



**MAY 2025**

## **DISAPPEARING ACTIVISTS AND IMMIGRANTS**

Many years ago, I joined seminarians and lay people to take a trip led by professors from The Lutheran Seminary of Chicago to the Holy Land. We would see where Jesus was born, the places He walked and the things that He did. It was like "Walking the Bible", visiting where He was born, where He lived and walked, where He taught, where He was crucified, and where He was resurrected. Where else could we learn more about our faith than in this place. Jesus lived here: the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, Hebron, Palestine, Israel, locations where historians were engaged in digging to find and examine even more historic details, the ocean, the cities, the settlements, the hospitals, we saw them all. See where He was born, cover the paths He walked, various locations where the disciples walked with Him, where they lived, where they learned and where they finally locked themselves in rooms after He died as they feared the Jews and what they might do to them.

It was 2005. While the trip was all those things and more, we came to discover that the Israeli/Palestinian conflict was getting worse and worse. It was to consume much of our time, experience and memories. One professor was a New Testament scholar, another an Old Testament scholar. We were accompanied by a Rabbi, we visited with Israeli's, and historic places associated with each of the religions to be found here: Israeli's (Jews), Palestinians (Christians) and those who were Arabs. Let me tell you why. But first, you should know that I created a presentation, "No Direction Home" that I shared with churches and other groups who were concerned about the Middle East, and about the place where Jews, Christians, and Arabs lived in near constant tension. At the time we were there, elections were to be had for the Palestinians, and former President Jimmy Carter was there trying to assure credibility of the elections. He was to author the book PALESTINE: PEACE NOT APARTHEID. It was published one year after our visit.

A couple of years later, I would join the group again, same professors, same plan, save they tacked on a remarkable visit to Jordan. Judy joined the group as I had to share what I had seen with her. What does this have to do with activists and immigrants you might wonder, and why do I bring this up at all? The fact of the matter, Jimmy Carter was a man of peace, who managed to sign a peace deal with Egypt,

So here we are at present, what is happening to those peace plans necessary for our current day, and what is happening? Why do we not look for peace, and search for real solutions to the world of today. Well, first thing we've had a new president (lower case/ as upper case not warranted). He considers himself the best president who has ever lived. His answer to peace is tariffs, his caring about people is non-existent, because he is a living King, a brilliant judge of truth, a remarkable student of history, a fine man of culture, and a leader who knows all there is to know.

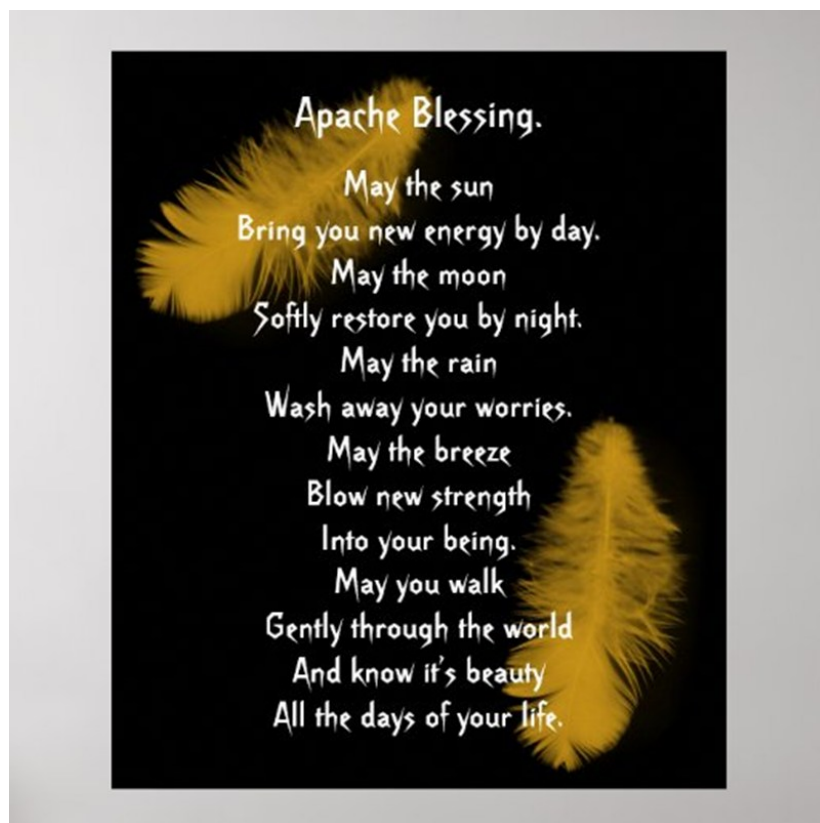
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Let's take the Middle East, for instance. He has a great plan to get rid of the Palestinians and the Jews. His plan is to turn Gaza into a place where people can play golf, install beautiful hotels for guests, his son-in-law has quite a vision indeed. He can't wait to get started! But first, let's get rid of those pesty Palestinians, and since he is a man of great faith, he'll sell you a Bible. As part of your purchase of land, he'll clear out the people who live there and they will be gone. He would build great golf courses, destroy those who are starving, and make the new world a place of happiness. Musk would sell cars to the residents, no need to worry about religion or history, death or suffering. He would clean out the area, and ship the Palestinians to say, El Salvador. They wouldn't come to the U.S., no problem, so we can save hassles with the Government, judges, rules or regulations. We'll disappear them; nobody will ever see them again.

Come to think about that, there is no problem doing that, because all these are sick people, who don't belong here anyway, and can always be taken off the streets, at any age, any time, day or night. There is an airline that is based in CT that's glad to help deport people wherever the president wants to ship them. They are glad to ship them as the result of financial incentives.

Finally, the gross incompetence of all these plans, and the hate and lies they spread suggest that there are no guardrails, no reasonableness. He had to make a show of coming to Rome when Pope Francis died. After-all, he had gotten easter eggs for the children at the White House and he could not possibly miss the opportunity to put himself in the spotlight.

He loves to show his "power" though not to Putin. May he take a bow for his first 100 days. Amen.



## THE DARKNESS OVER CAME IT – PASTOR’S MESSAGE

*For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*Romans 8:38-39*

The Middle East conflict has always been a complex and multifaceted issue, one that requires thoughtful diplomacy and compassionate leadership. Yet, the current political climate, marked by divisive rhetoric and superficial solutions, has only exacerbated the tensions. Instead of focusing on healing and reconciliation, there is an alarming trend towards displacement and erasure of communities.

