

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

**TRANSFORM US: JOURNEYING WITH
JESUS TOWARDS A NEW CHURCH**



RELIGION & RACE
The United Methodist Church

GCORR invites you to use this Lenten devotional, *“Transform Us: Journeying with Jesus Towards a New Church”* for personal or congregational use. This devotional was inspired by themes from our Racial Justice Prayer and Action Challenge in 2022 and 2023: lament, repentance, hope, liberation, healing, and reconciliation.

The purpose of the devotional is three-fold:

1. Help people of faith gain additional biblical and theological learning regarding how the practice of antiracism is part of our discipleship journey.
2. Understand how (white) privilege can be used to benefit and harm others.
3. Transform hearts and minds through each week’s devotional reading.

The devotional is structured following the six weeks of Lent.

The format for each day is as follows:

- Opening prayer
- Scripture
- Short meditation
- Closing prayer

Each week has a devotional for each day. The final day of each week, day 7, is structured as a 45-minute small group study.

The format for the study is as follows:

- Main idea or theme for the week
- Opening prayer
- Opening exercise or activity
- Scripture
- Reading/Reflection and a corresponding activity (if any)
- Questions for discussion
- Wrap-up time
- Closing prayer

The format for individual and communal reflection in wrap-up time, a component of the small group study on day 7, is based on the R.A.C.E. framework. The purpose of this framework is for white participants and Black, Indigenous, People of color (BIPOC) participants to engage small group reflection using their cultural lenses. Reflection prompts will be different for both white and BIPOC participants to honor and embrace these differences.

The framework is below:

- **R**eflect on how my white privilege and participation in white supremacy has shaped the ways I look at Jesus and my faith,
- **A**ssess the ways in which I may need to repent,
- **C**hallenge the white normative ways I engage Jesus and my faith individually and in community with others, and
- **E**ncounter Jesus in a new way using non-dominant cultural lenses.

The purpose of engaging wrap-up time with this framework is so that both white participants and BIPOC participants can examine, in their respective Lenten journeys, how systemic oppression and systemic racism affects and harms the human family. Facilitators are invited to encourage participants to use this time as one of self-reflection. Participants may write reflections in a journal, write on a piece of paper, or sit quietly as they silently reflect on each prompt of the R.A.C.E. framework.

Our prayer is that as you engage this Lenten devotional, the Spirit of God would meet you in a new, fresh way transforming your heart, mind and spirit. May Jesus meet you anew on your Lenten journey!

PART 1:
Daily devotions for six days

Theme:
LAMENT

DAY 1

Opening Prayer

God of our weariness, evil seems to have the last word in this world. The wicked seem to be winning in all they do. Where are You? How long must I sit and endure this pain? Remind me of your faithful love. Remind me of your deep mercy. Remind me that You are the God of the Angel Armies. Come and deliver me! Amen.

Scripture

Psalm 6:6-10

"I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eyes waste away because of grief; they grow weak because of all my foes. Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping. The LORD has heard my supplication; the LORD accepts my prayer. All my enemies shall be ashamed and struck with terror; they shall turn back and in a moment be put to shame."
(NRSVUE)

Meditation

Have you ever been sick and tired of being sick and tired? The psalmist tells us they are "worn out from groaning" (v. 1). Have you ever been in that place? Maybe you are in that place right now. Whatever has brought you to the state of being sick and tired of being sick and tired, I invite you to accept how you feel. Why? Because God does. The psalmist lays their pain bare. They are worn out from their deep sadness. They cry so much—every night—that their tears have soaked the bed and couch. Their vision is failing because of their grief and distress. And yet, they do not hide any of it! The psalmist brings all their mess to God! The psalmist is convinced—and convinces us—that because God has heard them crying (v. 8), God will respond. What deep hope and assurance!

Today, I invite you to give your tears and grief to God like the psalmist did. Give your tears and grief to the One who is strong enough to carry it and you. Give your tears and grief to God trusting that God listens to your requests, accepts your prayer, and terrifies, defeats, and shames all your enemies.

Closing Prayer

God of Divine Strength and Comfort, help us to not hide our pain from You—especially when we are sick and tired of being sick and tired. Arrest our grief and distress with Your deep, healing love. Come near to us as we come near to You. Amen.

DAY 2**Opening Prayer**

God, how long will you leave us to deal with the suffering and evil we face all around us? Have you forgotten about us? God, sometimes it feels like you do not care. Sometimes it looks like and feels like you have let the enemy defeat us. Strengthen us to trust in your faithful love. Strengthen us to rejoice in your salvation. Strengthen us to sing because you have been good to us. Amen.

Scripture**Psalm 13**

"How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me,

O LORD my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say,

"I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD because he has dealt bountifully with me."

(NRSVUE)

Meditation

Climate scientists logged this past July as the hottest one ever! July 2023 saw temperatures rise 1.5 C degrees higher than the previous year. Wildfires in Hawaii killed hundreds, destroying historic indigenous areas.

Local, state, and federal leaders are creating legislation and policies to erase accurate presentations of the enslavement of black and brown peoples in U.S. history. The histories of other people of color and indigenous people are being erased too.

A 22-year-old self-radicalized white supremacist walked into a Dollar General in Jacksonville, Florida intent on murdering African American people. These are the events we hear about when we turn on the news, scroll through our phones, or look at our computers.

So much suffering! So much uncertainty! So much evil! Has God forgotten about us? Has God hidden God's face from those who suffer at the hands of their enemies? These are the laments the psalmist presented to God.

At the end of the psalm, the psalmist decides to rejoice in God's salvation. The psalmist remembers they "have trusted in your faithful love" (v. 1). The psalmist decides "to sing to the Lord because he has been good to me" (v. 6).

It isn't that the psalmist's situation or feelings have changed. It is that the psalmist leans on the God of faithful love, the God of salvation, the God of goodness. We can too. Even in times of suffering and uncertainty surrounded by evil, we can lament in faith to the One who saves, the One who is faithful, and the One who is good.

Closing Prayer

We are in distress and lamentation. We cry out loud to you; listen to our prayers. Please give us the gift of tears as we weep alongside your people. Assure us of your presence that "though the wrong seems oft so strong," you are the ruler yet. Listen to our cries, O God. Take heed to our supplication and grant us the joy of your presence. Amen

- Rev. Connie Semy P. Mella,

Academic Dean of Union Theological Seminary, Philippines

DAY 3**Opening Prayer**

God of grace and God of glory, it is difficult for us to remember that the suffering we face is nothing new. Our parents have been here before. Our ancestors have been here before. Our Savior is called the Suffering Servant, the Crucified God. Help us remember that when we lament before you, we are demonstrating our faith in a God who can take it, a God who knows what we face. Help us remember that even in saying "My God, My God, why have you left me all alone?"—as Jesus did on the cross—we are placing our trust in the One who can carry it all. Amen.

Scripture**Psalm 22:1-5**

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame."

(NRSVUE)

Meditation

March 2020. I will never forget this month and year because it is when COVID-19 interrupted our lives on a global scale. Many people suffered mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically as well as carrying the fear and anxiety of getting COVID-19.

When I was quarantined with my family in our house, working from home and supporting four kids schooling online, I remember thinking to myself, "Have we ever been here before, God? Have we ever had to exercise our faith in these circumstances?" I remembered my enslaved ancestors.

I remembered both my grandmothers who lived through the Great Depression. I remembered my parents and other Baby Boomers who lived through segregation.

Suddenly, I realized I was not naming my laments during COVID-19 in isolation from humanity. I realized my laments joined a long, historic litany of laments to God which comforted me.

The psalmist wonders why God has left them all alone and why they cry out and God doesn't answer. Then, the psalmist names who God is—the holy one, enthroned and Israel's promise—and something amazing happens! Identifying God in this way causes the psalmist to remember the faith of their ancestors saying, "They trusted you, and you rescued them; they cried out to you, and they were saved; they trusted you, and they weren't ashamed."

We can lean on and put our trust in the One who rescued, saved, and graced our ancestors. God will do the same for us.

Closing Prayer

We find ourselves in a time of great sorrow. Because we are weary, we lament. Because our hearts are broken, we lament. Because our spirits are crushed, we lament. Because our souls want to faint, we lament. And when we lament, You are near. When we lament, You are the Breath of Life. When we lament, You are the One that sustains us. Amen.

- Rev. Gigi Warren, Ordained Elder in the UMC
& GCORR Board Member, Atlanta, GA

DAY 4**Opening Prayer**

Crucified God, thank you for your might, and faithful, covenant love. It is a love that will not let us go, a love that keeps us, a love that is stronger than hell, death, and the grave. No matter what we face—the death and sickness of dear loved ones, job losses, enemies that hound us, friends that betray us, institutions that persecute and oppress us—always grace us and strengthen us to entrust our spirits into your hands. Amen.

Scripture**Psalm 31:1-5, 9-12**

"In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me; take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel." (NRSVUE)

Meditation

"Into your hands I commit my spirit." Another bible translation reads, "I entrust my hands into your spirit." We may recognize these words from Psalm 31:5 because they were the words Jesus said on the cross just before he "breathed for the last time," in Luke 23:46.

I believe Psalm 31 is the purest expression of lament. The psalmist talks to God asking for quick deliverance naming God as their refuge, rock, and strong fortress. Why? Because the psalmist's suffering is endless: depression, failed vision due to grief, a life consumed with sadness and groaning, weakness in their body and spirit, and their enemies and neighbors consider them a joke.

Jesus also knew this level of suffering, humiliation, and grief as he hung on the cross. And Jesus demonstrated trust in God "not by being dishonest about what he was enduring" but by being honest before God. Jesus' honesty before God - which was also an expression of trust in God—came in the form of crying out to God saying, "I entrust my spirit into your hands."

The second half of Psalm 31:5 says, "You, Lord, God of faithfulness—you have saved me." Jesus committed his spirit into God's hands, in his pain, suffering, and death because Jesus knew that God is the God of faithfulness and salvation.

I invite you to place a situation, person, and/or place of deep pain and suffering at the front of your mind now. As you breathe in, say "**You, Lord, God of faithfulness, you have saved me.**" As you breathe out, say "**I entrust my spirit into your hands.**"

Closing Prayer

God, I know that you will not leave me in this agony; you are my Redeemer! In my lament, the warmth of your presence accompanies me; You cry with me and also comfort me. You sustain and guide me with your grace, love, and mercy. And like the prophet Habakkuk, like a praise, I proclaim, "...but I will still celebrate because the LORD God saves me. The LORD gives me strength. He makes my feet as sure as those of a deer, and he helps me stand on the mountains." (Habakkuk 3: 17-19, CEV) - Rev. Alma Pérez, Director of Hispanic/Latino Resourcing of Discipleship Ministries

DAY 5**Opening Prayer**

"Rise up, Lord, and show your power! Let us know that you are still present to your people with your saving power." (The CEB Lectio Divina Prayer Bible, 2011, p. 688)

Scripture**Psalm 44:17-26**

"All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you or been false to your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way, yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals and covered us with deep darkness.

If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a strange god, would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart.

Because of you we are being killed all day long and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!

Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.

Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love."

(NRSVUE)

Meditation

Psalm 44 reminded me of the storm that arose on the sea in Luke 8:22-25. Jesus and the disciples had boarded a boat. As soon as they begin sailing to cross to the other side of the sea, Jesus falls asleep (v. 23). As the storm worsens, the disciples become afraid, yelling at Jesus to wake him up saying "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" (Luke 8:24) The disciples' cries echo the words of Psalm 44:23: "Wake up! Why are you sleeping, Lord? Get up! Don't reject us forever!"

The psalmist does not let God off the hook, holding God to account for God's job of pushing back storms of all kinds.

The echoes of the disciples and the psalmist's words have also reverberated in our minds and spirits at different points in our lives. We may even be saying these words right now in our present storms, "Wake up, God! Where are you? Are you just going to let me drown in my suffering?"

When troubles come in our lives, we might feel like God is nowhere to be found. God is there. God is present. The Lord can be found in our honest critiques of the job God is doing in pushing back our suffering and oppression. The Lord can be found in the stories our ancestors told us about "the deeds God did in their days, in days long past" (v. 1). The Lord is present in our honest cries, cries saying to God, "Stand up! Help us! Save us for the sake of your faithful love" (v. 26).

Closing Prayer

God of our tears, thank you for your faithful love. Thank you that your faithfulness is the foundation on which we cry out, grieve, mourn, shout, wail, and honestly express our suffering and oppression. Thank you that you can take it. Continue saving us for the sake of your faithful love. Amen.

DAY 6**Opening Prayer**

God of our doubts, give us courage in suffering to face each day lifting our cries to you. Give us courage in suffering to remember your fulfilled promises and deeds done in our lives in times past. Give us courage to trust you when we cannot see the way forward and when pain and suffering seems neverending. Strengthen our lips and spirits to say, "Bless the Lord forever" anyhow. Amen.

Scripture

Psalm 89:46-52

"How long, O LORD?

Will you hide yourself forever?

How long will your wrath burn like fire?

Remember how short my time is—for what vanity you have created all mortals! Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol? Selah. Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?

Remember, O Lord, how your servant is taunted, how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples, with which your enemies taunt, O LORD, with which they taunted the footsteps of your anointed. Blessed be the LORD forever. Amen and Amen."

(NRSVUE)

Meditation

I remember being in worship in churches during some of the darkest times of my life. I felt so alone in a sea of other worship attenders at many at different points in their lives and faith too. The specific thought I remember thinking during those times was, "I'm just here, God. Worshipping right now when I feel sad, lost, and alone doesn't even make sense. So, I'm going through the motions. But I'm here."

During these dark times, I also felt guilty about going through the motions of worshipping God. Somehow, it didn't feel real. It wasn't until one Good Friday worship service—a service of lament in the Christian calendar—that I felt right at home in God.

