

THE RISK OF BEING

WOKE

SERMONIC REFLECTIONS
FOR ACTIVISTS

CURTISS PAUL DEYOUNG

Foreword by Iva E. Carruthers

Discussion Guide

The Risk of Being Woke

by Curtiss Paul DeYoung



This Discussion Guide offers facilitation hints, discussion questions, and session outlines to help guide you and your community in a Lenten book study. Or use the questions for personal reflection in a journal or as seeds for meditations.



The season of Lent offers us the opportunity to take stock of our spiritual lives and practices, and to deepen our connection and commitment to the liberating path of Jesus. Modeled after Jesus' 40 days of desert dreaming at the beginning of his ministry, Lent invites us to be lovingly accountable to God's vision of justice and compassion and awakened to the places where that vision is being challenged and suppressed, even as we seek spiritual nourishment for this calling as movement-makers.

If Jesus' time in the desert teaches us anything, perhaps it is that there are risks to this heart-opening, mind-expanding, gut-wrenching, new life-awakening path of liberation. And we need those angels, those messengers and journey companions, who will meet us along the way, bearing comfort and strength.

This Lent, Join the Movement is inviting us to turn toward one such journey companion: Curtiss Paul DeYoung's new book [The Risk of Being Woke: Sermonic Reflections for Activists](#). Rooted in the activism that emerged following George Floyd's murder, this book offers biblical reflections to "nurture and nudge us as we encounter risks in the midst of the journey" (xvii).

Thank you for joining us in this rising up journey.

May you find nourishment in these readings and your conversations along the way.

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Contents

In this Discussion Guide, you will find:

- A sample outline for how you could structure your discussion sessions;
- Weekly discussion questions and supporting materials;
- Guidance for creating group covenants to foster brave space for conversation; and
- Tips for facilitating generous, rooted, prophetic, and truthful sacred discussions.

Sample Outline for Discussion Sessions

Preparation

Invite participants to read the chapter(s) you will be discussing and the scripture reading for the week. Ask folks to spend time digesting, taking notes, and praying with each chapter. You can also encourage folks to journal about their responses and questions each day as well. Set aside 60-90 minutes for shared discussion. *NB: This discussion group would also easily be adapted to Zoom or other online group forums.*

Materials Needed

Candle(s) and/or other materials for a sacred center; journals [optional]; paper and writing implements [optional]

Set Up

Set up chairs in a circle or around a table with the candle(s) at the center. If you are using them, place journals or paper and writing implements at each seat.

Session Outline

Times provided are for a 60-minute discussion group.

Simply extend or reduce discussion time if you are hoping for a shorter or longer session.

CENTERING TIME (5 MINUTES)

As we engage in conversations around difficult topics, it is helpful to remind ourselves that these discussions are holy ground and that we are entering a sacred journey, connected to God and to each other as beloved ones of the Holy One. At the same time, one of the most important capacities we can grow as part of our racial justice practices is the ability to center (and recenter) ourselves. Practicing grounding ourselves in breath, prayer, and intentions helps us develop the ability to return to that centered place when we experience distress or harm. It also helps us to reconnect to the “why” of our practice, to what keeps us coming back, even when things are difficult or overwhelming. So, begin your time together with grounding, symbolic action, and prayer.

- Once folks have gathered, invite everyone to take some deep breaths and ground themselves in their intentions for this place and time.
- Light your candle(s) as a reminder of God’s presence in and among us as we gather.
- Offer the prayer provided below, or another of your choosing.

Holy God, our Guide and Companion,
open us to your presence among us
in this moment and every moment.
As we journey in these paths of struggle and hope,
keep us centered in your love and justice,
that as we wake, we will listen
and as we journey, we will risk
and as we rise, we will stay,
until justice comes
for each and for all. Amen.

COVENANT (5 MINUTES*)

Attending to the “how” of your gathering and fostering accountability are both important antiracist practices. Take a moment at the beginning of your time together to re-read your covenants and invite a moment of check-in about how you are doing at keeping them and if any more should be added.

*Note: Creating the covenant your first time may take longer. See guidance for creating your covenant below.