In reflecting upon these troubling developments, it becomes clear that we must return to the fundamental principles of peace and justice. The lessons from past leaders, such as Jimmy Carter, remind us of the importance of empathetic governance and genuine efforts towards conflict resolution. It is imperative that we advocate for policies that prioritize human dignity and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Moving forward, it is crucial for international communities to hold accountable those who seek to undermine peace efforts. We must resist the allure of easy answers and confront the harsh realities with integrity and resolve. Only through sustained and collaborative efforts can we hope to address the profound challenges facing the Middle East and beyond.

As citizens and stewards of global peace, we have a responsibility to speak out against injustice and support initiatives that foster true understanding and cooperation. Let us strive to build a future where every individual is valued and where the scars of conflict are met with the balm of compassion.

In this turbulent era, our collective voice can be a powerful force for change, illuminating the path towards a more harmonious and equitable world.





### FRIDAY GATHERING

- **Entertainment** - if you would be interested in/willing to entertain at a Friday Gathering Dinner, please let Judy Butterworth-Kremer know at [judyvbk@aol.com](mailto:judyvbk@aol.com).
- 195 guests were served at Friday Gathering dinners in the month of March.

### THURSDAY GROCERY DISTRIBUTION

- 320 people were served in the month of March.

### JANET'S CLOSET

- Volunteers are still needed for Wednesdays and Saturdays 11 to 1.
- We need gently used seasonal clothing, blankets and shoes. Clothing racks are needed.
- 69 people were served during the month of March.

### COMMUNITY OUTREACH

- 560 people were reached during the month of March - (CRT, Mutual Housing, Ester's Home and New Life Church, the immigrant community - Islamic and Hispanic, and the International Mission Church)

### SPECIAL UPCOMING DATES OF NOTE

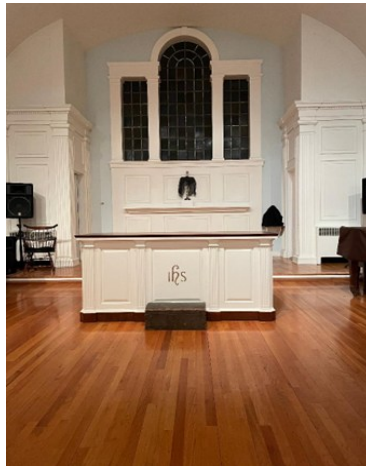
**MAY 11 - MOTHER'S DAY**  
**MAY 26 - MEMORIAL DAY**



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### GRACE IN APRIL

**MAUNDY THURSDAY, GOOD FRIDAY, EASTER AND APRIL 27TH**





## GRACE AND BLUE EARTH

For all of our events, we use compost bins for leftover foods and we also use compostable plates, cups and utensils. This has made a difference, as you can see below.



# DO YOU WANT TO FAST THIS LENT?

*In the words of Pope Francis*

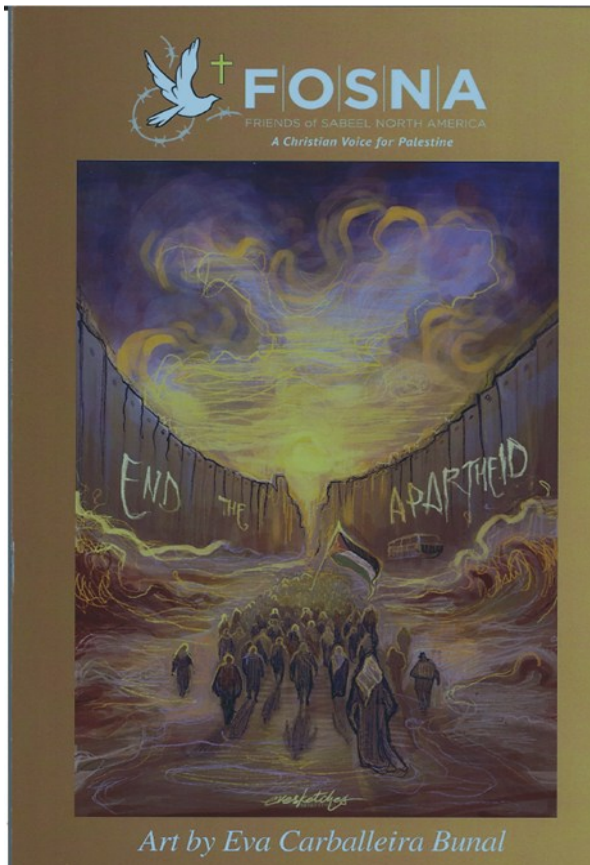
- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and have trust in God.
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

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## WE ARE A RESURRECTION PEOPLE!



Art by Eva Carballeira Bunal

continued Israeli attacks in the West Bank, and even threats from the President of the United States.

It is more important than ever that we show our support and dedication to a free Palestine and that we move towards the dawn of Easter Sunday together.

This Easter, I hope that you will continue to support the movement for a free Palestine with a generous gift to Friends of Sabeel North America.

There are many ways to give: you can make a secure donation online at [fosna.org/easter25](https://fosna.org/easter25), or you can mail the enclosed envelope with a check or your card information.

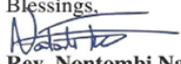
Please know that, whatever you can give this year, it makes a difference. As someone who traveled to Palestine with Friends of Sabeel North America last year, I was able to put names and faces to the cries of my Palestinian siblings.

As Christians and people of conscience in the United States it is more important than ever to remind the people of Palestine:

*You are our siblings. You are made in God's image. You deserve freedom, justice, and peace. You deserve lives filled with hope, not lives filled with fear.*

**"We are a Resurrection people! We are a Resurrection people! We are a Resurrection people!"**

This Easter, and always.

Blessings,  
  
Rev. Nontombi Naomi Tutu

Dear friends,

**"We are a Resurrection people! We are a Resurrection people! We are a Resurrection people!"**

As we move together towards Easter and the foundational miracle of our faith, I have found myself having to say these words to myself almost daily.

As we look at a world in which hatred and division seem to have the upper hand, it is easy to think that our faith has been in vain. Yet, what could have been more difficult than the fear in the hearts of the followers and family of Jesus on that Friday, Saturday and early Sunday?

The One they believed was the Messiah had been crucified, and they had laid his lifeless body in a tomb. How much despair must have been in the hearts of the women as they made their way to the tomb to anoint his body. How fearful they must all have been to be identified as his followers.

