I am reflecting upon the book, Bonhoeffer and King written by J. Deotis Roberts. Both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King:

- Were social activists with a solid theological foundation.
- Lived servant lives of witness in their pilgrimage of service
- Knew the human face of God and advocated for the humane use of power
- Recognized the collective and systemic evil in the abuse of power in church and politics
- Warned about the political and military machinery of people who play god with other people's lives
- Saw evil in political order- Bonhoeffer, Nazism & Anti-Semitism; King, Racism & Segregation
- Shared a mission to "liberate the oppressed"
- Told how "The fall occurred again and again, day after day and the church remained silent"
- Spoke about "love in action" that "God is as close as a neighbor in need"-
- Believed in the "transformative power of the Gospel", the "soul-and-savior gospel"
- Preached the message of The Sermon on the Mount
- Had short lives- died at Thirty- nine years...king's death was during Easter

**Criminal Justice Fact:** Youth, LGBTQ populations, and people with mental health disorders are all over-represented in solitary confinement.

The summer of 1964: My first visit to Berlin. went through Checkpoint Charlie and saw The Berlin Wall, an obstacle course of barbed wire, buried mines, spiked glass. There were also memorials of flowers, notes and crosses.

**Action:** Consider hosting a screening of NRCAT's film, *Breaking Down the Box*.

The fall of 2019: My return to Berlin. went back to Checkpoint Charlie and saw sections of The Berlin Wall everywhere. There are sections all over the world. Reminders to "Remember."

<http://nrcat.org/torture-in-us-prisons/take-action/breaking-down-the-box>

The winter of 2020 My trip to El Paso, Mexico, Las Cruces, went to "Matthew 25" ecumenical centers. On the border wall, a sign says, "Not Criminals, Not Illegals-We Are International Workers." We heard stories of suffering, separation and survival.They praised and thanked God.

These trips were opportunities to reflect upon the saving power of God's grace.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 28

**Date:** Sat, Mar 28th

**Scripture:** Psalm 102:19

**Prayer:** God of presence, help me to be your ears, hearing the groans of the prisoners, and to be your hands, working to set free those who are (or feel) doomed to die. Guide those in prison to feel your presence and know that you are with them always. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** Solitary Confinement has been shown to cause increased suicidal ideation and self-harm behaviors, visual and auditory hallucinations, hypersensitivity to noise and touch, insomnia, paranoia, and PTSD.

**Action:** Talk with your congregation about becoming a "Station of Hope" in order to support individuals returning from incarceration. Learn more here:

<https://www.healingcommunitiesusa.com/become-a-station-of-hope>

Contact Sandy Strauss at [sstrauss@pachurches.org](mailto:sstrauss@pachurches.org) for more information

**Psalm 102:19** "...from heaven the Lord looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die"

**Sandy Strauss, Director of Advocacy, PA Council of Churches**

Have you ever experienced loneliness, depression, pain, anguish, or grief that felt so oppressive that there seemed to be no way out? Have you ever had such feelings of despair that it feels as if you are completely alone? Most of us have probably had these feelings from time to time, and perhaps have found solace in the words of the psalmist from Psalm 102: "...from heaven the Lord looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die..."

Now consider our brothers and sisters who are literally locked behind bars, denied the freedoms and privileges that belong to us, with little or no hope of being set free in the foreseeable future. Then imagine that some small incident lands them within a box, isolated from their fellow prisoners and nearly all direct human contact. We would be hard-pressed to imagine the level of hopelessness at being in this kind of situation—feeling not just distant from other human beings, but wondering if God hears their groans, or if they are doomed to die in a place where no one seems to care. We know that when we are feeling alone and in anguish we have the freedom to visit a counselor, speak with friends, listen to music, take a walk in nature, and generally find ways to feel God's presence in ways that give us hope. This is more difficult for those in prison who may feel abandoned by society. God may feel distant, but our efforts can help our neighbors in prison know that we hear their groans and are working for their restoration when it feels like no one else cares. We can become the face of God for them, giving them hope and strength to sustain them through the darkest moments.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 29

**Date:** Mon, Mar 30th

**Scripture:** Psalm 91:1-16

**Prayer:** Prayer: Lord deliver me from my complacency. In the face of overwhelming evil in this world, may I find refuge, solace, and a path forward in your grace.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** It is estimated that prisons could save up to \$75 million dollars annually by eliminating solitary confinement.