CHECK IN (5 MINUTES – DEPENDING ON HOW MANY PEOPLE YOU HAVE)

Offering a time for participants to check in helps build community and foster relationships which is part of practicing racial justice. As Audre Lorde reminds us, “Without community, there is no liberation.”

- Invite participants to share their names and pronouns and respond briefly (in a sentence or two) to one of the following check-in prompts:
 - Where is one place/what is one moment in which you caught a glimpse of a future of racial justice for all?
 - What’s something you are grateful for or lamenting today?
 - What challenges and/or joys are you experiencing in your life?

DISCUSSION (40 MINUTES)

- Choose one of the questions in the discussion guide to focus on for a while. Then follow with another one or two. Expect to only have time to engage 1-2 (maybe 3) questions in a 60-minute session.
- [Optional – To cater to different learning styles and personalities or foster a more contemplative atmosphere, invite participants to use their paper and writing implements to do a free write for about 2 minutes in response to the question. Then move into a verbal discussion.]
- [Optional – If your group is large or if you have a lot of internal processors/introverts, have folks turn to a neighbor to share their thoughts initially in pairs or trios, and then bring some of what they talked about to the larger group]

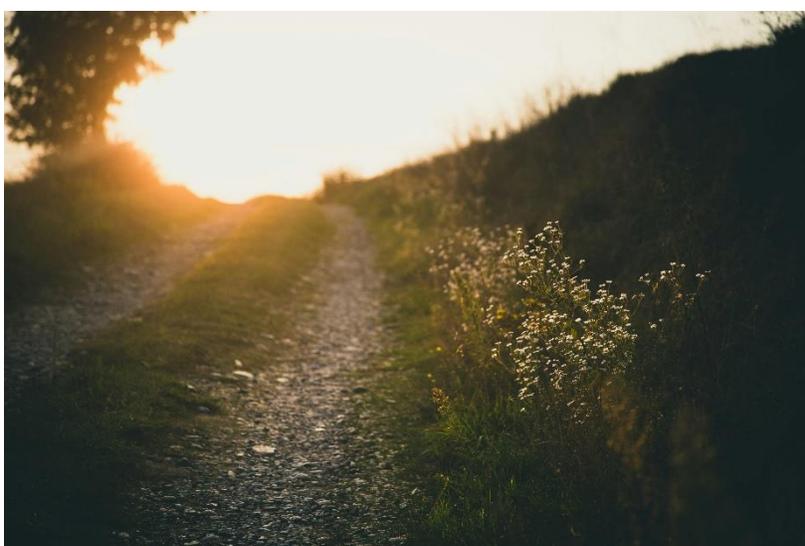
SPIRITUAL PRACTICE INTRODUCTION (3 MINUTES)

Staying woke means challenging and changing the ways we live and move through the world. Engaging in different spiritual practices can help form us for this rising up journey.

Read the description of the spiritual practice designated for the week. Invite participants to participate in that practice at least once or more between now and your next session. After week one, you can also use this time to invite participants to offer any reflections or experiences they want to share with others about the spiritual practice they engaged the week before.

CLOSING BLESSING (2 MINUTES)

- Engage the group in one of the following sending practices:
 - Invite each person to share one word of how they are feeling or what they are taking with them from the discussion today.
 - Invite each person to share one word of gratitude for this time together.
 - While standing in a circle, invite participants to place their right hand on their own heart, and their left hand on the back of the person next to them (having asked their permission). Take some deep breaths together and invite folks to notice the connections between their beating hearts.



Weekly Discussion Group Materials

Week 1

“Martin Luther King asked folks to remain awake in 1968. Black Lives Matter activists asked people to stay woke in 2014 as Ferguson, and many other places then, before and since, experienced the killing of Black people by police...With the uprising in 2020 in Minneapolis following the killing of George Floyd, we need to stay awake, stay woke, so we do not sleep through, and miss, what God is doing” (7).

