

Lent 2019 Challenge Series



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Introduction

The six weeks of Lent commemorate the 40 days Jesus spent being tempted in the wilderness. To Jesus' first followers, these 40 days brought to mind the 40-year journey of the Jewish people from captivity in Egypt through the wilderness to freedom. Through both of these stories, we understand Lent as a season of resistance. It is a time to identify ways we are tempted to compromise God's call to partner in the work of bringing healing and reconciliation to the world. It is a time to repent of our passive participation in systems of injustice and practices that fuel enmity and polarization. It is a time to commit to change that brings more freedom into our lives and the lives of those around us. As we prepare for Easter, we choose to participate in God's work of breaking the chains of injustice, apathy, hostility, despair—even the chains of death itself!

Through this six-week challenge series, we will look at how Jesus modeled the seamless connection between compassion and action. We will learn from how he dealt with opposition—not hesitating to confront his critics, but always from an attitude of love rather than judgment. We will identify ways to engage without becoming overwhelmed or paralyzed by the scope and scale of injustice. Recognizing that God has called each of us—in all our uniqueness—to partner in the work of liberation, we will explore opportunities to use our particular skills and temperaments to join with others in taking initiative and creating momentum. Together, we will celebrate being part of a community that is seeking to be the change we want to see in the world.

Overview

Week 1

The series will begin on March 10 with a message that looks at the interconnectedness of contemplation and action, as illustrated in Jesus' life, with a particular focus on the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. We will seek to create space for inward reflection on how the current political climate affects us emotionally, psychologically and spiritually, as well as reflection on our outward responses in this current climate. The objective of this week—and for the series as a whole—is to foster a sense of hope, and develop practices to engage in action for social justice in life-giving ways. There are no discussion materials for this introductory week, but you may wish to meet as a group and decide which justice issue you will explore together (see "Challenge Group Format" below).

Weeks 2-4

The materials in this book cover weeks 2-4 of the series:

- *March 17: The Art of Conversation*
Following Jesus' example in listening, questioning, and engaging lovingly, while also speaking up for the vulnerable, and speaking out against injustice.

- *March 24: Overwhelmed by Injustice*
Finding a way to partner with others to engage in specific justice issues without becoming overwhelmed, distracted or hopeless.
- *March 31: Finding our Niche*
Celebrating God's invitation to partner in the life-giving process of bringing more of heaven's justice and mercy to earth.

Week 5

On April 7, we will hold a churchwide Day of Service. As usual, we will meet at Cedar Ridge for a potluck breakfast at 9 AM before starting on-site and neighborhood service projects at 10 AM. Groups (and individuals) have the option of joining a project or initiating their own. For each of the projects, we will provide volunteers with brief information about some of the underlying justice issues, as well as links to find out more, and suggestions of ways to remain engaged. For more information, see www.crc.org/serve.

Week 6

April 14 is Palm Sunday. Kids will join us for the first half of the service, where we will tell the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in a family-friendly way.

Challenge Group Format

Most discipleship series have discussion questions for each week, based on the previous Sunday's message. With challenge series, we take a different approach: groups select one of several "real life" challenges. The challenge for this series is how to engage lovingly and effectively in one of the following justice issues:

- Poverty and hunger
- Racial justice and immigration
- Environmental justice

The challenge group discussions will help group members apply the content of the Sunday morning messages in the specific context of one of these justice issues. General guidance is provided in the material for how to structure each of the three weeks—including narrowing down the challenge (these issues are huge!). However, groups should not feel bound by these suggestions. You may want to mix large group discussions, times of sharing in smaller groups, exercises, opportunities for self-reflection, and other ways of exploring these challenges. Make sure you also allot time to pray about these issues, and for one another as we seek to address them in our own small—but meaningful—ways.

Practicalities

Messages

The questions and exercises for weeks 2-4 are not as closely tied to the Sunday message as

they are for most discipleship series. However, it will still be very helpful if you have heard the message for that week before engaging with this related material. If you were not able to be at Cedar Ridge for the Sunday service, please listen or watch the message online (www.crcc.org/messages/).

Annexes

At the end of this packet, you will find three annexes with additional resources for the different challenge areas: poverty and hunger, racial justice and immigration, and environmental justice.