Because I was already at a place of lament in my life, that Good Friday service gave me space and permission to both sit with the hardship I was facing that did not make sense AND remember the hope God gives.

That Good Friday service gave me space and permission to say "Bless the Lord forever! Amen and Amen!" because the Lord is the One on whom I can throw my questions. The Lord is the One on whom I can cast my doubt and uncertainty. The Lord is the One to whom I can say "How long will it last? Will you hide yourself forever? Where now are your loving acts from long ago, my Lord—the same ones you promised to David by your own faithfulness?" Bless the Lord forever indeed. Amen and Amen.

Closing Prayer

"Lord, especially when it seems to me that you are absent, give me the grace to trust you. Amen."

(The CEB Lectio Divina Prayer Bible, 2011, p. 734)

Please go to the next page to do Part 2 →

PART 2:**Sunday School Class Lesson for 45 Minutes****Main Idea**

(Based on the theme for that week)

Expressing lament as a disciple of Jesus is not simply naming sadness and despair. It is naming sadness and despair as we point toward our Jesus, our Eternal Hope.

Opening Prayer

God of grace, the pain around us is indescribable. We seek justice every day! We feel defeated every day! The harder we try, the tighter the grip of white supremacy seems to get around our necks. We feel we are fighting alone. You are hiding your face from us, it seems, creator God! How long will we experience this defeat? How long will we suffer the pain? How long before we can breathe the fresh air of equity and justice? We are tired God! We have no more tears to cry. We have no energy. We feel numb. We wish to give up. Look at us, divine Wisdom! Have mercy on your people! Restore hope among us! Show us signs of your presence. Hear our humble cries! Help us Holy God, to not ignore our anger and our frustration, but to share it with you in a way that re-energizes us to continue the work: to seek justice, to demand equity for all, and to stand in the margins with the hurting. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

- Rev. Alka Lyall, Pastor of Broadway UMC-Chicago, IL, GCORR Board Member

Opening Exercise/Activity

[Rivers Of Babylon - YouTube](#)

Listen to the following song from Sweet Honey in the Rock titled "Rivers of Babylon," while thinking about what experiences you may remember of having to sing a familiar song in a new place.

Silently reflect for about 2 minutes. Then, take 5-7 minutes to share your insights with the person seated next to you.

Scripture

Psalm 137

"By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down!
Tear it down! Down to its foundations!"
O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

Reflection/Reading & Corresponding Activity (if any)

The writer of Psalm 137 reflects on the Babylonian exile of the Israelite people. The Israelites longed to return to Jerusalem—their homeland and place of worship. Their enemies and captors, the Edomites, took down the city and, now, ask them to sing songs of joy and play their instruments in a strange land. At the end of the psalm, the psalmist puts their feelings of vengeance into God's hands saying, "A blessing on the one who seizes your children and smashes them against the rock!"

Now, we may feel shock when we read this, judging the Israelites for their words and point of view. However, before we pass judgment, let's consider two readings from our own history that reference Psalm 137:

Frederick Douglass' famous speech "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?"

Douglass uses the opening lines of Psalm 137 to paint the picture for his audience. He says that black slaves being expected to celebrate and sing about the independence of a nation in which they are still captives is wrong. Read an excerpt from his speech below:

This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrevocable ruin!

I can today take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! We wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song; and they who wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth."

A MIDRASH* READING OF PSALM 137

By the waterholes of Mother Country we slung down our yidakis, and cut our bodies and drugged our minds in grief, as we remembered the dreamtime.

And the settlers demanded from us a corroborree performance and a jail sentence, mutual obligation and a souvenir boomerang for the gift shop.

How could we dance and perform sacred traditions for their markets? We have become aliens and inmates, invisible in this eternal land.

If I forget the traditions of the elders, then will the brightly coloured birds fade to gray. Then will the rainbow-serpent permit the sun to dry up all the waterholes, and droughts and floods will come.

Baiaame will remember those white settlers — invaders, will bless those who pay you back for the small-pox and the hangman's noose.

And you, Daughters of the British Empire — ravagers, will be destroyed, for you stole our children, and you smashed their heritage against the jagged reefs.

-Karl Hand

January 31, 2011 | Issue 866, Culture

*Psalm 137 for Invasion Day: A pro-indigenous midrash**
Green Left

**a midrash is an interpretation or reworking of an ancient scripture text, which applies it to contemporary situations.*

Questions for Discussion

1. Has the practice of lamenting—either in personal worship or communal worship—been a part of your faith tradition and culture? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Why do you think Frederick Douglass refers to Psalm 137 in his speech “What to a Slave is the Fourth of July? What is Douglass lamenting?”
3. How does the Midrash reading of Psalm 137 show the similar experiences of the Israelite people and indigenous people? What is being lamented in the indigenous version of Psalm 137?
4. Psalm 137 is a communal lament, the cries of a suffering and oppressed community of people. How might you begin incorporating the practice of lamentation into communal worship at your church/ministry setting? What might this practice look like?

Wrap-Up Time

R.A.C.E. FRAMEWORK

(for white participants only)

- **R**eflect on how white culture has shaped the ways I engage lament as a regular spiritual practice.
- **A**ssess the ways in which I need to lament my wrongdoing individually and communally.
- **C**hallenge the white normative ways I engage lament as a spiritual practice.
- **E**ncounter Jesus in a new way using non-dominant cultural lenses in the practice of lament.

(for BIPOC participants only)

- **R**eflect on how white supremacy has shaped my relationship to lament as a spiritual practice.
- **A**ssess the ways in which I need to engage the practice of lament in my life for racial harm I have experienced.
- **C**laim/Reclaim the practice of lament individually, culturally, and communally.
- **E**ncounter Jesus in a new way, using my understanding of lament and my cultural lenses.

Closing Prayer

Say the following prayer together:

We pray for exiles and refugees;
for those who have been displaced by war,
poverty, discrimination, poison or violence;
for those who have fled their homelands
for safety, for work, for hope,
for those who have been taken from their
homes into slavery.

We pray with them and join in their song.

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.

We pray for all oppressors,
that their eyes may be opened,
that their hearts be changed,
that they find their own true, deepest
longings for life.

We pray for them and plead for their
conversion.

For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth,
saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

We lament the families that are broken,
the cultures that are destroyed,
the traditions that are lost,
the voices that are silenced.
We weep with them and join in their song.

How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

We join in their grief.
We honor their terror.
We accept their anger.
We lift their cry.
We stand with them and join in their song.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!"

We pray for the end to all violence
and the end to all the offspring of injustice,
that evil itself be demolished
and its spawn eliminated,
that every human heart be free of fear.
We rage with all victims of injustice
and join in their song.

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

We pray for exiles and refugees.
We are among them:
for until our sisters and brother are restored,
our home is not whole or safe.
We pray with them, and join in their silence.

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PART 1:
Daily devotions for six days

Theme:
REPENT

DAY 1

Opening Prayer

Transformative God, we praise you for making all humanity. We praise you for grieving the day you made human beings (Genesis 6:6) once You saw our inclination to always choose wickedness in all its forms—racism, sexism, elitism, classism, and favoritism. Forgive us for choosing lesser ways and lesser gods rather than You. Give us the strength to live lives that produce fruits of repentance. Help us not to repent in vain but rather honor You in our being and doing. Grant us abundant grace to always be willing to repent of our participation in systems of injustice and oppression. Grant us courage to turn from the evil powers of this world every day toward your equity, justice, and reparative work in the world. Amen.

Scripture

Matthew 3:1-3

"In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" (NIV)

Meditation

The most brutal winter I remember is the blizzard of 1996. I was a senior in high school and the snow would not stop falling! It made my friends and me happy because school was canceled for 2 weeks! Emergency road crews kept reminding drivers via news and radio outlets to stay off the roads because they were working hard to clear them. They plowed day and night to make a path for vehicles. This image comes to mind when I think about John the Baptist, a street preacher, telling the people to repent. John the Baptist is preparing the road of people's hearts—just like Isaiah and other prophets did down through the ages—for Jesus' coming.

The act of repentance is not a one-time action but a way of life. What ways do we need to repent of today? How have we been complicit in the evil systems of this world in keeping others oppressed? What are the areas of our lives, mindsets, and actions we need to turn around from each day to 'prepare the way for the Lord' already at work in the world?

As Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg writes, "...tshuvah is about coming back to where we are supposed to be, returning to the person we know we're capable of being—coming home, in humility and with intentionality, to behave as the person we'd like to believe we are" (On Repentance and Repair, p. 25). It is the work of returning to the person our Creator knows we were made to be.

Closing Prayer

God of infinite grace and infinite chances, thank you for gracing us each day with new sunrises and sunsets and more opportunities to choose "life and prosperity" rather than "death and adversity" (Deut. 30:15). Help us remember that repentance is just as much about the call to prepare the way of the Lord each day as it is about our turning away from our participation in the oppressive, evil powers of this world. Help us repent of and renounce, resist, and reject the sinful and evil systems that seek to dehumanize us and crush the spirits and souls of the least and oppressed among us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

DAY 2

Opening Prayer

Lord of all creation, thank you for coming into the world making it possible for us to live in postures of repentance each day. Remind us that turning to you, God, in repentance is not just for those with power, prestige, status, wealth, and position. Remind us that turning to you, God, in repentance is for men and women, white and black, indigenous, people of color, differently abled and neurotypical, and those considered culturally inferior and culturally superior. Remind us, Lord, that living lives in repentance starts with You. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Scripture

Acts 20:20-21

"You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."

(NIV)

Meditation

Growing up, much of my theological background was moderately conservative and evangelical. So pastors, lay leaders, and church members among whom I was raised believed it was their responsibility to save people from their sins. Many even became anxious when they would share the gospel of Jesus with others and they would not accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.

I realized, when thinking about my own faith and theological heritage, the ways we have harmed other nations and cultures by adopting a (white) savior complex. It is defined as "an ideology that a white person acts upon from a position of superiority to rescue a BIPOC – community or person." ([What Is White Savior Complex and Why Is It Harmful? \(health.com\)](https://www.health.com/what-is-white-savior-complex-and-why-is-it-harmful/)).

White missionaries and pastors throughout the history of church evangelization historically went into communities of color to force them to "turn to God in repentance and have faith in Jesus" (Acts 20:21).

Even though I grew up in the Black church tradition, many church members who served on our evangelism team believed in and had adopted the white savior complex. As a result, when sharing the gospel of Jesus with others, they would do so with a superior, paternalistic attitude.

As disciples of Jesus, we are not to force anyone to turn to God. As disciples of Jesus, we are to declare who Jesus is and will always be to all nations and peoples—authentic to their context—making room for the work of the Holy Spirit to turn people's hearts to God in repentance so they claim faith in Jesus. It is God who saves, delivers, and works repentance in God's creation.

Closing Prayer

God, please. As I turn, as I turn, turn me toward justice. Toward mercy, toward reconciliation, toward learning, toward growth, toward becoming, toward You. May it be so. Amen.
- Rev. Dr. Laura Norvell, Pastor at Faith UMC, Rockville, MD

DAY 3

Opening Prayer

Just like David prayed in Psalm 51, "Create in us clean hearts, God, and renew right spirits in us." Lord, we know that repentance is not just about forgiveness. Otherwise, Jesus' mission would have stopped at the Last Supper. Give us divine understanding to realize that Jesus' death was also so that we could live lives worthy of the calling, live lives that prove your divine love and grace are real. Help us remember that repentance is about naming how we have harmed our neighbors, owning our harmful actions, and truly feeling sorrow in our hearts. Only when the hurt and harm of our neighbors hits our hearts can we move toward any kind of reparative work with them in your name. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Scripture

Jeremiah 31:19

"After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth."
(NIV)

Meditation

Brené Brown became popular for her work on shame and vulnerability. She has done numerous interviews and TED talks and was contracted by Netflix for a special on her work. One video on empathy versus sympathy has Brown explaining the difference between the two terms. Sympathy is defined as "feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune" whereas empathy involves us "investing our hearts into others" lives reassuring them they are not alone" ([What Is Empathy? – R-Squared \(r2hub.org\)](https://www.r2hub.org/what-is-empathy/)).

The action of empathy is often referred to as feeling *with* another rather than feeling *for* another.

One can say that in the Jeremiah 31 scripture, the prophet feels *with* God for the way in which he has offended God and humiliated himself in his youth. Jeremiah feels sorrow for what he has done – an inward pain. We might even go so far as to say he feels empathy for himself in the choices he made and, as a result, how he offended God.

Feelings of shame and humiliation often accompany our feeling sorrow over what we have done and how we have harmed someone else. Isn't this the first step to living a life of repentance every day – getting in touch with our inward pain about how we have harmed ourselves, God, and others? Isn't this the first step to repairing what we have broken and those we have oppressed – to truly feel, in our bodies, what we have done?

Closing Prayer

Loving God, we have strayed from your kingdom values – values of love, grace, humility and repentance - claiming the values of the culture – values of oppression, greed, white supremacy, and capitalism. Help us truly repent, O God. Help us come to divine understanding – not just in our minds and spirits, but in our physical bodies too. God of all Truth, give us courage and grace to turn around and walk in ways that honor You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 4**Opening Prayer**

Gracious God, we praise you for your divine regret that did not just remain at feeling sorry for humanity or being sorry that You created us. We praise you and thank you that your divine regret moved You to send Jesus – the One who made repentance possible for us.

Lord, help us to feel godly sorrow when we have harmed our neighbors. Help us feel godly sorrow seeing the sinful systems of this world that divide us against one another – white against black people indigenous people, and people of color, man against woman, gay against straight, young against old. Help us feel godly sorrow seeing war, famine, disease, and senseless death in our world. Then, give us holy discontent every day to roll up our sleeves and work together with your Spirit to repair what is broken. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Scripture**2 Corinthians 7:9-10**

"Yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."
(NIV)

Meditation

The apostle Paul made many journeys back to the church at Corinth after his first letter to them. The church community dealt with many of the divisions we currently have in our culture now, except the context of their time was different.

