

Publication Date: February 17, 2026

Reflection Date: February 18, 2026 - [Ash Wednesday](#)

Returning Together with Whole Hearts

The following is a shortened version of a longer reflection; please click on the image to watch the full version.

“Even now, says the Holy One, return to me with your whole heart— with fasting, with weeping, with mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the One who is your God.”

These ancient words from the Prophet Joel in the first reading for [Ash Wednesday](#) rise like a summons across centuries. Not as a threat, but an invitation. A call to return to what is deepest and truest in us. It lands in our griefs, our wounds, our longing for healing. The Prophet's words ask us to come back with our whole hearts—not the polished parts, but the tender ones, the bruised ones, the ones we try to hide.



Click on the image to watch the full reflection

There is a kind of grief that doesn't announce itself. It settles quietly in the chest, like a stone placed there by an unseen hand. At first, it feels like too much to carry. It tightens the breath. It hardens the edges of the heart.

But over time something begins to shift. Not because the loss disappears, but because the heart, in its mysterious wisdom, grows tired of being closed. A small crack forms. And in that tiny opening, a consoling God slips in. The Sufi poet Rumi once said, "The wound is the place where the Light enters you."

The grief is still there, but it is no longer the whole story. The pain remains, but it is held differently—not as a weight that crushes, but as a truth that shapes. This is the sacred tension: the ache that does not leave, and the grace that keeps arriving anyway. Where the heart, even in its sorrow, begins to return.

Ash Wednesday invites us into that very place. Lent is about awakening. It is about remembering that we are woven together, that the Holy One calls us not only to return, but to return together.

We live in a time when heartbreak is everywhere. We live in a time when violence has become so common that many have stopped noticing. Ash Wednesday dares us to feel again. To soften again. To return again.

May the ashes we receive today awaken in us a holy tenderness. May they strengthen our resolve to honor the sacredness of every life.

We begin this season not bowed down, but standing open—hearts softened, spirits awake, ready to return to the Holy One who calls us still. Amen.

Carolyn D. Townes, OFS

Franciscan Justice Circles Animator, Virtual Justice Circle Convener

(modified from a fuller reflection at Catholic Women Preach)

Suggested Action: Take a personal inventory during Lent of the ways in which you are called to feel again the violence and injustice that many are suffering, and what you are called to do at this time. Consider joining or forming a Franciscan Justice Circle to help you find ways to take loving action alongside companions also rooted in the gospel.

Suggested Petitions:

Lord, help us to return to you—together—with whole hearts, awakened with a holy tenderness.

Lord, help all people suffering through heartbreak, fear, and anxiety to know Your consolation and healing.

Prayer

Dear God,

We know there is suffering, injustice, and despair in our world. Let us not avert our eyes or close our hearts. Instead, help us to feel your light and presence, to remember that we belong to one another, to mend that which has been torn apart, and to seek communion with You and one another, our hearts' great desire.

Amen.

Fishes & Loaves Lenten Prayer Service



Please join FAN staff and friends for a Franciscan prayer night dedicated to anti-hunger and poverty alleviation on **Thursday, February 19, at 7PM ET / 4PM PT**. In response to Pope Leo's invitation to spiritual poverty through *Dilexi Te* and increased risks to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, we invite you to pray with and for all those who involuntarily fast during Lent. This event will launch FAN's 2026 anti-hunger campaign, Fishes & Loaves. [Click here](#) to register.

Help Stop the SAVE Act

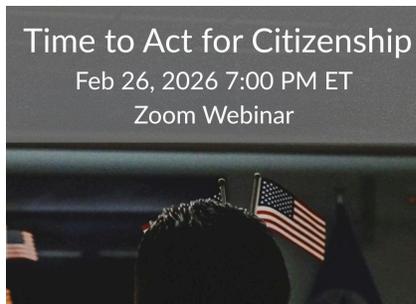
Currently, the Senate is preparing to vote on the 2026 Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act, requiring individuals to provide documentary proof of U.S. citizenship when registering to vote in federal elections.

The SAVE act would prevent millions of eligible voters from participating in elections because they lack documentation and/or have changed their names through marriage.

As Franciscan-hearted people, we are called to protect democracy as our most important way to resolve political differences without violence. Opposing these provisions is an important step in defending voter rights and making sure that all eligible Americans can make their voices heard. Please take action [here](#).