Additional Activities

Paper Chains Resource

A daily activity—suitable for individuals and families—is available to accompany this series. The self-assembly paper chain materials, consisting of a packet of 7 pieces of paper (6 purple and 1 white), can be found on the Welcome table in the Commons. Assembly instructions are printed on the bottom of the final page. Hang your paper chain somewhere in your home. Then, each day, break a link in the chain (purple links for the 40 days of Lent, and white links for the 7 Sundays) to reveal words of Scripture and simple daily practices of liberation.

Shrove Tuesday—*Tuesday, March 5*

Pancake dinners on Shrove Tuesday (or Fat Tuesday) are a Cedar Ridge tradition. We encourage you to meet together, and—space permitting—invite non-group members, friends and neighbors to join the feast.

Ash Wednesday—*Wednesday, March 6*

Our Ash Wednesday service, from 7 to 8PM, is an hour of prayer and reflection as we enter the 40-day Lenten season. Ashes remind us of our connection to the earth and to one another, and we will acknowledge our mortality with the refrain, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” When we surrender to this sobering reality, we open ourselves to God’s healing power to make us into “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.”

Good Friday—*Friday, April 12*

Stop by Cedar Ridge between 6 and 8PM to slow down and reflect on the betrayal and death of Jesus. This will be a quiet and reflective time to interact with objects at different stations that will help guide our meditations. A family-friendly track will be available for this self-guided service.

Lenten Discipleship Series 2019 Breaking the Chains

Week 2: The Art of Conversation

Winston Churchill famously said, “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.” This week, we look at how to hold the difficult conversations that engaging in social justice involves. Poverty and hunger, racial justice and immigration, and environmental issues have the biggest impact on society’s most vulnerable members; and as followers of Jesus, we are called to speak up for those who are marginalized and oppressed (Proverbs 31:8). Such conversations are often heartfelt and passionate—and this is a good thing! We are talking about important issues that impact thousands or even millions of people created in God’s image. At the same time, emotions can sometimes prevent us from listening, or lead us to be uncaring or unloving in what we say.

We want to follow Jesus’ example of really *listening* to people—seeking to understand their viewpoint and underlying story. And we want to respond lovingly, with humility and graciousness, believing the best of others. We want to learn from one another, and can often learn the most from those who are very different from us. At the same time, we also want to be willing to challenge ideas and attitudes that do not contribute to justice, healing and reconciliation. We do this, not because we want to win an argument, but because we understand that we are partners with God in bringing more love to the world around us.

Suggestions for this week’s discussion

Briefly share stories about what you have done in the past in your selected challenge area (poverty/hunger, racial justice/immigration, or environmental justice), and where you currently feel you are with the topic. Potential questions include:

- What are the one or two specific issues within this area that you feel most passionate about right now?
- How have you learned about these issues?
- How have you engaged (volunteered, advocated, taken action) with regard to these issues?

Consider the various responses of the group members, and identify the one or two specific issues within the social justice area that you would like to explore as a group.

- Are there elements of these issues that are strongly associated with one political party or viewpoint? If so, how can you depoliticize the conversation and find common ground?

- Are there elements of these issues that are emotional triggers for you? If so, why is that? Are there ways you can discuss these issues without allowing emotion to limit your ability to listen to others?

Suggestions for activities

Watch this TED Talk with NPR interviewer Celeste Headlee:

https://www.ted.com/talks/celeste_headlee_10_ways_to_have_a_better_conversation

- Which of these 10 basic rules do you struggle with?
- How do these rules apply to “difficult” justice-oriented conversations?

Read the three practices for crossing the difference divide: <https://3practices.com>

- Identify someone who has a different opinion to you about your selected social justice issue. Make a plan to engage with the person this week, and take “unusual interest” in them. “Stay in the room” with them (virtually or in person) and seek to learn something from them that you can share next week with the group.

Identify some of your emotional triggers when discussing your selected social justice issue.

- How do they relate to the list of common triggers given here: <https://outsmartyourbrain.com/find-your-emotional-triggers-on-this-list/>
- The author recommends a practice of “Being Present”—being intentionally self-aware of our emotions, relaxing, detaching, centering, and focusing on how we want to respond. Commit to being present in this way this week—and pray for each other, knowing that the Spirit of Christ is with us as we try to respond in more loving ways.

