Our congregation gladly scrambled to help during the Texas winter storm. But we shouldn't have to do it again.

The deadly storm presents an opportunity for Lenten reflection, self-examination, and confession, write two pastors who serve in a hard-hit community.



People line up to get into a grocery store in Texas after Winter Storm Uri.

By Michael GiengerCo-pastor, Central United Methodist Church
By Julia RileyCo-pastor, Central United Methodist Church

MARCH 5, 2021

By Sunday, Feb. 14, freezing temperatures accompanied by rain and snow reached the Houston-Galveston area. While forecasters had predicted dangerous weather conditions, few Texans expected the massive failure of the state's energy grid.

In the midst of subfreezing temperatures, more than 4 million Texas homes and businesses lost power, many for days. On Galveston Island, 95% of homes were without power for over 36 hours.

When our congregation at Central United Methodist Church in Galveston learned that Winter Storm Uri was coming, we knew that many of our fellow congregants would not have a safe, warm place to go.

Since a relaunch in 2015, Central UMC has been building relationships with and working alongside Galveston's unhoused community. People at the church knew that with the county's lone emergency shelter limited to 50% capacity because of the coronavirus, many unhoused residents would not have a place to sleep.

For five days, Central UMC transformed into a pop-up shelter for the most vulnerable in Galveston. Classrooms became dormitories, housing almost 60 people. Volunteers became chefs, providing three meals a day. "Sanctuary" took on new meaning.

When the church lost power, volunteers checked in overnight guests in the dark, conserved their phone batteries for emergencies and piled blankets on visitors as the building's temperature dropped into the 40s.

When the church lost water, staff members scrambled to find ways for guests to use the bathroom safely. We eventually collected pool water from a nearby neighbor to manually flush the toilets, but for a time, folks were forced to use buckets lined with plastic bags.

In the midst of this, the global church observed Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent. While the guests at Central held no formal service, people in the church experienced the themes of Ash Wednesday firsthand.

Lent is an intentional time of ***stripping away***, a rare season in which we pause long enough to tell each other the truth about human frailty and mortality.

Like the season of Lent, crises have a way of revealing and exposing hidden truths. Winter Storm Uri stripped away many of our comforts and forced us to reflect on ourselves and the world more honestly.

The failures of utility providers revealed the frailty of our inequitable systems. The need for refrigerated trucks to store extra bodies exposed the nearness of our mortality.

The death-on-your-doorstep reality that millions of Texans faced over that week revealed what Galveston's impoverished and unsheltered communities experience day in and day out.

Millions of Texans found themselves stripped of those things that the pandemic had not already taken away: electricity, heat, water, food. For

most, the loss of access to water and power was temporary. But for too many others, poverty and homelessness are crises without an end in sight. This was illustrated by the differing reactions to the weather crisis.

One of Central's housed volunteers, familiar with extreme weather, said, "I know how to handle a hurricane; I don't know how to handle this."

By contrast, when one of Central's pastors apologized to an overnighter for the lack of flushing toilets, the guest said, "No worries, Pastor. This is what we do regularly. It can be hard to find a bathroom when you're living on the streets."

Another unhoused guest said, "No reliable access to shelter, electricity, bathrooms, food or water? That's just a typical Wednesday."

Those experiencing poverty and homelessness live in a constant state of crisis. But unlike winter storms or hurricanes, their crises prompt no declarations of emergency or outpourings of support.

In a strange way, the aftermath of Winter Storm Uri presents us with an ***opportunity for Lenten reflection, self-examination and confession***.

Angry Texans are rightly demanding answers about systemic failures: How could this happen? Who was responsible? How are we contributing to the problem? How can we ensure that this never happens again?

But those same questions need to be turned toward the ever-present crises of poverty and homelessness.

Regarding people forced to sleep in a church because they have no home: How could this happen? Who was responsible? How are we contributing to the problem? How can we ensure that this never happens again?