Paul wrote the second letter addressing two main issues – pagan worship and not continuing to financially support the believers in Judea. These two issues alone created other divisions, namely disunity and rebellion against Paul's apostolic authority.

Every time I read this verse, the phrase that sticks out to me is "godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret." Stop and reflect on that phrase for a moment within the context of the church at Corinth's time and all they faced.

In all their division and disordered allegiances to God, Paul wrote that he was "happy because your sorrow led you to repentance," naming God as the One who willed it.

When is the last time we were so sorrowful about something we did, said, or were complicit in that it led us to turn from that way of thinking and turn toward God's life-giving action? Our sorrow over being complicit in our participation in systems of oppression and injustice that harm our neighbor and dishonor God must lead to repentance that leads to salvation – salvation that creates and re-creates wholeness, healing, and completeness in our neighbors and us. Otherwise, our sorrow is cheap and meaningless.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg puts it this way: "The reason to do repentance work is not because you are BAD BAD BAD until you DO THESE THINGS but because we should care about each other, about taking care of each other, about making sure we're all OK." (Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, p. 58)

DAY 4***Closing Prayer***

God of Justice that created all people without exception in your image, open our eyes to realize the dignity and worth of every human being. Open our ears to hear the cries of those wounded by racial and tribal discrimination and their lament for change. Open our hearts to repent of hate-filled attitudes, behaviors, and speech that demeans others. Let us repent for not doing enough to speak up, to say, "No! That's not right!" In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 5**Opening Prayer**

Gracious and merciful God, we praise you and thank you for your faithful and forgiving love. We often take your lovingkindness for granted thinking we are entitled to grace and mercy as your covenant people. Help us remember your covenant love comes with justice for all people, not some or the ones we deem as being deserving. Help us remember your covenant love calls us to hold our political, national, and religious leaders accountable for the work to which they were elected and to which you have called them. Help us remember the only way to honor You, hear from heaven and remain in your forgiving love is for us to turn from our wicked ways. Help us to turn from the ways in which systemic racism and structural oppression have dehumanized us. Help us to turn toward your light and love. Amen.

Scripture**2 Chronicles 7:14**

"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

(NIV)

Meditation

Is there someone in your life who will show up for your big events but with whom you seem to have no daily relationship? If we are honest, sometimes we are the people who have been present during public ceremonies and celebrations but absent in the everyday in our relationships with others.

Solomon and the people were worshipping the Lord remembering and "rejoicing with happy hearts for the goodness the Lord had done for David, for Solomon, and for His people Israel" (2 Chronicles 7:10).

God reminds them that their worship and repentance must always be based on the One who will forever be with them and has been faithful to their ancestors and to them. In fact, God tells Solomon how he and the people are to respond: "If I close the sky so there is no rain" (v. 13), the people are still to call God's name, humble themselves, pray and seek God's face, and turn from their evil ways.

The result? Then, God will hear them from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land.

In what ways do we focus more on how others perceive us rather than focusing on the ways God calls us to repent of our evil ways and love our neighbors? How is God calling us to become more mature followers of Jesus?

Closing Prayer

Creator of all peoples, nations, and cultures, we have been called by your name, and so we are your people. Give us courage and strength each day to repent of the lesser calls we answer, repent of the people and places to whom we pledge our allegiance, and turn to You so that You, the divine healer, can forgive our sin and heal our lands. Amen.

DAY 6**Opening Prayer**

God of repairing what has been broken, thank you for your reparative and faithful love as seen in your Son, Jesus. Help us by your Spirit to live in what repentance looks like when done your way. Help us by your Spirit to understand You do not just call us to turn away from our sin and walk in the way of Jesus. You call us to become co-laborers with you in repairing what we have broken in our world and the people whom we have oppressed and harmed. Amen.

Scripture**Luke 19:8**

"But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

(NIV)

Meditation

Reparations. The word has been used in the last few years in conjunction with conversations on slavery and how to compensate African Americans for the harm that happened over centuries. The word has also been used when discussing land reparations to Native Americans. The word alone is a lightning rod in this country.

According to Pew Research Center, "about three-quarters or more of white adults oppose reparations, and so do a majority of Latinos and Asian Americans." ([Why most Americans oppose reparations for slavery : NPR](#)).

This opposition is for several reasons. However, the primary reason lies in the fact that the idea of reparations challenges our American cultural values of working hard and earning what we receive.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, author of *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, had this to say about the reparative part of repentance: "Without transformation, there's no repentance. There's only the same harm, again and again, perpetrated in different ways" (p. 36).

Zacchaeus was transformed by Jesus talking to him and inviting himself to Zacchaeus' house. The tax collector, who had cheated other Jewish people keeping money for himself, was moved to give half of his possessions to the poor and pay back four times the amount to anyone he cheated. This is reparations! But it wasn't a performative action to make a privileged Zacchaeus feel better about what he had done. It was Zacchaeus' transformation after meeting Jesus that moved him to repent of his actions by repairing the harm he had done.

Please go to the next page to do Part 2 →

DAY 6***Closing Prayer***

"Jesus, we repent and return to you, as you call us in Amos 4-5. We hear your call: Return to me. Return to me and seek me. Return to me, seek me, and do justice. Jesus, we repent, confessing our complicity in evil systems, our apathy towards pain, our pure enjoyment of things that satisfy us, our inability to forgive just as Christ has forgiven us. Thank you for being born as a refugee into a tiny ethnic minority, oppressed and persecuted to death by the empire, and yet never fighting back in the form of empire but embodying self-sacrificing resistance."

- *Rev. Sandra Maria Van Opstal,*

*"A Liturgy of Longing," A Rhythm of Prayer:
A Collection of Meditations for Renewal*

PART 2:**Sunday School Class Lesson for 45 Minutes****Main Idea**

(Based on the theme for that week)

Repentance is not the offender simply saying, "I'm sorry." Repentance involves the offender owning the harm done and repairing it.

Opening Prayer

Forgiving God, thank you for saving us. Thank you for delivering us from sin and freeing us through the cross. Sometimes we take your forgiveness for granted. Sometimes we take the forgiveness of others whom we have harmed for granted. Forgive us and help us remember that repentance is about more than saying I'm sorry. Help us remember that repentance your way means repairing what we have broken. Help us remember that repentance your way means we forever surrender to being "restorers of broken streets, repairers of broken walls" (Isaiah 58)—especially in the lives of those we have harmed. Amen.

Opening Exercise/Activity

Pre-work for group leader/facilitator:

Fold an 8.5x11" paper in half. On one side of the paper, write a series of "I'm sorry" statements. (E.g. I'm sorry for breaking your vase, I'm sorry for saying that unkind remark to you, I'm sorry for driving your car and leaving it without gas, etc.)

Write 10 "I'm sorry" statements and 10 questions aimed at repairing the harm. On the other side of the paper, write questions oriented towards repairing the harm that was done. For example, for "I'm sorry for breaking your vase," you could write "What can I do to fix it/replace it?" Cut them out and separate them, putting all the "I'm sorry" statements together and all the reparation questions together.

Instructions for activity:

Divide small group participants into 2 groups with an even number of people in each group. The groups should not exceed 10 people. Tell each group that once you distribute the pieces of paper, the 2 groups should not show their pieces of paper to the other group. Give the "I'm sorry" statements to one group. Give the questions to the other group. The group with the "I'm sorry" statements must match their statements with the group that has questions aimed towards repairing harm done.

Give small group participants 5 minutes for this activity. Once each statement finds its question match, then call the small group back together and reflect on the activity for 10 minutes using the below questions as a guide:

- Why do you think the "I'm sorry" statements were matched with the reparation questions?
- What did this activity teach you about repentance?
- What did you discover about yourself and/or the people you connected with in this activity?

Scripture**Isaiah 1:16-17**

"Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."
(NIV)

**Reflection/Reading &
Corresponding Activity (if any)**

Isaiah 1:16-17 gives us a vivid picture of true repentance—repentance that accounts for both the harm done and the repair God calls for. The first action "wash and make yourselves clean," calls Judah and Jerusalem—the geographical people to whom Isaiah is speaking—to turn from the evil they are doing. The Hebrew word for "wash" here translates as "to wash off or away, to bathe."

At this point, our theological memories are likely causing us to think about the "bath" we receive as believers in the sacrament of baptism. Both symbolically and in the baptismal vows taken, we publicly commit to die to our allegiance to sin and evil, pledging our allegiance to God alone.

But the act of baptism does not stop there. If it does for us as believers, it is incomplete. God, through Isaiah's words, calls Judah, Jerusalem, and us today to repair the harm we have done to our neighbors and to the vulnerable: Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow.

True repentance acknowledges the harm done in the past and in the present and considers what the harmed neighbor and most vulnerable among us needs to become whole and healed. Then, true repentance vows to move forward transformed, no longer engaging in the same patterns of harm.

Questions for Discussion

1. How did you understand repentance prior to engaging this week's Lenten theme? How do you understand repentance now?
2. How does engaging repentance God's way dismantle our addiction to quick fixes and instant repair when we have harmed someone?
3. How does the American church need to repent and reckon with its historical and present harm of the 'other' in the name of God? What might it look like for the American church to repair the harm?
4. Why does God call us, as disciples of Jesus, to engage in regular repentance in our daily lives?
5. What has God called you to repent of both individually and communally during this week of Lent?

Wrap-Up Time

R.A.C.E. FRAMEWORK

(for white participants only)

- **R**eflect on how white culture has shaped the ways I engage repentance as a regular spiritual practice.
- **A**ssess the ways in which I need to repent of wrongdoing against my neighbor and turn more to God and others.
- **C**hallenge the white normative ways I engage the practice of repentance individually and communally.
- **E**ncounter Jesus in a new way using non-dominant cultural lenses in the practice of repentance.

(for BIPOC participants only)

- **R**eflect on my privilege and participation in white supremacy and how it has shaped my relationship with repentance as a spiritual practice.
- **A**ssess the ways in which I need to engage repentance in my life towards those who have harmed me.
- **C**laim/Reclaim the ways I engage the practice of repentance individually, in my culture, and communally.
- **E**ncounter Jesus in a new way, in my understanding of repentance, using my cultural lenses.

Closing Prayer:

Merciful God, help us find our way again. Turn us back towards the road spotted with your other pilgrims, wayfarers, and repentant servants. Remind us that your way is the way of returning. Guide us by your Spirit and by your light. Make us remember the power of the Spirit within us. Make us remember the gifts of our minds, our hearts, and our bodies that you have bestowed on us, that we would use them to honor the directives and the invitations you lay upon us. Place your wounded hands upon our broken hearts and turn us towards you. Lord of Light, Lord of Life, Lord of Resurrection. Amen.
 - Rev. Sandra Maria Van Opstal, "A Liturgy of Longing,"
A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal

PART 1:
Daily devotions for six days

Theme:
HOPE

DAY 1

Opening Prayer

Hope of the world—that's who you are, loving God. Even in the middle of your wilderness journey that ultimately leads to Calvary, you breathe hope, abundance, love, and life into your people. You remind us that we can count on you—that all people can count on you—to walk with us toward a future with hope. We hope to become more generous with one another, We hope to become more patient with one another. We hope for more courage to work in concert with you, loving God, to battle sin, sullenness, and suffering so that all may have enough grace, enough to eat, enough space, enough fullness of life. Continue to fill us with hope as we accompany you on this Lenten journey. Amen.

Scripture

Exodus 20:1-3

"Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."
(NRSV)

Meditation

Our sovereign and loving God has created every human creature on earth. When the Israelites of old were enslaved and oppressed, our sovereign and loving God delivered them and freed them and led them into lands that were fecund and welcoming. The challenge for the Israelites—and for us today—is that we sometimes forget that God is forever delivering us and leading us all to freedom, flourishing, and right living. We forget and so are tempted to elevate and worship other gods, seeking in vain the deliverance that can only come from the divine deliverer. Racism, tribalism, suppression of historical truths we do not like, our embrace of might-makes-right ideals, and the notion that God is only white and only represents one political ideology and is on the side of North America—these are all definitions of false gods. The true God-in-Christ saved the Israelites, saved Gentiles, saves us all from our own sin, and is working to redeem the whole world and to set at liberty all of those who are oppressed. Make no mistake: the God of scripture loves each of us and offers salvation to each of us. Let us place nothing before our sovereign and loving God.

Closing Prayer

Strong and compassionate deliverer and God, we confess that we sometimes place other gods before you. We make decisions rooted in anger, fear, political frenzy, racial prejudice, or selfishness which push aside your truth and your will for our lives. Your voice is so clear, Hope of the World. Forgive us and help us to listen more earnestly for your call in our lives. You alone are the God we desire to serve. Thank you for showing us your ways, through Christ who comes to make plain your vision. In his saving name. Amen.

DAY 2**Opening Prayer**

Dear Guiding Light, I agree with the psalmist, who declares your instruction to be perfect, your rulings to be faithful, and your commandments to be pure. I glory in your mighty works and bless you for sending Jesus to save all of us from sin and death. Open your word to us now, so that our daily lives may reflect the love, mercy, and justice you pour out on all creation. Make me an instrument and a living testimony to your lovingkindness and care. Amen.

Scripture**Psalm 19:14**

"May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."
(NIV)

Meditation

The closing prayer in Psalm 19 is that all that the writer says, does, believes, and even secretly thinks all be acceptable and pleasing to God. Consider that. We who seek a closer and more faith-filled relationship with God typically seek to do what we believe God considers right. We may pray, give tithes, be courteous to those we meet, try to keep our homes free of too much discord and meanness. But we live in the real world where we are sometimes compelled to make difficult decisions, to encounter people we do not understand, and to fall back on ungodly prejudices and beliefs to control our thinking.