Looking for a bigger challenge? Consider holding an intentionally diverse meal. Invite people who you know represent a range of views on your selected social justice issue.

- “The People’s Supper” was an initiative to hold difficult conversations with people across the political divide following the 2016 presidential election. Their guidebook has many helpful suggestions that can be adapted to different settings. You can download it here: <https://preview.tinyurl.com/y324ypty>

Lenten Discipleship Series 2019 Breaking the Chains

Week 3: Overwhelmed by Injustice

We want to address injustice in society—but which form of injustice? There are so many! It is easy to become overwhelmed by the scale, depth and complexity of the issues, and decide to disconnect from it all, or get stuck in our own emotional responses. This week, we consider how we can stay involved, without giving in to hopelessness. To do so, we need to remember that we are not the solution to the world's problems: we are partners with God, called to be faithful in our daily lives. We can find joy and peace in knowing that we are not alone in the work of healing and reconciliation, and that ultimately love will triumph.

God has given us skills and passions that we can apply to justice issues in ways that are uniquely our own. This doesn't mean we will always be comfortable as we engage in these difficult issues, but it can mean we view engagement as an opportunity, more than an obligation. By remaining focused, partnering with and learning from others, celebrating small successes, and remembering to take time out to rest and relax, we can create a sustainable way to contribute to important societal challenges. To ensure a continued connection between contemplation and action, we need to regularly and prayerfully reassess our motives and attitudes, remembering there is no "them" and "us."

This week's discussion

Think back to last week's discussion where you identified one or two specific issues within the social justice area that you wanted to explore as a group.

- How do you see these issues played out locally? What are the main challenges? This may require some online research—fortunately, most of us have smartphones at the ready! (See additional resources in the annexes of this book.)
- What local organizations or institutions are addressing these issues?

Consider the various initiatives at Cedar Ridge. (You can find them listed on our website under "Get Involved.")

- Does Cedar Ridge currently play any role in addressing these issues?
- If so, how could you get involved with that work?
- If not, what could Cedar Ridge do, and what role would you be willing to play?

Share stories about what you have done—or seen done—in the past that has been successful in addressing these issues. What has been less successful?

- What can you do as individuals?
- Is there anything you would like to do together as a group?

Suggestions for issue-specific activities

Conduct online research into the issues, and local solutions. (See annexes.)

Commit to praying for your selected issue each day this week.

Poverty and Hunger

- Recognize some of the hard decisions faced by the poor and strengthen empathy by watching Eldar Shafir's TED Talk "Living Under Scarcity" at www.youtube.com/watch?v=gV1ESN8NGh8
- Try making these hard financial decision yourself by playing the online game Spent: <http://playspent.org/html/> How did this exercise make you feel?
- Document everything you eat this week, and add up the cost of buying that food.
 - Compare that amount to the federal poverty line of \$12,490 for an individual (\$240.19 per week), which is intended to cover all food, housing, transportation, health and other costs.
 - Compare it to the minimum wage for Montgomery County of \$12.25 per hour (for employers with 51 or more employees).

Racial Justice and Immigration

- What do you think about affirmative action? Watch "The House We Live In" at www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW764dXEI_8. Did this change your perspective at all?
- Take an implicit bias test at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>. How do you feel about the results of your test?
- Strengthen your capacity for empathy this week towards immigrants. Read about current policies and their impacts on families. Check out this resource: www.doinggoodtogether.org/bhf/blog/understanding-immigration. It is designed for families with young children, but the action steps listed are ones we can all take.

Environmental Justice

- Watch an introduction to environmental justice at www.nrdc.org/stories/what-is-environmental-justice.
- Take the Ecological Footprint Quiz (www.my.footprint.org) to estimate the amount of land and ocean area required to sustain your consumption patterns and absorb your wastes; and learn how to reduce your impact on the Earth. Did the results surprise you?
- Learn about the damaging impact of plastic pollution at www.conserve-energy-future.com/causes-effects-solutions-of-plastic-pollution.php This week, challenge yourself to be part of the solution, and not part of the problem, by selecting small practical action steps from the list in the article.