Focus Reading: Chapter 1 – The Risk of Being Woke

Optional Reading: Introduction: Remaining Awake in a Racial Reckoning

Scripture Reading: John 11

Discussion Questions:

1. What are you “staying woke” to this Lent? What capacities, skills, attitudes, and practices are you building in order to stay woke?
2. Where do or have you experienced the risks of being awake to racial injustice?
3. What is your stake in the work of racial justice? How does this stake empower, ground, and you to risk being woke?

Spiritual Practice: Breath Prayer

A breath prayer is an ancient contemplative practice of praying aimed at allowing you to open to the presence of God and ground yourself in that presence. The prayer consists of two short phrases, one to accompany your inhale, and one to accompany your exhale. You can create your own breath prayer to help you stay connected to the core values and commitments that compel and support your rising up journey this Lent. Here are some examples:

Inhale: Surrounded by Love,

Exhale: I will stay woke.

Inhale: If Jesus has woke me,

Exhale Jesus will sustain me.

Week 2

*“Jesus’ death was a state-sanctioned murder. God stepped in with resurrection, declaring Jewish lives mattered. What is the resurrection witness in the United States that declares that Black Lives Matter?”
(17-18).*

Focus Reading: Chapter 2 – Oppressed Lives Matter

Optional Reading: Chapter 13 – When the Empire Strikes Back

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-18 and John 19:1-22

Discussion Questions:

1. In this chapter, the author helps us understand what it meant for God to become flesh as a Jewish person living under Roman occupation in the 1st century. How does he connect the ancient Roman context to that of racial violence and injustice in the United States in the 21st century? What implications do those connections have?
2. DeYoung suggests that both the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus testify to God’s declaration that oppressed lives matter. What could it look like for you to participate this testimony in your own community?
3. What might be the resurrection witness for Palestinians living through war, violence, and occupation in our current context?

Spiritual Practice: Lament

Lament is a long-standing practice in Christian traditions of laying bare before God the truth of the injustice, suffering, and violence in our lives and our world. Our sacred scripture is full of laments, from the blood of Abel calling out from the ground in Genesis, to the Psalmist’s wail: “tears have been my food day and night, to Jesus’ expression of forsakenness on the cross. Take some time to create your own lament. Here are some questions to get you started:

1. Address – How might you call on God, what name do you call God when you need God the most?
2. Complaint – What is the truth of injustice or suffering you want God to hold with you?
3. Request – How are you hoping God will act and empower you to act?
4. Expression of Trust – What do you hold on to about God and God’s vision for the world that helps you believe God holds this with you?

Week 3

“The site of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, now called George Floyd Square, hosted the first rally and protest the day after his death. From that first day on May 26, 2020, people have shown up and tended to memories, rage, and grief, and stood up against racial injustice. Among those gathering were Floyd’s family members. But many others, unrelated by blood, have become family through faithfulness” (67).

Focus Reading: Section 2 Introduction – The Call to Community

Optional Reading: Chapter 10 – We Are Better Together

Scripture Reading: John 19:25-27

Discussion Questions:

1. Tell a story about your experience of becoming “family” through faithfulness in critical times.
2. What crucifixions have been experienced in your local context?
3. If we take the four women at the crucifixion in John’s gospel as a model of what community can be and do in the face of racial injustice, what kinds of practices might we engage in as a community?

Spiritual Practice: Pilgrimage

Take a trip to a site of racialized violence or injustice or struggle for racial in your city or town. See what that place has to reveal to you about God’s presence in community and the ways in which you are called to partner with others to this rising up journey. Offer some prayers for those impacted by what happened there. How will bearing witness in this place change you?

Week 4

“We can call to our God, even if we are questioning if God is there. God will hear our cry. In God’s time zone, our dead ends are not final; our sin is not final; our mess is not final; and the power of empire is not final” (109-110).

Focus Reading: Chapter 11: God’s Time Zone

Optional Reading: Chapter 8: The In-Between Time

Scripture Reading: Matthew 27:45-54

Discussion Questions:

1. This reflection begins by reminding us that God operates in a divine time zone and sometimes there are ways that God is acting in our lives that we do not see in the present moment. When have you experienced a moment in the divine time zone? What did you come to know after that experience?
2. In Act Three, we discover the ways God’s time moves both forward and backward, even “undoing certain historical realities.” What is a historical reality you wish you could undo? What might you do in the present to help heal the lineage of that historical reality?
3. In Act Four, the author struggles to make sense of Jesus’ experience of God-forsakenness on the cross. What do you make of this moment in Jesus’ story?