Are your thoughts Christ-filled when you encounter a homeless woman pestering you for money? What words come to mind when politicians raise taxes to support public education, yet your children and grandchildren go to private schools? Which meditation is in your heart when Black and brown people demonstrate in the streets against police violence in their community? Are you detached? Are you angry? Is your first response to bristle when the words, "racism" or "discrimination" are uttered?

The psalmist's prayer is that we love God and follow God's commandments and love others so much so that even our very thoughts reflect godly love, mercy, forbearance, compassion, and justice for all.

What thoughts do you have that are pleasing to God? Are the meditations of your heart in this moment acceptable in God's sight?

Closing Prayer

Merciful and mighty God, I have no doubt that your word enlightens and guides us in the paths of right living. You continue to teach us your ways and give us second chances to focus our hearts, minds and souls on you. As the psalmist implores, "Clean me of any unknown sin and save your servant"—me!—from willful sin. Don't let them rule me. I want to live so you can use me as an instrument of healing, love, reconciliation, and peace all the days of my life. Thank you for your son, Jesus, who walks with me and all of us on this journey. Amen.

DAY 3**Opening Prayer**

"My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness!" O God, if I could anchor my hope in those words alone, what a change I could make in my own life, in my home, in my community, in my world! And, so, I'm hoping, Lord. WE are hoping, Almighty One. You promise that if we abide in you, that you will abide in us and change the world for the better through us. You have called us for this moment to witness to the power of holy love and soul-changing relationships with Christ and with one another. Teach us to anchor our hopes in you and to seek your face in every person we encounter. Amen.

Scripture**1 Corinthians 1:27-31**

"Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose people that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies'? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. That's why we have the saying, 'If you're going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God.'
(The (MSG) by Eugene Peterson)

Meditation

The earliest Christian churches were established on the radical concept that the most learned, financially endowed, or socially elevated people were NOT automatic leaders. Rather, the early movement of Christianity invited rich and poor, young and old, Jews and Greeks, women and men, and servants and masters to the common welcome table set by Jesus Christ. Further, it was often those of lowest estate who had heard and embraced the miraculous stories of Jesus and shared them in places where various people gathered. Church was the setting where social, racial, class, and gender-role barriers were left at the door so that all could learn of and worship God in spirit, equity, and truth. The hope inherent in the Jesus Way was and is that those whom society deems as "nobodies" were as anointed, as beloved, as worthy of salvation, as important to Almighty God as the "somebodies" who were elevated only according to human standards.

Does your faith community and social circle reflect that inclusion today? Are people of the lowest socio-economic status seated as equals in worship and leadership in your church? Does your congregation reflect the diverse races, classes, and circumstances of everyone in your city or town? Do you regularly hear voices of people who are poor, immigrants, people of other races, people under 25, or LGBTQIA people in your worship and Bible studies? What would it take this Lenten season for your faith community to make lasting connections with those you have previously excluded?

Closing Prayer

Dear loving God, we are grateful that we are all "somebodies" in your kingdom. And we admit that we tend to exclude people whose lives, cultural and ethnic locations, orientations, economic realities, ages, and first languages are foreign to us. We confess that we have made "nobodies" out of members of your family whom you created in your divine image. As you forgive us, remind us of your calling and pester us, God of Love, that we may build more bridges and mend more rifts that divide your human family. Help us to honor those we deem "different," as we remember that we are "different" too, and that is only your grace that makes us all "somebodies" in your eternal home of welcome. Teach us to love boldly and to put that love into actions that change the world. In the name of our Savior, the Christ, Amen.

DAY 4**Opening Prayer**

"God is change. When the Israelites, first brought out of Egyptian slavery, built a golden calf, God became angry enough to destroy them. We recall the curiosity and recounting that Moses brought to God allowing for a change of heart, and we invite that same spirit of curiosity and recounting into our being. We remember the God of change." (from the "Liturgy of Invitation" by Samantha Houser, p. 16 in *A Liturgy for All Bodies. New Words for A New World.* (Cyclical Publishing, 2022))

Scripture**John 2:19-22**

"Jesus answered, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up. The Jewish leaders replied, 'It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?' But the temple Jesus was talking about was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken." (Common English Bible, CEB)

Meditation

When Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the temple, it was not because people were conducting business. Jesus, son of a carpenter, knew the importance of commerce and making a living. Moreover, Jesus understood that the buying and selling of animals for Passover rituals had historically been part of normal temple operations. What Jesus is protesting is the entire cultic practice of ritual animal sacrifice as a central practice of the faith.

In his audacious claim that he could re-create a temple in three days, Jesus is referring to himself as the embodied temple, the living sacrifice, chosen by God to take on human sin once and for all. Jesus challenges the notion that either golden idols or sacrifices of food and beast were sufficient for God's purposes. In the new Jesus kingdom, we are to sacrifice our very souls to God, just as Jesus sacrificed his very life so that we can become new creations who emulate our crucified and risen Savior. Through his death on the cross, all humanity is redeemed and made ready for the work of changing the world for good.

So, what are the old temple practices that we should leave behind to become temples of goodness through Christ? What harmful stuff must be torn down in our hearts, souls, and faith communities and replaced with more welcome, more love, more embrace of those who are "different," more boldness in bringing out justice and equity in Jesus' holy name? What idols must we replace in our lives to become more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ?

Closing Prayer

"Almighty God, who is able to make all things new and who is able to restore life anew every morning, help me never to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the constant renewing of my mind through the Spirit of Christ. Amen." (from p. 108 of *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People* by Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, published by Upper Room Books, 1990)

DAY 5**Opening Prayer**

O Great Creator, you are the God who gives colors to our lives. In times of our sadness and weakness both of body and soul, you are reminding us that we are not alone. That we can carry each other's burdens. So that heavy loads will be lighter. If problems and difficulties will put us down, we will kneel and gather our strength and we will rise up. In ripen age, we will always remember that as long as there is hope, there is life. You are our hope and strength in these trying times. We put our trust in Jesus, our living hope. Amen.

- *Benjie B. Benitez, OSL*

*Pastor at First UMC - Dagupon Temple
Dagupan City, Philippines*

Scripture

Matthew 5:43-47

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your God in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"
(NRSV)

Meditation

A woman had a supervisor who was extremely hard to work with. He noticed immediately that she was smarter, more efficient, and more of a team player than he was. He assumed she was after his job (she was not), so he kept a close eye on her, second-guessing her decisions and changing deadlines and goals without notice.

The woman, a Christian who believed in the transforming power of prayer, began to pray every day for her supervisor. She put him at the top of her prayer list, asking God daily to bless him with excellent health, a happy marriage, career success, and peace and contentment. She prayed for him every day for six months.

Did he make miraculous changes? Not really. But she noticed changes in herself. She became less anxious about her job. She became more focused on supporting the work team and being more present with people she loved.

Her supervisor apparently sensed that she was more engaged in her own work/life balance and, therefore, did not seem as "threatening" in her ambitions.

Eight months in, the supervisor accepted another job in another agency. When he left, the woman shook his hand and said, "You taught me a lot."

He was taken aback but replied, "Thank you. I think I learned some things, too."

It is hard to love an "enemy," yet we believe God's intervention can bring about good change. Try it.

DAY 5***Closing Prayer***

God who loves my enemies and my friends, you promise to prepare tables of abundance in the presence of our foes. Show me the way to pray for my enemies and to pray and act in ways that prevent me from being an ungodly enemy to others. Remind us all that our common enemies are cruelty, greed, hatred, fear of those we call "strangers," indifference in the face of need, and unwillingness to humble ourselves enough to be your change-making disciples. Show us how to remake ourselves so that a table is prepared for all who are hungry in body and spirit. Thank you for the guidance of your son, our Savior, the Living Christ. Amen.

DAY 6**Opening Prayer**

Hope of the World, we thank you for inviting us to be your disciples. We thank you for understanding our humanness and our brokenness and for loving us anyway. May we see and feel the grace you extend as a gift which we are to share freely with one another and with the whole world. For Jesus comes to claim every soul upon this earth, not just those of us in churches, in nice neighborhoods, in the right clubs, and in the favorite political and social groups. As followers of Jesus Christ, we seek to share with and learn from all your people, including those we are tempted to ignore. Grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days, Holy One. Amen.

Scripture**Zephaniah 3:9-13**

"In the end I will turn things around for the people. I'll give them a language undistorted and unpolluted, words to address God in worship and, united, to serve me with their shoulders to the wheel. They'll come from beyond the Ethiopian rivers, they'll come praying—all my scattered, exiled people will come home with offerings for worship. You'll no longer have to be ashamed of all those acts of rebellion. I'll have gotten rid of your arrogant leaders. No more pious strutting on my holy hill! I'll leave a core of people among you who are poor in spirit—what's left of Israel that's really Israel. They'll make their home in God. This core holy people will do no wrong. They won't lie, won't use words to flatter or seduce. Content with who they are and where they are, unanxious, they'll live in peace."
(The (MSG) by Eugene Peterson)

Meditation

Even as he condemns the disobedience of Judah, the prophet Zephaniah also casts a vision of God gathering the scattered community from across the world, bringing them back together to worship and serve. The prophet imagines those who have lived by God's word and who have been faithful, even in exile, as becoming a holy core of the new community of God, the new and anointed Israel. These remnants of the faithful will live out God's truth, and live in humility, justice, and peace. What a vision to cast then and now!

Our 21st century society is rocked by violence, political warfare, racial oppression, disease, hunger, and climate change. Is it even possible for people who follow Christ to image a world of peace? We pray, sing, and hear sermons about the power of Almighty God to transform us and the world; but do we really stand on the promises of God? Are we as God's people willing to cast our every care on God and follow Christ to become co-healers of God's world? Our only hope is in knowing and serving the God who created the world and who has sustained it and us since the beginning of time.

Zephaniah believed that God's realm was at hand, despite the generations of struggle by his people. We, like that prophet, are called to believe, receive, and do God's will. God's promises are solid, and we can place all our trust in God-in-Christ. Never forget: God is with us.

Closing Prayer

Jesus, you are here with us, and you have been with us for generations. We believe in God, who has created and is creating, and we believe that you are leading us to discover new truths and to be agents of understanding, peace with justice, healing, and love in this and every land. Give us the vision of Zephaniah so that we can see clearly that you are leading us on right paths to new ways of being your people. Help us to love and accept on another as friends and co-workers, even those we never before imagined working with. For you have called and redeemed all people from every corner of this world, and your love and grace are sufficient. Teach us to trust that grace and to live it out on your terms, not our own. We praise you, Jesus, son of the wonder-working God. Amen.

Please go to the next page to do Part 2 →

PART 2:**Sunday School Class Lesson for 45 Minutes****Main Idea**

(Based on the theme for that week)

We Can't Help God Change the World If We Don't Have Hope.

Opening Prayer

"Dear Lord, You have shown me what a bridge Love is across my wild rivers of anger and my deep valleys of mistrust; how it can tame that uncompromising beast, Guilt, and its constant companion, Anxiety. You have shown me how Love warms without burning, cools without chilling, holds without crushing. Whenever I may be hungry, Love can fill my emptiness. Whenever I may be wounded, Love can heal. However, down I may feel, one touch of its pleasure can make me a saint. There are times, though, when Love expects more of me than I have to give. If it is possible, let that cup pass from me, but if not ... Amen. (from *For All Seasons. Prayers, Proclamations, Readings, Responses, Planned Spontaneity, Personal Meditation and Corporate Worship* by John Winn. Published in 2001 by The Preachers' Aid Society of New England, p. 42)

Opening Exercise/Activity

Invite class members to pair off. Taking turns, each person should tell their partner one social/political/moral issue or concern that seems to them beyond God's control and beyond their own ability to address. The other partner is to listen without interruption, then offer a brief prayer for God's intervention, revelation, or idea for how the faith community might learn and do more. Allow about 10 minutes max for this activity.

Scripture

"So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith."

(Galatians 6:9-10, NRSV)

Reflection/Reading & Corresponding Activity (if any)

LEADER: Ask a strong, expressive reader (or invite group members to take turns) to read this excerpt from, "Stir What You've Got," a sermon by the late Rev. Dr. Joseph E. Lowery, a contemporary of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and himself a civil rights era icon.

Stir What You've Got

What Paul told Timothy in his second letter was this: "Timothy, I know you are wrestling with some problems, but I want to remind you to stir up the gifts of God that I know are within you." A lot of us are like Timothy; worried about what we don't have when we are not using what we do have. God has given us what we need. Just stir up what you've got.

...Don't let that baptismal fire you got when you joined the church die out. Don't let the fire simmer down to a flickering flame, growing weak and dim from negative windows of doubt from within and from without...

...Paul is suggesting that all of us have some gifts that we are only partially using. Ordinary people have some physical strength that they never use, Remember the old TV show "The Incredible Hulk"? He was an ordinary person until something stirred within him and ignited his extraordinary strength. It is the same thing with us. When you stir up what's inside of you, you gain new strength...

Stir up your intellectual energy. You just don't know how much brain power you have. I've read that we use only 24 - 33 percent of our brains. Let God stir up your intellectual energy and see what you might be able to accomplish. Some of us have physical energy, some of us have intellectual energy, and some of us are lazy spiritually. Our spiritual energy must undergird all that we are and all that we do. Without a true relationship with God in Christ Jesus, we are in trouble... Spiritual energy needs to be stirred up. God gives us what is needed to build us, not destroy us; to build us, not destroy us; not to belittle, but to enlarge; not to be mean or demean, but to inspire.