**Action:** Consider volunteering the Pennsylvania Prison Society, a non-profit oversight body for PA's prisons. Read about volunteer opportunities here:

<https://www.prisonssociety.org/become-a-volunteer>

Contact John Hargraeves at [jhargraeves@prisonssociety.org](mailto:jhargraeves@prisonssociety.org)

**Psalm 91:1-16** "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence."

**By Emily Schmid, Advocacy Programs Associate, PA Council of Churches**

In recent years I have grown to enjoy the season of Lent more than the season of Advent. Anticipating a second coming of Christ in the face of evil in this world is a lot harder for me to do than to spend a season repenting and reflecting on all the different ways in which I fall short. I must admit that I am far more comfortable with the idea that we are all sinners than the idea that we are all saved. It is much easier for me to self-indulgently bury my head in the sand, throw up my hands in exasperation, and say, "well the world is just evil and there is nothing we can do about it."

The things that snare me and trip me up are not bird catchers or the plague. They are the idea that "it is what it is" and "there's nothing we can do about it." I find it very easy to be complacent in the face of the evil in our world. In his documentary, *True Justice*, Bryan Stevenson draws a clear line between the practice of lynching in our country and the practice of the death penalty. Often times individuals were lynched not because of a crime they committed, but due to a social transgression. One of the biggest of these social transgressions was romantic involvement with a White woman. Lynching was committed in the name of *my* safety.

I hear things like that and quite frankly, I don't think I deserve to be saved. I don't feel like I deserve to take refuge. But my wallowing in my own guilt does not serve God and it does not serve Justice. One thing I have come to learn recently is that we are all simultaneously both Sinner and Saint. Prosecutor and defendant. Jury and Judge. Defendant and Prosecutor. May we discern a righteous and just path forward together.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 30

**Date:** Tue, Mar 31st

**Scripture:** Romans 6:14

**Prayer:** God grant us the humility and gratitude to be compassionate towards those we interact with on a daily basis, and to all others who cross our paths. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** Pennsylvania spends more than 4 billion dollars annually to incarcerate its citizens.

**Action:** Find a re-entry coalition in your area and inquire about ways you can support them. For information for the Harrisburg area go here:

<http://www.reentrynow.org/membership-information.html>

**Romans 6:14** “For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.”

**By Will Horst, Returning Citizen**

As a young man, nearly five decades ago, I spent two years in prison. In the intervening years, I’ve often pondered the mystery of how it was that I turned a corner in my life way back then and never returned to prison like so many do. How did I do that, I’ve wondered. I could pat myself on the back and say that, well, I made up my mind that I wanted a better life, and then I did what I had to do to get it. But did I, really? We often hear the phrase “There but by the grace of God go I.” But do we really believe that?

We usually think of grace as a kind of gift from God. The word grace comes from the Latin *gratia*, which is also the root word for gratitude.

All those years ago, doors opened for me at opportune times. When I reached out for help, it seemed there would be a hand reaching back offering hope. Well, I opened those doors, you might say. I grasped the helping hand. Me. I did those things. But maybe the grace, the gift, was in being able to see the open door when it appeared, in being able to find the hand offering help, and then to be able to grasp it. If that’s true, then there’s nothing particularly special about me or anything I did. Nothing to congratulate myself for. There’s only gratitude. Gratitude for the “gift” of seeing. Gratitude for being able to find my way. That’s grace.

With gratitude comes humility. With humility comes compassion for those who perhaps aren’t able to see the open door or the helping hand because of fear, because of shame, or because of the traumas they’ve suffered. In gratitude there’s no room for blame, only for kindness and love.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 31

**Date:** Wed, April 1st

**Scripture:** Galatians 6:1-2

**Prayer:** Oh Lord, center my heart in you so that I may better reflect your grace today and always. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:**

Over five thousand Pennsylvanians are sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

**Action:** Watch Brandon Matthews explain "The Surprising reason why our criminal justice system doesn't work"

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmvrBGmu9k4&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmvrBGmu9k4&feature=emb_logo)

**Galatians 6:1-2** "My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

**By David Arnold, retired clergy, United Methodist Church**

When I see someone acting in ways that aren't loving it's hard not to speak out against them. I fight with myself all the time about whether to come out publicly against whatever it is, or whether to simply mutter about it with close, like-minded friends. Muttering is usually the easiest choice. Friends who agree with me will mutter too and we will all feel reinforced in our beliefs and all feel a little smug and self righteous too. After all, whoever the offender was and whatever they did, they shouldn't have done it and are surely deserving of our judgement and condemnation. It's particularly easy in these contentious times to rear-up on my high horse and verbally strike the offender, even if I couch my actions by only doing it among trusted friends. But what should I really do? How can I react in a righteous and loving way?