Lenten Discipleship Series 2019 Breaking the Chains

Week 4: Finding our Niche

We live in a polarized society, where even the phrase “social justice” is a divisive and politicized term. We are bombarded daily with news about injustice and oppression. And we lead busy and exhausting lives that leave little time and energy to engage in weighty societal issues. All of this can lead to guilt or a sense of obligation: rather than breaking chains and celebrating liberation, we could end up adding to the heaviness of life!

But it needn't be that way. Jesus calls all who feel burdened to find rest in him, and to share his easy yoke (Matthew 11:28-30). Our involvement in action flows not from guilt but from love—from our connection to the Love that holds the universe together. We are invited to partner with God as the justice and mercy of the kingdom of heaven are gradually, but relentlessly, established on earth. This week we celebrate the opportunity to use our unique personality, gifting and experience to help make the world a better place in a way that makes us better, more fulfilled, and hopeful people.

This week's discussion

Take some time to think about your personality and skills. Share your thoughts, and see if others in the group who know you well see other aspects you have missed.

- How would you characterize your personality?
- What are your main strengths?
- What do you most enjoy doing?
- What skills do you have?

Think about local opportunities to address the justice issues you have been exploring, as well as non—geographic-specific opportunities, such as advocacy and awareness raising.

- How might you apply your personality and skills to these opportunities?
- What is realistic for you, given your current circumstances?

Most things are more fun with friends. Think about your relationships—others in the group, people at Cedar Ridge, coworkers, friends, neighbors, and family members.

- Can you think of anyone who might be interested in joining you as you engage in these opportunities?
- Make a plan to reach out to them.

Identify simple lifestyle changes you can commit to in support of this issue.

- What practice(s) can you build into your daily or weekly routine to support this issue?
- Is there someone who you can ask to check in with you on this, to add the encouragement of accountability?

Suggestions for activities

Take an online personality test. Options include the following:

- <https://psychcentral.com/quizzes/personality/start.php>
- www.16personalities.com/free-personality-test
- www.eclecticenergies.com/enneagram/test
- www.metarasa.com/mmdi/questionnaire/

Meditate on Luke 2:41-50 and Luke 4:16-22. Conduct an imaginary conversation with Jesus, asking him where he found his clear sense of identity and purpose.

Get some practical ideas of ways to engage here: <http://tinyurl.com/yyashh8g>.

Write down a list of friends or acquaintances who you know to be engaged in some kind of justice work. Who are the three of these with whom you would feel most energized to work? Make a plan to meet with each of them to discuss what they do and how you might get involved.

Lenten Discipleship Series 2019 Breaking the Chains

Annex 1: Resources for Poverty and Hunger

Challenges in Montgomery County

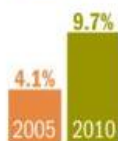
No other county in the Washington region, including the District of Columbia, experienced increases in poverty of the same magnitude during the late 2000s.



1,100 people in Montgomery County are homeless on any given day, including **318 children**.



More than one-third of students in public schools qualify for free and reduced-price meals.



Between 2005 and 2015, **childhood poverty** has more than doubled in Montgomery County.

1 adult with 2 children must earn **\$77,933** a year to make ends meet, according to the county's self-sufficiency standard.



1 in 7 adults has limited English proficiency and approximately **58,000** adults lack high school diplomas.



For an overview of poverty in Montgomery County see "Faces of Poverty 2018" at <https://tinyurl.com/yxeg444n>.

For a deep-dive into the demographics of poverty in Montgomery County, check out "Hidden Hardships" at <https://tinyurl.com/yyzeywu>.

Cedar Ridge partners with Manna Food Center. You can find out more about hunger in Montgomery County and Manna's efforts to address it at www.mannafood.org.

For a summary of Montgomery County's Food Security Plan, and ways to get involved, visit <https://tinyurl.com/yyd46ayu>.

