

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

SNAP/ Food Stamp Challenge

Daily Devotions



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Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger



Day 1



Written by Dave Miner and Rev. Phillip Dennis. Dave is a member of Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis, the Board Chair Emeritus of Bread for the World and President of the Indianapolis Hunger Network.

Morning

*“Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God, . . .
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.” —Psalm 146:5, 7*

Today as you participate in the *SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge*, be strengthened by the knowledge that you are joining in work that matters deeply to God. From the first days of creation to the promised table in the kingdom of heaven, God always shows concern for feeding people, particularly the hungry. More than 2,000 verses in our Bible express God’s concern for the poor and hungry. God has called patriarchs and matriarchs, sons and daughters, prophets and priests, generals and kings, and you to this task.

Do not doubt that your fast this week is part of God’s work. While our hunger may not directly put food into the mouths of the hungry, it brings us into community with them as we temporarily share their experience of suffering. As Christ experienced injustice even to death, so we, even briefly, visit the injustice of food insecurity experienced by one in five Americans, and the injustice of 18,000 children who will die today around this ‘modern’ world from hunger and related causes. This is to say that offering your body voluntarily for the sake of those without enough to eat is a Christ-like act. Your participation today and this whole week is a good and faithful act, which we pray will be transformative for you and for the world.

***Prayer:** Creator God, we ask that you tend our spirits today, just as angels tended Jesus, who was hungry and tempted in the wilderness, so that we may be strengthened in solidarity with and in compassion for those who hunger every day. Amen.*

Noon

*“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”
—Luke 11:11–13*

We wouldn’t think of offering something harmful in response to a request of food, would we? However, as we consider our options for the midday meal, we might also think about the millions of poor children in the U.S. Many of them are gathered at this time of day in public school cafeterias, where they will be served a free meal. The free meals are the good part of the story; since many of these children will have little else to eat until they arrive at school again tomorrow. The down side is that the food served in many school cafeterias does not constitute a full or balanced diet, with high levels of sugar, salt, and fat. Cafeteria directors do the best they can with the budgets they are given, but Congress has not sufficiently funded our school meal programs.

Often students will supplement their “diet” with cheap, readily available sugary drinks and junk food. These children often find themselves sleepy, lethargic and even hungry a short time later. They are hardly prepared for academic success. The systems and institutions involved function for the benefit and convenience of adults. Corporations, parents, and administrators may benefit from the situation as it is, but the most vulnerable children do not benefit, do not have choice, do not have power, do not even have a voice. Perhaps their only hope is to find a benevolent advocate, working to change this unjust system. Bread, not a snake. An egg, not a scorpion.

Prayer: You, Lord, are a God of hope and deliverance.

You have fed us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

But the bread and the cup, life and salvation, are not offered justly to all.

On our watch we have seen innocent and powerless people deprived of Your gifts.

Yet we have ignored or fallen silent, claimed powerlessness or given up hope.

*Forgive us and give us strong words and bold actions to change the unjust systems
that keep poor people weak and hungry.*

Help us, Lord, and shape our peace around the care You ordain for all who suffer.

Amen.

Evening

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” —John 6:35

At the end of this day you may be hungry, tired, grumpy, frustrated, or even a little desperate. These feelings are common to persons who are not sure where their next meal is coming from. Did today’s SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge deprive you of eating the things you wanted or as much as you wanted? Was it hard to concentrate on your work or to make the best decisions? Was it difficult to be as patient and gracious as you might have been in the past?

It is good news that soon your SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge will be over. The best news is that hungry, malnourished and food-insecure people around the world can **all** be fed. It’s **doable**. In Indianapolis the Indy Hunger Network has mapped the systems. We can clearly see how hunger can be ended in the U.S. in just a few years, via strong public and private programs working together. Internationally hunger deaths have been cut in half over the last 30 years and elimination of hunger globally is a realistic goal for the next 30. It is within reach. For Christians this is *gospel* good news, a gospel fulfillment, an exhibition of the kingdom of God which *is at hand*. It starts with the compassion and empathy we have shared today, and continues by the grace of God as we transform individuals, families, communities and the systems that operate in our society. Praise be to God. Let it be so.

Prayer: God is great. God is good.

Let us thank God for our food.