Spiritual Practice: Sacred Pause

A sacred pause helps us connect to the divine time zone, creating space for us to pay attention to the ultimate in the midst of our everyday concerns and tasks. To begin your sacred pause, start by discontinuing what you are doing, sitting comfortably and allowing your eyes to close or find a gentle focus. Take a few deep breaths and with each exhale release your thoughts of what’s next; let go of any tightness in the body. Conclude with a moment of noticing what your pausing has allowed you to pay attention to.

Week 5

“One cannot know if an action for racial justice will achieve what is hoped for. I suggest an experience of eternity transforms our perceptions of reality and enables us to embrace future possibilities” (112).

Focus Reading: Chapter 12: God’s Preparation for a Future Yet Unseen

Optional Reading: Chapter 5: *The Economics of Racial Equity*

Scripture Reading: Luke 23:26-49

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever experienced the revelation of the transformation of reality like the author describes in Luke’s crucifixion story? When did it happen? What did you see?
2. What “what-if” questions haunt you when it comes to racial justice? What “what-if” questions give you hope?
3. Where do you find strength, encouragement and resilience as you work and wait for the hoped for future of justice, yet unseen?

Spiritual Practice: Visualization

The great African American poet Lucille Clifton said, “We cannot create what we cannot imagine.” Take some time to imagine what a world of racial justice would look like. Draw or journal different components of your vision. What do these visions show you about how you are being called to risk being woke in this moment in our world?

Additional Week

Depending on when you start and end your weekly discussions this Lent, you may need an additional week of discussions. We suggest adding this week's material somewhere in the middle of the season, keeping Week 1's materials as the first week and Week 5's materials as the last week.

"In the context of Roman oppression, Jews rarely trusted Greeks. The conversation between Jesus and the Greek woman was a first step in trust building. Trust became possible because she as a privileged, dominant culture person acknowledged her privileged position, treated an oppressed Jew like Jesus with dignity and respect, and recognized her own need for healing" (32).