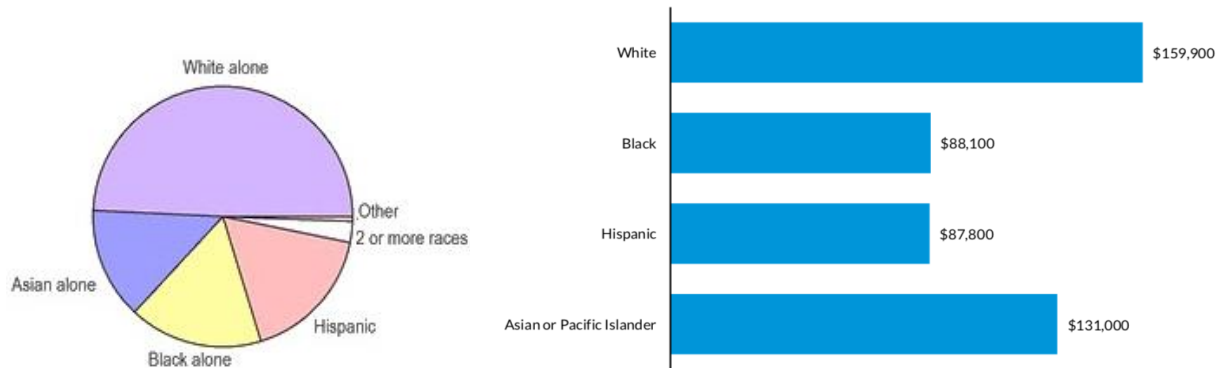
To learn more about homelessness in Montgomery County, go to www.montgomerycountymd.gov/homelessness/. To find ways to get involved, check out Interfaith works at <http://www.iworksmc.org>.

(If you need assistance in finding resources for Howard, Prince George's or Baltimore County, please contact questions@crcc.org.)