*By God’s hands we **all** are fed.*

*Thank you Lord for **daily bread**. Amen.*

Day 2



Written by the Rev. Irene Pak is currently serving as the Associate Pastor at the Stone Church of Willow Glen in San Jose, California.

Morning

²The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue. ³The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel has said to me: One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, ⁴is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land. ⁵Is not my house like this with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire? —2 Samuel 23:2–5

I grew up in a Christian home where it was important to pray before every meal. In fact, my parents taught me and my siblings a prayer that we recited in song when we were very little:

In Korean:

날마다 우리에게 양식을 주시는
은혜로우신 하나님 참 감사합니다.
아~멘

Translation in English:

For the meal that you provide for us daily
We joyfully thank our Gracious God.
Amen

Needless to say, because this is the prayer we recited over and over again, I never did learn the Johnny Appleseed prayer that all of my other friends learned as children. You know, people might be critical of those things that are rote or recited over and over again as losing meaning, but there is something about the old and familiar that I love. There is something about knowing something so deep in our being that we will never forget it that reminds me of God's abiding presence with us—even when we take it for granted. And yes, I still sing that Korean prayer before meals sometimes. And I do believe it is God's word upon my tongue.

Prayer: Oh, the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord. For giving me the things I need the sun, and the rain, and the apple seed. The Lord is good to me. Amen.

Noon

²⁹God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

—Genesis 1:29–31

This past summer, I took our youth group on a mission service trip to Pescadero, California, a rural town and a farming community. On one of the days, we had the opportunity to serve on a farm called Potrero Nuevo. It's an organic farm and the owners of the farm donate 80 percent of their crops to organizations and people who are in need of fresh fruit and vegetables and sell 20 percent. That day, we harvested fruits and vegetables and even planted rows of new veggies for several hours. By the time our service for the day ended, we had harvest 650 pounds of food that would all go those in need of fresh produce, and needless to say, we were all exhausted.

Afterward, I heard conversations among the youth with a new sense of appreciation for where their food comes from and for the laborers who provide it. Apparently, the food at the grocery store doesn't just magically appear. Those who picked strawberries that day felt the labor and saw the dirt in their nails that goes into picking the fruit that comes nicely packaged at the store. At lunch, they all mentioned eating with a broader and deeper appreciation. Praise be to God.

***Prayer:** We thank you God for this food. We thank you for the laborers and farmers who help bring it from the ground to the table. Truly, it is very good. Amen.*

Evening

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

—1 Corinthians 13: 1–3

Being raised in a Korean household, the one thing I grew up knowing how to do very well was eat. Coming from a culture where food and meals are central to hospitality, I also grew up understanding that meals were always meant to be shared with one another. It was never “my” rice. It was always “our” rice. I know I’m not the only one to boast this, but my umma (mom) was and still is to this day the best cook I know. And I believe to my core after years of watching her prepare meals for huge groups of people and for our family, the reason it tastes so darn good is because it’s prepared with love. Every chop of an onion and the timing of all that she touches is done with intention and care and a “feel” that it’s ready. There are no recipes. I have asked her for recipes and she responds that she can’t measure how much of a certain thing goes in certain dishes. “You just have to taste it,” she says. I think it’s really just because you can’t measure or script meals made with love.

***Prayer:** God of love, today, may all that we do and may all that we have done, draw from the well of love you provide for us. Through Christ’s love and heart, Amen.*

Day 3



Written by Laura Stricklen, Presbyterian and Program Assistant with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

Morning

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” —Isaiah 58:6-7

Last year as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer with the Presbyterian Hunger Program, I was one of over 46 million US residents receiving SNAP benefits. While my overall experience on food stamps was tied to my service year and in some ways not reflective of the norm, I was offered a glimpse into the lived realities of food insecurity in America.

I now know what it feels like to uncomfortably stand in line with impatient shoppers while the cashier runs an EBT card twice because he first ran it as a debit card. I know what it feels like to wait for hours in the benefits office, herded from one room to the next to see yet another overworked and underpaid social worker. I know what it feels like to doubt whether to spend a few extra dollars on quality local, organic produce when others may see such an investment as a frivolous waste of the money I had been graciously given. I had an embodied experience of what it means to be part of “the hungry” in America. What became apparent is the urgent and continual need for us to collectively loose the bonds of injustice and to share the bread that must not be denied to anyone.

As you reflect on your journey through the SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge, what new insights have become apparent to you? What perspectives do you now bring to your thinking on hunger in America? What former ways of thinking will you leave behind as a result of this experience?