Paul reminded Timothy of who he was and where he came from. Paul told Timothy that he knew his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice. They had good stuff in them, so Timothy came from good stock. He just needed to rekindle and stir it up...

...Stir up determination. Determine to try it God's way by trying love and forgiveness...Stir up grace. There is no secret what God can do when you stir up the gifts that are within you.

I was having tea with a friend, and I didn't remember putting sugar in the cup. It was still bitter when I took my first sip. Before I could add sugar, my friend reminded me that I had already added the sugar and that it probably was at the bottom of the cup. When I checked, sure enough, there was the sugar. I just need to stir it up. When I did, I could taste the sweetness, and it was good to the last drop. That's the way God needs us to be. He needs us to stir up what he has already deposited in us. Look somewhere down in the bottom of your dedication. It's there! ...Whatever you have within you, stir it up!

Excerpt from Singing The Lord's Song in A Strange Land by Joseph E. Lowery, published by Abingdon Press, 2011, pp. 37-40. Reprinted with permission.

Questions for Discussion

1. Name a time when you spoke or acted on behalf of another person or group of persons whom you believed were treated unfairly in a public arena. What action did you take? (i.e., wrote a letter to a politician, attended a public meeting, attended a prayer vigil, etc.)
2. What makes some of us "grow weary of doing what is right" when it comes to addressing discrimination against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color? Against poor people? Against immigrants?
3. Think about the issue or concern you talked about in our opening exercise. What gift has God given you that you might "stir up" to address it? What one small thing are you willing to do?

Wrap-Up Time

R.A.C.E. FRAMEWORK

(for white participants only)

- **R**eflect on how white culture has shaped the ways I understand hope.
- **A**ssess the ways in which I need to practice hope in my life and bring hope to others.
- **C**hallenge the white normative ways I engage Jesus and my faith individually and communally in the practice of hope.
- **E**ncounter Jesus in a new way using non-dominant cultural lenses in my understanding and practice of hope.

(for BIPOC participants only)

- **R**eflect on how white culture has shaped my relationship to hope.
- **A**ssess the ways in which my neighbors and I need to experience hope.
- **C**laim/Reclaim the ways I engage the practice of hope individually, culturally, and communally.
- **E**ncounter Jesus in a new way, in my understanding of hope, using my cultural lenses.

Closing Prayer

Stir us up, O God, and renew our spirits, that we may walk in your ways. Teach us how to ask for help, for love, for prayers from this community so that we are strengthened and equipped to bear the burdens of those who are shunned, those who are alone, those who are blamed for their poverty or illness, or those whose stories are deemed unjustly as not worthy of being told. Stir up in us your divine love, your wide mercy, your deep justice, and your radical reconciliation, that all may know spiritual and physical enough-ness in your holy name, Jesus. Amen.

PART 1:
Daily devotions for six days

Theme:
LIBERATE

DAY 1

Opening Prayer

Lord of true liberation, thank You for coming to die for the redemption and freedom of all creation. Help me to die to my selfish ways and desires—the ways and desires that undermine and destroy divine liberation for all. God, grant me grace to live into divine liberation in my mind, heart, and spirit. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Scripture

Job 3:18-19

"The captives are completely at ease; they do not hear the voice of their oppressor. Both the small and the great are there, and the slave is set free from his master."

(Apologetics Study Bible)

Meditation

Job's words are part of his opening speech in Job 3 in which he curses the day he was born. The unimaginable suffering and loss Job experienced is well known in the Hebrew Bible. However, Job's monologues about his suffering are less well known.

Job speaks about death in chapter 3 wondering why he was not stillborn, asking, "Why didn't I die as I came from the womb"? (v. 11) rather than endure such deep suffering. Job describes how death, in a sense, frees people of their roles and circumstances in this life. He talks about how those who are captives are "completely at ease" and "do not hear the voice of their oppressor." Job goes on to say that those who are small and great in this life experience the same fate, and the "slave is set free from his master."

Walking this Lenten journey every year, we are reminded of Jesus' journey in the wilderness for 40 days and the sin we must put to death in our lives to be fully alive. Over this Lenten journey, what sin—the sin of greed, prejudice, and hatred—must you die to to be fully alive in Jesus? Over this Lenten journey, what corporate sin—sins of racism, sexism, and oppression—must I divest myself of to be more fully liberated in Jesus?

Closing Prayer

Liberating God, you give us commandments not as a burden to bear but as an invitation to live the life you have for us. Grant us open hearts ready to accept your invitation, that we might become a people who bear the fruit of the freedom and new life you give us. Amen.

- *Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, April 2023*

DAY 2

Opening Prayer

God of true freedom, help us pledge our allegiance to you every day we wake up rather than the values of this world and our own agendas and biases. Lord, help us remember that being set free in You means walking in the law of the Spirit of life in Jesus. Amen.

Scripture

Romans 8:1-3

"So now there isn't any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. God has done what was impossible for the Law, since it was weak because of selfishness. God condemned sin in the body by sending his own Son to deal with sin in the same body as humans, who are controlled by sin." (CEB)

Meditation

Every time I read this scripture passage, verse 2 always strikes me: ***The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.*** This verse makes you wonder, doesn't it? How does the law of the Spirit of life set us free from the law of sin and death?

When I traveled to the Democratic Republic of Congo for the first time with my family last December, I was excited and nervous. Most of my husband's family that I would be meeting for the first time speak French and Swahili—not English.

I had an amazing time, I believe, partly because I was fully open to this new experience. I did have some fear and anxiety because it was my first time traveling outside the United States. When I was younger, I do not believe I would have been as open to this new experience and likely, would have had expectations and perceptions that might have caused significant tension and defensiveness with my husband and his family.

When the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus is working in us, we are open to other people, groups, and cultures different from us. When the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus is working in us, we are free to learn from our mistakes, re-evaluate how God wants us to treat our neighbor, love our neighbor well, and engage conflicts knowing we can break down and recover well. When the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus is working in us, we can choose the way of life, love, and liberation no matter what we face.

Closing Prayer

Lord of life and liberation, thank you for showing us in Jesus how to live freely in You. Thank you for not condemning humanity and for setting us free through the law of the Spirit of life in Jesus. Amen.

DAY 3

Opening Prayer

God, we thank you and are in awe of your life-giving, chain breaking love. Help us not to hoard your liberating love but to share it with those who need to be transformed by it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Scripture

Isaiah 58:6

"Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke?"
(CEB)

Meditation

When my children were younger, one of my biggest pet peeves was when they would take off their shoes with the laces still tied. I hated it! When they took off their shoes in this way, the shape and mouth of the shoes would become misshapen and damaged. They did not do this all the time though. Liberating their feet from the shoes without untying them, to my children's credit, only happened when they were excited, in a hurry, or tired. I am certain, as children, we took off our shoes in the same way. Perhaps we still do. But, what about other places, situations, or people in our lives for which we are seeking liberation?

Isaiah's words remind us that liberation does not come instantly, or without engaging processes of undoing. Notice the prophet's words: **releasing, untying, setting free, breaking**. His words remind us that God's continual call to us as people of God is to fast from evil, injustice, and oppression by **releasing** others, **untying** yokes, **setting free** those who have been oppressed and mistreated, and **breaking** every yoke of the bonds of this world. Indeed, divine liberation involves elements of dismantling, disrupting, and upsetting the status quo—the status quo in which those with the most power and privilege are centered, seen, comforted, and comfortable. Are we willing to choose this kind of fast for Lent? Are we willing to be dismantlers, disrupters and upsetters of systems of oppression to free the mistreated in the name of Jesus?

Closing Prayer

Great and glorious God, by your might and power, we are mighty and powerful disciples for You. Help us lean into your divine courage each day to be holy dismantlers, holy disrupters, and holy upsetters so those who are tied up in yokes of systemic oppression can be freed in the name of Jesus. Amen.

DAY 4**Opening Prayer**

Loving God, You freed yourself from heaven and all divine power coming to humanity as a child, to show us how to live, how to love, and how to be liberated. Help us see our new life in You as an eternal opportunity to serve others, to love our neighbors as ourselves. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Scripture**Galatians 5:13-14**

"You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself."
(CEB)

Meditation

The idea of freedom in the context of the United States is individualistic, rights-based, and autonomous. However, in other countries in the world, freedom is very contingent on how the community and the collective may be impacted by the exercise of one's individual rights and freedoms.

When seatbelt laws were introduced years ago, many people were dissatisfied with the enforcement of these laws. Although the seatbelt laws were created to protect the collective, individual drivers were upset because they felt the government was taking their choice to wear seatbelts (or not) away. Eventually, drivers got used to putting their seatbelts on when driving in their cars.

Divine freedom—freedom in the kingdom of God—begins with a single statement: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus frees us—mind, body, spirit and soul—to serve others, love others, and look to their interests before our own. Divine freedom, is culturally humble, Christ-centered, and communally minded.

Think of someone different from you whom you were completely inconvenienced to serve. Who was the person you thought about first, yourself or the other person? Perhaps during the remainder of this Lenten journey we might consider recommitting to serving those different from us from a place of love with their self-interest first—not our own.

Closing Prayer

"Your liberation is for the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed. May your will be done for your beloved children. Vanquish our hubris, fears, uncertainty, and doubts and lead us into your sweet liberation. Amen."

- *Nadia Kanhai, NIC Chair, Anti-Racism Task Force, co-chair CCORR | Aurora, IL*

DAY 5**Opening Prayer**

Divine Liberator, your desire for us to do right and be in right relationship, as your children, is so that we may continually live in freedom. Forgive us when we use our freedom as an opportunity to enslave ourselves and others. Forgive us when we use others' liberation for our own selfish purposes, making them slaves to our selfish agendas. Grace us every day to reclaim our collective liberation to be agents of your divine liberation everywhere. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Scripture**Jeremiah 34:15-16**

"Recently you turned about and did what was right in my sight; each of you proclaimed liberty for the other and made a covenant before me in the temple that bears my name. But then you went back on your word and made my name impure; each of you reclaimed the men and women you had set free and forced them to be your slaves again."
(CEB)

Meditation

I remember watching the movie "Twelve Years a Slave" in 2013. At first, I did not want to see another movie about African Americans portrayed as slaves. Then, I decided to watch the movie because it offered another perspective of a Black person's experience in slavery.

The movie tells the story of Solomon Northup, a freed African American man who was sold back into slavery. Northup was drugged, kidnapped, and sold in the place known today as the National Mall in Washington, DC near the Federal Aviation Administration.

I was angry watching the movie because I could not wrap my mind around the fact that Northup was experiencing chattel slavery as a free man. Therefore, his mind, heart, spirit, and soul were free.

The people of God went back on the promise they made in their covenant with God and re-enslaved Judean men and women. Originally, they had done what was right in the sight of God using their liberation to liberate the Judeans.

If we use our holy imagination to reflect on the posture of the Israelites in captivity, we might think about the fact that it must have been hard to remain in covenant with God. We might think about how difficult it must have been for the people of God to protect the liberation of others when they could not maintain their own.

How many times have we—intentionally and unintentionally—hindered others from being liberated in God by our unjust actions?

Closing Prayer

Life-giving God, all creation is called to experience true freedom in You. Help us yoke our hearts, minds, and spirits to your divine liberation—not liberation contrived by human agendas. Help us resist claiming other ways of liberation—ways that uphold systems of oppression and suffering—that may cause our neighbors to be oppressed. May we claim your path of justice and liberation each day—a path of service, humility, and love. In your name we pray. Amen.

DAY 6**Opening Prayer**

Faithful God, You call us to walk in the law of your Spirit – the Spirit of Christ. You call us to do justice and liberation and not just be content to pay lip service. May our actions as your disciples liberate others in your name. May our neighbors – no matter what their respective identities are – be blessed and transformed in your name by our liberating actions. Amen.

Scripture

James 1:25

"But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing."
(NRSVUE)

Meditation

Sociologists Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun created a list of values of white supremacy culture in their book *From Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups* in 2001. They curated the list of white supremacy values because, in their words, "Culture is powerful precisely because it is so present and at the same time so very difficult to name or identify."

One of the values in the list is perfectionism. I believe none of us are strangers to feeling the effects of perfectionism in our daily lives and in the organizations in which we work and belong.

One of the ways perfectionism operates is specifically in the way we view mistakes. Jones and Okun note that, when perfectionism is operating, "mistakes are seen as personal" and "making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong with being wrong." Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

However, consider James' words in chapter 1, verse 25: "But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere....they will be blessed in their doing."

As disciples of Jesus, it is the Spirit of Christ that makes us perfect and gives us perfect freedom. We do not make it ourselves, nor are we supposed to hold others to some impossible standard. We are blessed in our perseverance and doing what is right and honoring others. It is God who blesses and perfects our efforts, not us. It is through our human frailties and mistakes that the might and glory of God shines!

Closing Prayer

God of those with weaknesses and different abilities, help us to cling to your strength and your ability to work in us and through us. Give us strength to resist the ways we claim the value of perfectionism in our lives. Give us courage to divest from the lies of this world that tell us, "You cannot make mistakes." Help us claim your perfect law—the law of the liberty in the Spirit of Christ—that helps us persevere in doing right. Help us remember it is You alone who blesses our efforts. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Please go to the next page to do Part 2 →

PART 2:**Sunday School Class Lesson for 45 Minutes****Main Idea**

(Based on the theme for that week)

Jesus came so that we could be liberated—not just saved—from our individual and corporate sin: hatred, unconscious bias, prejudice, systemic racism, inequity, and greed.

Opening Prayer

"God, make us new. And help us to remember and renew our baptismal covenant, so we might become your beloved community, and the world may know that we are committed to dismantling all kinds of -isms and oppressions that tear the fabric of humanity. We commit ourselves to singing a new song, to sing the songs of Zion always and everywhere in our land. Amen."