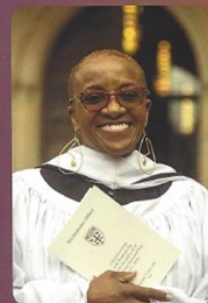
*And then, the empty tomb, the risen Lord, a fulfillment of their faith and hope.*

We are called to be those who know that the empires of this world cannot withstand the power of the risen One who commanded us simply to "Love one another, as I have loved you."

During this Easter season, Palestinians are dealing with their devastated homes and communities in Gaza,



## Easter 2025: Hope Beyond Apartheid



*A message from Rev. Nontombi Naomi Tutu*

## PASTORAL MESSAGE ON THE DEATH OF POPE FRANCIS



April 21, 2025

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.*

*Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi*

Dear church,

On this Easter Monday, we of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America join with people around the world in heartfelt grief at the death of Pope Francis, and we celebrate his life eternal in Jesus Christ.

Pope Francis served Christ's church with wisdom, courage and humility. Throughout his pastoral ministry, he served as an instrument of God's justice and peace for all people and the whole of creation. His commitment to the poorest people, in his native Buenos Aires and around the world, was ever present, even in his simple living.

Pope Francis will go down in history as the first Jesuit bishop of Rome and the first from the Americas. His papacy will be remembered for his clarion call to action for climate justice, his bold engagement in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, his compassionate approach to several complex social issues, and his clear concern about the rise of right-wing populism worldwide and its impact on the most vulnerable.

In particular, we will remember Pope Francis for his significant contributions to the dialogue of life between Lutherans and Catholics, advancing the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. We will recall with amazement his participation alongside the Lutheran World Federation in a joint ecumenical commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation on Oct. 31, 2016. I will never forget witnessing the procession of the pope and the general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation down the aisle in red stoles during the prayer service that day. We give thanks to God for this witness to our visible unity in Christ.

We pray that God will strengthen the people of the Roman Catholic Church with the promise of Christ's resurrection. We extend our condolences to all our Catholic siblings, including the bishops, priests, deacons, scholars and laypeople with whom we are in dialogue and partnership. We also pray that the Holy Spirit will guide the deliberations of the College of Cardinals as they begin the process of selecting a new pope.

O God, we remember with thanksgiving those who have loved and served you on earth and now rest from their labors, especially our brother, Pope Francis.

Keep us in union with all your saints, and bring us with them to the joyous feast of heaven; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

In Christ,  
The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton  
Presiding Bishop  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

**About the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:** The ELCA is one of the largest Christian denominations in the United States, with 2.8 million members in more than 8,500 worshiping communities across the 50 states and in the Caribbean region. Known as the church of "God's work. Our hands.," the ELCA emphasizes the saving grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, unity among Christians and service in the world. The ELCA's roots are in the writings of the German church reformer Martin Luther.



## POPE FRANCIS KNEW I BELONGED

by Jim McDermott

APR 21, 2025

When Pope Francis' condition first began to worsen in February, I found myself suddenly feeling the kind of vertiginous paradigm shift usually reserved for the loss of close family or friends, that sense of a curtain being torn aside and a truth being revealed. The detail that really broke me was the news that as he had gotten sicker, Francis continued to text and call the people of Holy Family Parish in Gaza.



It was so far beyond what anyone would expect of a critically ill 88-year-old man. And yet it crystallized for me what has been so personally important about Pope Francis: his dedication to welcoming those on the margins.

In his 12 years as pope, Francis appointed cardinals in 72 different countries, 24 of which had never had a cardinal before. And where larger, older, wealthier, and more politically connected dioceses like Lisbon, Venice, Milan, Florence, Paris, Los Angeles, Sydney, and Philadelphia have all had cardinals in the recent past, Francis looked instead to "far-flung" places like Tehran, Belgrade, Kalookan, Wellington, and Tonga. These appointments have given a voice and place in the church to communities that have otherwise been ignored, excluded, or forgotten. Indeed, they've created a whole new way of thinking about the place and appointment of cardinals.

A few months into his papacy, Francis also used his first official trip as pope to shine a spotlight on some of the world's most excluded and abused people: asylum seekers. In his visit to the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa, where thousands of refugees waited in camps, Francis celebrated a Mass to mourn the many others who have died trying to get there. "Let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty of our world, of our own hearts," he prayed. "Has anyone wept? Today has anyone wept in our world?" His altar for the Mass sat in a painted refugee boat. His priorities and his care could not have been clearer, and remained so throughout his papacy.

Francis was the pope who spent his first Holy Thursday washing the feet of prisoners, including women and non-Christians, and continued his visits throughout his papacy. He is the pope who turned a Vatican palazzo into a homeless shelter, the pope who shared meals with sex workers, and did so as a matter of course. That's what a pope — what a pastor — should do.

When Pope Francis was elected in 2013, I had been a Jesuit for almost 21 years, a priest for nearly 10. And for about 19 of those years, I had been learning how to accept and appreciate my sexual identity as a chaste gay man. I had been lucky in a lot of ways to come to a fuller sense of myself within the Society of Jesus. I was surrounded by others who, whether straight, gay, or bisexual, were welcoming of me. They helped me to see my identity as a gift, a part of me to celebrate, laugh about, and rejoice in.

At the same time, 10 years in the priesthood had brought with it the ongoing challenge of working in an environment where you were expected never to reveal or share about your experiences of God as a gay or bisexual man, a challenge made enormously difficult at times by the horrendous mistreatment of queer people — including gay and bisexual priests — by some Catholic clergy and prelates. At times it felt as though queer clergy were asked to stay silent so Catholic leaders could continue to scapegoat queer people without having to worry

about their own clergy calling them out.

Still, I thought I was managing it pretty well. I had learned to appreciate my identity as a blessing that God had given me, something that helped me see and relate to the world in a different way, rather than something deviant or sinful, so I saw myself as someone who could be there for LGBTQ+ Catholics. I could offer care and understanding, as many other priests, sisters, and brothers do.

Then Francis held his first on-plane press conference and said, with regard to queer people, “Who am I to judge?” It was the first time that I ever heard a church official speak — not behind closed doors but publicly — of us in a kind or accepting way. And looking back, I think it was the first moment I considered the possibility that being gay in the priesthood or in life truly was okay. It turns out, no matter what you tell yourself or your friends tell you, when you live and work in an institution that tells you to keep your identity a secret and scapegoats you anytime it faces a scandal, there’s some part of you that just isn’t quite sure whether you *are* actually good. If I’m a gift, why does everyone in charge talk about me like I should be ashamed? When Francis spoke as he did, not only as a priest or bishop in the church but as the pope, he gave those of us who are queer reason to believe that in fact no, we’re not crazy. We really are okay, we really are a blessing. With five words, he made room for us. Twelve years later the reverberations of that one simple question continue to change me.