Regarding those who froze to death in their houses because they had no transportation: How could this happen? Who was responsible? How are we contributing to the problem? How can we ensure that this never happens again?

Regarding the single mother who told church staff, “It was so cold that my kids wouldn’t stop crying”: How could this happen? Who was responsible? How are we contributing to the problem? How can we ensure that this never happens again?

To be frank, Central UMC shouldn’t have to shelter people again. Not because it’s a burden to do so -- as Christians, we believe that as we care for the poor, we are, in some mystical way, caring for Jesus himself. There is no greater privilege for a community of faith.

No, Central shouldn’t have to shelter people again because the larger church community should respond in such a way that there are no more people to be housed, no more people living in poverty, no more people without access to basic human necessities. Housing and access to basic utilities are human rights.

While Lent is a time of reflection, self-examination and confession, it ultimately gives way to resurrection and new life.

In the same way, the aftermath of Winter Storm Uri offers us a chance to put to death the old systems of inequity and live into the hope of a new, resurrected way of being in our world.

This Ash Wednesday, mourning scours our hearts

The last two years have deepened our experience with grief. As we move into the season of Lent, a pastor and assistant professor asks what has been learned.

By Timothy Adkins-Jones



FEBRUARY 28, 2022

Blessed are those who mourn,

For they shall be comforted.

Matthew 5:4 (NKJV)

I'm sick of mourning — sick and tired, to be more precise. I feel this deeply.

For nearly two years, it seems that all I have done is mourn, and even that mourning has not been possible in ways that are familiar and comforting.

I'm tired of offering committals into the front-facing camera of my laptop during a Zoom call.

I'm tired of small gatherings and to-go box lunches that ill-serve as replacements for community consolation and the comfort of shared repasts.

I'm tired of having a sick and shut-in list and a COVID-19 care list and of seeing many named there leave them through death instead of healing.

I'm tired of having to argue the benefits of testing and vaccinations and the Christian commitment to community and loving our neighbor.

Out of this weariness, I'm struggling to muster any energy and excitement about Ash Wednesday. Maybe attaching enthusiasm to Ash Wednesday isn't fair to begin with. It is a day that does not usually garner excitement.

At least in the past ***I've looked forward to the discipline that is initiated on that day,*** and to the time of repentance and reflection that it signals as the beginning of Lent.

But I don't want to repent right now, and I really don't want to reflect much more. Many of us have been in our homes doing that a lot for two years, and after all the loss, I don't want to give up anything for the next 40 days.

If I can be honest, I want to tell Ash Wednesday to keep its ashes and its mourning, because I've done enough. Our spirits have fasted through two Lents and the seasons in between. Yet even writing this, I can't shake Jesus' words,

Blessed are those who mourn,

For they shall be comforted.

How, Jesus? When, Jesus?

Where does this comfort that you promise come from? Is it from a changing of the circumstances surrounding my mourning? That can't be it. Whether I'm mourning the continued pandemic or another loss of life, I don't see any immediate changes ahead. Taken with the sin of greed that has extended this crisis longer than necessary, neither changing government nor changing policy could have immediate effect on such massive ills.

Is the comfort coming from your presence, Lord? Of course there's comfort in knowing and feeling your arms around me! I pray and worship and know that you are there, but something tells me that is not the comfort described here.

Maybe this comfort is more than what can be attained through singing my favorite hymn or listening to a good sermon. As much as I'm sick of it, as much as I don't want to do it anymore, **maybe the comfort will come from the mourning itself**. Maybe even more mourning, or at least better mourning, is in order.

Ecclesiastes 7:2-3 says that it is

Better to go to the house of mourning

Than to go to the house of feasting,

For that is the end of all men;

And the living will take it to heart.

Sorrow is better than laughter,

For by a sad countenance the heart is made better.

