

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Lectionary Year A

WEEK ONE

PREPARE

Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by lighting a candle, signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to come and speak to you through these words of Scripture and time of meditation.

READ

Psalm 32

Additional Scriptures for this week: Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7, Romans 5:12–19, Matthew 4:1–11

REFLECT

Lent – In the season of Lent, we reflect upon and celebrate the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the deep significance these have for our lives today. We examine the stories of Jesus’ ministry on earth, and consider the ways we are called to follow his example in our own daily lives. By studying Scripture, praying, making sacrifices of our own, and reflecting upon where God is at work in our hearts, this season draws us into deeper knowledge and love of the one who gave himself up for us.

Scripture – The words of this week’s Psalm take us through the different stages of salvation: death in sin, repentance, forgiveness, and joy. We are presented with images of “groaning,” a body “wasted away,” and strength being “dried up” as a characterization of life without God. For many of us today, we interpret these words metaphorically, to refer to the state of our spirits before finding God, the darkness of a life brought down by sin. Most of our physical needs remain consistently met throughout our journey of salvation. But, for many orphans in Africa, this is not the case. Can you imagine being able to read these words in a literal way?

ZOE Story – Zakayo Mutwiri was just 12 years old when he lost his mother to complications related to HIV/AIDS. Only two years later, his father also died of the disease. Left to care for himself and his two younger siblings, Zakayo was forced to drop out of school in order to try to grow food for their family to be able to eat. Unfortunately, this was often not enough, and they would go days without a full meal. In addition, one of his siblings developed malaria and their school attendance dropped. In such cases orphans often feel abandoned by God as well as others in their community. Thankfully, Zakayo was introduced to ZOE’s empowerment program in Kenya and joined a group of orphans learning about their identity as beloved children of God, and working together to overcome poverty and achieve self-sufficiency.

Through all he learned at ZOE, Zakayo was able to improve the health of his family by installing mosquito nets above their beds, registering for health insurance, and learning how to properly wash and dry their dishes. He also learned skills to improve his home garden and open a business kiosk along with other orphans in his ZOE working group. Zakayo's family is now able to regularly eat meals and pay for all of the children's school fees on their own. Most importantly, Zakayo and his siblings have been transformed by the message of the Gospel and their identity as part of God's family. They regularly attend church together, and Zakayo sings in the choir.



Application – Zakayo's story of starvation, poverty, and disease is the story of thousands of orphans across Africa. They can read the words of the Psalmist and know what it is like for body and soul to be wasting away. However, Christ came to redeem and fulfill both bodies and souls. Missions like ZOE focusing on empowering orphans to care for themselves and understand their worth as children of God are examples of God's continued redeeming work of bodies and souls.

It is a common practice for individuals to give up something they cherish during the season of Lent. Whether it is dessert, Facebook, or even daily fasting, the idea is to sacrifice something that has become an integral part of your routine and replace it with dependency and meditation upon Christ. This connects us, in a very small way, with the sacrifices Christ made on our behalf, which we remember and celebrate during Easter. In addition, such small sacrifices and meditation connects us to God's people who are suffering in the world, including orphans. You may have already chosen something to give up this year. If so, take some time to think and pray about the ways the Spirit is calling you to use that sacrifice to lead you into deeper relationship with God. If not, prayerfully consider what God might be calling you to sacrifice this season.

Reflection Questions

1. Can you, like Zakayo, read the words of the Psalmist and know what it is like to feel your strength being dried up as a result of hunger or illness? If not, who around you may be able to relate to these words and how can you be in prayer and service to them this week?
2. Whether or not you have chosen something to give up for Lent, what is one way that you can sacrifice your own interests today or this week, in surrender to Christ?

PRAY

Respond by speaking or writing out a prayer to God, or use the prayer below as a starting point:

Merciful God, you hear all of our prayers and know our needs before they become words on our tongue. Thank you for your unchanging goodness to us, and for the opportunity to reflect during this season of Lent. Help me(us) to grow into deeper dependency upon you these next seven weeks, and to become more conformed to the image of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

ACT

After considering the reflection questions, in what ways can you minister to those in your community (neighborhood, church, workplace, etc.) who are experiencing the hunger of poverty, pain, or sickness this season? If your church has the means to create a community garden, that could be an exciting opportunity to not only build relationships and cultivate food, but join the orphans halfway across the world who are doing the same.