To my astonishment, over the course of his papacy Francis continued to build on that simple statement of toleration. As with other groups who find themselves on the margins or outcast, like migrants and refugees, women, or communities in the developing world that Western media largely overlooks, Francis has reached out to LGBTQ+ people time and again, in texts, on the phone, in audiences abroad, and at the Vatican itself. While the United States government has launched its disgusting erasure of transgender people, Francis has repeatedly welcomed trans people. In fact, in 2023, he announced that trans people can be baptized and become godparents. A few weeks later he said that LGBTQ+ couples who have been married civilly can receive a blessing from clergy.

People have since parsed to death what exactly these announcements mean: Is the Catholic Church now able to bless gay marriages? Must parishes allow trans people to be baptized and become godparents? If a parish can refuse, under what circumstances? But the message that Francis has been sending is clearly one of greater inclusion for queer people in the church. And he’s offered the same message in the letters and gestures of support he’s sent to those who have advocated for LGBTQ+ Catholics and faced abuse, like Loretto Sister Jeannine Gramick or Father James Martin. Gramick and members of her team at New Ways Ministry have had audiences with Francis. Martin was invited by Francis to participate in the Synod on Synodality.

And while normally any new group of cardinals named by Francis will include at least a couple with truly horrifying positions on homosexuality, his last set of appointments included several new cardinals who are very publicly supportive of queer people.

For years now I’ve heard queer clergy speak of Francis’ passing with fear not simply of retrenchment but retaliation. I’ve feared it, too, a new pope who comes intent on stomping the life out of Francis’ contributions to the church. What could be more heartbreaking than to see the progress he’s made rolled back or condemned? And it doesn’t take more than a passing glance at the state of American politics to understand how easily such things can happen. But I find myself less worried about the future of the Church. And it’s not because I feel confident that Francis appointed all the right people, or that his cardinals will elect the right person to take his place. No, it’s the fact that right from the beginning of his papacy to the very

last days, he kept extending himself to the people on the margins like myself and telling them they belonged, inviting them in. Others may try to dismiss those actions, but for those of us on the margins to whom he spoke, there is no forgetting the love in his eyes, no denying his ever-reaching hand or the simple, life-changing truth that he shared that we really are a gift, that we really do belong.



Jim McDermott is a freelance screen and magazine writer in New York. He writes a Substack on pop culture and spirituality at Pop Culture Spirit Wow

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### ON EASTER SUNDAY 2025, TWO MEN ADDRESSED THE WORLD

From Facebook - unknown author

On Easter Sunday 2025, two men addressed the world. One had trouble breathing, the other had trouble shutting up. One clung to life long enough to offer a final blessing. The other clung to grievance like a toddler with a toy he'd already broken. And in the space between their words—between grace and bile, between resurrection and resentment—we found the chasm that defines this era.

#### THE LAST BLESSING

Pope Francis, just days before his death, emerged onto the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica with the breath of a dying man and the spirit of a giant. Unable to read his own Urbi et Orbi address, he still insisted on standing before the faithful, waving to the crowd, blessing children, offering joy. "Brothers and sisters, Happy Easter!" he said. "All of us are children of God."

His message, read aloud on his behalf, pleaded for peace in Gaza, Ukraine, Myanmar, and Congo. He called for aid instead of arms, compassion instead of cruelty. He asked the world not to close its doors to migrants and those in need. He died the next day.

This is what courage looks like. This is what faith sounds like. And this is what a final sermon should be: selfless, human, hopeful.

#### THE PETTY TYRANT'S PARADE

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic and deep inside his own echo chamber, President Donald Trump spent Easter Sunday spraying venom on Truth Social like a skunk with a grudge.

His opening post tried for warmth: "Melania and I would like to wish everyone a very Happy Easter!"

But the illusion didn't last. Soon came the bile:

"Happy Easter to all, including the Radical Left Lunatics who are fighting and scheming so hard to bring Murderers, Drug Lords, Dangerous Prisoners, the Mentally Insane, and well known MS-13 Gang Members and ... ."

And, of course, he couldn't resist revisiting the 2020 election, accusing his opponents of fraud and wishing them a sarcastic "Happy Easter."

No mention of resurrection. No nod to Christ. No humility, no mercy, no grace. Just recycled lies, tired blame, and a Hallmark card dipped in acid.

He didn't stop there. He attacked Biden. He attacked judges. He called immigrants criminals. He declared himself "the greatest friend that American capitalism has ever had."

And then, as if it were all normal, he went golfing.

### **THE RUBRIC: HUMANITY VS. HUBRIS**

It would almost be funny if it weren't so blasphemous. But the contrast doesn't stop there—it gets louder the closer you listen.

If we grade them on compassion, Francis passes while Trump tantrums.

If we grade them on truth, Francis pleads for it while Trump buries it. If we grade them on the spirit of Easter—hope, forgiveness, love—Francis embodied it with his final breath. Trump mocked it with his thumbs.

One man spent his last day calling for peace.  
The other spent his yelling into the void he created.

### **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO GRIFT**

What Francis gave away—blessing, kindness, dignity—Trump has only ever tried to sell. Every Easter post is a sales pitch in a tinfoil halo. Every "God bless" is a dog whistle to the paranoid. And every "Happy Easter" is followed by another tantrum against a judge, a migrant, or a ghost from the 2020 ballot box.

This isn't faith. It's performance art for the spiritually bankrupt.

You can't preach resurrection while fantasizing about revenge.

You can't invoke Christ while mocking the crucified.

And you sure as hell can't call yourself a servant of God while suing the prophets and golfing through plagues.

### **HISTORY TAKES ATTENDANCE**

Francis's final appearance was a moment history will remember—a weak body held upright by moral strength. Trump's Easter outburst was one more smear on an already stained record.

The Pope asked the world to imagine peace. Trump asked the world to imagine him on the throne again.

One gave his last breath. The other won't stop breathing threats.

We do not confuse noise with meaning. We do not mistake a megaphone for a message.

One gave a blessing.  
The other gave a middle finger.

And one of them had the decency to die with dignity.