Here in Ecclesiastes, the preacher is suggesting that the house of mourning, the place where people would go to actively and purposely mourn for at least seven days after someone's death, a place of quiet and intentional mourning, that this place or state of being is better than being in a place of joy and laughter.

The suggestion is that intentionally moving through the sorrow is better than laughing or even "praising our way through," because our sadness will make our hearts better.

I love Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the third verse in The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language:

Crying is better than laughing.

It blotches the face, but it scours the heart.

He captures the benefit of mourning, whether it be over personal loss, sin in this world or a seemingly perpetual pandemic. It does the work of cleansing.

The idea of scouring isn't pleasant. It brings to mind all the times I've had to scrub gunk off pots and pans while washing dishes. But if these last two years have done anything, they've piled up all kinds of nastiness on our hearts — grief, loneliness, bitterness, sadness. There's no question that the work of moving through it all is painful. It's also necessary, if we're to make progress and find a pathway toward some semblance of peace after the pandemic is over, or at least contained.

Our comfort will come not from the malaise of mourning but instead through its intentional practice that will help clear away two years of accumulated trauma. There is no rushing through something so deeply experienced.

May this Ash Wednesday and the Lenten season it inaugurates be a time in which the discipline of mourning provides a pathway to a sustained comfort incubated amid the pressures of the world. May our liturgical and communal discipline foster practices that help us work our way through our collective grief. And may the peace of God that is beyond our understanding be our guide.

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We're All Sinners, and Accepting That Is Actually a Good Thing

March 6, 2022

By Tish Harrison Warren



An Anglican priest reflects on matters of faith in private life and public discourse.

This is the first Sunday of Lent, a season in preparation for Easter when Christians often focus on **sin and repentance**. One of the things that's most difficult to swallow about Christianity is the idea that normal, nice people are sinners, that we are born sinful and can't elude being a sinner by being moral or religious enough.
It can seem gentler and kinder to think of human beings as basically good, our intuitions basically correct and our motives basically pure. But then we run into the hard facts of greed, genocide, abuse, oppression, lies, tyranny, hatred, jealousy, violence, murder, enslavement and even mundane selfishness, impatience, arrogance or resentment in our own heart.

It wasn't until college that I ever really thought about the Christian doctrine of sin. I had grown up in a Baptist church hearing about how Jesus "died for our sins," but it seemed that sin was the breaking of certain rules — drinking too much, sleeping around, lying, murder and stealing. I was a docile kid mostly into student theater and church. Not much of a rebel. So, for me, being a sinner was more of an abstract religious idea than any kind of felt reality.

In college, through a string of failed relationships and theological questioning, I came to understand sin as something more fundamental than rule breaking, more subtle and "under the hood" of my consciousness. It was the ways I would casually manipulate people to get my way. It was a hidden but obnoxious need for approval. It was that part of me that could not rejoice in a friend's big award or accomplishment, even as some other part told her, "Congratulations!"

My favorite definition of sin comes from the English author Francis Spufford. He says that most of us in the West think of sin as a word that "basically means 'indulgence' or 'enjoyable naughtiness.'" Instead, he calls sin "the human propensity to mess things up" — only he doesn't use the word "mess," and his word is probably closer to the truth of things.
This propensity is not only passive like an accident, but is also "our active inclination to break stuff," Spufford says, including "moods, promises, relationships we care about and our own well-being and other people's."

This is the slow dawning that I had about myself in college, and with it came liberation. Far from being a crushing blow of self-hatred, the realization of my actual, non-theoretical sinfulness came with something like a recognition of grace. I saw that I was worse than I'd thought I was, and that truth knocked me off the eternal treadmill of trying to be better and do better and get it all right. It allowed me to slowly (and continually) learn to receive love, atonement, forgiveness and mercy.

Every week now in church, I kneel with my congregation and admit, in the words of the Anglican liturgy, that I have sinned against God, "in thought, word and deed" by what I have done and by what I have left undone, that I have not loved God with my whole heart and have not loved my neighbor as myself. With my whole community around me, week in and week out, I admit, as Spufford says, that I have broken stuff, including other people and myself with my human propensity to, ahem, mess things up.