'Time to Act for Citizenship' Webinar



Time to Act for Citizenship

Thursday, February 26, 2026

7:00p ET / 6p CT / 5p MT / 4p PT

Immigration policy is shifting rapidly, with enforcement and detention increasing while long-term solutions remain unresolved. Join Franciscan Action Network for a timely webinar on Thursday, February 26 at 7PM ET/6PM CT offering a clear overview of the current immigration landscape, a faith-rooted reflection on why a pathway to citizenship matters, and practical ways to take action, including opportunities to engage through FAN's April Advocacy Days. We will also hear directly from a DACA recipient. Please register [here](#).

'Present Dynamics in Palestine and Effective Action Opportunities' Webinar

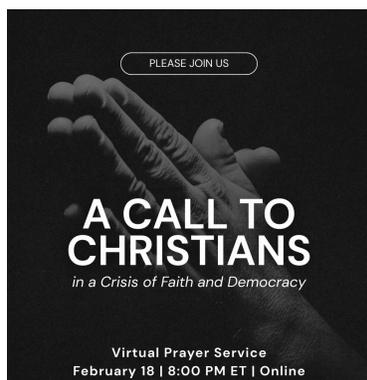
What is happening on the ground in Gaza and the West Bank today? What strategic nonviolent actions might we take in accord with the way of just peace? Join us on **Tuesday, March 3, 1:00-2:30 PM ET** in reflection and discussion at this critical time as attacks and annexation increase in the West Bank, while killing continues in Gaza along with aid being significantly restricted.

The webinar will feature the following panelists: Omar Haramy, Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, Jerusalem; Amira Musallam, Unarmed Civilian Protection in Palestine, Bethlehem; Rabbi Alissa Wise, Rabbis for Ceasefire, U.S.; Br. Jacek Orzechowski, Franciscan, OFM, Siena College; Olivia Katbi, National Coalition to Boycott Chevron, U.S.; and Nusaiba Mubarak, American Friends Service Committee.

[Click here](#) to register.



A Call to Christians in a Crisis of Faith and Democracy



On Ash Wednesday, the Franciscan Action Network is joining a diverse group of Christian leaders across traditions to launch **A Call to Christians in a Crisis of Faith and Democracy**, a bold call to courage in the face of cruelty, growing authoritarianism, and the misuse and abuse of our faith. Tomorrow evening, February 18 at 8:00 PM ET, we invite you to join the virtual prayer service that will launch this new initiative. You can register [here](#).

Franciscan Justice Circles



Members of the **DC-area FJC** met for a prayer action at ICE Headquarters, Washington DC on February 14, Valentine's Day to pray for peace and justice amid a mass deportation campaign that is causing much suffering and injustice. Their service included a gospel reading, several Franciscan prayers, a litany of lament, and a song from Minneapolis with these lyrics:

*It's okay to change your mind, show us your courage, leave this behind
It's okay to change your mind, and you can join us, join us here anytime.*

Upcoming [Franciscan Justice Circle](#) (FJC) gatherings:

Kansas FJC: Tue. Feb. 16 at 7:00 pm CT via Zoom

St. Bonaventure U. FJC: Wed. Feb. 18 at 12:30 pm ET In Person

Michigan FJC: Wed. Feb. 17 at 7:00 pm ET via Zoom

Virtual FJC (ltd. mobility): Thur. Feb. 19 at 11:00 am PT / 2:00 pm ET via Zoom

Pacific Northwest FJC: Thur. Feb. 19 at 1:00 pm PT via Zoom

Phoenix FJC: Thur. Feb. 19 at 5:00 pm MT via Zoom

NYC-area FJC: Thur. Feb. 19 at 7:30 pm ET via Zoom

SoCal FJC: Thur. Feb. 19 at 6:00 pm PT via Zoom

Twin Cities FJC: Mon. Feb. 23 at 7:00 pm CT via Zoom

Colorado FJC: Mon. Feb. 23 at 7:00 pm MT via Zoom

CT-RI FJC: Tue. Feb. 24 at 7:00 pm ET via Zoom

Texas FJC: Tue. Feb. 24 at 7:15 pm CT / 6:15 pm MT via Zoom

Online Prayer Vigil for Immigrants hosted by Phoenix Franciscan Justice Circle: Thur. Feb. 26 at 5:30 pm PT / 6:30 pm MT / 7:30 pm CT / 8:30 pm ET after the FAN *Time to Act for Citizenship* webinar

SE Wisconsin FJC: Fri. Feb. 27 at 3:00 pm CT via Zoom

To find out more about any of the [FJC](#) gatherings coming up or for information about joining or forming a Circle, please sign up [HERE](#).