**TO THE CATHOLICS WHO STILL WORSHIP TRUMP**

You don't get to hide behind "God uses imperfect people." That line is for those who repent. That's for sinners who kneel, not tyrants who tweet. You think Jesus would've stormed the Capitol in a red hat?

You think the man who flipped tables in the temple would pose for a Bible photo op after gassing a crowd?

You call yourself pro-life while cheering on mass deportations.

You take communion while swallowing conspiracy theories whole.

You ignored every single Gospel passage about humility, compassion, and the dangers of wealth—and replaced them with Trump's golden toilet.

Pope Francis begged us to remember the poor. Trump called them criminals.

And you still chose the guy with the spray tan and a grudge.

Pick a side. Because one of them followed Christ.

And the other thinks he is Christ—minus the love, the sacrifice, or the spine.

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**MORNING REFLECTION 4/22/25**

by Jim Carter

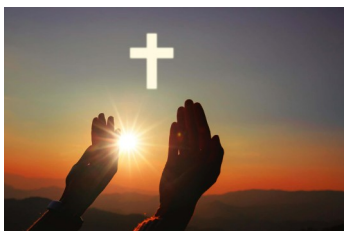
"The world tells us to seek success, power and money; God tells us to seek humility, service and love." Pope Francis (December 17, 1936 –April 21, 2025)

Pope Francis led by example. As a Jesuit priest, his heart, soul, teachings and actions were focused on supporting those less fortunate.

Isn't it our responsibility to support those that have, for whatever reason, less than others? Success, power, and money are the results of an ego driven, scarcity dominated lifestyle.

When we are humble enough to recognize that our life is a blessing in itself, that whatever personal attributes we have are a gift from an ethereal power, and that after this one short life we have been blessed with, the material assets we have accumulated are irrelevant; we recognize that the greatest impact we can have in this lifetime is in servicing and loving all of those around us.

Rest in peace Good Shepherd, may your presence in our world not be quickly forgotten.





Trump's America is doing the opposite.

by OLIVIA OF TROYE  
April 27

The U.S. human rights report has served as a global benchmark for decades, naming abusers, defending the oppressed, and documenting uncomfortable truths. Now, it's being rewritten. Not to reflect reality but to protect a narrative. Key parts of the report, once dedicated to documenting systemic abuses, are

being quietly erased before its public release. This isn't just bureaucratic editing; it's a calculated effort to reshape the moral compass of U.S. foreign policy. And it marks a dangerous turning point: we're no longer documenting abuses. We're burying them. This isn't some oversight. It's being done intentionally, and it reflects where we are right now under Trump's second term.

As the lead for the United Nations and Africa policy in Vice President Pence's office during Trump's first term, I witnessed firsthand how diplomatic priorities shift when no one's looking. What we're seeing now isn't theoretical—it's the logical endpoint of patterns I observed inside the first Trump White House. What's most alarming is that the same power brokers from the first term are now entrenched, operating with fewer constraints and far more experience in how to dismantle institutional guardrails. While Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Kristi Noem are the public faces of this administration's foreign policy and national security, the decisions still flow from the same inner circle I watched behind closed doors. The faces may have changed, but the hands pulling the levers remain the same.

We used to be the country that called out these abuses when they happened elsewhere. We used to stand up for people imprisoned for their political beliefs or for journalists silenced by their governments—people like Alexei Navalny in Russia, Mohamed Soltan in Egypt, or the Cuban journalists arrested during the 2003 "Black Spring." The U.S. once viewed it as our responsibility to defend political dissidents against dictators. Now? We're editing those very abuses out of our annual report. Why? Because we're now doing them too.

### The Evidence: What's Being Erased

Let's walk through some facts.

Under Secretary Marco Rubio's leadership, the State Department has issued explicit instructions to strip out crucial details from its annual human rights reports, including references to prison conditions, political corruption, suppression of protests, violence against LGBTQ+ people, and the weakening of democratic checks and balances abroad. Press freedom? Political expression? Sanitized. These aren't just omissions; they're strategic erasures. The goal? To align the reports with the administration's political agenda and recent executive orders.

When the U.S. government scrubs references to protest suppression from its own reports, we have to ask: *is this just about what we say to the world, or is this about what comes next here at home?* If we stop naming suppression abroad, what happens when Americans are the ones in the streets? This isn't just bureaucratic. It's a warning.

This quiet but profound redefinition of human rights, emphasizing "economic freedom" and religious

liberty while ignoring state violence, censorship, and systemic discrimination, isn't just a shift in priorities. It's a message to the world: we no longer consider defending human dignity universal. We see it as optional.

And some omissions aren't just disturbing—they're damning.

The Trump administration recently negotiated the transfer of immigrants from the U.S. into El Salvador's notorious prison system despite well-documented histories of abuse and extrajudicial killings inside those facilities. Yet, the entire section on prison conditions has been erased in a draft of the forthcoming State Department report on El Salvador. The only remnants? A buried reference to prison deaths under "extrajudicial killings" and a vague mention of torture by guards. Let that sink in: we're outsourcing immigration enforcement to regimes known for torture, and deleting the evidence.

The report for Hungary, circulated internally as the model template for all country reports, had the entire “Corruption in Government” section struck out. Let's not forget: Trump has openly praised Hungary's authoritarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as “a great man.” This is what happens when the U.S. government stops reporting on human rights and starts protecting the abusers we now call allies.

At the same time, the administration is still issuing statements condemning other countries. Just this week, the U.S. imposed visa restrictions on over 250 Nicaraguan officials for human rights violations. Having seen Stephen Miller in action firsthand, I'm confident these restrictions are about more than just the violations. And yet, we've pulled out of the United Nations Human Rights Council, again.

Let's not pretend this is just about how we present ourselves to the rest of the world. While the State Department is hard at work scrubbing evidence of human rights abuses from reports aimed at foreign regimes, DHS has quietly dismantled the very office responsible for protecting the civil rights and civil liberties of the American people. That office once served as a check within DHS, monitoring racial profiling, religious discrimination, and abusive immigration enforcement. Its elimination isn't an isolated bureaucratic decision. It's part of the same authoritarian strategy: erase the documentation, dismantle the protections, and leave the public in the dark. Just like the edits to the human rights report and the restructuring of the State Department, this is part of the same strategic arc: dismantle accountability, concentrate loyalty, and erase protections, both at home and abroad.

Let's be real: the United States can't claim the moral high ground on human rights when we're actively undermining them at home.