The Eastern Orthodox practice of praying ***the Jesus Prayer*** has become important to me over the past few years. This prayer simply says, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." It is usually prayed repetitively and meditatively, again and again.

In praying it over and over, I noticed how strange and transformative it is to repeatedly identify myself as a sinner. I am not identified primarily as a mother, a writer, a woman or a priest. I am not primarily a Democrat or a Republican or a Christian. I am also not primarily an upstanding citizen or right or reasonable or talented or "on the right side of history." Instead, again and again, in these received words, I call myself a sinner.
This recognizes that I will get much wrong. That as a writer, I'll say things, however unintentionally, that are untrue and unhelpful. As a mother, I will harm my children — the people I love and want to do right by most in the world. And it tells me that I will harm them in real ways, not just dismissible "well, shucks, we all make mistakes" kind of ways. As a priest, I will lead people astray. I will not live up to what I proclaim. I will fail. I will hurt people, not just in theory or abstraction. I will cause true harm.
This humbles me.

I need this humility. Our broader culture does too. The Lutheran theologian Martin Marty wrote that we live in a culture where "everything is permitted and nothing is forgiven." He meant that we tend to reject the idea of sin and judgment in favor of a "you do you" moral individualism. We try to convince ourselves that there is only personal appetites and preferences, but we cannot quite shake a sense of good and evil because most of us retain a sense of justice, a sense that what we do matters. But when

someone violates our often unspoken sense of justice or righteousness, there is no way of atonement. There is no absolution or restoration.

An understanding of universal sinfulness, in contrast, is the verdant soil from which grace can spring. The British author Tom Holland called the Christian doctrine of sin a "very democratic doctrine," because it has a leveling quality. To paraphrase Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, it draws the line separating good and evil not between political parties, cliques, classes, religious groups or ideological tribes, but instead through every human heart.

But we're not left to stew in guilt or shame. We aren't just sinners; we are sinners who can ask for mercy and believe that we can receive it. Living in this posture is what makes forgiveness possible, which is the only thing that makes lasting peace possible. Without a clear sense of right and wrong, we will end up endorsing injustice, cruelty and evil. But without an equally profound vision of grace, we will end up only with condemnation and an endless self-righteous war of "us versus them."

After I kneel with my church each week, confessing that I have blown it, I am invited to stand and receive absolution and forgiveness. I'm then invited to "pass the peace" to those around me and extend to them the same mercy and forgiveness that I've received. "Forgiveness flounders," the theologian Miroslav Volf wrote, "because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners." But if I am a sinner, then my enemy and I have something in common: We are both wayward and in deep need of grace.

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WOOPing a meaningful Lent: Seeking joy through changing behaviors

A practice to promote well-being offers the possibility of joy despite brokenness, writes the director of the Thriving Congregations Coordination Program at Leadership Education at Duke Divinity.

By Kelly Ryan Director, Thriving Congregations Coordination Program
TUESDAY, MARCH 22, 2022

"Did you know gorillas burp when they are happy?"

My 4-year-old niece proudly offered that gem (which happens to be true) on the way home recently from school. Predictably, it led to silly and somewhat gross banter about how humans

demonstrate happiness. The conversation came to a halt only when she asked me a thoughtful and difficult question: “Aunt Kelly, what do you do when you’re happy?”

Or, to put it another way: What do I do to achieve a state of happiness, well-being or contentment even approximating the delight my niece had enjoyed in sharing that weird science fact?

The question was timely. Happiness has been on my mind in the months since my friend Allison died. At her funeral, Allison’s pastor said she had a “high theology of everyday living.” Even as the cancer treatments stopped working, even as she fearfully and sorrowfully contemplated leaving behind her soul mate and her three young children, Allison delighted in mundane moments.