- *Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar,*
Bishop of The United Methodist Church

Opening Exercise/Activity**HUMAN KNOT GAME**

Facilitators: Give participants about 10 minutes for this activity.

Participants stand in a tight circle, shoulder to shoulder. Everyone first raises their left hand, reaches it into the circle, and joins hands with another participant. Then everyone raises their right hand, reaches into the circle, and joins hands with another participant. Once everyone has connected hands, participants must work to disentangle themselves without disconnecting hands. Participants may talk to one another to give direction and brainstorm together.

Once the time has ended for this activity, participants may return to their seats and reflect on the activity using the following questions as a guide:

- How did you feel about this game before playing it?
- How did you feel about this game after playing it?
- What did you discover once you untangled hands in one part of the circle?
- How is this game similar to and/or different from disentangling systems of sin and oppression?

Scripture**Isaiah 61:1-2**

"The Spirit of the Lord God is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of our God's vengeance; to comfort all who mourn." (CSB)

Reflection/Reading &**Corresponding Activity (if any)**

Lilla Watson, born in 1940, is an Indigenous Australian visual artist, activist, and academic. I became familiar with her name and her words when serving with Lutheran Volunteer Corps eight years ago as their National Program Director.

Watson is often credited with saying the following about liberation: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Watson has stated that she is uncomfortable with being the credited as the sole author of these words because the quote was created in her collaborative work in the early 1970s with an Aboriginal rights group in Queensland, Australia. This quote resonates in my mind when reading Isaiah 61:1-2.

Jesus also spoke these words when he began his ministry after being tested in the wilderness for 40 days. As we read Isaiah's words, reflect on Jesus speaking these words at the beginning of his ministry, and reflect on Watson's quote on liberation.

We see that true liberation is not individualistic and cannot be realized by just one person. True liberation—divine liberation—calls us to recognize our grace-filled responsibility as freed people of God and invites others into God's kingdom to engage collaborative liberation work for God's glory.

Helping others is good; however, for sustaining systemic liberation, we engage the God-work of bringing good news, healing, proclaiming, and freeing those bound by sin from this mindset: "I was once you. I am no longer, by the grace of God. Let us work together with the Spirit of God to free one another and others."

Questions for Discussion

1. How do you view the work of liberation—individual, communal, or both? Why do you view liberation this way?
2. Do you believe true liberation can be sustained in the lives of people and communities without the Spirit of God? Why or why not?
3. Reflect on Isaiah 61:1-2. Which actions in Isaiah's words are easiest for you to engage? Which ones are a challenge?
4. Reflect on the quotation by Lilla Watson. How does the Great Commandment mirror our liberation being "bound up" with our neighbor's liberation? Why is this important for us to understand in our discipleship journey and anti-racism work?

Wrap-Up Time

R.A.C.E. FRAMEWORK

(for white participants only)

- **R**eflect on my white privilege and participation in white supremacy and how it has shaped the ways I understand liberation.
- **A**ssess the ways in which I need to practice liberation in my life and liberate others.
- **C**hallenge the white normative ways I engage Jesus and my faith individually and communally in the practice of liberation.
- **E**ncounter Jesus in a new way using non-dominant cultural lenses in my understanding and practice of liberation.

(for BIPOC participants only)

- **R**eflect on how white culture has shaped my relationship to liberation.
- **A**ssess the ways in which I need to liberate myself and others in my life.
- **C**laim/Reclaim the ways I engage the practice of liberation individually, culturally, and communally.
- **E**ncounter Jesus in a new way, in my understanding of liberation, using my cultural lenses.

Closing Prayer

"Lord, if we set the prisoners free, must we also leave judgement and sentencing to you? Will you set them on equal footing with us? Above us? Are you sure about this liberation thing, God? It sounds like a liberal agenda. You turn our worlds upside down and inside out. How can we unlearn the othering we've been taught our whole lives? We cannot even conceptualize the true liberation you promise. Help our unbelief. Your liberation is for the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed. May your will be done for your beloved children. Vanquish our hubris, fears, uncertainty, and doubts and lead us into your sweet liberation. Amen."

- *Nadia Kanhai, NIC Chair, Anti-Racism Task Force, co-chair CCORR | Aurora, IL*

PART 1:
Daily devotions for six days

Theme:
HEAL

DAY 1

Opening Prayer

Saving and Gracious God, through Christ you promise hope for the hopeless, abundance for the bereft, and divine justice and mercy for your people. Yet that promise is hard to believe in a world where so many experience despair, oppression, hatred, and greed that laughs at want and where injustices are committed against the most vulnerable. We are wandering in the wilderness. Remind us, Dear One, that you have given us power to change this world for the better and to heal the land, if only we are willing to put our total trust in your word and to do the work of lovingkindness in your name. For you alone have the answers we seek and the healing power we need. Amen.

Scripture

Isaiah 35:5-6b

"Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be cleared. Then the lame will leap like the deer, and the tongue of the speechless will sing."
(CEB)

Meditation

This beloved scripture has offered solace for generations, because it imagines a future when the human world will be healed from physical affliction and illness.

Yet, Isaiah's prophecy also offers a vision of spiritual and communal healing when God's people harness their spiritual and temporal power to end racism, heterosexism, ableism, sexism, tribalism, and all other systems of human devastation.

We who follow Jesus Christ believe in the holistic power of redemption. We have biblical assurance that the reign of God is manifesting. God's plan is for all people to flourish and to experience equity and enough-ness. We are God's vessels called to pour out healing justice, mercy, reconciliation, repentance, and lovingkindness. Most urgently, we who follow Jesus are called to seek God's healing in our own hearts. That healing will lead us to make deliberate and tangible changes in our own homes and communities. And that healing will equip us to witness fervently and humbly how God-in-Christ daily transforms us into agents of needed change. As we Christ-followers become more faithful in more holy living, the world around us will be guided by God's light shining through us.

As we shine, others will join us in seeing with new God eyes, hearing with new God ears, and dancing together on the common ground of God's all-encompassing love. And, together, we all will sing God's praises.

DAY 1***Closing Prayer***

O Lord, you created us equal; yet we have treated one another unjustly. You created us in your holy image. Yet we have failed to recognize the dignity and sacredness of your image in every person. Some of the old wounds of injustices are still bleeding and the callousness of our scars prevents us from being more sensitive to others as we ought to. As the new, tender skin emerges from under the old scars, create in us a new humanity through the brokenness of our experiences. Create in us a new humanity, so that we may celebrate together the dignity and sacredness of humanity in one another for the sake of your glory. Amen. *(Adapted from a litany created for a 1987 event, "Racism. The Church's Unfinished Agenda," sponsored by the General Commission on Religion and Race)*

DAY 2

Opening Prayer

Truth-telling God, you offer living water and cleansing fire to everyone. Yet, we know that you have a special affinity for those who are physically poor and hungry, for those who survive—or don't—the scourge of racism, colorism, tribalism, and other forms of insidious, systemic, and hard-to-face expressions of sinful inhumanity. Forgive us for making this Lenten journey too much about "me" and not enough about "us", especially those who groan under the weight of unjust warring, economic death, disease, and the indifference of those with more power. Forgive us for our "up-by-your-bootstraps" dishonesty, when we know good and well that every morsel of food, every dollar in our accounts, and every blessing from you should be shared in the name of the One who gave his very life. Forgive and teach your children, Mothering God. Amen.

Scripture

Exodus 2:21-25

"Moses agreed to come and live with the man, who gave his daughter, Zipporah, to Moses as his wife. She gave birth to a son, and Moses named him Gershom, 'because,' he said, 'I've been an immigrant living in a foreign land.' A long time passed, and the Egyptian king died. The Israelites were still groaning because of their hard work. They cried out, and their cry to be rescued from the hard work rose to God. God heard their cry of grief, and God remembered God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked at the Israelites, and God understood."
(CEB)

Meditation

Theologian Ched Myers asserts a unique "trialectic" aspect to God's relationship with the human family. "On the one hand, the God of Creation cares for all peoples, exhibited in countless stories and teachings in both testaments. On a second hand, the God of Israel also calls and names a peculiar people (1 Peter 2:9) 'formed by and for Godself' (Isaiah 43:21) in order to nurture them in a distinctive way of life. On a third hand, the God of the Exodus clearly takes the side of poor and outcast people (of whatever tribe and tongue), being uniquely attuned to the 'groans' of their suffering (Genesis 4:10, Exodus 2:24, 3:7)." On his earthly journey, even into the wilderness, Jesus lamented for all three groups because every human is God's beloved child. At the same time, our daily walk with God compels us to acknowledge God's particular affinity for the poor, the immigrant, the stranger, and the shunned. Too many of us Christians who have more privileges because of our identities and socio-economic locations actively participate in oppressing, repressing, ignoring, or lying about why some humans do not have enough love, money, access, and sustenance. We sometimes close our ears to their groaning, often because confronting systemic oppression seems "too big" or too far above our spiritual "pay grade." But God hears the groaning of all people and created us to be agents of healing, comfort, and justice-making for one another, particularly the oppressed. How do we hear with God-touched ears? (Quotation from *Our God is Undocumented. Biblical Faith and Immigrant Justice*, by Ched Myers and Matthew Colwell. Orbis Books, 2012, p. 91)

Closing Prayer

"For the love of a God who delights in justice, we will seek justice. For the love of our neighbor who deserves justice, we will seek justice. For the love of our spirits who are betrayed when justice is left undone, we will seek justice. For the love of the lost who are reconciled through honesty and accountability, we will seek justice." Amen. (By Kimmothy Cole, from *A Liturgy for All Bodies. New Words for a New World*, Cyclical Publishing, 2022, p. 111)

DAY 3**Opening Prayer**

Today, Holy Life-Giver, we say, "There IS enough." False prophets and fear-mongers say, "It is us against them," "they are coming for your jobs," and "if we don't do something they will take what is ours." But, at our best and most faithful, we know, Holy God, that there is enough. Enough money for a living wage for all. Enough food to feed the world. Enough medicines and research to enhance life. Enough love and respect and justice to go around. And so, we rebuke the narrative that feeding a poor, brown child will stop our nation from being great. We renounce the lie that a same-gender-loving couple spells doom in a world that needs more love. And we vow to follow the Christ who walks with us so that all—and we mean ALL—might have abundant spiritual and physical lives. Grant us the courage to walk on with Jesus. Amen.

Scripture**Luke 7:37-39**

"Just then a woman of the village, the town harlot, having learned that Jesus was a guest in the home of the Pharisee, came with a bottle of very expensive perfume and stood at his feet, weeping, raining tears on his feet. Letting down her hair, she dried his feet, kissed them, and anointed them with the perfume. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man was the prophet I thought he was, he would have known what kind of woman this is falling all over him.'"

(The (MSG) by Eugene Peterson)

Meditation

The Pharisee misses the significance of the woman's actions, radiates jealousy, and renders false-hearted judgement against the woman and Jesus. We can almost hear his thoughts: "This oil is too precious and costly to be in her hands. I'm a spiritual leader and respected legal authority! Jesus should defer to me, not this harlot! Her anointing is an insult to our tradition; historically, only kings and high priests are subject to this ritual. She should be ashamed to come into my home!"

Like many of us today, the Pharisee is a misguided byproduct of a narrow idea that so-called Christians have a divine right to decide who are—and who are not—God's beloved people. This narrowness tempts us to assign labels and worth to others as "harlot or holy," "progressive or conservative," "chosen or rejected."

However, the woman who honors the Savior Jesus invites in us a spirit of newness and audacity. The precious oil of new possibilities may be expensive, but it is not wasted because she has found a new life in Jesus that is priceless. In Christ, there is enough grace, enough redemption, and enough room in God's house and on God's earth for everyone. If all Christians everywhere would open our hearts and arms to the whole world and shun our prejudices and pietism in favor of invitation and equitable treatment, how might the world be transformed? How do we, the church, become the healing balm through which God anoints all people?

Closing Prayer

"May the Lord bless you and keep you as you go from this place. May the Lord give you strength and perseverance—strength to recognize yourself as a beloved child of God, strength to accept God's grace freely given, and perseverance to be the vessel through which God works in the lives of others. Amen.

-*"Benediction," by Joshua Taylor, from A Liturgy for All Bodies. New Words for a New World, Cyclical Publishing, 2022, p.106*

DAY 4**Opening Prayer**

(SING OR SAY)

"Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.
 Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.
 Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me.
 Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me."
(Lyrics by Daniel Iverson, No. 295 as printed in Hymns and Psalms. A Methodist and Ecumenical Hymn Book. Methodist Publishing House of London, 1983)

Scripture**Psalm 51: 15-17**

"Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise. You don't want sacrifices. If I gave an entirely burned offering, you wouldn't be pleased. A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God. You won't despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed."
 (CEB)

Meditation

In most versions of the opening prayer/song, the third line is, "Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me." This version, however, begs God first to "break me," and beautifully reflects David's sentiment in Psalm 51:17. This plaintive psalm was the king's response to being challenged by Nathan about his adulterous affair with Bathsheba.

As a king trusted to lead God's people, David nonetheless allowed lust, greed, and abuses of power to overtake him. He takes another man's wife and sends the husband—his own loyal soldier—to his death. Nathan's brave indictment is a watershed moment. Through Nathan, God confronts David with the devastation he caused by using his God-given power and privileges for evil purposes. David realizes his own puffed up, hardened heart must first be shattered and laid before God so that it may be renewed, recalibrated, and readied for *God's* purposes.

We, too, are called by God to crush our own arrogant, greedy appetites and break self-serving abuses of power in church and society so that we may tear out forever all racist actions, agendas, policies, practices, and procedures in churches and public institutions. To become co-workers with Christ in creating a more just and loving world, we who follow him must sacrifice our own unjust actions, ideals, self-serving biblical interpretations, and alliances. We are called to break our chains of arrogance, ignorance, and indifference and to present our broken and crushed souls to God, who promises to remold us and make us—and the world—whole.