### **The Strategy: Concentration of Power**

These report edits aren't happening in a vacuum. They're just one piece of a much broader plan that's now coming into full view. While the public debates what's being removed from a report, behind the scenes, the Trump administration is preparing something even more sweeping: an executive order that would gut the very institutions responsible for human rights, diplomacy, and democratic engagement. The goal isn't just to rewrite a report, it's to rewrite the entire role the United States plays in the world. And that starts with hollowing out the State Department itself.

A leaked draft executive order, reported by *The New York Times*, outlines a sweeping plan to dismantle the State Department itself. Among the proposed changes:

**Eliminating the Bureau of African Affairs** and replacing it with a "special envoy" focused primarily on "strategic extraction of resources" and counterterrorism—not diplomacy or development.

**Shutting down embassies and consulates across sub-Saharan Africa** by October 1.

**Dissolving the bureaus for democracy, human rights, refugees, and migration.**

**Terminating the State Department's climate envoy** and cutting off its work on global climate diplomacy.

**Ending Fulbright scholarships** unless tied to national security fields.

**Killing off recruitment pipelines** like the Rangel and Pickering Fellowships, which gave underrepresented students, including those from historically black colleges and universities, historically a pathway into diplomatic careers.

The plan would eliminate the foreign service exam, a nonpartisan, merit-based entry point for diplomats, and instead base hiring on whether applicants' views "align with the president's foreign policy vision." **Ask yourself: what does it mean when defending Ukraine's sovereignty could get you sidelined—while admiring Putin's tactics gets you promoted?** That's not diplomacy. That's complicity. This isn't restructuring. It's a purge.

A department once staffed with experts dedicated to global stability and democratic values is being replaced by political loyalists. The Foreign Service, USAID, and public diplomacy programs are being gutted. A new "Undersecretary for Transnational Threat Elimination" will take their place, focused not on peacebuilding but on control. The message couldn't be clearer: diplomacy is dead. Human rights are irrelevant. Loyalty is everything.

### Why This Matters

Because human rights violations don't happen in a vacuum. They start with a slow erosion of norms. With the belief that "it can't happen here." But it *is* happening here. This isn't just about institutions. It's about people. It's about whether we still believe in justice, not just for ourselves, but for those without power, without a microphone, without protection.

However, even as the Trump Regime tries to erase decades of work, they haven't succeeded...yet.

There are still career diplomats fighting from within. Whistleblowers risking their futures across government agencies. Human rights lawyers holding the line. Activists refusing to be silenced. And millions of Americans, maybe you reading this, who still believe in what this country *should* stand for. I've worked in the rooms where policies are made. I've seen what quiet courage looks like. I've seen people speak truth to power even when the cost is high. That still exists. That still matters. And it's worth protecting.

### A Legacy to Remember: Moral Leadership in Dark Times

As we reckon with what's being torn down in our own country, the world also mourns the passing of Pope Francis, who dedicated his life to the very values we're watching erode. His example stands in stark contrast to the leadership we're witnessing today.



## POPE FRANCIS SAID, "HEAL THE WOUNDS."

He wasn't perfect, but his legacy is one of profound moral clarity. He stood with the poor, the refugees, and the outcasts. He spoke boldly against "the globalization of indifference." He reminded us that caring for people, especially the most vulnerable, is not a political act. It is a moral imperative.

Pope Francis came from the Jesuit order, a Catholic tradition known for its intellectual rigor, global outreach, and deep commitment to social justice. Jesuits have long championed the rights of the poor, advocated for peace, and taken bold stands on environmental stewardship and human dignity. As someone raised in a conservative Catholic household, and who has evolved in my views over time, I found great comfort and inspiration in his voice. He wasn't afraid to speak uncomfortable truths, to call out greed, exclusion, and indifference. I will miss him tremendously.

At a time when leaders build walls, Pope Francis built bridges. When powerful men opted for silence, he demanded justice. And when others clung to power, he chose humility.

### The Path Forward

**To the International Community:** Don't give us a pass.

Don't assume the United States will hold the line. Question us. Pressure us. Support the American voices resisting from within. We need you now more than ever to call out the backsliding, and to keep fighting for global human rights standards, with or without U.S. leadership.

### For Those of Us at Home:

These changes, from edited reports to dismantled departments, aren't isolated incidents. They form a coherent strategy to concentrate power, eliminate accountability, and redefine America's role in the world. What begins with erasing uncomfortable truths from reports ends with erasing rights themselves.

For those of us in the U.S., yes, it's getting darker by the day. But this isn't the end. Our values don't disappear just because they've been erased from a report. They live in us, in how we show up, in what we defend, in who we choose to be.

Pope Francis once said that the first thing we must do is stop the bleeding. "Heal the wounds," he told the church. His message was clear: stop leading with doctrine or rules. Start with mercy.

That's where we begin, too—by refusing to let the truth disappear.

-Olivia

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## FROM DALE'S BACKYARD



In just one hundred days we've seen the Trump Administration freeze funds Congress already approved, dismantle entire government agencies, and use emergency powers to push harmful policies without due process or oversight.

We've seen our community members taken from our communities and sent to foreign prisons without any ability to protest their treatment or see a judge. Children as young as two years old who are American citizens have been sent out of the country. This has all happened with administration officials insisting "due process" is a luxury that cannot be afforded to everyone running counter to our bedrock principles.

These and other actions go far beyond everyday government measures. They tear away at democratic norms and put our civil society at risk. It is time to be clear eyed in recognizing the constitutional crisis before us. It is time we demand Moral Courage.

**We call on Congress to have the Moral Courage to:**

👉 Reinstatement and **fully fund agencies** that serve the common good such as USAID and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau as a moral and constitutional imperative.

🚫 **Block the Trump administration's potential invocation of the Insurrection Act** to further militarize the border and misuse the military to support mass deportations.

✈️ **Stop abusing** the Alien Enemies Act to deport immigrants and green card holders without due process and suggesting the same for citizens and permanent residents

🔍 Support bipartisan legislation that **reins in tariff policies** hurting the global and U.S. economy

🍲 Defend **SNAP, Head Start, Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security** and other programs that serve as a lifeline to millions of children and families, with daily and emergency food and medical assistance.

💧 **Block any attempts by the Trump administration to revoke the tax-exempt status of Harvard University** and other tax-exempt organizations based on their DEI policies or other political disagreements with the administration.

🗳️ Overall, **demand an end to the abuse of executive power** that undermines our freedoms.