Noon

“If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.” —Isaiah 58:9-10

While making ends meet could sometimes be difficult in a service program with a requirement to live at the poverty level for a year, I actually ate better in that one year than I have in all of my life. I joined a community garden, bought my summer produce at a reduced rate through a community buying club, attended countless community meetings with incredible potlucks, shared the responsibility of making meals with close friends, and enjoyed the occasional feast after a hard day’s work on a local farm.

Granted, I had the privilege of intentionally building relationships with pillars of Louisville’s local food system, but I attribute most of my eating well in my service year with the cultivation of community—communities committed to meeting needs, showing love, and seeing all members as creative, resourceful, and whole. When we as a united people join in the mending of the world and authentically care for one another—casting out blame and our need to set ourselves apart—the insurmountable suddenly becomes possible; our light rises in the darkness and our gloom is like the noonday.

In what ways has this challenge changed your understanding of the role of community in addressing hunger? How are you currently involved in your community, and how will you now participate in community life?

Evening

“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to live in.” —Isaiah 58:12

Our systems, our societies, our communities are undeniably broken. Globally 925 million people currently suffer from food insecurity and hunger. 16,000 of our children die every day from hunger related causes. One in six Americans face hunger daily. We live and breathe in a world in dire need of repairing and restoration.

And yet there is hope. The same God who parted the seas and led the Israelites out of oppression, the Christ who continually spoke truth and love to power, the Spirit that renews us invites us to be repairers of this egregious breach. In the face of staggering statistics about hunger, we are planting gardens, pooling our money and harnessing our collective buying power to provide fresh fruits and vegetables for ourselves and our neighbors, and actively shaping legislature, policy, and corporate practices that impact the system that feeds us. Our hope lies in the resurrection of past ways of being first demonstrated to us through Christ. We are not only assured of the new life made available for the people around us, the communities we live in, and the systems we perpetuate, but we have the great privilege of participating in the repairing and redeeming of this world.

In what ways will you be a restorer of the streets to live in with regard to hunger? What is this experience compelling you to now do or be?

Day 4



Written by staff at MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national nonprofit working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the United States and Israel.

Morning

THE FOUR PEOPLE (adapted from the 2013 MAZON/JCPA Hunger Seder Hagaddah)

At Passover, Jews remember the Four Children, each of whom has a different reaction to hearing the Passover story. The adaptation below identifies four people with different perspectives on and experiences with hunger.

Person 1 asks, “Teach me about hunger. What can I do to help?”

To this person, reply that 50 million American men, women and children struggle to put enough food on the table each day. Ours is not a problem of having enough food, but of creating better ways for people to access and afford food that is healthy, nutritious, and sustaining. Provide her with information about programs that help people access healthy food—such as SNAP, WIC, school breakfasts and lunches, and senior feeding programs. Teach her how to visit her public officials, write letters to the editor, organize petitions, and join with others to impact real social change.

Person 2 asks, “But I’m not hungry. What does this have to do with me?”

To this person, reply that although he does not experience the oppression of hunger daily, it is only when none are hungry that we will truly live in a safe, stable, and just community.

Person 3 says, “My family is hungry but we’ve never needed help to buy food before. This is embarrassing.”

To this person, reply that there is no shame in seeking assistance and, in truth, it is those among us who refuse to lend a helping hand who should be ashamed. When she asks for and receives help, she is making the world more whole by feeding her children.

Person 4 asks, “I experience hunger now. Why is learning about hunger important to me when what I really need is food?”

To this person reply that this problem will only be solved when we all come together to say, “No more!” When Moses inspired the slaves in Egypt, they joined forces with others who were suffering and eventually emerged victorious. Today we must all work as one to repair the world.

Noon

PARABLE OF THE BABIES IN THE RIVER

One day, a group of friends gathered for a picnic at a river near their village. As they shared food and conversation, one of them noticed a baby in the river, struggling and crying as she floated downstream. Quickly, they rushed to save her from drowning. But no sooner had they done so, two more babies came floating down the river. And even more after that!

The friends quickly decided they needed to coordinate more of the villagers to assist in their rescue activities to ensure that none of the babies perished. They organized volunteers to take turns watching over the water and rescuing the babies as they floated down the river. Volunteers recruited their friends to help, and before long the entire village was helping to rescue the babies from the river.