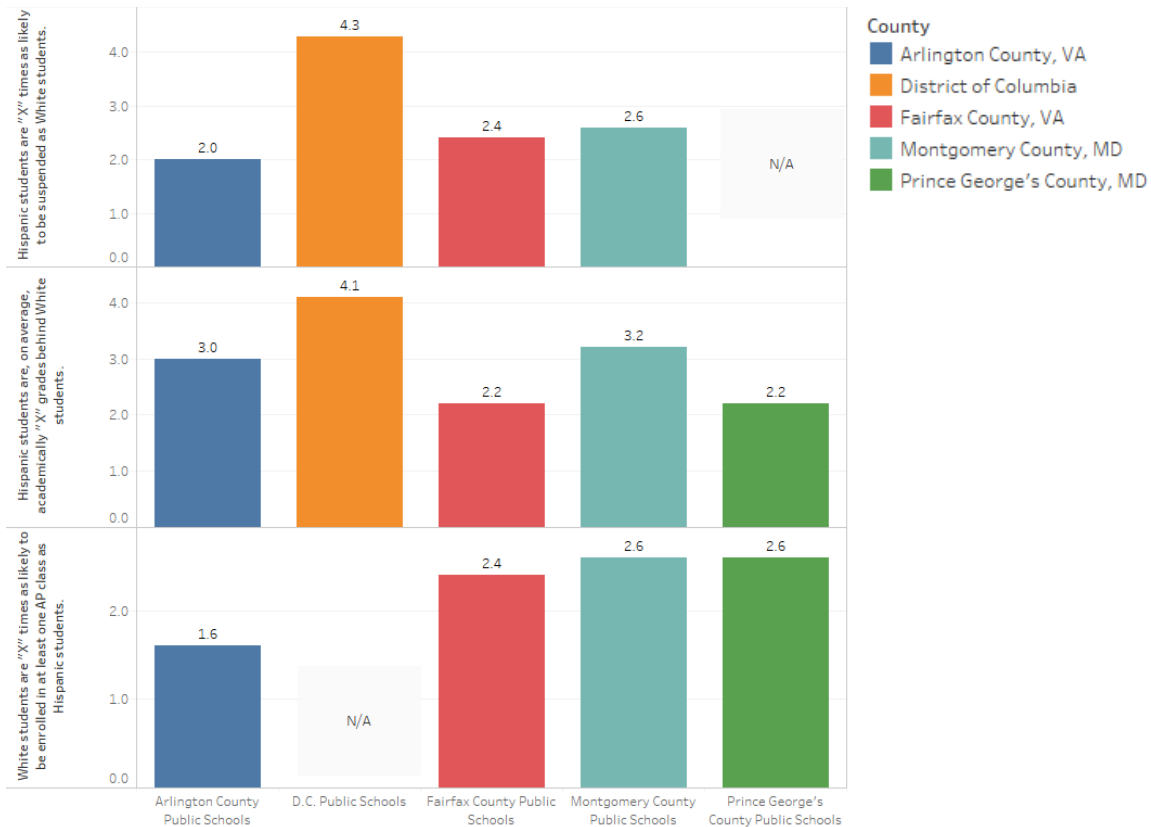
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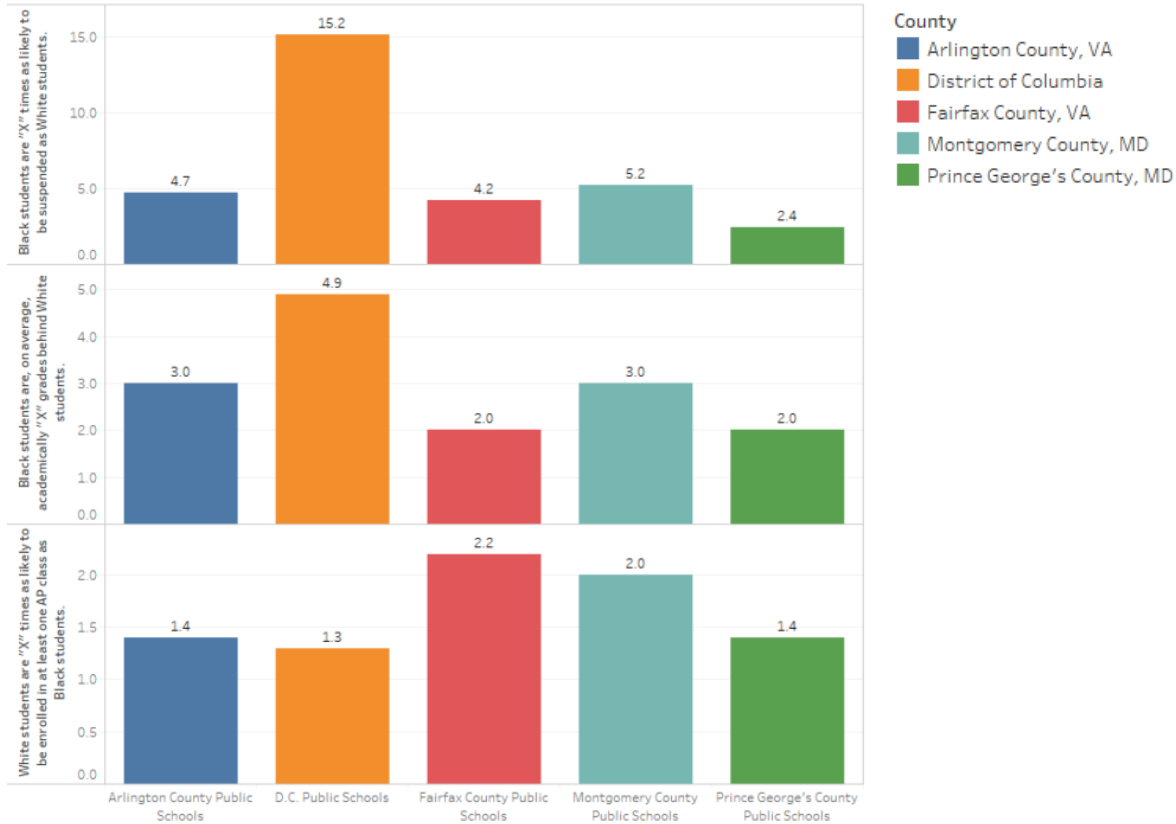
Annex 2: Resources for Racial Justice and Immigration

Percentage of Population and Average Income (2011-2015) by Race in Montgomery County



The Racial Divide between Black and White, and Hispanic and White Students





For information on racial gaps in income and home ownership in Maryland, see <http://tinyurl.com/y577es6u>.