This isn't about party or personality—it's about principle and the common good. Our diverse faith traditions teach us to care for one another, stand up for justice, and protect the most vulnerable. And right now, that means standing up to prevent unchecked executive power.

As Dr. King once said, "There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor

politic, nor popular, but...because conscience tells him it is right.”

We urge Congress to act now, with moral courage, to end this abuse of power. Oversight isn't optional, it's essential to our democracy.

In faith,

**Adam Russell Taylor**  
**President**  
**Sojourners**



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## THEY CAME FOR THE BOOKS FIRST

## SOJOURNERS

Historical patterns of intolerance from Germany to Israel to the U.S.

by Greta Lapp Klassen

IN MAY 1933, Nazi-influenced student groups publicly burned more than 25,000 books by Jewish authors and those deemed liberal or leftist in 34 university towns across Germany. Newspapers supported it as “action against the un-German spirit,” and Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister of propaganda, said to a crowd of 40,000 that “the era of extreme Jewish intellectualism is now at an end. ... The future German man will not just be a man of books, but a man of character.”



This antisemitic act of censorship and intolerance is memorialized at the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem, where a display about book burnings sets the tone for the rest of the museum. Before you enter the display on the rise of Nazism, you must first consider the gravity of book burnings. A prophetic quote from 19th century German poet Heinrich Heine concludes the display: “Where books are burned, human beings are destined to be burned too.”

Across the city, in East Jerusalem, is the Palestinian-run Educational Bookshop. It consists of an English store, which doubles as a coffee shop, workspace, and community hub, and an Arabic store across the road. This family-owned business, which opened in 1984, sells all sorts of titles related to Palestine. There are Palestinian books on cooking, art, and history; there are novels, textbooks, and children’s books. The Educational Bookshop carries titles that are hard to find within Israel, and on a Sunday afternoon in February, this popular bookstore was raided by undercover Israeli police for the first time.

“They came into the shop with a search warrant,” Ahmad Muna, assistant manager of the shop, told me. “They demanded a search that happened over the course of two hours. The officers were aggressive, brutal, were not polite.” According to Muna, the officers didn’t speak Arabic or English; at first they used Google Translate to figure out book titles.

“At some point they had enough of Google Translate,” Muna said, “It was getting too tedious.

So, they started to judge the books by their covers, by the design, by the picture on the cover, any book that had the flag of Palestine, any book that had a picture of a prisoner, of a boy being arrested, a picture of the wall, a picture of a Palestinian flag, it was confiscated.”

Police took away about 300 books in trash bags. Muna and his uncle were arrested and detained for two nights. After release, both were put under house arrest for five days and banned from entering their shop for more than two weeks.

A month after the initial raid, the bookstore was raided again. This time the police did not have a search warrant. They detained Muna’s father, confiscated the keys to the store, and took 50 more books, although most were later returned. The store reopened shortly after the second raid and has received an outpouring of support from Israelis as well as diplomats from eight countries who attended the hearing of Ahmad and his uncle, Mahmoud, in February.

These raids point toward increased intolerance for Palestinian perspectives within Israel, where 21% of the population is Palestinian Israeli (a larger percentage of the population than that of any minority group in the United States). And as such intolerance grows in Israel, it also grows in the U.S., Israel’s biggest political and economic ally.

On March 8 in New York City, Mahmoud Khalil, a legal permanent resident of the U.S. who is married to an American citizen, was detained in his apartment building lobby by immigration agents who arrived in unmarked cars. Khalil, a graduate student at Columbia University until December, was a lead organizer and negotiator for the pro-Palestine campus demonstrations last year. He was transferred to an ICE detention center in Louisiana to await deportation, despite having no criminal record. A judge has stayed the deportation and ordered Khalil returned to New Jersey for a hearing. According to an Associated Press report, Khalil’s attorney spoke to one of the ICE agents during the arrest, who said “they were acting on State Department orders to revoke Khalil’s student visa.” Once the ICE agents were informed that Khalil had a green card and not a student visa, they said that they were revoking the green card instead.

The raids on the Educational Bookshop in Jerusalem and Khalil’s detainment are both attacks on free speech, a foundation of healthy democracy. The free exchange of ideas is fundamental to a culturally pluralistic society, and banning books and arresting protesters are attempts to limit exposure to ideas unpopular with a current administration, not the so-called “anti-terrorism” measures that governments claim.

I asked Ahmad Muna why people of faith should particularly care about the raids on the Educational Bookshop. He said, “Raiding bookshops, getting into what people read, attacking places where knowledge is spread, where knowledge is written, where people come so they can get introduced to new ideas, to new struggles, to new challenges, a place where people can or should feel safe — everybody should stand to condemn such actions, regardless of what religion they follow.”

In the U.S., defending free speech is part of defending religious freedom too. When one part of the First Amendment is attacked, the others are endangered. Suzanne Nossel, former CEO of PEN America, an organization defending free expression, explains it this way: “As set out in the First Amendment, free speech is a series of interlocking rights that collectively ensure that citizens have the ability to perpetuate and perfect their system of governance.” These protections — of freedom of belief, speech, the press, and assembly, and the right to petition the government for the redress of grievances — are both private and public. “Those freedoms are the essence of democratic citizenship,” writes Nossel.



A bookstore raid in Jerusalem and a green-card holder detained in New York may feel far away for some people — but people of faith, and people of privilege, must stand against these attacks. In his famous poem, German Protestant pastor Martin Niemöller (who initially supported Hitler, then spent his life repenting that support) reminds us why “First they came for the Communists / and I did not speak out / Because I was not a Communist ... Then they came for me / And there was no one left / to speak out for me.” As Christians, we are called to speak up for the silenced until they can speak for themselves, to speak up for the bookseller and the activist.

This is how God’s justice is loosed in the world. How are you speaking up?

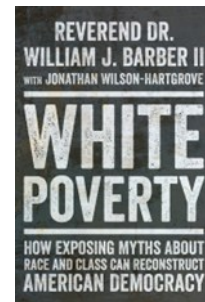
Greta Lapp Klassen is a former editorial assistant at *Sojourners*.

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### WHITE POVERTY

A book by Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

One of the most pernicious and persistent myths in the United States is the association of Black skin with poverty. Though there are forty million more poor white people than Black people, most Americans, both Republicans and Democrats, continue to think of poverty--along with issues like welfare, unemployment, and food stamps--as solely a Black problem. Why is this so? What are the historical causes? And what are the political consequences that result?