Focus Reading: Chapter 4: Discussing Race in Dominant Spaces

Optional Reading: Chapter 9: Sameness Meets Creoleness

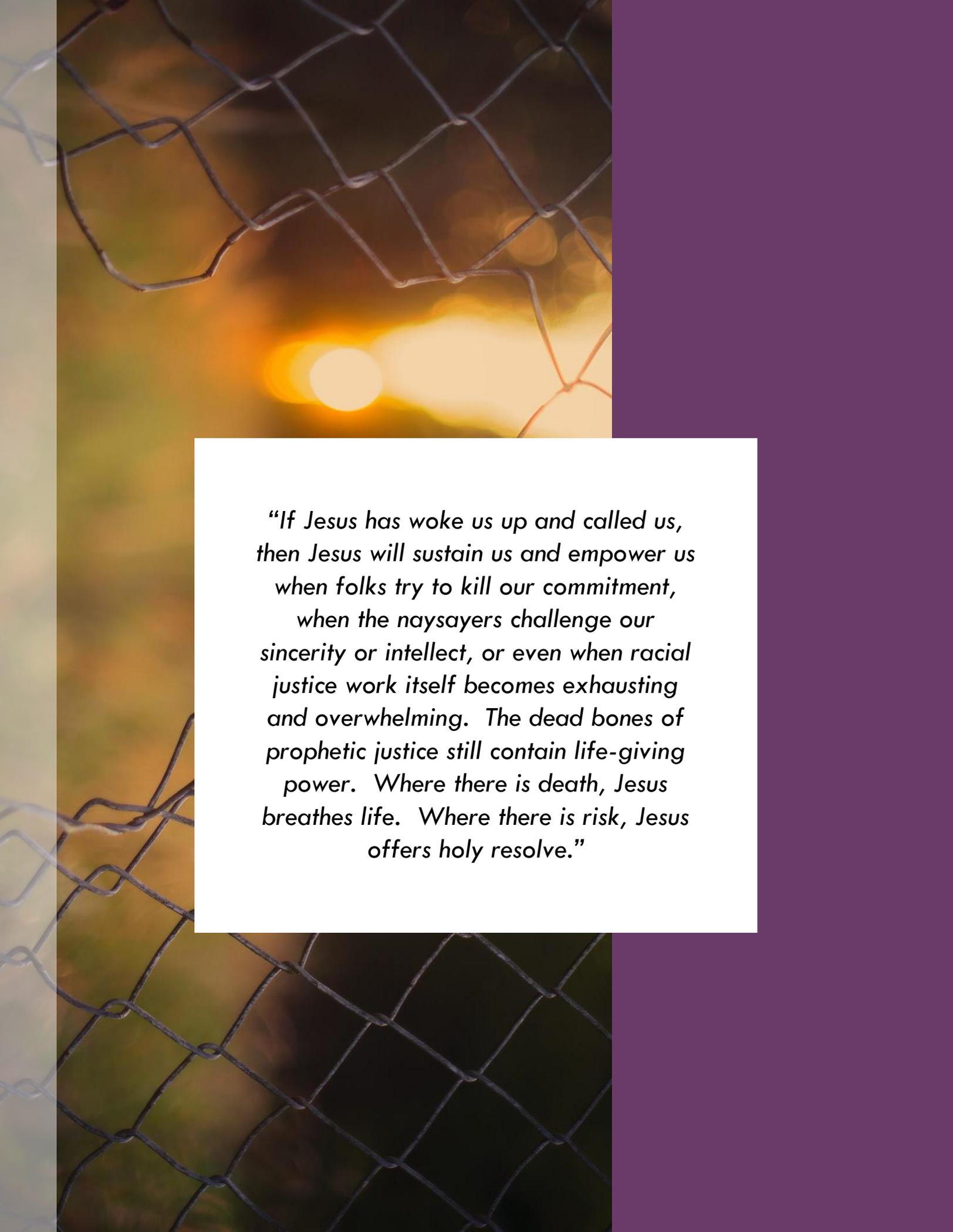
Scripture Reading: Mark 7:24-30

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever experienced being in a space where you did not share the same privileges as most of the people you were encountering? If yes, what was/is that like for you? If no, what do you make of that?
2. What does it take for you to stay in challenging conversations of accountability? What strategies do you have to reorient defensiveness and self-regulate?
3. When has someone entrusted you with a difficult truth? How did you respond? How do you wish you had responded?

Spiritual Practice: Sensory Grounding

In moments of heightened emotions, it can be helpful to have practices that help you ground in the present moment and connect to the world and those around you. One way you can do that is to notice 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste. If one or more of your senses is not available to you, you can reuse one you do have access to. If you can, as you notice these things, offer a moment of gratitude for their grounding presence in your life.



“If Jesus has woke us up and called us, then Jesus will sustain us and empower us when folks try to kill our commitment, when the naysayers challenge our sincerity or intellect, or even when racial justice work itself becomes exhausting and overwhelming. The dead bones of prophetic justice still contain life-giving power. Where there is death, Jesus breathes life. Where there is risk, Jesus offers holy resolve.”

Group Covenants

In order for conversations to be courageous and for us to strive to “do no harm” in our discussions around racial justice, it is important to create a container that can hold them. In the UCC, we are a people of covenants, meaning we seek to make and hold promises with one another, guided and held by the Holy One, that help us grow, change and flourish as God’s beloved ones. So, before you delve into your discussions, take some time to discuss why you are here and how you want to be in conversation with each other. Give each person a chance to give voice to their hopes for this time and their personal goals for how they want to show up. Then make some collective agreements to help you foster [a brave space](#) for your conversations. Remember, the goal is to practice staying woke, that is, to “develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses that the new situation demands (6)” in and through your conversations, not to be comfortable, unchallenged, respectable, or sheltered. Once you’ve discussed these covenants, offer a sign to each other that you will hold them, with the help of God.