In this scripture we are warned not to be tempted to engage in unloving behavior and so become liable for the very condemnation we are ready to dump on the offender. Instead, we are told to use gentleness in our words and actions, to be careful that we ourselves don't fall victim to unloving behavior like that we are prepared to condemn in others.

So how am I to bear another's burdens and conform to the teachings of Christ. Gentleness seems to be the key. Self righteousness and anger will not turn anyone's heart to our way. But rational, gentle persuasion may at least help them contemplate another understanding. And it also offers an opportunity to me. Calming myself and responding in a loving spirit may turn out to bless me as much or even more than them.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 32

**Date:** Thur, April 2nd

**Scripture:** Psalm 91:1-16

**Prayer:** Faithful Lord, inspire us with your Word. As you love righteousness and justice, guide us also in that love. We are self-serving, but you are generous. Let us be fearful before you, so that your unfailing love might rest upon us. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** Prior to 2019 all death row inmates in PA were housed in solitary confinement.

**Action:** Watch this video the video below which explains the court system in PA.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IAGSi2d9Ts&feature=youtu.be>

**Psalm 33:5** "The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love."

**By Rev Dai Morgan, United Methodist Advocacy in Pennsylvania**

Psalm 33 is a song of praise. It recognizes God as the Creator and the all-knowing Lord of human events and history. It asks, "May your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord." This Psalm recognizes that it is appropriate to "fear" the Lord (v. 8), "Let all the people of the world revere him." While seeking the help and love of a faithful God, fear also remembers that we are in a relationship. Let us not forget where power lies.

This fear, reverence, and awe results because the "word" of the Lord is "right and true." The same word, the psalmist tells us, by which the heavens were made. This concept is contained in verses four and six. However, sandwiched in the middle of that thought is today's verse, "The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love." Given its position within the text, one might expect this verse to say that the Lord IS righteous and just. But rather, the original Hebrew states that the Lord LOVES these things.

Consequently, putting two and two together, if one fears the Lord (who loves righteousness and justice), one should also love righteousness and justice. The problem is, we don't. At least, not when it's inconvenient or disadvantageous. That's human nature. However, there is a counter-motive to human nature. It is the revelation of God. God's word. It is the prod against human sinfulness.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 33

**Date:** Fri, April 3rd

**Scripture:** Proverbs 29:4

**Prayer:** Lord, in the face of blatant greed and injustice renew our faith and spirit so we may continue to do the work of sharing your love with the world.  
Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** PA charges inmates a \$5 co-pay to visit the doctor while the minimum wage for a prison job is \$0.19.

**Action:** Familiarize yourself with the district attorney and county commissioners in your county.

**Proverbs 29:4** "By justice a king gives a country stability, but those who are greedy for bribes tear it down."

**By Beth Taylor**

Our justice system is nothing if not greedy. When I first got involved in criminal justice reform, I was shocked to find out that many prisons and jails charge inmates daily rent. In Pennsylvania, these fees can range from \$5 a day to more than \$70 a day. This means that in addition to facing all of the challenges that come with re-entry, one of which is finding employment and earning a living wage, a returning citizen is immediately burdened with a debt they'll struggle to repay – a debt that can total in the tens of thousands.

Plus, while incarcerated, local and county jail inmates are charged inflated rates to make phone calls because the cost includes commissions, or kickbacks to the jail, and added fees. And there are the commissary charges. And bail, which results in the typical US jail being about 60% filled not with convicted criminals but with people awaiting trial, stuck behind bars because of their poverty.

Beyond monetary greed, the system is too often greedy for punishment, not rehabilitation. This allows for the routine use of prolonged, indefinite solitary confinement with no concern of its devastating effects. And this is just the tip of the iceberg -the list could go on and on. The consequences of this greed reach far beyond the prison walls, rippling out in ever wider circles - families, friends, communities, our spirits, our faith. The despair of it all can be overwhelming and changing the system can seem impossible.

But doing the work to change the seemingly impossible has been exactly what has renewed my faith and spirit over and over again. The energy generated by coming together in solidarity with those currently imprisoned, prison survivors, affected families, faith communities, and ordinary community members like me gives me hope that systemic change is not a pipe dream and that we will finally see the true justice that we demand.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 34

**Date:** Sat, April 4th

**Scripture:** Ephesians 4:1

**Prayer:** God help us each to discern what role you may have us play as we work towards justice. Help us to lift each other up along the way and open our eyes to who we can invite to the table.

Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:**

As of 2018 98,000 of PA's residents were incarcerated in prisons, jails, and other detention centers.

**Action:** Read this article about re-entrant Brandon Flood, who currently serves on the PA board of pardons.

<https://www.inquirer.com/columnists/attytood/brandon-flood-former-inmate-pennsylvania-new-pardons-secretary-john-fetterman-20190407.html>

**Ephesians 4:1** "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called."

**By Rev. Carla S. Christopher Wilson, Associate Pastor of Faith Formation and Outreach at Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Lancaster, PA**

Paul wrote these words from the same place the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote some of his most powerful words of action, empowerment, and motivation - a jail cell. Like Dr. King, Paul calls his friends and fellow community organizers to make "every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace". Paul speaks about a unity that celebrates diversity. Some are called to be teachers, some pastors, some caretakers, and some prophetic truth-tellers. Our unity comes from the love we are called to show each other and our neighbors. In that unity of cooperation, with each different part working properly, the whole body is built up. In justice work we are also called to create space for diverse talents; to remove barriers from participation and to ensure places at the table for all our differently-abled, multi-cultural siblings of all ages, genders, and orientations. Can most of us even imagine though, the courage and faith necessary to see and experience God's love so clearly in a place of direct oppression and physical danger? How can we go outside our comfort zone to stand with people who may be so different than we are at a time when we feel most vulnerable and afraid, times we are most tempted to pull inward or react defensively?

Both Paul and Dr. King knew those were, these are, the times when we need each other most. The movement song of Dr. King's marching days says, "Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on." In the quiet of our prison cells, the world and the status symbols of our daily lives stripped away, we can see with clarity how much we need each other, our movement partners. Who are we called to welcome to the table, to build with, to open ourselves and listen to this Lenten season?

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



**Date:** Mon, April 6th

**Scripture:** Hebrews 13:3

**Prayer:** Jesus, remind us of those in prison, and help us to move beyond simply thinking about and remembering, but to acting with and for those whose power was taken away from them. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** More African American Men are in prison, jail, and on probation or parole than were enslaved in the US in 1850.

**Action:** Listen to this episode of This American Life which talks about how sentencing changed in PA over the course of 20 years.

<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/604/20-years-later>

**Hebrews 13:3** "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured."

**By John-Michael Cotignola Pickens, Criminal Justice Education and Advocacy Coordinator, Mennonite Central Committee Washington, DC Offices**

Lent is the difficult and dark road that leads to Easter which is the culmination of Christ's time here on Earth. Lent, much like Christmas, highlights how the divine enters our world and does not shy away from the pain and suffering that comes with our humanity. Christ experienced the evils of the empire's (in)justice system much like so many people experience to this day here in the U.S. A common statistic that is thrown out is that the U.S. has 5% of the world's population but 25% of the world's prison population.

We have a problem; our criminal justice system is more like a criminal injustice system. The author of Hebrews calls on their readers to be like Christ and to enter someone else's pain, to imagine being incarcerated and tortured. We are called to journey alongside them much like Jesus journeyed alongside the marginalized, oppressed, and forgotten peoples of His time.

Hebrews 13:3 asks for us to remember those who are incarcerated and experiencing torture which is great, while Jesus paints a dramatic picture of what His followers, the sheep, will be remembered for in Matthew 25:31-46. Part of what His followers will be remembered for is visiting "Jesus" in prison. It is not enough to remember those in prison, we must see Jesus in people who are incarcerated and get out of comfort zones and visit them. It is my prayer that those visits will drive us to advocate for a more just criminal justice system that rehabilitates rather than punishes and restores what has been broken.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 36

**Date:** Tues, April 7th

**Scripture:** Lev 19:33-34

**Prayer:** Spirit of the Living God, nurture the hopes of the captives until those hopes become a whirl of music, a voice for justice, a prayer of reconciliation. Teach us all to rely on faith because certainty is rarely real. Soften the hearts of the oppressor with mercy. Set the captives free. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** 84% of detained individuals in removal proceedings do not receive legal representation.