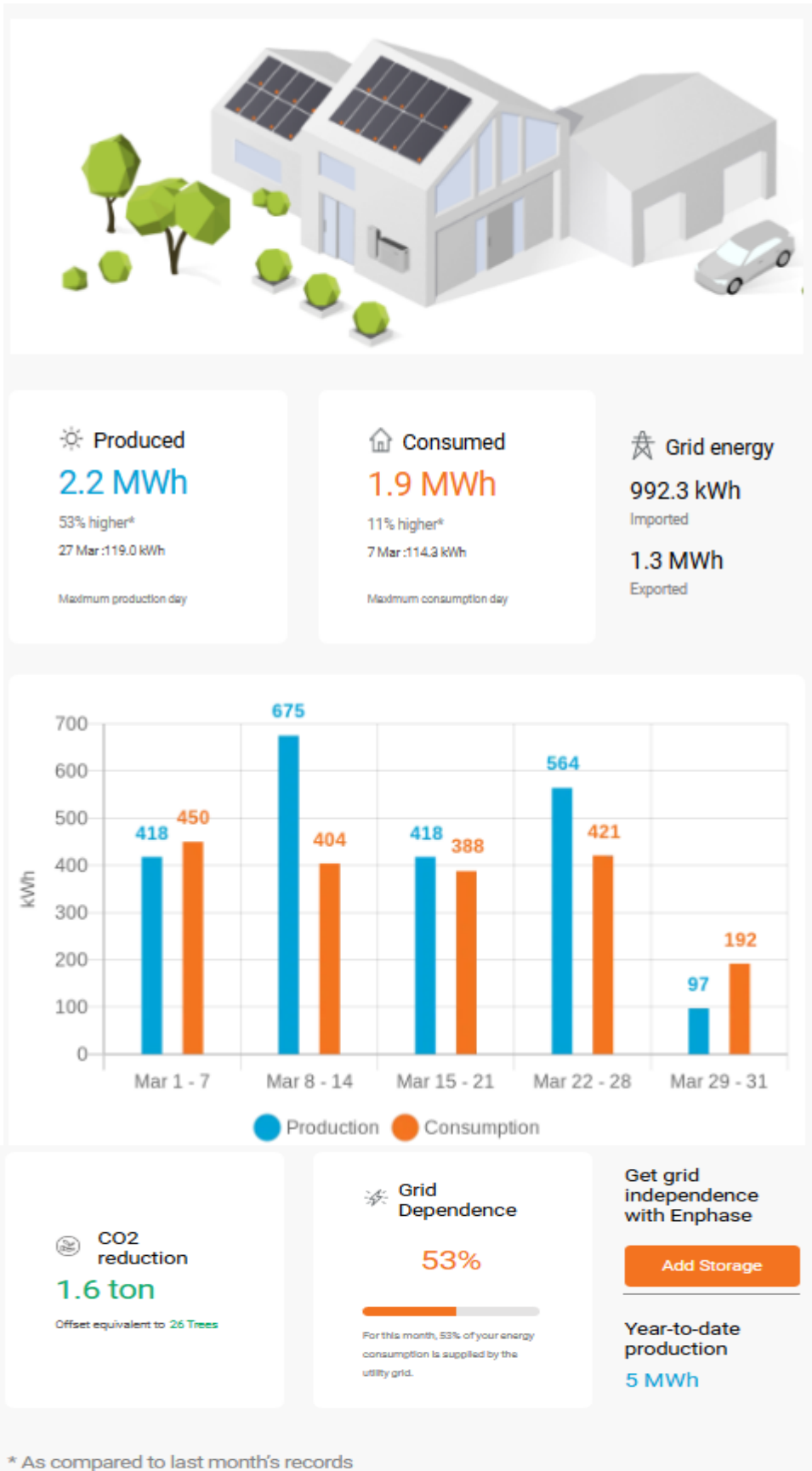


These are among the questions that the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II, a leading advocate for the rights of the poor and the "closest person we have to Dr. King" (Cornel West), addresses in *White Poverty*, a groundbreaking work that exposes a legacy of historical myths that continue to define both white and Black people, creating in the process what might seem like an insuperable divide. Analyzing what has changed since the 1930s, when the face of American poverty was white, Barber, along with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, addresses white poverty as a hugely neglected subject that just might provide the key to mitigating racism and bringing together tens of millions of working class and impoverished Americans.

Thus challenging the very definition of who is poor in America, Barber writes about the lies that prevent us from seeing the pain of poor white families who have been offered little more than their "whiteness" and angry social media posts to sustain them in an economy where the costs of housing, healthcare, and education have skyrocketed while wages have stagnated for all but the very rich. Asserting in Biblically inspired language that there should never be shame in being poor, *White Poverty* lifts the hope for a new "moral fusion movement" that seeks to unite people "who have been pitted against one another by politicians (and billionaires) who depend on the poorest of us not being here."

Ultimately, *White Poverty*, a ringing work that braids poignant autobiographical recollections with astute historical analysis, contends that tens of millions of America's poorest earners, the majority of whom don't vote, have much in common, thus providing us with one of the most empathetic and visionary approaches to American poverty in decades.

SOLAR REPORT - MARCH 2025



## **MAY 2025 BIRTHDAYS!**



*May you all be blessed as you celebrate your special days!*

Did we miss your birthday or anniversary? Contact the office at 860-527-7792 or email [office.gracelutheranhartford@gmail.com](mailto:office.gracelutheranhartford@gmail.com) to update our records.

### **Grace Lutheran Church – Readers for May 2025**

***Note: If you are unable to read on your assigned Sunday, please switch with someone else.***

<b>Date</b>	<b>Reading #</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Reader</b>
5/4	1 <sup>st</sup>	Acts 9: 1-6	Dale Eberhardt
	Psalm	Psalm 30	Unison
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Revelation 5: 11-14	Marty Holmeen
5/11	1st	Acts 9: 36-43	Nina Kretschmer
	Psalm	Psalm 23	Unison
	2nd	Revelation 7: 9-17	Rebecca Lewis
5/18	1st	Acts 11: 1-18	Karla Grafton
	Psalm	Psalm Hymn – How Great Thou Art	All
	2nd	Revelation 21: 1-6	David Grafton
5/25	1st	TBD	TBD
	Psalm	TBD	TBD
	2nd	TBD	TBD



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Lou Oliver, Vice President

Dale Eberhardt, Treasurer

Judy Butterworth-Kremer, Secretary

Janice Potter, Financial Assistant

Dale Eberhardt, Organist

Emma Coleman-Carr, Altar Guild

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