Accountability is a key antiracist practice, so use the covenants to help get conversations back on track or address moments of slippage. Don’t forget to check in with each other periodically throughout your time together to see how you are doing at keeping your covenants. Creating accountability together is not about policing others’ expressions, but rather, it is about empowering the group to address harm when it happens and return to the love and justice that is at the heart of your desire to practice antiracism.

Below are some covenants that we recommend.

We agree/covenant to:

- Use “I” statements
locate your reflections within your own experience and avoid speaking for others
- Speak truths
be as forthcoming as you can with your own understandings, thoughts and feelings
- Embrace differences and complexities
recognize that the person/people you are in conversation with are bringing their own perspective, shaped by their own experiences; work toward understanding rather than agreement
- Lean in with curiosity
stay openhearted, ask questions to deepen understanding, resist withdrawing or shaming
- Expect discomfort
build in moments for deep breathing, pauses to reflect and recenter, and moments to be aware of your mindbodyspirit
- Address impacts
no matter what the intent, harm happens; hold space to understand impacts and repair harm; be accountable for harmful impacts
- Respect confidentiality
decide between conversation partners if and how anything that is said may be shared with others
- Foster reciprocity
listen actively when you are not speaking, work toward equity of voices, be aware of the space you are taking or if you’re withdrawing to or staying comfortable in silence
- Practice self-care
only you know how you are able to engage in conversations like these in any give moment; share what you are able, sustain your heart, go as deep as you can but no deeper, nurture your own well-being

Facilitator Tips

Movement facilitator adrienne maree brown describes facilitation as both holding space and holding change. She reminds us that the word facilitate comes from the Latin root *facilis*, which means to make easy. She says, “To hold change or hold space is to hold both the people in and the dynamic energy of a room, a space, a discussion, etc....To hold change is to make it easy for people with shared intentions to be around each other and move towards their vision and values...Facilitation is making it as easy as possible for groups of people to do the hard work of dreaming, learning, visioning, and acting together” (*Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation*, 7). While you won’t be able to make people comfortable or promise safety, as a discussion facilitator, you have the opportunity to cultivate a shared space geared toward each person’s flourishing, toward deep connection and toward transformative learning. It is a sacred calling and a blessing in community, but it is not without its challenges and pitfalls. So here are some tips and reminders for facilitating antiracist, life-giving, and transformational discussions.

- Encourage a space of curiosity over critique; foster an environment of appreciative inquiry.
It is easy for groups to get caught in a posture of critique, focusing on where they think the author is wrong or what they disagree with. This often prevents engagement with the core ideas the author is offering and can serve as a distraction from the deeper work the book is encouraging. Invite people to find a balance between critique and generosity and to focus on what they are noticing and learning, rather than nitpicking how they might differ.
- Hold space for complexity/ambiguity.
Each person brings a variety of experiences, ideas and values to the room. The goal of discussion is not necessarily to agree but to come to understand one another. Remind people that there is space for multiple truths. Encourage people to entertain the idea that there can be difference without disaster!
- Help people be mindful of universalizing their experiences.
Even if the people in your group share many identity markers and similar life experiences – and especially if they don’t – there will be a diversity of knowledge, skills and understandings in the room. These differences are part of the richness of learning together. But it is often tempting for folks to assume that everyone shares their experience and understanding. As a facilitator, you can remind people that their experience is just that, theirs, and may not be shared by others. See “Use ‘I’ statements” in the covenant above.
- Introduce pauses and opportunities for self-regulation.
Moments of conflict or intense emotions may arise during your conversations. You will be talking about ideas and experiences that are filled with fraught emotions for many. Don’t be afraid to invite folks to slow down and take a breath if things get tense or if folks seem to be getting left behind by the conversation. Even if you’ve just reached a pause in a conversation, take the opportunity to recenter. This capacity to reground yourself is an important antiracist practice.
- Watch for imbalances and be invitational.
All of us have been formed by white supremacy in practices of dominance and myths of superiority. Your discussions may have moments that fall into typical patterns of power that privilege certain voices or styles of interaction. Pay attention to who is speaking and who isn’t, who is taking up a lot of space and who is not taking enough. Do your best to keep creating openings for people to engage, using prompts like, “Would anyone who hasn’t spoken yet or in a while like to speak?” or “Let’s take a pause to hear from someone new.” Keep in mind that folks may have reasons for not engaging that they may not be able to articulate, so try to make sure folks can take a pass if they need to.