Lastly, consider how this season of Lent might more deeply connect you to the sacrifice and pain Christ endured on our behalf. Even if you have given something up, consider also trying the practice of fasting which has been done by Christians throughout the centuries. You could try fasting during the mornings, or taking one day each week. This time of dependence upon God is sure to enrich your relationship with God as well as instill a deep gratitude for the material blessings you have.

LEARN MORE

To learn more about ZOE's ministry and the ways our church partners with orphans and vulnerable children, visit www.zoehelps.org

WEEK TWO

PREPARE

Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by lighting a candle, signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to come and speak to you through these words of Scripture and time of meditation.

READ

John 3:1-17

Additional Scriptures for this week: Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 121 (UMH 844), Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

REFLECT

Scripture – The Scriptures for this week have a common theme: faith. Though this may sound overly simplistic, faith is a word that is often thrown around in Christian circles but we often do not stop to think about what we actually mean by it. Is faith simply an intellectual act of affirming belief in Jesus being the Messiah, the Son of God? Or is it more than an intellectual state? What do we mean when we say someone is a person of “faith”?

In this week’s passage from Genesis, we find an example of what faith looks like in the person of Abraham. When God asks him to leave his home, his land, and travel to an unknown place where God was leading him, Abraham followed obediently. Here, we see how faith certainly has an intellectual component; he would not have given up his life to follow a God he did not believe was real. But Abraham’s faith was also much more than a simple belief. It was manifest in deep trust, obedience, and selflessness before God. In Abraham, we see an example of someone whose faith bears the fruits of the Spirit and overflows into works of love.

In addition to faith’s not consisting solely of intellectual belief, we also know that simply trying to be a good person and doing acts of service does not fully capture what faith is about either. In the passage from John, we learn that Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, also wrestled with understanding what faith meant, and sought an answer by asking Jesus. Rather than telling Nicodemus to just believe that he (Jesus) was the Messiah, or that Nicodemus’ obedience to the laws of Judaism was good enough, Jesus asserts that no person can have faith without being born anew in the Holy Spirit. This is signified in the sacrament of baptism, when our sins are washed away and we are given new life, a life filled with forgiveness as well as the gift of the Spirit living within us. Authentic faith is a transformation that permeates all areas of one’s heart, mind and soul, and naturally spills over into the actions that characterize one’s life.

ZOE Story – One contemporary example of this Spirit-filled faith is found in the story of Alfred, an orphan empowered through ZOE’s ministry. Like thousands of other children living in the country of Kenya, Alfred lost both of his parents to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. At the age of 10, he became responsible for himself, two younger siblings, and his elderly grandmother. In addition, Alfred was forced to deal with the social stigma of his parents dying of HIV/AIDS, leaving him and his family ostracized and in poverty.

Through ZOE's empowerment program, Alfred was able to learn vocational skills as well as revitalize his farm to grow food. Most importantly, he experienced the deep love God has for him and the other orphans in his ZOE working group. Alfred was so transformed by what God had done for him that he felt drawn to adopt a three-month-old orphan girl who had been abandoned. This authentic faith comes from Alfred's deep trust that God will sustain him even when the burdens seem to be more than he can carry on his own.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the ways your faith manifests itself in your life? Do you feel tempted to rely on your faith either as an intellectual belief or a list of good works? How has your life been marked by transformation?
2. How does your faith cause you to make decisions that require dependency upon God? Following the examples of Abraham and Alfred, how can you sacrifice your own interests to serve God and God's people, and deepen your faithful obedience?



PRAY

Respond by speaking or writing out a prayer to God, or use the prayer below:

*We believe that God is present
in the darkness before dawn;
in the waiting and uncertainty
where fear and courage join hands,
conflict and caring link arms,
and the sun rises over barbed wire.*

*We believe in a with-us God
Who sits down in our midst
to share our humanity.*

*We affirm a faith
That takes us beyond the safe place
into action, into vulnerability.
and into the streets.*

*We commit ourselves to work for change
and put us on the line;
to bear responsibility, to take risks,
live powerfully and face humiliation;
to stand with those on the edge;
to choose life
and be used by the Spirit
for God's new community of hope.
Amen.*

– Prayer from Lent and Easter Readings from Iona

ACT

As we learned in the Reflection, the foundation for authentic faith is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. However, we cannot grow this faith unless we take steps to fall into deeper love and knowledge of God. What practices or habits do you have that shape your day-to-day life and relationship with God? Consider the ways you might set goals for a more disciplined spiritual routine.

Make it a priority this week to re-read this Scripture passage each day, asking God to send the Spirit to guide you and your time of study. Trust that, if your heart is open to receiving, God will teach you something new each time you read it. You may do this individually, but also with family or friends. Studying Scripture in groups is often helpful because one person may see one aspect of the Scripture while you may see another!

LEARN MORE

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WEEK THREE

PREPARE

Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by lighting a candle, signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to come and speak to you through these words of Scripture and time of meditation.

READ

Exodus 17:1-17

Additional Scriptures for this week: Psalm 95, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42

REFLECT

Scripture – This week’s passage from Exodus takes us back to the story of God’s chosen people, the Israelites, as they wandered the desert searching for food and water, on their journey to the Promised Land. Their leader, Moses, did not know how to end their grumbling and complaining, other than asking the Lord to provide

Throughout their story told in the Old Testament, we see how the Israelites chose to forget God’s provision and goodness, and instead focused selfishly on meeting their own desires. This often led them into trouble; as they forgot what God’s living water tasted like, they began to create idols in their life and lost their thirst for true sustenance.

Application – It may feel easy to distance ourselves from the story of the Israelites because it was so long ago; we do not often spend our days wandering in literal deserts or struggling with idols of gold statues. However, perhaps the story of forgetting God’s faithfulness and becoming caught up in selfish desires sounds a bit more familiar.

Thankfully, we have the blessing of knowing Christ, the living water. Unlike the Israelites, we have the gift of being able to look back on the stories of Jesus in our Scripture, and see who God is. In this week’s passage from John, we are presented with the scene of Christ befriending a woman at a well who had not only earned a reputation for promiscuity in her community, but also was from the group known as the Samaritans, who did not associate with Jews. Though most would not even acknowledge her presence, Jesus offered her himself as the living water that quenches all thirst, and revealed to her that he was the Messiah. He even allowed her to serve him a drink of water, to quench his physical thirst.

Through his actions, Jesus shows us that God’s love breaks down our human social divides and extends salvation to all who will accept it, so that we may “never be thirsty.” This scene also teaches us that Jesus did not simply give this woman a blessing and leave. He sat with her, befriended her, and allowed himself to be served by her. Jesus embodies a model of relationships that is not easily found in our world today: taking in those who are cast out, leading them to the life-giving water, and expecting to receive from them in return. Though there is no guarantee that this kind of relationship will be easy, we can trust that it will be a blessing, deepening and challenging our faith.

ZOE Story – In many ways, these kinds of relationships are what the ministry of ZOE seeks to facilitate. Through empowering orphans to meet their own physical needs and teaching them of God’s love, ZOE partners in the U.S. are challenged to learn from the stories of those very different than themselves, who have been cast out in their own societies. Each party is inevitably blessed by the relationship.



The ZOE working group of orphans called Ruhashaya provides one profound example of the impact this kind of interaction has had on vulnerable children in Rwanda. Together, this group of 127 young people had great success in learning vocational skills, hygiene, home construction, and, most notably, the transformative love of God. After experiencing their own empowerment, the group noticed there were still many orphans in their community who were struggling and needed similar resources. So they decided to use half of their proceeds from a coffee harvest to “adopt” 89 other orphans! In addition to providing these children with micro-grants, vocational training, and a share in the coffee plantation proceeds as ways of breaking the cycle of poverty, these orphans developed relationships of mentoring and friendship. Clearly, the life-giving water of Christ was not hoarded or forgotten in this community, but gushes forth as a spring for all to share.

Reflection Questions

1. How can you relate to the Israelites in this passage, forgetting the blessings and faithfulness of God and choosing instead to grumble and complain? What are some things for which you have to be thankful?
2. How have you led others to the life-giving water of Christ, particularly those who are cast out by society? How can you follow the example of the Ruhashaya ZOE group in your own community?

PRAY

Respond by speaking or writing out a prayer to God, or use the prayer below as a starting point:

Jesus, our Lord, we praise you for being the source of unchanging, life-giving water, that quenches all our thirsts. Forgive us for the ways our hearts become dry and complacent so quickly and easily, and for the ways we fail to emulate your example of friendship with those around us. Fill our hearts with your Spirit that your love might overflow for all to taste. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

ACT

As we see from the example of Christ in this week's Scripture, as well as the Ruhashaya ZOE Group, sometimes leading other people to the life-giving water is as simple as becoming their friend. Sitting beside them, sharing stories with one another, and sharing a meal are small but powerful ways that facilitate the kind of relationships to which Christ calls us.

Consider the ways you might emulate this example in your own life. Some ideas may include hosting a dinner with your neighbors, volunteering to tutor those who need extra help, or choosing to eat lunch with a co-worker you do not know. This would also be a topic to discuss with family and friends, and would be a helpful way to hold one another accountable.

LEARN MORE

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WEEK FOUR

PREPARE

Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by lighting a candle, signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to come and speak to you through these words of Scripture and time of meditation.

READ

John 9:1–41

Additional Scriptures for this week: 1 Samuel 16:1–13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8–14

REFLECT

Scripture – In this fourth week of Lent, each of the Scripture passages have powerful themes related to the Kingdom of God: light and darkness; power and weakness; sight and blindness. At the heart of each of these is choosing to see others the way God sees us, a task that can be difficult for us. However, as we have seen in the stories of ZOE orphans and in the Scripture passages over the last three weeks, true faith transforms us so that we see others through the lens of Christ.

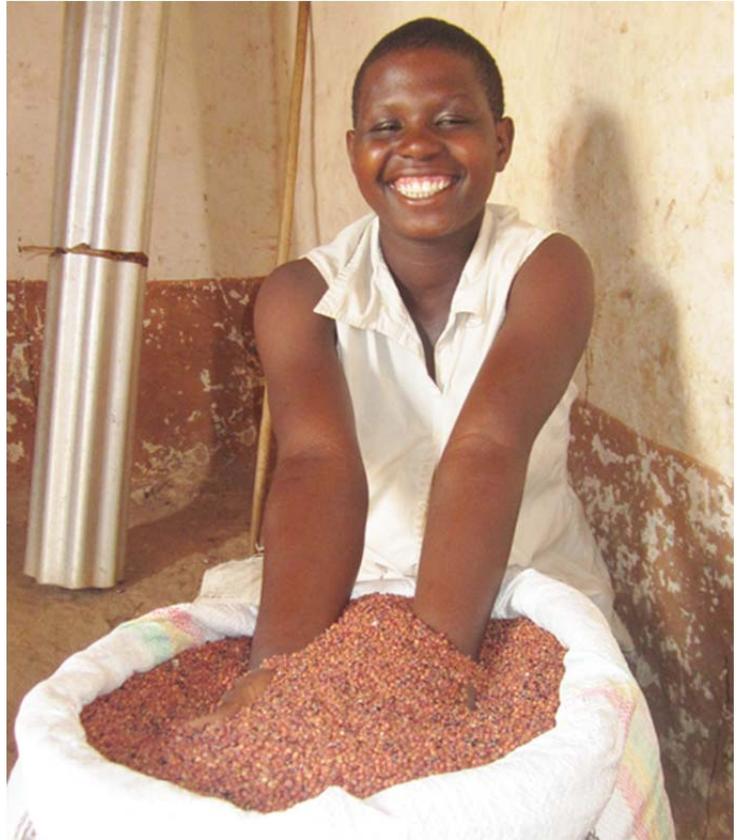
The story from the Gospel of John for this week tells what is probably one of the most well-known of Jesus' miracles: healing the blind. Though you may have heard similar stories told multiple times and preached in different ways, the narrative in chapter 9 of John's Gospel presents some unique details that bring the story to life in a particular way. In contrast to other accounts of Jesus healing the blind, this story includes an extended account of the healing, the Pharisees' reaction of disbelief and investigation, and discussion with Christ about what it all means. This does not seem to be simply another one of Jesus' miracles. For John, this story carries much more importance and requires careful consideration.

Application – The blind man's awareness that Jesus had unique power highlights the key theme of this passage: blindness is not simply one's physical ability to see or not see, but whether we recognize the revelation of the works of God in Christ Jesus. This is precisely the irony that runs through this story. The Pharisees, who are supposed to be the most religious and therefore pious Jews, end up missing out on the very Messiah that they have been waiting for, who is standing right in front of them!

Though we may be tempted to think that we would have been able to recognize Jesus as the Son of God, and avoid the prideful mistakes of the Pharisees, there are many other ways our own lives are also guided by blind spots rather than clarity of vision. Thankfully, we are able to reflect on Jesus revealed as the Son of God in the stories of Scripture, in the tradition of the church, and in our experience of living as the body of Christ in our own communities. Each of these sources, guided by the Holy Spirit, contribute to conforming our minds to the mind of Christ, and open our eyes to the blind spots we might not otherwise see.

ZOE Story – One living example of the power Christ to open our eyes is found in Eve, a ZOE orphan living in Rwanda. Like so many children in her community, she lost both of her parents at a young age. Though Eve had been taken in by an orphanage and had most of her basic needs met, she never learned how to support herself on her own. And sadly, she did not know the love God had for her.

After the orphanage, Eve went to live with an elderly woman who became her foster mom, the woman did not have the resources to support them both, and Eve was soon forced to beg for food and work on the streets. She tried to go to school in order to better herself, but the other children made fun of her. She was often sick, hungry, raggedly dressed, and lacked the materials needed for class. Understandably, Eve grew bitter toward the other children who had two parents and who had the resources to get through daily life.



Thankfully, Eve found the ZOE program and was able to learn the skills necessary to support her and her foster mom. She was amazed to meet other orphans who had been through similar challenges, and she was transformed by the experience of working together with friends in her working group community. Most importantly, Eve learned of the love God has for her and the hope that is found in Christ. She regularly attends a village church and has moved beyond any bitterness toward children who have both parents. As Eve put it, she “has learned to love all children, even those with parents.” Thanks to the love of God, Eve’s eyes have been opened to the blind spot of bitterness that could have bogged her down with anger and prevented her from finding joy. Now, Eve sees with clarity the hope she has for the future in Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you see yourself in each of the characters of the passage from John (the blind man, the Pharisees, Christ)? How can you relate to Eve’s story of God opening her eyes to a blind spot in her life?
2. What ways is your mind being conformed to the mind of Christ and what steps do you take to make this happen? Who do you have in your life to help you see potential blind spots?

PRAY

Respond by speaking or writing out a prayer to God, or use the prayer below:

Most holy God, we thank you for sending your Son to embody the life of transformation that you desire us to have. Lord, in your mercy, help our eyes to be opened to the blind spots of our lives, and give us the courage to allow your light to shine in. Grant that we may live by the guidance of your Spirit today and always, that our minds might become more conformed to the mind of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

ACT

Eve's story provides a wonderfully relatable example of the ways our blind spots may be bitterness or unforgiveness toward others. Eve also shows us what it looks like when we allow the love of God to shape our hearts and lives, leading us to see others clearly through the lens of Christ, which casts out bitterness and resentment. If you feel as though there is someone whom you struggle to forgive, pray for God to help you see the other person in the light of Christ and to give you the strength to seek reconciliation in that relationship. If you cannot think of a specific person, pray for God to shed light on the ways you judge other people or fail to see them as a brother or sister in Christ.

In addition to seeking out our own areas of blindness, we are called to spread the light of Christ into our dark world. Consider the ways you might be able to shine hope and joy to those around you. It can be as simple as looking your cashier in the eye at the grocery store and engaging them as a child of God, or calling an old friend to let them know you are thinking about them and praying for them in this season of Lent. Try to find at least one way to actively spread Christ's hope each day this week!

LEARN MORE

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WEEK FIVE

PREPARE

Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by lighting a candle, signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to come and speak to you through these words of Scripture and time of meditation.

READ

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Additional Scriptures for this week: Psalm 130, Romans 8:6–11, John 11:1–45

REFLECT

Scripture – This week, our Scripture passages move to the theme which the season of Lent is slowly building towards: resurrection. In all of the readings, we find themes of life and death, forgiveness and sin. In Christ's body on the cross, which we partake of each time we break the bread of communion, life and death come together. We remember Christ's physical death; yet we rejoice in his glorious resurrection. We reflect upon the death our humanity and sins bring; yet we experience new life and forgiveness in Christ.

In the passage from Ezekiel, we find a strange story, full of haunting images of dried bones being raised up out of a valley and put together with new flesh. It is difficult to discern what all of this means at first, but that is part of the nature of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Though these prophets had strange visions, often as perplexing to the people around them as they are to us today, such prophecies were a vehicle God used to bring God's voice of justice and truth amidst a broken world.

Application – The image of resurrection that is prophesied by Ezekiel is a vision of God's people being restored from their place of brokenness and exile. Throughout much of the Old Testament, the Israelites cannot seem to get their act together. It seems that once things start to go well, they mess up again in a new way. But, alongside this theme of brokenness, there are also voices of redemption and restoration. Through the cries of prophets like Ezekiel, they remember who they are and the reason they had to hope. This story is our story.

Unlike the Israelites, we have not only seen the fulfillment of their covenant with God in Christ but also experienced the profound hope of Christ's resurrection. This is an incredible gift. But, like the people of Israel, we are prone to forget who we are as children of God and how we must follow Christ's example of living in this world. The need for prophetic voices is still very much alive, as they call out the injustices of this world and inspire us to do the same. They help us to see our blind spots and work to bring in the kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven.

ZOE Story – Though there often seems to be more darkness and injustice to cry out against than light to celebrate, we must not forget the promise that Christ is alive and working even in our broken world. In last week's devotional, we learned about the radical love that ZOE's Ruhashaya Working Group extended by adopting 89 additional orphans as their own. One of these adopted boys was named Theogene who had spent most of his 18 years of life alone and begging for food. He lived homeless on the streets, and was often beaten and abused by those who saw him as inferior and would not pay him for his labor. Theogene said many times he simply wished to die; his life was void of hope.

Then, when Theogene met a fellow orphan of the Ruhashaya Working Group, he was befriended with dignity and respect. Theogene was accepted into the group, and was amazed by the ability of his brothers and sisters in Christ to pull themselves out of poverty and find joy despite the great suffering they had experienced in life. Theogene found hope even amidst the darkness of his circumstances, thanks to the ZOE orphans who showed him the love of Christ by taking him in and helping him achieve freedom from poverty and injustices. Theogene was able to buy a pig, and shared how it brought him incredible joy to see it give birth to six piglets, three of whom he gave away to other orphans. Theogene's story is no longer one of darkness and despair, but of light, a light that he seeks to share to other people.



Reflection Questions

1. God longs for justice and goodness to come to all people, and longs for us to follow Ezekiel's example in bringing those things to earth. What injustices in your own community are you passionate about? In the world?
2. In what ways can you use words to speak out against injustices in our world? In what ways can you use actions?

PRAY

Respond by speaking or writing out a prayer to God, or use the prayer below as a starting point:

Righteous God, Lord of all justice, we thank you for the great gift of your Word, and the ways your Spirit uses it in our lives. Thank you for the ways it guides and challenges our perceptions of justice, and helps us to recognize the prophetic voice of those we might otherwise be tempted to dismiss. Just as Theogene found your hope in the midst of his despair, help us to have ears that hear those voices, and give us the courage to act on them to bring justice to your people and our world. In Jesus' name we ask these things. Amen.

ACT

The opportunities for enacting justice in our local communities, in our nation, and in our world are too many to count. This can at times be overwhelming, but we must not let it paralyze us or prevent us from living into our calling to follow Christ. Instead, it is helpful to remember that God is bigger than all of the problems we see and does not expect us to solve it all on our own! Just like Theogene, God has given us each unique gifts, equipping us to face the injustices of our world that meet our deepest passions. If you are not sure where your passion lies or how it might be put into action, spend some time praying about this. Have conversations with family and friends about what gifts they see in you and how those might be utilized to glorify God. Explore ministries within your church, organizations in your community, or even local lobbying groups that might already be working to bring the justice you are called to support. If Theogene can follow God with so much of the world against him, how much more can we who are so richly blessed?

LEARN MORE

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WEEK SIX – PALM SUNDAY

PREPARE

Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by lighting a candle, signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to come and speak to you through these words of Scripture and time of meditation.

READ

Matthew 21:1–11

Additional Scriptures for this week: Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

REFLECT

Lent – Palm Sunday tends to be a well-celebrated event in the church’s calendar. Many churches have long-standing traditions of incorporating palm branches in the worship service in order to remember Jesus’ procession into Jerusalem. It is also an exciting way to incorporate children into the stories of Jesus. However, sometimes when we get so wrapped up in the tradition, we forget the power that lies in the story itself.

Scripture – Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as outlined in our Scripture passage from Matthew, marks the beginning of Jesus’ last days, and is what many churches choose to commemorate during what we call Holy Week. When we stop to think about it, this scene, which we have likely reenacted and read through many times, is quite provocative. Rather than avoiding the danger that he knew awaited him in that city, Jesus chooses to face it and face it boldly.

This simple teacher, who had been stirring up crowds and challenging the status quo everywhere he went, comes processing into a city imitating the arrival of a king, on one of the most common, lowly animals: a donkey. In addition to the use of this less-than-majestic animal, his path was paved with leaves of tree branches and the cloaks given by people in the crowd. In this powerful moment, Christ again chooses to embody and endorse the meek life of common folk, creating a stark contrast to luxury accorded earthly kings and challenging our notion of what true kingship looks like.

Application – This story poses a challenging question to us: would we have been among those in the crowd who laid their cloaks down on the dusty road, recognizing this common man as our king and Savior? Or would we have stood back, watching from afar and remaining in our comfortable place of skepticism? For our modern minds, it is often much easier to place our trust in ourselves or in authorities who have won tangible power in our society. However, Christ subverts these authorities and challenges us to look beyond worldly designations to the unchanging source of truth and justice.

ZOE believes that orphans have something profound to teach us, not in spite of their material differences from us, but because of them. Though we may have very dissimilar lives from these orphans on a surface level, we are united with them in Christ and in our call to be his disciples. They are our brothers and sisters, who have much to teach us about the kingdom of God. Moses Mugendi, a Kenyan orphan, provides one example of how Christ’s hallowing of the ordinary, as seen in the story of Palm Sunday, can be emulated by his people today.

ZOE Story – After losing both of his parents at the age of 14, Moses had to take on the responsibility of caring for himself and his four younger siblings. Though he inherited land from his parents, he did not know much about how to use it for cultivating crops, and instead worked for neighbors to receive small wages that barely provided enough food for his family. He was isolated, living without community and without knowledge of his identity as a child of God.



After partnering with ZOE by joining a ZOE working group in his community, Moses was given tools and training needed to cultivate his own land. Moses he fell in love with the work of farming. ZOE gave him a goat to provide fertilizer, which has since produced multiple kids. Today, Moses stands proudly beside an acre of abundant, drought-resistant crops that feed his family and provide a sustainable source of income. Though being a one-acre farmer may seem unimpressive by Western standards, Moses found God in the everyday work of tending his crops, and now is bursting with joy that he wants to share with others. He teaches other children in his community the skills he learned as he became empowered, while sharing the love of Christ that transforms ordinary life to be extraordinary.

Reflection Questions

1. Imagine that you were standing in the crowd of people as Jesus was processing into Jerusalem. How would that scene have made you feel? Empowered? Skeptical? Awestruck? What does this say about the Kingdom of God?
2. How can you make your work, whether at home or in other spheres, a hallowed, sacred space? What aspects of ordinary life might be opportunities to worship the God who became a common human being?

PRAY

Respond by speaking or writing out a prayer to God, or use the prayer below as a starting point:

Most holy God, thank you for coming down on our level in the particular person of Jesus, whose glorious kingship was revealed in processing on a donkey along a humble path of tree branches and dusty cloaks. Thank you for this gift which guides our notion of glory and power, and reveals to us your hallowing of the mundane and ordinary details of life. Help us to surrender these realms of life to you, so that we might be wholly conformed to the pattern of Christ. Amen.