You can read about the rise in race-based hate crimes in Maryland here: <http://tinyurl.com/yxzt8b9m>

For information on how white people can become better allies to people of color, read this article in Sojourners: <https://sojo.net/articles/our-white-friends-desiring-be-allies>.

Learn about refugees and asylum seekers in Montgomery County, and find out how you can help, by going to <http://montgomerycountyinterfaithmd.org/programs/welcoming-our-new-neighbors/> and downloading the resources guide.

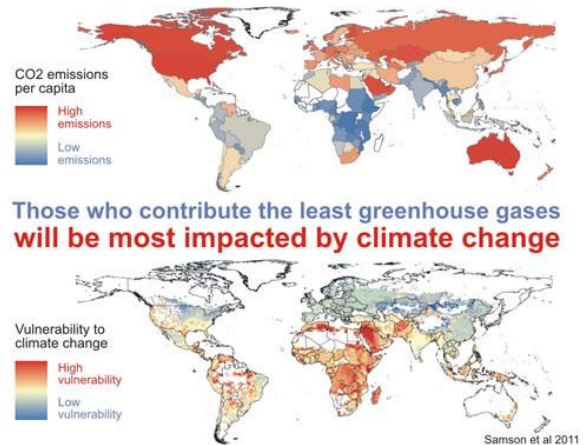
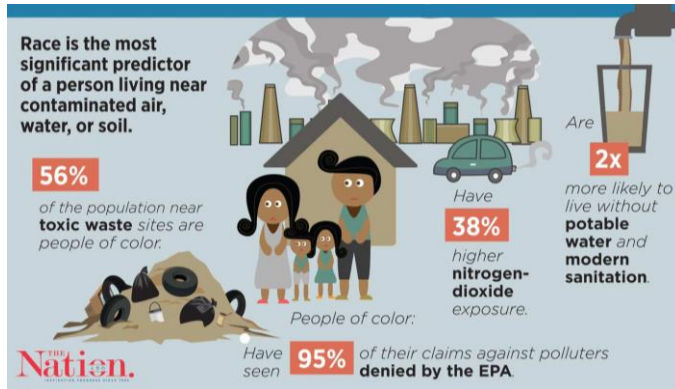
Read the story of an immigrant—and why she is now an advocate—at this link: <https://firstfocus.org/blog/why-im-an-advocate-my-immigrant-story>

(If you need assistance in finding additional resources, please contact questions@crcc.org.)

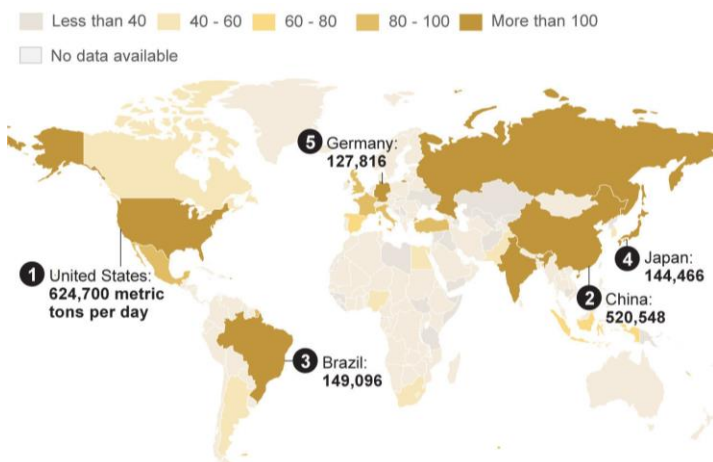
Lenten Discipleship Series 2019 Breaking the Chains

Annex 3: Resources for Environmental Justice

Environmental Racism in the US, and the Injustice of Global Climate Change



Metric Tons of Solid Waste Generated Each Day (in Thousands)



Learn more about global climate change at <https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>.

For an overview of environmental issues impacting Maryland, and suggestions for taking action, visit Environment Maryland (<https://environmentmaryland.org/issues>) or the Maryland chapter of Sierra Club (<https://www.sierraclub.org/maryland/conservation>).

Learn about the many risks to the Chesapeake Bay, the importance of its preservation, and ways to take action at www.cbf.org.

(If you need assistance in finding additional resources, please contact questions@crcc.org.)