DAY 4***Closing Prayer***

(If you have access to the internet, meditate silently on the scripture as you listen to [this song](#))

Or pray these words,

Attending and Merciful God, as you heard the ancient prayer of David, and as today you hear the global weeping of those caught up in power-mongering, racism, warring madness, you demonstrate that you have a special compassion for the needy and oppressed. Help us to hear the cries of those to whom we have turned a deaf ear. We promise to follow you in all things, led by our friend and Savior, Jesus Christ. So, break us and crush anything in us that does harm in your beloved kingdom. Teach us to open our mouths to proclaim your praise and to speak and do justice and mercy and healing in Jesus' holy name. May it be so.

DAY 5**Opening Prayer**

Take up permanent residence in our lives, God. We invite you to come in. We invite you, knowing that we may have to change the menu, the seating, the logistics, the way we worship, and the way we live our lives. We may have to open the windows and let fresh winds blow in. But it is no longer about us alone, prodding and healing God. We are ready to lean on you and learn from you. We are ready to follow Christ on your terms, instead of going off on our tangents. We are ready to sit at your table with others of your human family and drink from the cup of mercy, reconciliation, and love. Welcome, Holy One.

Scripture**Romans 8:9-13**

"If God has taken up residence in your life, you can hardly be thinking more of yourself than of God...Even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—you yourself experience life on God's terms. It stands to reason, doesn't it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, God will do the same thing in you that God did in Jesus...So don't you see that we don't owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent?" (Adapted from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson)

Meditation

A meme traversing the internet depicts a jowly man sprawled out on the ground after having tried to climb a flimsy ladder over an eight-foot wall which is only four feet long. The man chose to take the more difficult option to climb that wall rather than just walking around it. The caption reads, "Me, when I try to lean on my own understanding instead of God's."

The invitation to follow Jesus, by definition, is an invitation to trust his teachings, his actions, and his call on our lives. Yet, God also gives us wonderful minds and the freedom to make our own decisions about how to live. Jesus tells us to love one another, but our personal and social experiences teach us to be wary and cautious of people and groups we don't know. Jesus calls us disciples to "feed my sheep," yet we who have more resources want to find loopholes to determine who is worthy and unworthy of our spiritual or physical food. God knows that we will sometimes lean on our own understanding only, forgetting our higher calling, missing the mark, and falling, physically and spiritually. The good news is that God invites us every day to get up, "get on with it," and discover the healing promised us through Jesus the Christ, who is the answer to every human frailty, pain, injustice, and wound.

Closing Prayer

Patient and Persistent Life-Giver, we fall in so many ways, yet you always extend a hand to pull us up. You are the way, the truth, and the life, yet we stumble along dimly lit side streets rather than follow your bright, shining promise. We lean on our own understanding of how to treat one another, and we do harm, yet you have given us an ambiguous roadmap and message through Christ Jesus that we are to love one another. Forgive us for being hard-headed and willful in our mistrust and misdeeds against our neighbors. Free us for joyful and unfettered obedience in you. We praise your name and count our blessings through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

DAY 6**Opening Prayer**

Holy God, we have joy in our hearts because Jesus came to save us all. In this season, though, even with that joy, we also remember the terrible cost he paid on the cross. Along his earthly journey, he was fed, embraced, cheered, loved, and revered; but he was also reviled, "othered," treated like a criminal for telling the truth about who he was, and betrayed. Jesus struggled so that he would understand our struggles. Jesus walked with the broken people of his earthly days to show us how to walk with those among us who are broken. Revive our zeal for following Jesus Christ in all his ways for all our days. Amen.

Scripture***Philippians 3:13-14***

"Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it on my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

(NRSV)

Meditation

This poem by Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes, is written in the voice of a mid-20th-century Black American mother telling her own story of struggle and triumph over adversity to her Black son and urging him to draw on spiritual strength in times of challenge. The words reflect a particular experience of African Americans in navigating systemic and de facto racism, discrimination, violence, repression, and despair. At the same time, the poem is a universal celebration of God-given determination, the will to survive and thrive, and the call of God-in-Jesus to seek and create wholeness and healing sufficient to defeat hatred and injustice. Hughes' words are reminiscent of those written to the Philippians to cheer us on as we are journey through the wildernesses of life:

MOTHER TO SON**

By Langston Hughes (1901-1967)

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare;
But all the time
I've been a'climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark,
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back;
Don't you sit down on the steps,
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard;
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

—THIS POEM IS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

**If you are using this resource with a group, invite a volunteer to read it aloud. Or listen to it individually or as a group [on YouTube](#), as narrated by award-winning actor Viola Davis.

DAY 6***Closing Prayer***

Guardian, guide, and good friend, Jesus, you know that for too many of God's people, life "ain't been no crystal stair." Each of us has experienced some level of adversity and disappointment. However, many of us reading this prayer have sat silent and passive while other human beings have had much more than their share of pain, deprivation, loss, exclusion, and unjust treatment. Forgive us our indifference and our passive participation. Help us to see the God-light in those we would otherwise ignore and pity, so that our hearts catch fire and real transformation happens in our hearts and, through us, in this world. With you beside us, tenacious Jesus, we will not turn back. May it be so.

Please go to the next page to do Part 2 →

PART 2:**Sunday School Class Lesson for 45 Minutes****Main Idea**

(Based on the theme for that week)

God-in-Jesus equips us and invites us to walk with him through human struggles and the adversities of Lent to bring, through him, healing to ourselves, our communities, and the whole world.

Opening Prayer

"God of the wilderness, be with us as we wander through the desert of our lives. Keep us from running back to the safety of our old assumptions, and walk with us as we learn to live the life abundant. Amen."

- Donna Sinclair, ED. Copyright 1998

United Church Publishing House

Opening Exercise/Activity

Ask the participants to pair off and to ask and answer, in turn, the following questions:

1. Imagine you are invited to dinner at someone's house, in a neighborhood that is strange to you, with people you do not know. What three things would you want the host to do to make you feel welcome, safe, and comfortable? Explain why you chose those three things.
2. Imagine that a person from a racial group other than your own, speaking only a bit of your language, dressed in rags, and obviously fleeing in fear, approaches you for food, safety, and support. What are the first three things that you will do to help them?

Scripture**Psalm 23**

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. God makes me lie down in green pastures, God leads me beside quiet waters, God restores my soul. God guides me in paths of righteousness for God's name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in God's house forever."
(NIV)

Reflection/Reading & Corresponding Activity (if any)

(VOLUNTEER READS)

According to the New Interpreter's Bible, the well-loved Psalm 23 is not merely a hymn of comfort to be recited to mark occasions of death and dying. Rather, it is "a psalm about living, for it puts daily activities, such as eating and drinking and seeking security, in a radically God-centered perspective." Further, the commentator writes, this psalm "calls us not simply to claim individual assurance but also to take our place with others in the household of faith." Psalm 23 praises God as like a shepherd who provides for and protects a flock.

In King David's time, it was the sovereign human ruler—the one anointed king—whose solemn responsibility was to provide sustenance and safety for his people. However, the biblical accounts preceding the psalms demonstrated that human kings were many times self-absorbed, cruel, inept, and unreliable. So, the psalm writer reminds God's people that whatever they have comes from God.

The imagery of God as a shepherd is also a reminder to the Hebrew people that God delivered them from exile in Egypt and continues to deliver them and guide them in right paths. The act of anointing with oil, an ancient practice that accompanied the coronation of kings and queens, is in this psalm offered by God to the one who believes in God and trusts and follows God's teaching. In this psalm, the interpreter's volume asserts that God is celebrated as both shepherd and host who provides food ("You prepare a table"), drink ("my cup overflows"), and shelter/protection.

In extolling God's goodness and love, the psalmist uses the Hebrew word, *hesed*, which denotes more than kindness and superficial love. Rather, *hesed* (sometimes spelled "*chesed*") means the compassion, loving kindness, faithfulness, and grace of God. *Hesed* implies the aspect of God's love that calls us to be kind hosts and recognizes that the necessities of our lives belong to God and that they are gifts to be shared.

Psalm 23 is not merely a celebration of what God has done for me, and aren't I blessed—although I am. It is also a call to proclaim to the world a God who wants to prepare tables and anoint all people as holy, beloved, and worthy. It is a call for followers of Jesus Christ to extend our hospitality, our loving-kindness, and our hands to one another, especially those pushed aside and despised because of greed, poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other ways that we "other" God's children.

So, God is your shepherd? How might you better witness to others God's transforming presence in your life?

Questions for Discussion

1. What is one action our church/faith community could undertake to offer greater hospitality to members of a marginalized group in your community? (Discuss several and choose one.)
2. If our church/faith community took this action, how would you participate?
3. What ONE word or phrase from Psalm 23 might inspire a group from your church/faith community to take this first action step?

Wrap-Up Time**R.A.C.E. FRAMEWORK**

(for white participants only)

- **R**eflect on how white culture has shaped the ways I understand healing.
- **A**ssess the ways I need healing in my life and how I need to extend healing to others.
- **C**hallenge the white normative ways I engage Jesus and my faith individually and communally in the practice of healing.
- **E**ncounter Jesus in a new way using non-dominant cultural lenses in my understanding and practice of healing.

(for BIPOC participants only)

- **R**eflect on how white culture has shaped my relationship to healing.
- **A**ssess the areas of my life in which I need healing.
- **C**laim/Reclaim the ways I engage the practice of healing individually, culturally, and communally.
- **E**ncounter Jesus in a new way, in my understanding of healing, using my cultural lenses.

Closing Prayer

Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus. Now, O healing Savior, may the assurance you have given to generations of your anointed ones, the power of your Lenten wilderness struggle, and the promise of the coming Resurrection Day reside in each of us now and forever, and may that power bear fruit in the here and now. We claim and proclaim your blessings. Amen.

PART 1:
Daily devotions for six days

Theme:
RECONCILE

DAY 1

Opening Prayer

Mighty God, reconciliation is a hard process. Sometimes it takes days, and sometimes it takes years for us to reconcile with family, friends, enemies, You, and, yes, even ourselves. Help us take the first step in the strength of your Spirit. Help us get out of our own way to heal harm we have done to ourselves and others. Amen.

Scripture

Genesis 33:1-5

"Jacob looked up and saw Esau approaching with four hundred men. Jacob divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two women servants. He put the servants and their children first, Leah and her children after them, and Rachel and Joseph last. He himself went in front of them and bowed to the ground seven times as he was approaching his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, kissed him, and they wept. Esau looked up and saw the women and children and said, "Who are these with you?"
(CEB)

Meditation

One of the most difficult growing pains I had in high school was gaining self-awareness in relationship with my peers. When I was a senior in high school, competition was high for who became valedictorian and salutatorian and gave graduation speeches. Many in our senior class were members of the National Honor Society and regularly asked each other about our grades and grade point averages.

I remember one person in my senior class wanted to earn better grades than me. She would regularly ask me about my availability to study together for tests, quizzes, and general subject material. Rather than express my frustration to her and ask her about her true intentions for our meeting, I gossiped about her, expressing my frustration to mutual friends of ours behind her back.

One day, she called me at home (when landline phones were still popular!) to confront me respectfully about gossiping about her. I admitted I had done so and asked her forgiveness. She forgave me, but I still felt horrible! That one phone call and conversation was one of the deepest experiences of grace I had ever experienced as a teenager.

Esau did not have to meet with Jacob, his brother, and express his forgiveness in the form of hugs, kisses, and gifts. What grace! My classmate did not have to call me and extend forgiveness, but she did. What grace! Jesus did not have to offer up his life to reconcile humanity to God, but he did. What grace!

Closing Prayer

God of grace and reconciliation, forgive us when we cause harm systemically, communally, and individually. Give us courage and strength to show up amid those whom we have offended and to own the harm we caused. Give us even greater divine wisdom and humility to ask forgiveness of those we have harmed and work together with them to repair and reconcile what we have broken. Remind us, by your Holy Spirit, that we are called to always be your children, messengers of God's reconciling love. Amen.

DAY 2**Opening Prayer**

Lord of all the seasons in our lives, thank you for being with us in the middle of deeply difficult reconciliation processes and seeing us through—whether we have been harmed or caused the harm. Help us remember—in mind, body and spirit—that life is not linear, and grief and forgiveness are hard. Help us remember that we live in a world with resilient systems of evil, privilege, and abuse of power. In the face of these systems, remind us of who You are, Great God, and whose we are. Remind us that reconciliation does not arrive in 30 minutes but comes in fits and starts. Strengthen us to keep your divine vision and gift of reconciling love in every season. Amen.

Scripture**Genesis 50:15-21**

"When Joseph's brothers realized that their father was now dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge against us, and wants to pay us back seriously for all of the terrible things we did to him?" So they approached Joseph and said, "Your father gave orders before he died, telling us, this is what you should say to Joseph. "Please, forgive your brothers' sins and misdeeds, for they did terrible things to you. Now, please forgive the sins of the servants of your father's God." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers wept too, fell down in front of him, and said, "We're here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I God? You planned something bad for me, but God produced something good from it, in order to save the lives of many people, just as he's doing today. Now, don't be afraid. I will take care of you and your children." So he put them at ease and spoke reassuringly to them." (CEB)

Meditation

Have you ever been in the process of reconciling with someone? Then, an event occurs that makes it feel like the reconciling process with that person is starting over again? I am sure Joseph and his brothers experienced this emotional rollercoaster when their father Jacob died. Once Jacob died, Joseph and his brothers were in the throes of grief. Joseph was busy grieving and planning the burial details. His brothers were also grieving and wondering if Joseph would hold a grudge against them now for selling him into slavery. I am sure, at this point of deep grief and loss, Joseph and his brothers felt like they had made no progress at all in their reconciliation process.