- Get comfortable with the unfinished.
The work of racial justice is the work of generations. Becoming antiracist is the journey of a lifetime. You won't solve racism or learn everything there is to know about it in one discussion session or through one book discussion. Remind folks that urgency is a strategy of white supremacy and that being on-the-way is what we are called to as followers of the revolutionary Jesus. Discussions might not end wrapped up in a pretty bow and that's ok. Keep people leaning into the ongoing nature of this work.
- Address harm when it happens; attend to impact over intent.
If someone says or does something harmful in the process of your discussion, take the time to address it. If at all possible, it is often helpful to call people in with the whole group present, though sometimes it may make sense to do so individually in a follow-up conversation. However you decide to approach it, try to make sure that there is opportunity to bring attention to harmful words or behavior, including bias, prejudice, microaggressions, and discrimination. Be especially attentive to the tendency of people of European descent to engage in cathartic confession, often discussing heinous racist things they have done or witnessed, being mindful that these kinds of stories may impact others in the group in harmful ways. When calling in, the goal is not to shame or demean someone, but rather, to invite them into deeper relationship by creating accountability. While folks will often insist that they "didn't mean to" do harm, and will try to focus on what they were intending to say, remember that practicing antiracism means attending to the impact of what we do and say, regardless of what our intent might have been.
- Resist the tendency to be, or be seen as, the expert or arbiter of the space.
Facilitation is not about centering yourself; it's about centering the work. As a facilitator your role is not to have all the answers or control the space, but rather to help encourage transformative conversations. You are there to enable and empower the learning and discovery of the participants. Folks may want to turn you into the authority on all things antiracist, but you can help remind them that each person has contributions to make to our understanding and growth as a group and each person has responsibility for keeping the group accountable to its best intentions, practices and values.
- Diffuse or de-escalate defensiveness.
One of the ways that discomfort and/or shame can manifest itself in conversations involving race or racism is as defensiveness. This may be embodied in lots of different ways, including getting angry and loud or retreating to silence. However it is displayed, the result is often a wall built between that person and others, or between self-protection and growth/learning. Try to de-escalate defensiveness by inviting people to take a breath or notice/write down what they are feeling (see Introduce pauses and opportunities for self-regulation above). Invite people to lean in with curiosity and resist withdrawing in those moments or to take the time they need to self-regulate, but return to the group so that the learning and connection can continue.
- Encourage accountability and self-compassion.
It is important to foster accountability in our communities (see Address harm... above). Accountability is owning our mistakes or moments where we cause hurt or harm, or moments when we act out of alignment with our values and working toward repair and effective change. True accountability encourages us to grow. But too often, accountability elicits shame. Remember, shame really gets us nowhere. Wallowing in shame or guilt or sadness or despair actually keeps the focus on that individual, rather than the realities of racism or the harm it causes. So as a facilitator, you have the opportunity to help the group develop practices of accountability AND to move away from being numbed or overwrought by shame and guilt. Invite people to make a connection to their heart by rubbing where their heart is on their chest as they offer themselves self-compassion and remember that they are a beloved child of God, even when they mess up. We all need to be reminded of grace as we strive to do better.



Thank you for committing to the rising up journey with us this Lent. We hope you have been nourished for all the work that lies ahead.

We leave you with this charge from Rev. Dr. DeYoung at the end of this book:

“Work for racial justice in a broken world where the power of the prophet never dies. Build community in a broken world where oppressed lives matter and we are better together. Seek the mystic in a broken world and rest in the womb of God. When the empire strikes back, hear the call out of Egypt and enter God’s time zone. Put on the lens of eternity and look past a broken world toward a racially just future yet unseen” (131-132).

May it be so.