

Third Sunday

Lent Passage: Exodus 17:1-7 YEAR A

Food Insecurity Reflection Passage:

Ruth 1:1, 3-5 NRSV

"In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Food insecurity is a global problem. It is often tied to displacement from people's home, community, and even the land where they grew up with their family. It is woven into the web of an economic system that is not always fair and just.



That system also includes structural racism. From a womanist perspective, it is critical that we name the injustices and *wrestle in the discomfort* of doing so. We cannot adequately address and dismantle what we are unwilling to name and face.

What is also true is that when elected officials, business leaders and faith leaders do not make an investment in an area, and businesses leave the community, one of the first businesses to abandon our neighbors is a grocery store. This opens the door to food deserts or acts of food apartheid. Remember that term from earlier?

And the people will cry out and will quarrel with their elected officials saying, "give us a full-scale grocery store, not another corner store," in the same way that the Israelites cried out to Moses for water (Exodus 17:1-7). Hunger is a wilderness experience. When our neighbors cry out, all too often they are met with this response, "what am I to do with these people?" In essence, it is as if food-insecure people are being othered. Their hardship comes across as a burden to people who are in a position to help. Imagine the immoral insensitivity in that!

Many of our Black, Latinx, and Indigenous neighbors live in the geography of segregation. They are disconnected from the basic human rights of resources that are necessary for flourishing and healthy living.

It is not by accident or happenstance. It is designed that way by the embedded iterations of structural racism that dislocate people of color from having the resources that affluent neighborhoods have.

In **Chapter Two** of the book, under the subheading "*That Time Fast Food Was Weaponized*," we learn about the differences between grocery stores, full-scale supermarkets, corner stores, and convenience stores. Though we might use these terms interchangeably, they are not the same. Re-read the section to see the differences.

Structural racism shows up in policies that disregard and deny Black and Latinx neighbors from receiving community improvement grants. There is also coded language in city and county agendas that perpetuate redlining and discriminatory practices against people of color.

Sadly, there are introductions of house bills that call for acts of punishment of days gone by like the push for a return to firing squads as a method of execution in Tennessee where people of color are already disproportionately affected by mass incarceration. This is a policy that is being weighed.

As we look at our reflection text, it opens this way: *In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.* This means that an entire population of people was food insecure. Everyone was experiencing it. It is the kind of

devastation that happens in the aftermath of hurricanes, tsunamis, and other climatic events that affect access to food. Remember when the population of New Orleans was displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005?

By definition, famine is an extreme scarcity of food. Our neighbors are not in a famine; some are in a so-called food desert. This reality has been magnified during the pandemic of 2020-2022, especially since it impacted the middle-class population.

Just like in the Ruth passage where Elimelech (whose name means "My God is King") and his family left Bethlehem - a town whose name means *the house of bread* - in search of food, many of our neighbors are in search of fresh, healthy, affordable and even diet-specific and culturally specific foods.

These are important factors tied to *food security*. For instance, if Native American, Mexican, Jewish and Halal foods are not readily available in a neighborhood where people from these demographics live, then our neighbors don't have access to foods that meet their specific dietary and cultural needs.

For women, the struggle is often greater. In biblical times, women did not have agency over their lives.

Their livelihood, survival, and identity were tied to a male relative. They were either the daughter of, wife of, or daughter-in-law of a male relative. When life happened and they became a widow, not only did women lose their spouses, but they lost spousal support. They did not have the means to be independent. In some cultures, the same is true today. Women are still "forbidden" or not allowed to have agency over their lives. What is also true is that in households where women are experiencing abuse, or escaping from it, they often find themselves at a crossroads of survival. Many are *scrimpin' and scrapin'* just to be able to have food to eat. Their wilderness experience is compounded by more struggle.

Write:

In some communities, there are pawn shops and fast-food eateries but no grocery stores. Read the Exodus 17 passage. As you reflect on it, through the lens of faith and food justice, how would you answer the question that the Israelites posed to Moses in verse 7: **is the Lord really with us or not?**

Reflect:

According to the Food Industry, there are 40,000 stores in the US that sell food. Is a corner store sufficient for meeting the needs of a community? Why or why not?

If you answered, "it's better than nothing," explain why?

Pray:

God, as I journey through this season of Lent, help me to be attentive and sensitive to the people who are struggling. Please forgive me for any time I have "othered" my neighbor. Give me the courage to speak my faith, not my judgment or uninformed opinion about those who are food insecure. Shape my heart so that I may make a difference. God, if the situation breaks Your heart, then let it break mine, too. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Act:

This week, walk the journey of one who lives in a community where their only option for grocery shopping is a **corner store**. Choose a store in a neighborhood that is predominantly Black, Latinx or Indigenous. Buy your groceries from this store to prepare a meal using fresh, healthy food. This means not choosing processed foods or sugary snacks.

What was the experience like? What did you buy?
What did you notice about your reaction?

Final Thoughts:

How is this experience shaping your Lenten journey?

Resource: Fully Yours Podcast; episode 4.12 *Tilling Land, Tilling Justice* and episode 5.2 *Land and Race*

Notes: