

Bishop Easterling's 2021 Lenten message

Beloved of God, as we prepare to enter this deep and rich time of Lent -- a time of prayer, remembering our baptism, and preparing others for theirs -- we look back over almost a year of global pandemic, racial and political unrest, and almost a year of social distancing, tremendous loss, and struggles against feelings of isolation and resignation. And, we look forward to a future yet filled with continuing liminality, more questions than answers, and perhaps yet more dreams deferred. But one thing is certain: what brought us through the past, and will hold us in the future, is our faith – our faith in God.

Our faith enables us to endure through all. **Therefore, may we take this time in the present to immerse ourselves in the deepest things we know: the art of sacred contemplation, the soul-stirring intentionality of daily prayers, and the faithful discipline of fasting.** This year, many will continue the tradition of fasting from food. **But I'm also inviting us to fast from social media.** I know many of us rely on professional platforms for our ability to worship and to work. I'm not speaking of that engagement. I'm talking about those entertainment platforms, those that so easily absorb our time and innocently draw us in. May we use that time, instead, to write, to write our own prayers of lament and thanksgiving, read a classic of our faith tradition, or perhaps engage a new theologian, or simply sit in the beauty of silence. I also invite us to intentionally pray three times a day -- at the beginning of our day, at midday, and again in the evening. What a powerful expression it will be to know that throughout our entire annual conference we are in a posture and attitude of prayer as one.

There are two Lenten studies (presented by the Baltimore-Washington Conference) that we hope that you will consider using during this time. Both of them are modeled on the format introduced through the “Who are We” study and offer an opportunity to come together as the beloved community to focus on our faith through our United Methodist Social Principles.

The first study is entitled “[Reclaiming and Living Covenant.](#)” This study will be focusing on reading and studying Scripture, exploring ways we are equipped to seek justice, learning about the experiences of other United Methodists engaged in the work of ending oppression, and creating accountability to, and with, each other. It will explore such topics as incorporating justice as a spiritual discipline, caring about all of creation, promoting peace and restorative justice, and transforming the context of hate to love. Rev. Neal Christie will offer a guided journey through this study each Thursday of Lent at 12 noon.

The second study is “[Created to Love](#).” In this seven-week study, participants will be invited to follow the rhythm of our creator. God spun the sinews of creation. From the beginning, God modeled six days of activity, followed by a day of rest. In turn, we are called from the long stretches of our busy labor, into holy Sabbath. We pause in order to take in the joy and weight of being formed in love as the hope of creation. In these seven weeks, you will be drawn into a rhythm of renewal through such topics as: is my heart pure, how are my actions aligned with God's will, and where do we need to be transformed.

Beloved, whichever study you choose, I pray that you will engage it enthusiastically and with an expectation of transformation and blessing. I hope that you will join us three times a day in prayer and that you will fast from platforms of entertainment on social media. God is with you; God is with us. May this sacred time be one of spiritual renewal, revelation, and transformation, May God richly bless you.

[Join us](#) for a six-week Lenten Experience of Scripture, UMC Social Principles, and Antiracist Action to Build Beloved Community with one of its authors.