INTERFAITH PRAYER

Oh, Holy One. Creator of our entire human family. We call on you now to have mercy upon each of us. Guide our actions so that we may, despite our shortcomings, reflect your compassion and help us to move closer to a time when those who are without their own homes will be able to come home. To come home to themselves and come home to the world as you would have us build for each other.

SERMON STARTERS BASED ON REFORMED JEWISH READINGS AND CHRISTIAN LECTIONARY FOR MARCH 14 AND 15 AND 21 AND 22

REFORMED JEWISH READING FROM THE TORAH FOR MARCH 15
EXODUS 32:1 TO 20
THE GOLDEN CALF

32 When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.’ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

7 The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ’ The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 11 But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, ‘O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, “I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever.” ’ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

15 Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, ‘There is a noise of war in the camp.’ But he said,
‘It is not the sound made by victors, 
or the sound made by losers; 
it is the sound of revelers that I hear.’

“As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

In these challenging times it is easy to lose hope that God’s promise to our human family will be fulfilled. But even when we lose hope, God has mercy on us. As we recall the trials and struggles of our ancestors, we are called by our creator to have compassion for the members of our human family who are in their own wilderness - without a permanent place to call home, without a place to raise their children, a sanctuary to come home to after a hard day’s work, a place from which they can help build a stronger community. By speaking truth to power and urging those who represent us to act in ways that reflect our deepest values, we can help to build a more just and compassionate city for us all. We must not place our faith in idols and empty promises but in solutions which truly lift people up and offer relief.

CHRISTIAN COMMON LECTIONARY, YEAR A 
THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT 
MARCH 15

EXODUS 17:1-7

17:1 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

17:2 The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?”

17:3 But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

17:4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

17:5 The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

17:6 I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.

17:7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

So often in this culture of complaint, we have many who helplessly complain about their predicament in the wilderness. They despair. Others complain that there nothing we can do to help the homeless and there is not enough money. Much like the Israelites complaining to Moses in the desert, we find ourselves in some desert imagining that we have no resources. In the midst of this struggle, however, God invites us to use our imaginations and support efforts to offer life to those who struggle. We must move from resignation to smart resolve to find solutions to address the needs of those who struggle rooted in a belief that God is abundant and can provide what is needed. Like Moses, how can we persist and travel alongside those who are discouraged and see the life God has promised? Can we be open to the surprising ways in which God can provide?
The life-giving gift of water is symbolic of the ultimate goal that God’s children may not only survive but also flourish.

**ROMANS 5:1 - 10**

5Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace, in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

- For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Homeless people in New York can feel beaten down by a very oppressive economic system where housing is grossly expensive, wages are marginal, and access to health care, child care and good nutrition is really challenging. The cost of rent has drastically increased while wages have remained flat. Just as early Christians lived under the oppression of the Roman Empire and struggled mightily, homeless people find it next to impossible to get their lives together in a system which actively works against them. We need, as a society, to be transformed by God’s grace where our worth or justification is not evaluated by our bank accounts. Instead, we have value because of God’s unmerited love for us which poured out upon our hearts. In response to this love, we need to invest in others in the same way that we invest in others who are more privileged. As did the community of the first century, our community needs to experience God’s love as a present reality, given by the Spirit, even in the midst of world which can be legalistic and harsh.

**REFORMED JEWISH READING FROM THE TORAH FOR MARCH 21**

**EXODUS 35:20 TO 35:7**

**OFFERINGS FOR THE TABERNACLE**

20 Then all the congregation of the Israelites withdrew from the presence of Moses. And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the Lord’s offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments. So they came, both men and women; all who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, all sorts of gold objects, everyone bringing an offering of gold to the Lord. And everyone who possessed blue or purple or crimson yarn or fine linen or goats’ hair or tanned rams’ skins or fine leather, brought them. Everyone who could make an offering of silver or bronze brought it as the Lord’s offering; and everyone who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work, brought it. All the skilful women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine linen; all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the goats’ hair. And the leaders brought onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breast piece, and spices and oil for the light, and for the anointing-oil, and for the fragrant incense. All the Israelite men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring anything...
for the work that the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord.

In dealing with the homeless crisis, we need to have a great generosity of spirit and in offering emotional and material assistance. Assistance to the homeless and the construction of affordable housing has seen more and more cutbacks. As the the cost of rent climbs and becomes impossibly out of reach for homeless people, they are too often faulted for being homeless and advised to just work harder and do more for themselves. Economic forces, however, are also working against poor people just as they did in the Great Depression. In response, we must proceed from an ideal of abundance rather than scarcity and be much more generous in caring for our brothers and sisters. Generosity begets more generosity.

CHRISTIAN COMMON LECTIONARY READINGS
MARCH 22, YEAR A, FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT
PSALM 23

23:1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
23:2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
23:3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
23:4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.
23:5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
23:6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

As homeless people go from shelter to shelter from one precarious situation to another, we need as a society to offer solace and comfort to help them stabilize their lives. In the midst of chaos, how do we as a human community offer to each other stability and tranquility where people can stay in one place and put down roots? How is it that we prepare a table for the homeless in the face of so many enemy-like forces which keep people in poverty and deny their humanity?

EPHESIANS 5:8-14

5:8 For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light-
5:9 for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.
5:10 Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.
5:11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.
5:12 For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly;
5:13 but everything exposed by the light becomes visible,
5:14 for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore, it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

We need to make the homeless crisis visible. It must be placed in the light and we must not have people who are poor live in the shadows. Assuming homelessness is a problem in other parts of the state but not in our own community simply is not true. We often don’t realize how many people are suffering in our communities. People are often too embarrassed to talk about it. It is a true tragedy that over 150,000 children in New York are homeless. Can we expose the situation in our own congregations? The fruit of the light is shown by doing what is good and right and true. Our society lives in darkness when we deny reality and do not openly address our problems. We must arise from our slumber and awake to the reality around us. We must join together and Say Yes to HSS in order to bring help to our homeless neighbors.