**Action:** Consider attending a Vigil with the Shut Down Berks Interfaith Witness. Check out their FB page for updates here: <https://www.facebook.com/shutdownberks/>

**Leviticus 19:33-34** "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt"

**By Peggy Snee Mumper**

Reflections on a Vigil at the Berks County Detention Center Mar 2018:

As we shivered together that blustery March day, I wondered how our presence here would make any difference to the vulnerable families locked behind doors and kept away from windows in a building several hundred feet beyond our little group as we beat drums, tambourines and our small hopes for a fairer world. We were not the first to gather there for a vigil nor would we be the last. To this day the captives continue in an endless stream of separation, detainment and trauma. There is no border wall for hundreds and hundreds of miles. These

visitors asked for asylum and were locked away. We carried signs in two languages that offered encouragement, acknowledged wrongs done, promised the love of good neighbors who come in the form of legal advocates and those lesser trained who occupy the vigil site a few hours each month. Those inside may or may not have shared our faith but we have a common humanity. We believed enough "an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" to be here. The longevity of the need, the indifference of politicians, the greed of those profiting from imprisoning others, and our own fears are walls and barriers that rise to surround them and us, too. As I pondered the value of our small demonstration, I was reminded that the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. We were there to pray and stand and sing and call out for change because we do not see how or when change will come. We were there to fill the void around that place with music and love and prayer and hope, because those things might get through walls and windows when we could not.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 37

**Date:** Wed, April 8th

**Scripture:** 1 John 1:9

**Prayer:** Dear God, guide us in the difficult work of racial reconciliation. Forgive us our transgressions and support us as we seek to repair relationships and undo racist systems. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** In 2010 Black people accounted for 11% of PA's population but made up 43% of its prison population.

**Action:** Take this implicit association test in order to recognize the effect of internalized biases. Have conversations about your results with your friends.

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

**1 John 1:9** "If we confess our sins, Christ is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

**By The Very Rev. Dr. Amy D. Welin, Cathedral Church of St Stephen, Harrisburg, PA**

Several years ago, in a faraway suburb, I was shocked when the convener of our pastors' colleague group confessed to us. "I must tell you all, I am racist. I repent, and will spend my life making amends for this." This minister was well-respected, devoted to justice and service to the poor. In the conversation that followed the stunned silence, we discussed the many ways in which individuals of European heritage can live privileged lives, insulated from the harsh realities that cause suffering for our neighbors who are People of Color. We do not want to be racist. We are offended when someone suggests that we may be racist. Yet we swim in a cultural river that is racist. We are complicit unless we resist. What does racial justice look like to me this Lent?

Racial justice looks like repenting of the evil that has been done in my name (supporting legislative reform of mandatory minimum sentences) Racial justice looks like learning how to dismantle racist structures in church and in society (reading Ta-Nehisi Coates' Between the World and Me and Lenny Duncan's Dear Church and Ibram Kendi's How to Be an Anti-Racist) Racial justice looks like stepping out of my comfortable tradition and visiting churches with membership that is largely People of Color. Racial justice means listening to painful stories with trust in the voice of the narrator. I confess that I have been complicit in racism. I ask forgiveness for my sins, usually committed in ignorance, and resolve with the help of God to work for racial justice.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 38

**Date:** Thu, April 9th

**Scripture:** Matt 25:36

**Prayer:** Dear God, teach us to recognize opportunities to express small mercies to one another. Guide us to use our resources rightfully in a way that fulfills your kingdom. Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** African American men are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white men. If current trends continue, 1 in 3 black boys born in America today will be imprisoned.

**Action:** Organize a voter registration drive. The American Association of University Women put together a good guide to help you get started:

<https://aauw-pa.aauw.net/policy/resources/registration/>

**Matthew 25:36** Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

**Marsha Roscoe, Deacon, Collaborative Mission Center Director, Lower Susquehanna Synod**

Somewhere between Palm Sunday and Holy Thursday, Jesus goes to the temple to deliver his final discourse. The cross looms near. Good Friday is inescapable. Every moment, every word, every breath count. Christ's passion is palpable. Still, Jesus never misses an opportunity to teach us. Jesus appreciates the sanctity of these final hours and uses them to prepare us for what's next – the fulfillment of God's Kingdom (see Matthew 23-25).

Jesus shares a vision for making God's Kingdom known through acts of mercy -- clothing, visiting, and feeding. Think about these for a moment. There are an infinite number of possibilities for expressions of mercy; yet, Jesus calls our attention to the basics – food, clothing, visitation, accompaniment. Participating in and contributing to the very nature of God's Kingdom is accessible to each one of us. Ordination not required. The only prerequisite is love of God and neighbor.

