

A Space for Grace



There are five sessions in this guide – one for each of the first 5 weeks of Lent.

Each week has an introduction, a reading, some discussion starters and a question.

Go to spaceforgraceweb.wordpress.com and put your answer to the question in the comments and take the conversation beyond your congregation.

On Thursday April 6 at 6:30 pm we will gather at the Ministry Center of the Episcopal Diocese of Western New York (1064 Brighton Rd, Tonawanda) for evening prayer, reflections by Bishop Franklin and further conversation.

Week One

The Gospel for the first Sunday in Lent is Matthew 4:1-11. It tells the story of Jesus fasting in the wilderness and being tempted by Satan. Satan tempts Jesus with food, safety and power.

Read Matthew 4:1-11.

Many people in our country lack basic necessities, feel afraid or powerless.

In an interview with American Conservative magazine. J.D. Vance, author of Hillbilly Elegy talks about the corrosive effects of powerlessness.

“I was speaking with a friend the other night, and I made the point that the meta-narrative of the 2016 election is learned helplessness as a political value. We’re no longer a country that believes in human agency, and as a formerly poor person, I find it incredibly insulting. To hear Trump or Clinton talk about the poor, one would draw the conclusion that they have no power to affect their own lives. Things have been done to them, from bad trade deals to Chinese labor competition, and they need help. And without that help, they’re doomed to lives of misery they didn’t choose.

Obviously, the idea that there aren’t structural barriers facing both the white and black poor is ridiculous. Mamaw recognized that our lives were harder than rich white people, but she always tempered her recognition of the barriers with a hard-nosed willfulness: “never be like those a–holes who think the deck is stacked against them.” In hindsight, she was this incredibly perceptive woman. She recognized the message my environment had for me, and she actively fought against it.

There’s good research on this stuff. Believing you have no control is incredibly destructive, and that may be especially true when you face unique barriers. The first time I encountered this idea was in my exposure to addiction subculture, which is quite supportive and admirable in its own way, but is full of literature that speaks

about addiction as a disease. If you spend a day in these circles, you'll hear someone say something to the effect of, "You wouldn't judge a cancer patient for a tumor, so why judge an addict for drug use." This view is a perfect microcosm of the problem among poor Americans. On the one hand, the research is clear that there are biological elements to addiction—in that way, it does mimic a disease. On the other hand, the research is also clear that people who believe their addiction is a biologically mandated disease show less ability to resist it. It's this awful catch-22, where recognizing the true nature of the problem actually hinders the ability to overcome."

The author speaks about "human agency" which means the sense that we have the ability to make lasting decisions about our own lives. In other words that we have the power to direct our own lives and the shape that they take.

Conversation Starters:

- Looking around your community, what might make someone feel powerless?
- How have you seen powerlessness and hopelessness in your community? What impact has that had on your community?
- What do you think it means that "We are no longer a country that believes in human agency?" Do you believe that true or not true?
- As there been a time in your life when you didn't feel that you had human agency?

Question:

What is the biggest challenge facing the people in your community and what can the faith community do to help?

Week Two

The Gospel for the second Sunday in Lent is the story of Nicodemus seeking out Jesus under the cover of darkness to find out more. He doesn't want his fellow leaders to know that he is talking to Jesus.

Read John 3:1-17

For many people there are things that they believe, think or want to know more about that they don't want others to know.

In a piece on the Huffington Post in September, George Friedman reflected on the Public and Private lives of candidates. He said, in part,

"When I was in college I knew someone who intended to go into politics. He was 19 and systematically avoided anything that might prove "a problem" to his future career. What he avoided was everything that a normal 19-year-old might do. I couldn't articulate then what I can now: I do not want to be led by someone who has led a life free of trial, error, remorse and forgiveness. I do not want to be led by anyone who hasn't moved to the edge of the abyss because I want my leader to know what the abyss looks like and how to back away slowly. I do not want what we think of as a flawless leader, because being flawless is itself a vice. I want to be led by someone who has grappled long and hard with life. I will not list the venal sins humans are prone to, but I want the person who walks into a room with Vladimir Putin to know the demons that can drive a person. It is a dangerous world and I want a president who knows how to be dangerous if he has to be - and knows when not to be.

As a voter, I simply want to know that this is someone who has lived. I do not want to know the details. I have lived a life I have enjoyed immensely. I have tried many things, failed at some, succeeded in others. I have many regrets and many things I wish I could live again. I do not intend to lay out all the things I have done in public. This is my private trove, and not meant to be shared. I would not respect a presidential candidate who has none

of these things, nor would I respect a presidential candidate who sent out a press release detailing them. I value privacy and I value a presidential candidate who demands it too.”