In the middle of the ongoing rescue operations, one villager jumped out of the river and began running upstream. “Where are you going?” shouted the other rescuers. “We need you here to help us save these babies!”

As she ran she replied, “I’m going upstream to stop whoever is throwing them in!”

Reflection: *Through service to others, we strengthen our communities. But direct service can only alleviate some of the pain of hunger. What must we do to create the long-term, enduring changes required to end the struggle to put nutritious food on the table? Each and every action we take makes a difference. When we make our voices heard in the public square, call attention to the issue in the media, or demonstrate our priorities at the ballot box, we become more engaged in the ongoing struggle to end hunger in our communities.*

Evening: *Prayer written for MAZON by Rabbi Scott Perlo*

One day, God, may it be Your will
that we live in a world perfected,
in which food comes to the hungry as from heaven
and water will flow to the thirsty as a stream.

But in the meantime,
while the world is filled with hunger,
empower us to stand on Your behalf
and fulfill the words of your prophet:
“to all who are thirsty bring water,”
and “greet those who wander with food.”

Bless us that we should sustain the hungry.

Day 5



Written by the Rev. Michael Livingston, a PC(USA) pastor and the Public Policy Director and Washington Office Director for Interfaith Worker Justice. He is also the former President of the National Council of Churches.

Morning

“Give us this day our daily bread.” —Matthew 6:11

In 2009 Congress passed a bill to give school lunches to kids and funded it by taking food stamps away from their parents. We gave them lunch and denied them dinner. Is this who we have become? Can we, who celebrate the one who inspired a miracle of sharing that fed thousands, tolerate this congressional sin? We wash our hands before eating but not of complicity in our national shame. “Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.” Underlying this decades old wisdom is the assumption that healthy meals will follow as the sun rises and sets each successive day. That assumption is no longer valid for nearly 50 million people in our nation. As we begin this day in our SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge let us remember those in our communities for whom daily bread is not a given but a challenge.

***Prayer:** God of the creation: We pray for daily bread...” with the full expectation that the day begins with a healthy choice from a pantry full of good things to eat. Remind us of the millions for whom breakfast may very well be the only meal of the day. Accept our thanks for those who take this SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge in solidarity with the most vulnerable and let us resolve to end hunger in this decade. Amen.*

Noon

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” —Matthew 20: 16

Jesus told a parable in which laborers that started at the end of the workday were paid the same as those who began in the morning. He envisioned a compassion that demonstrates the poverty of our economic system. Our laws favor corporations over unions, employers over workers, and profit over people. The federal minimum wage today pays a worker less than that same worker would have earned in 1968. We work longer hours for less pay without even the meager protections that our laws afford. Workers wages are stolen with impunity. Income inequality today is greater than at anytime in our history. In these days of hardball capitalism it is nearly impossible to comprehend a generous God who gives with extravagance out of a boundless compassion for all. Come early, come midday, come late at night; the God of love is waiting.

***Prayer:** God of love: We thank you for your incomprehensible generosity. And though we may not understand it we pray for the courage to follow where Jesus leads us. In your wisdom first and last are not fixed positions on a humanity laboring under a strict social order. They are occasions for miracles of grace showered upon a grateful humanity. Thank you for your amazing grace and for the teller of parables whose truths turn our lives inside out and fill our days with wonder, in Christ we pray, Amen.*

Evening

“...it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.” —Ecclesiastes 3:13

Contract workers in federal buildings in Washington D.C. clean the buildings and serve hamburgers and french fries, salads and shakes to hungry tourists in food courts enjoying the rich historical heritage of our nation. Many of these nameless servants can't afford health care and decent housing. They can't take a paid sick day to care for themselves or their children for fear of losing their jobs. Our tax dollars subsidize the corporations who employ them but give them “poverty pay.” The food stamps they need and the Medicaid upon which they depend are paid for by a shrinking middle class while the wealthiest among us contribute an ever-smaller share of the cost for our common life. How long will we continue to reward CEO's with enormous bonuses and leave unprotected workers whose labor makes all profit possible?