Watching kids’ sports practices, baking cakes, engaging in deep conversations, dancing to favorite music, even visiting the cancer clinic — all were opportunities to notice God’s abiding presence and abundant grace.

Allison’s was a beautiful way to encounter the world, but mine is much more either/or than both/and. In the face of profound systemic injustice and white supremacy, the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, the threat of nuclear war, nearly 1 million dead from COVID-19 in the U.S. alone, and so many other examples of oppression and suffering, I tend to wallow, depriving myself of even small joys, as though that could somehow contribute to mending my broken self or our broken world.

I needed help to shift this mindset, to live like Allison.

So, I did what millions of others have done: I enrolled in the free “Science of Well-Being” class on Coursera. The course is led by Laurie Santos, a Yale University psychology professor and the host of The Happiness Lab podcast. It is based on Santos’ “Psychology and the Good Life,” the most popular undergraduate course ever offered at Yale.

After taking a baseline happiness survey, more than 3 million classmates and I have explored the kinds of things we think will make us happier — things like a good job, more money, a

perfect body — only to discover that we are completely wrong about what will actually improve our state of mind.

Santos blames this "mis-wanting" on what she charmingly calls "annoying features of the mind." To put it bluntly, she says, "You are clueless about what is going to make you happy."

But we can take heart. Santos teaches strategies we can employ to overcome our biases and incorrect intuitions.

What better time of year to explore such strategies or practices than Lent? To correct our mis-wanting to align more with what God wants? This exercise has required me to radically alter my typical approach to the current penitential season.

Like many, I have historically given up stuff like dessert, snacks, alcohol or social media for Lent. For some, such fasts may reorient their hungers toward God. But for me — and for others, I suspect — these efforts often have been a way to lose 10 pounds, make a minimal effort or appear somewhat pious.

They have not drawn me into deeper relationship with Christ. They have not led to a lasting reordering of my desires (I can't be the only parent to gorge on chocolate while filling plastic eggs for an Easter egg hunt). And even worse, they have only deepened my focus on individualistic faith and personal improvement without the God-given and baptism-empowered vocation to pursue justice and peace for all of God's people.

This year, I set an intention to be, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:10 (a passage appointed in the Revised Common Lectionary for Ash Wednesday) "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." This year, I am WOOPing my Lent.

WOOP — Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan — is the brainchild of Gabriele Oettingen, a professor of psychology at New York University and the University of Hamburg in Germany. It is a tool for helping you move beyond simply knowing what you ought to do to increase well-being, to actually changing your behavior.

WOOP is based on mental contrasting, an approach that encourages holding together in your mind your desires and the obstacles that might prevent you from realizing them.

It can be practiced daily, in just five minutes, beginning with some quiet time to focus and relax before moving through each of the key words in turn. The time horizon for your wish might be "in the next day" or something farther out, like in the next 30 days. You reflect on questions like the following, answering each with three to six words:

- **Wish**: What is my dearest wish, one that is challenging but possible?
- **Outcome**: What would be the best outcome of fulfilling that wish?
- **Obstacle**: What inside me holds me back from fulfilling this wish?
- **Plan**: What specific action might overcome this obstacle?

After that, you develop a simple if-then plan: if this obstacle happens, then I will do this thing. The point is to not grip the wish tightly.

"The wishes come, and [you] WOOP them, and you don't need to think, 'OK, I need to fulfill that wish now,'" Oettingen said in an interview with Santos. "That's not the issue. It's very unevaluative; it's very 'unperformance.' Just take it in order to lead a more pleasant and constructive and fulfilling life."

I can't say yet whether WOOPing is making me happier. But it has transformed my experience of Lent. I have practiced almost every day, which has helped me see how often the obstacles I want to blame for a particular predicament are external.

It has helped me get in better touch with what I actually wish for in my life with God, and the steps I can take to bring that closer to reality.

And that, even in the midst of sorrow, has planted seeds of joy.