Conversation Starters:

- Where is the dividing line between public life & private life?
- Is the line different for those in authority in the government? In the church?
- How do we balance the image we wish to present to the world with the doubts and questions that we have?

Question:

What the ideas or groups or people that you would seek out by night so no one would see you?

Week Three

The Gospel reading for the third Sunday in Lent is the story of the woman at the well. The Samaritan woman with a past who meets Jesus and becomes an evangelist.

Read John 4:5-42

Jesus and the woman should never have spoken to each other. They were from two different faiths, they were a man and a woman who didn't know each other. One was a teacher, the other had a history that made her suspect.

For many of us, there are people that we would never meet, never speak to, who might change our lives if we got to know them.

On the website Quora, a young adult asked an interesting question:

“So I'm in a club at school and I'm talking with these guys people would associate as being "nerds." My friends really don't like this and give me weird and disgusted glares when I'm with them. My friends are in the club too, but they don't try to get to know the other people unlike me. The only reason they're in it is because it looks good on their resumes. I have seen this a lot with people, they think once they have enough friends they don't need more. Yeah the "nerds" might seem weird, but I'll admit I have a nerdy weird side and I just embrace it when I'm with them. But my friends and a lot of other people don't understand people have different sides of themselves and can act differently. The guys are also younger than me, but it seems like everyone younger than you is a "loser" and it's uncool to be friends with them. Personally I like hanging out with nerdy guys, they seem to be more friendly and it seems easier to approach them.”

Conversation Starters:

- Have there been times in your life when you were an “insider”? Have there been times in your life when you were an “outsider”? How did you feel as an insider? As an outsider?
- Who are the people that we feel uncomfortable talking to in our lives today?
- Who might feel uncomfortable talking to us?
- Where in our community do we encounter people we don't know well?

Question:

Who are the outsiders and how do we reinforce who is in and who is out?

Week Four

The Psalm for the fourth Sunday in Lent is one of the best known psalms, Psalm 23.

Read Psalm 23

One of the most comforting phrases in Psalm 23 is “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”

That raises the question, what do we mean by evil?

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy reflect on evil:

“During the past thirty years, moral, political, and legal philosophers have become increasingly interested in the concept of evil. This interest has been partly motivated by ascriptions of ‘evil’ by laymen, social scientists, journalists, and politicians as they try to understand and respond to various atrocities and horrors of the past eighty years, e.g., the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and killing sprees by serial killers such as Jeffery Dahmer. It seems that we cannot capture the moral significance of these actions and their perpetrators by calling them ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ or even ‘very very wrong’ or ‘very very bad.’ We need the concept of evil.

To avoid confusion, it is important to note that there are at least two concepts of evil: a broad concept and a narrow concept. The broad concept picks out any bad state of affairs, wrongful action, or character flaw. The suffering of a toothache is evil in the broad sense as is a white lie. Evil in the broad sense has been divided into two categories: natural evil and moral evil. Natural evils are bad states of affairs which do not result from the intentions or negligence of moral agents. Hurricanes and toothaches are examples of natural evils. By contrast, moral evils do result from the intentions or negligence of moral agents. Murder and lying are examples of moral evils.”

Conversation Starters:

- What first comes to mind when you hear the word evil?
- What is the difference between evil actions and evil people?
- What do you think about the distinction between natural evil and moral evil?

Question:

What evil do you fear?

Week Five

In the Gospel reading for the fifth Sunday in Lent, Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life”

Read John 11:1-45

The word resurrection carries both the concepts of new life and renewal.

The concepts of renewal and new life in the Christian church take many of their symbols from the new life and renewal of spring.

Here is one reflection on new life from a reflection in the gardening section of Reddit

“There is something about watching the earth come alive each spring that gives us all hope. As the birds make themselves known more fully and the sun warms our faces, the days lengthen and new tender green shoots surprise us each morning, we cannot help but feel renewed ourselves. We can make a game of it with children-

or ourselves... Was that daffodil there yesterday? Did we really plant a bulb there last fall or is that a volunteer? Somehow the dark burdens that may have weighed upon us heavily towards winter's end release their hold upon us."

Conversation Starters:

- What does new life mean?
- What are signs of new life that speak to you?
- What are signs of new life in communities? In congregations?

Question:

Where are you seeing new life?