***Prayer:** God of justice: Empower us to work for justice for the workers in our midst who serve our needs in the shadows of our society. Working even in broad daylight they are mostly invisible to us. We take for granted the fruit of their labor while the price of fresh fruit is beyond their reach. Help us to create a society where all created in your image can eat, drink, and take pleasure of work well done for just compensation. In the power of your Holy Spirit we pray, Amen.*

Day 6



Written by Shantha Ready Alonso is Field Organizing Manager at NETWORK and co-convener of the Ecumenical Poverty Initiative working group in Washington, DC.

Morning

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” —Romans 12:1

Some in the U.S. Congress have been talking about cuts to SNAP funding as part of our nation’s “shared sacrifice,” on a collective path toward deficit reduction and fiscal sustainability. For Christians, the term “sacrifice” is steeped in meaning. Today, you are invited to reflect about sacrifice.

Christians who take the SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge sacrifice personal freedom to eat whatever they please for the sake of developing a stronger sense of compassion, rooted in prayer and a desire for solidarity. You may be experiencing discomfort, but you have decided you will endure it for a higher purpose. The challenge you have undertaken is a small, voluntary sacrifice for a limited time.

Questions:

- *Your sacrifice is your choice, while millions lack the opportunity to make such a choice. What is the role of choice in making a sacrifice that is holy and acceptable to God? If you embraced a sacrifice that was imposed on you, would it still be a sacrifice?*
- *When members of Congress talk about a “shared sacrifice” does that sound reasonable to you? Why or why not?*
- *How do our current national conversations around SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge (and, more generally, our shared resources) address the concept of sacrifice? What, if any, moral or theological implications do you hear?*
- *What Christian scriptures, traditions, and faith experiences do you think of when considering what makes a sacrifice holy or unjust, beautiful or tragic?*

Noon

“This is my body, given for you.” —Luke 22:19

One choice you will never have to make during this SNAP Challenge is how to share your limited SNAP budget among your family. This simulation never forces you to decide how much you will eat versus how much you will give to your children.

Billy from Milwaukee has to make that choice daily. Catholic Sisters who participated in a June 2012 NETWORK *Nuns on the Bus* tour sat down for dinner with Billy at St. Benedict the Moor dining room in Wisconsin. The Sisters learned that Billy and his wife both work, but their hours were cut during the recession. Their combined incomes keep a roof over their two kids’ heads. They use SNAP to feed the kids during the day, and the whole family goes to eat at St. Benedict the Moor dining room in the evening. Billy said that it was okay for a parent to just eat once a day.

But, it wasn't right for growing kids like his 14-year-old boy to go hungry. So, Billy and his wife hold back, working full days with little to no sustenance.

With limited food, Billy and his wife ensure that any nutrients they gain access to are invested in the developing bodies of their children. Meanwhile Billy and his wife's bodies endure hunger, complete with its accompanying headaches, fatigue, dizziness and more. The sacrifice Billy and his wife make daily is their expression of love and commitment to their children.

Yet, unlike your sacrifice, the beauty of Billy and his wife's sacrifice is steeped in tragedy. When one steps back and considers the tremendous amount of food and wealth surrounding Billy and his family, their sacrifice is utterly preventable and unnecessary.

Questions:

- *Under what circumstance is it just to “offer your body as a living sacrifice” to God, and when is it unjust? Why?*
- *Do you think the type of sacrifice being made by Billy and his wife is what some in the U.S. Congress mean when they talk about “shared sacrifice”? If not, what do you think they have in mind?*



Evening

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us...” —John 1:14

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are...” —Hebrews 4:15

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” —John 6:51

Christians may not ever come to one single understanding of the meaning of all Jesus’ sacrifices, big and small. His life, death, and resurrection—and how all those things connect to our sacramental and communal life as Christians—are a mystery we contemplate for life. What Christians all agree on is that Jesus’ acts of self-gift were in service to God’s desire for us to have life, and have it abundantly.

Questions:

- *How do Jesus’ words “this is my body, given for you” resonate (or not) with your experiences during this challenge? Is your choice to do the SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge an act of self-gift? If so, for whom and to what end?*
- *Is it possible lawmakers who talk about “shared sacrifice” in the context of cutting SNAP and other safety net programs know not what they do? If so, what should our response be as Christians?*
- *What perspective might Jesus offer about “shared sacrifice” in the context of our current national discussion around fiscal sustainability? What might his words be to those in Congress? To Christians today?*

Day 7



For this day's devotion, we invite you to take the time to write your own prayers based on your reflection on the last week.

Morning

Noon

Evening