Jesus and the disciples faithfully reached out to those who were long forgotten by society. Clothe the naked, visit the ill, accompany a prisoner in jail. How we treat the least of these is how we treat Jesus. During these encounters, one thing is for certain – God is already present, so you will experience Jesus.

Lent is a perfect time for us to examine how we treat Jesus. I pray that we might seize the invitations to encounter Jesus through basic acts of mercy found in food, clothing, loving accompaniment and hospitality. For God is already there.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 39

**Date:** Fri, April 10th

**Scripture:** Levit 19:15

**Prayer:** God of Justice and Righteousness, as we face many challenges in life, help us to make sound judgments that promote equality when interacting with our neighbors, friends, and families, sharing your love and embracing your truths.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** On any given day, 30,731 Pennsylvanian's are confined to a county jail.

**Action:** Like Sound Community Solutions, The Abolitionist Law Center, and CRESC on Facebook for updates. If you're not on FB visit their websites and subscribe to their newsletters to stay up to date.

**Leviticus 19:15**—Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.

**By Dawn N. Cleveland, CRESC Restorative Justice Committee Member**

There are different kinds of truths we encounter when making unbiased choices in life, especially while facing challenges or circumstances that come our way. In general, people tend to make decisions based on what they perceive as “truth.” The first truth is in accordance with facts or reality. The second leans towards the truth as it relates to “US.” The third truth is being certain about God’s Will. In Proverbs 12:17 it states, “When you tell the truth, justice is done, but lies lead to injustice.” (GNB) Which truth do we suppress and which one do we embrace?

Society offers many enticing ways for individuals to conform to this world. God has become my model for justice due to my desire to seek the truth while contemplating unprejudiced decisions on behalf of others. There are over 331 occurrences of the word justice in the Bible in over. In some instances, the word righteousness is paired with justice. If justice requires an act of righteousness that comes from within each of us, then where does injustice dwell? After pondering this question, I’ve discovered that injustice dwells “in-just-US.”

The corruption that pollutes our world might cause “US” to compromise our professional ethics by having a strong influence on our character or judgments. Corruption can also affect our spiritual ethics, if we choose to leave God out of the decision making process. For every action there is a reaction, whether it’s good or bad. Learning to seize every moment will permit ourselves to make sound judgments in order to embrace the responsibility and accountability that has been entrusted to “US.” When we put forth a sincere effort to transform our behaviors of discrimination, cruelty, suppression, and repression, we are moving a step closer to loving our neighbors as ourselves.

# 40 Days in Solidarity

Scripture ~ Reflection ~ Prayer ~ Action



## Day 40

**Date:** Sat, Apr 11th

**Scripture:** Isaiah 42:5-7

**Prayer:** Dear God, grant that we may one day live out your vision for justice, righteousness, and peace on this Earth. Open our eyes to your will and lead us out of prison into your grace.  
Amen.

**Criminal Justice Fact:** In 2016 10.8% of PA's prison population were serving life without parole sentences.

**Action:** As this Lenten journey comes to a close, share one thing you've learned and one thing you've committed to doing in order to promote change in our criminal justice system. Post it on social media with the hashtag #40daysofsolidarity

**Isaiah 42:5-7** Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: "I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

**By Emily Schmid, Advocacy Programs Associate, PA Council of Churches**

I accidentally shoplifted last February. Dangerously, there is a grocery store next to my gym so when I'm on the treadmill craving Italian Ice I can instantly satisfy that craving. I walked in to Giant, went to the freezer aisle, grabbed the Italian Ice, and walked out. While in the car, I went to look for the receipt and realized I never got one. Because I never paid... I proceeded to go back inside the store and purchase my Italian Ices like a good citizen.

I can add shoplifting to the list of minor crimes I've committed in my life. I think if we were all to examine our records closely, we'd find that none of us are clean.

The racial disparities in our criminal justice system are not lost on me. As a young, white woman I walked out of a grocery store without buying Italian Ices, and no one batted an eye.

We are all called into righteousness and we all fall short. While I have never been to prison, I certainly have trapped myself in prisons of my own making due to ignorance, greed, pride, and anger. These prisons separate me from loving other Children of God. We have set up a false dichotomy for ourselves where those in prison are "un-righteous" and those who are free are "righteous."

These words from Isaiah are just as much for literal prisoners as they are for those who put them behind bars. May we work not only to liberate prisoners, but ourselves as well, from the systems of injustice under which we operate. May our eyes be opened to the way of the Lord, and may we all be freed from the prisons of our own making.