ACT

The stories of Palm Sunday and Moses Mugendi show us that God has the power to make ordinary, unsuspecting places and routines sacred. Though we don't often think of our daily lives as opportunities to worship or proclaim God's name, all work can be transformed by the love of Christ. Consider discussing with family and friends how your work (this includes more than just your "job") can become ways of serving Christ and sharing him with others. Gardening, volunteering, attending church, doing housework, exercising...all of these can be viewed as opportunities to connect with God and glorify God. One way that Christ actively hallowed the ordinary was through sharing meals with those very different than him. This might be a transformative activity for you to try in your community as well.

LEARN MORE

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WEEK SEVEN - EASTER

PREPARE

Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by lighting a candle, signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to come and speak to you through these words of Scripture and time of meditation.

READ

Colossians 3:1–4

Additional Scriptures for this week: Acts 10:34–43, Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24, John 20:1–18

REFLECT

Easter – After seven weeks of reflecting upon the stories of Christ in his life, suffering, and death, we have arrived at Easter; the tomb is empty. Though we remember and celebrate this same story each year, the significance it carries for our lives is never diminished. The challenge, instead, is being open to the change it can make in us.

The resurrection of Jesus certainly brings great hope in proclaiming that death is not the last word in our lives. No matter how much suffering and tragedy we undergo, no earthly circumstance can change the truth that Jesus is risen and we will be with him someday. But what does the story of Easter, the sight of the empty tomb mean for us on a day-to-day basis?

Scripture – The passage from Colossians provides an important insight into this question. You might notice the somewhat strange wording of these four small verses. In the very first sentence, it reads: “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above” (New Revised Standard Version). This seems slightly contradictory. If we have been raised with Christ, why would we still need to seek things “above”? It is possible that Paul was implying that we can participate in the resurrection of Jesus, precisely in our seeking the things of God?

Application – Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection bring together both death and life in his body. For our daily lives, this means no matter how broken or sinful a situation is, Christ can transform it and bring it new life. However, there are also some situations such as relationships, jobs, addictions, or habits that need to be put to death and mourned. Thankfully, we know that Christ’s suffering on the cross allowed him to experience and identify with our pain, so we know we are never alone, even in moments of utter darkness.

ZOE Story – Justine* is someone who understands this truth from experience. When both of her parents died, Justine had no other family and became an orphan, dropping out of school and begging for food. Without the protection of a community, people abused her by taking her parents’ land, and she suffered a sexual assault as well. Justine gave birth to baby boy named David*, and their first year of life together was malnourished and full of despair. Justine was angry with God whom she felt had allowed her to suffer so much. Then, Justine met ZOE.

From the first meeting with her ZOE working group, Justine was told of her deep worth as a child of God, something that had been neglected and abused by those around her. ZOE also helped her by reclaiming her parents land, and with the help of her fellow orphans in the working group she planted crops of beans and sweet potatoes. Additionally, Justine received a goat to provide milk and fertilizer for the garden, which provides balanced nourishment for her and David.

Slowly, Justine has regained her dignity as she has worked to become self-sufficient, able to care for herself and her child. She now knows the love God has for her and her baby, experienced through the partnership of ZOE and the support of her community in her working group. If the resurrection has the power to bring new life to Justine's story, despite the death and destruction she has experienced in our fallen world, what can it do for your life?



Reflection Questions

1. What areas of life do you need to allow death in order to allow God to bring new life?
2. How does Jesus overcoming death affect your daily life? What does it mean for your understanding of our inevitable bodily death? Metaphorical death to sin?

PRAY

Respond by speaking or writing out a prayer to God, or use the prayer below as a starting point:

Lord, we stand in awe before you, utterly amazed at the power that lies on the cross and in the empty tomb. Your goodness in bringing together both death and life in Christ's body is unfathomable, and we praise you for allowing us to partake in it despite our sin. Help us to allow death in the areas of our lives that need it, and to allow your offer of new life to transform those ashes into beauty. Thank you for the gift of Easter, and let us live in its truth this day and always. Amen.

ACT

This is what we partake of in sharing Communion, where death and life come together in Christ's body. At the table, which we share with Justine and all Christians, we humbly repent of the ways our sinful humanity brings death and destruction to ourselves and others, while also rejoicing in the opportunity to experience new, free life in Christ. Consider ways that you might bring the sacrament of Communion to your communities.

LEARN MORE

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