In this empire we live in—where white supremacy is lord and ruler—there is no room for mistakes. There is no room for the messiness of this human journey. Reconciliation is not about excusing the offenses of our most "vilest offender" (UMH 98).

Reconciliation is about our acknowledging the harm we have done—both by what we have done and what we have left undone—and committing to move forward differently.

Rev. Rebekah Simon-Peter puts it this way: "Leaders are wise to note if they are losing touch with those they love and lead. Take time to reflect on how you got out of sync with those in your care. Note your part in it. Prepare yourself to approach reconciliation. Quick apologies are not as effective as first changing your behavior. Both are important for reconciliation to be real." ([What I Have Learned from Yom Kippur about Reconciliation - United Methodist Insight \(um-insight.net\)](https://um-insight.net/what-i-have-learned-from-yom-kippur-about-reconciliation))

Closing Prayer

"Loving and Compassionate God, we are thankful despite the circumstances or events in our lives and the community. We beg You to grant us strength because through them You strengthen us. Despite these, we beg You to strengthen each and everyone, especially during this time. I pray that You will reconcile every race and tribe. May our origin, race, ethnicity, tribe, and orientation be not an obstacle for us to experience reconciliation."
- *Reymond Dungao, Pastor - Chaplain at SPMCI, Philippines*

DAY 3**Opening Prayer**

God, help me to check my own biases and prejudices when you call me to carry your message of reconciliation to those to whom you send me, especially those I consider enemies. Help me get out of my enemies' way in their journey of being reconciled to you. In your name I pray. Amen.

Scripture**Jonah 3:1-5**

"The Lord's word came to Jonah a second time: "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you." And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the Lord's word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days' walk across.) Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, "Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant." (CEB)

Meditation

What happens when God calls us to serve and minister to a group of people we do not like, a group of people we consider our enemies? Do we go to whom God calls us, or do we go to the people with whom we are comfortable—who look like us, sound like us, and believe like us?

I have served in cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry for over 20 years pastoring Anglo congregations. While my family and I did not find people in my pastorates we would vehemently label "enemy," we understood that our presence and my leadership in these congregations were to "historical enemies" as African and African American people.

And for some of the white people in my past congregations, I also understood that my family and I were "enemies" to them simply because of our culture and presence there. I came to learn that God had sent me to them so they could meet Jesus in different skin.

Did God call me to make friends with them? No. But did God call me to go? Yes. Sometimes I went willingly. Other times, I, like Jonah, went in fits and starts resisting God's mission the entire way and resenting the people to whom God was sending me.

But the mission wasn't about me. God's mission is never about us. It is always about others being reconciled to God through us, and, yes, in spite of us.

Closing Prayer

God of those who run and resist, thank you for being patient with us. Thank you for working in us and through us to reconcile others to You. Thank you, most of all, for working in spite of us and the prejudices and biases we hold. Amen.

DAY 4**Opening Prayer**

Reconciling God, thank you for your pure example of love and forgiveness shown on that last night with your disciples, even as you ate with your betrayer. Disabuse us of our desire to think your road—the road of reconciling love—is quick and easy and can be walked in our human strength. Ready us for the journey by your love each day. Amen.

Scripture**Matthew 26:26-30**

"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take and eat. This is my body." He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many so that their sins may be forgiven. I tell you, I won't drink wine again until that day when I drink it in a new way with you in my Father's kingdom." Then, after singing songs of praise, they went to the Mount of Olives."

(CEB)

Meditation

Jesus' last meal with his disciples is such a deep, rich, wondrous picture of reconciliation! Jesus declares his kingdom reconciliation is prophetic eating together and washing the disciples' feet in the face of betrayal, in the face of denial, in the face of desertion.

As disciples of Jesus now, whenever we feast with our communities of faith, we are observed by the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, including those first disciples. How are we honoring the covenant meal of love and reconciliation Jesus demonstrated to us? Are we coming to the table with a "club" mindset—thinking that only the privileged few and the saved should eat? Are we coming to the table with a "power" mindset—thinking that only those with power, status, and position should eat? Are we coming to the table with a "biased" mindset—thinking that only those that look like me, believe like me, love like me, and lead a pretty "clean" life should eat?

The next time you celebrate the Lord's Supper, use your spiritual imagination. Take all your biases and brokenness and lay them on the altar. Take all those who are struggling with addiction, grief, and mental health and lay them on the altar. Take the systemic evil and oppression in our world and lay them on the altar.

Jesus already broke his body and poured out his blood for all of it—for our world—and ALL in our world to be free of the shackles of evil, sin, and oppression. So, take. Eat. Drink from Christ. May our entire lives become living sacraments of justice and reconciliation to the glory of God.

Closing Prayer

Oh, Spirit of movements past and present, help us discern when to listen and when to speak up, when to pause and when to press on, and most of all keep us going even—and especially—when we are tempted by complacency. As we dismantle oppressive foundations, let us also build anew. Death-dealing systems do not have the final word when we put our trust in You.

- Rev. Shelby Lewis, Ordained Christian Church Minister (Disciples of Christ), Vanderbilt Divinity School Graduate

DAY 5**Opening Prayer**

"Today, under your Spirit, I want to be built in my inner being, to indeed be co-creator of paths for reconciliation, ways conducive to the building of your kingdom here and now. Today, I want to see that gap between my siblings and I be filled with your love. Restore in me the joy of your salvation! Renew your Spirit in me! And, as I commit to this task, sustain me! Lift me up as an ambassador of reconciliation. In your grace and mercy, listen, Oh Lord, my prayer!
- VJ Cruz-Báez, Pastor at La Plaza UMC, Los Angeles, California

Scripture**Matthew 5:23-24**

"Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift."
(CEB)

Meditation

My husband comes from a culture of deep hospitality, grace, and respect. These attributes of his culture are especially evident in the practice of gift-giving. One of his pet peeves is when, particularly during a significant event like a birthday celebration or funeral, people give cards with either money or a gift card inside and nothing else. Culturally, this practice—especially in the United States—seems impersonal and hurried to my husband.

Having been born and raised in the U.S., I was inclined to take offense to his comment when I first heard it and respond defensively. Over the years, I have examined this largely Western practice, concluding that my husband is right.

Reducing significant events like birthdays, funerals, wedding celebrations, and other momentous occasions to a card with a token of appreciation inside is an afterthought. The action does not convey the deep love, joy, respect, and honor we may feel for the person whom we are celebrating. The action is a check-off on our list communicating to the person and others, "Hey, at least I got you a gift."

Jesus' words remind us that the action of coming to God's altar is not just about the gift and the altar. Our coming to the altar and the gift we are bringing, for Jesus, is always about how we are showing up. Are we showing up in the presence of God with our gift not reconciled to our neighbor? Or are we showing up in the presence of God with our gift reconciled to our neighbor?

Closing Prayer

Almighty and merciful God, we know that when we offend another we offend you. We are aware that we have often allowed the shadow of hate to cloud our souls, hiding the light from our unseeking eyes. We have said unpleasant and hurtful things to our brothers and sisters when they failed to live up to our expectations. Fan the embers of that love until it roars again in flames of love, peace, and reconciliation. Forgive us our sins and help us to forgive those who have sinned against us. Lead us into new life through your Son Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of all. Amen.
- Michael J. O'Donnell, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (1992)

DAY 6**Opening Prayer**

God of Reconciling Love, the systems of this world provide space and opportunity for us to divide along lines of prejudice all the time—lines of race, lines of class, lines of color. Give us the grace to be messengers of your grace and reconciliation. And grant us humility and courage to admit when we don't get it right and need forgiveness. Help us embody your reconciling love in the face of betrayal, unkindness, deep bias, and prejudice. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture**1 Corinthians 11:20-26**

"So, when you get together in one place, it isn't to eat the Lord's meal. Each of you goes ahead and eats a private meal. One person goes hungry while another is drunk. Don't you have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you look down on God's churches and humiliate those who have nothing? What can I say to you? Will I praise you? No, I don't praise you in this. I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me." Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you broadcast the death of the Lord until he comes."

(CEB)

Meditation

Shared evening meals in our house are tough for us. We have two teenagers and one middle schooler in the house—all of whom arrive home at different times due to after-school sports activities and a late bus schedule. So during the week, our evening mealtimes look like each of us coming to the dinner table to eat our meal at different times. The Sunday dinner meal is the meal around which we intentionally provide space and time to eat, talk with one another, laugh, and catch up with each other on happenings in our school and work lives.

I wish the apostle Paul had written his letter to the Corinthian believers because of busy schedules that crept into their true desire to eat at the common table together. But this was not the case for them. Paul paid them a visit because he heard about the divisions within this Christian community—intentional divisions based on prejudice—that caused the believers to undermine the spirit and practice of the Lord's Supper. This undermining, ultimately, did not honor Jesus' sacrifice.

Paul calls the believers to not have private meals with one another based on culture, ethnicity, class, or any other division calling them back to the tradition Jesus had begun. Paul calls the believers at Corinth to be reconciled to God and one another by remembering the sacred and grace-filled nature of the common table—the Lord's Table. The apostle calls them to remember their identity as reconciled people of the table of reconciliation. May we also remember our identity as reconciled people of the table of reconciliation.

Please go to the next page to do Part 2 →

DAY 6***Closing Prayer***

"Lord God, too often we get it into our heads that what we do and who we are is all about our achievement, our wisdom, our status, our position. We convince ourselves that we are good and others are bad, that we are right and everybody else is wrong. Forgive us for choosing to see others with the eyes of human judgement, standards, and assessment. And teach us, by your Spirit, always to see each person we encounter and all those with whom we are in relationship with the eyes of Christ the Lord. Grant this, we pray, so that we might set ourselves to the business and joy of reconciliation in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen."

- Rev. Clifton Howard, Assistant to the Bishop, Central Texas Conference, Fort Worth, TX

PART 2:***Sunday School Class Lesson for 45 Minutes***

Main Idea

(Based on the theme for that week)

All humanity must first be reconciled to God for reconciliation to happen with one another and with oneself. In our reconciling with ourselves and others, we can also meet the God of reconciliation.

Opening Prayer

"Help each of us, gracious God, to live in such magnanimity and restraint that the Head of the church may never have cause to say to any one of us, "This is my body, broken by you." Amen.

-Chinese prayer, United Methodist Hymnal, 564

Opening Exercise/Activity

The following exercise is adapted from the book *Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0* by Brenda Salter McNeil, pg. 42-44:

- Give everyone a puzzle piece as they enter the gathering space.
- Begin the activity with opening prayer and reading 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

PART 1

Have everyone look at their puzzle piece examining it closely. You may ask the participants the below questions to help their examination:

- What does your puzzle piece look like?
- What specific details do you notice about it?
- How do you feel about putting puzzles together? Why do you feel this way?

PART 2

After everyone has examined their puzzle piece, invite them to work together to assemble the puzzle. Observe group dynamics as the Sunday School leader/facilitator.

- What do you notice among the group?
- Who seems to be engaged in putting the puzzle together? Who seems withdrawn/disinterested/frustrated?
- Which group members seem to be the leaders in this activity?

PART 3

After 20 minutes, invite everyone to go back to their seats for a large-group debrief. Use the below questions as guides for the discussion:

- What did you discover as you were assembling the puzzle as a group?
- How did your feelings/thoughts change from the beginning of the activity until the end?
- How is the process of reconciliation like putting a puzzle together? How is it different?

You may end the opening activity with these words from Dr. McNeil:

"Reconciliation is about how to relate even after forgiveness and justice have occurred. It's about how to delve even deeper into relationship with one another. Reconciliation is possible only if we approach it primarily as a spiritual process that requires a posture of hope in the reconciling work of Christ and a commitment from the church to both be and proclaim this type of reconciled community" (p. 26).

Scripture

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

"So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God."

(CEB)

Questions for Discussion

1. Why must human beings be reconciled to God before being able to reconcile with themselves and others?
2. How are forgiveness and reconciliation connected? What character traits do you think are necessary to maintain reconciliation—especially between oppressors and the oppressed (or those who have been victimized and victimizers)?
3. Can one experience reconciliation with God, others, and themselves without forgiveness? Why or why not?
4. How does the scripture lesson help us change the lens through which we engage racial reconciliation? What "human standards" might we use in our churches and communities that prevent others from being reconciled to God and us?
5. How might we be messengers of Christ's reconciliation in the public square (e.g. home, work, play, community, etc.)? What prevents us individually and communally from being ambassadors for Jesus in this way?

Wrap-Up Time

R.A.C.E. FRAMEWORK

(for white participants only)

- **R**eflect on my white privilege and participation in white supremacy and how it has shaped the ways I engage reconciliation as a regular spiritual practice,
- **A**ssess the ways in which I need to reconcile with God and others rather than white supremacy,
- **C**hallenge the white normative ways I engage Jesus and my faith individually and in community with others.
- **E**xperience/Encounter Jesus examining acts of reconciliation from non-dominant cultural lenses.

(for BIPOC participants only)

- **R**eflect on my privilege and participation in white supremacy and how it has shaped my relationship with reconciliation as a spiritual practice,
- **A**ssess the ways in which I need to reconcile with God and others by telling them how white supremacy has harmed me,
- **C**laim/Reclaim the ways I engage Jesus and my faith individually, in my culture, and community.
- **E**xperience/Encounter Jesus in a new way examining acts of reconciliation from my cultural lenses.

Closing Prayer

Creative and Life-giving God, open our eyes to see all the ways the fresh wind of your Spirit is making all things new. Help us resist the temptation to discern your reconciling movement in others by our own human standards. Help us to be bold reconcilers for You remembering that the gospel message and mission is about reconciling communities, peoples, and systems to You, not us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.