



***Study Guide for
The Cross and the Lynching Tree***
by Dr. James Cone

“Where is the gospel of Jesus’ cross revealed today?”

Six-week comprehensive Study Guide prepared by the **Conference Board of Church and Society** provides discussion questions, reflections, hymns, prayers and introductory video.

Email Sheila Peiffer (churchandsociety@nyac-umc.com) with any questions!

Lenten Study Guide for *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by Dr. James Cone

“They put him to death by hanging him on a tree.” (Acts 10:39)

The Cross and the Lynching Tree provides a provocative and relevant Lenten study for small groups in church congregations. Not only is the book a timely reflection on racism in this time of Black Lives Matter and tragedies like those of the Charleston church massacre, but also this theological work provides deep insights into what our primary Christian symbol really means and how the paradox of the cross informs our faith and contemporary experience. This “powerful and painful song for hope” is a perfect fit for Lent!

It is suggested that the following process be used:

- Order the book ahead of time (available at [Cokesbury](#) and [Amazon](#)) and identify someone to be a group leader. The discussion leader will be responsible for knowing the book well and thinking through the study guide questions ahead of time.
- Advertise the study well ahead of time, stressing that this book takes up both deep theological reflection on our primary Christian symbol and contemporary issues of importance to all.
- Try to limit groups to no more than 10 people so that there is opportunity for individual participation.
- View this [video](#) of Dr. James Cone giving a sermon at General Conference 2012 based on *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. The pastor and group leaders should see this video for greater general understanding, but you may also want to show this at your first group meeting. Dr. Cone’s passion is inspiring!

The study is designed for six sessions as follows:

Week One: Introduction and Chapter One (“Nobody Knows de Trouble I See”)

Week Two: Chapter Two (“The Terrible Beauty of the Cross”)

Week Three: Chapter Three (Bearing the Cross and Staring Down the Lynching Tree”)

Week Four: Chapter Four (The Recrucified Christ in Black Literary Imagination)

Week Five: Chapter Five (“Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep”)

Week Six: Conclusion: Legacies of the Cross and the Lynching Tree

If possible, consider showing the video of Dr. Cone speaking on this subject at General Conference 2012 ([available here](#)) at the first session or as a “prequel” to the Study. The video is 38 minutes, leaving time for discussion. It adds depth to hear Dr. Cone speaking about his own book!

Each session has a suggested opening hymn and prayer choices, optional, of course.

All page references refer to the paperback edition 2013, published by Orbis Books, Box 302, Maryknoll, NY 10545. This book is available through Cokesbury and Amazon.

Week One: Introduction and Chapter One (“Nobody Knows de Trouble I See”)

Opening Song: “Nobody Knows de Trouble I’ve Seen” (lyrics attached) (or in *Songs of Zion* #170)

Listen to Paul Robeson singing it here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EJSkJlh_fg

On page xiv, Dr. Cone states, “Unfortunately, during the course of 2,000 years of Christian history, this symbol of salvation [the cross] has been detached from any reference to the ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings.....” Do you agree?

Did it ever occur to you to link the cross and lynchings in this country? Do you think that it is accurate to say that lynching is a “memory that most white Americans would prefer to forget?” Does a collective lack of remembrance lead to the “fraudulent perspective ...of the meaning of the Christian gospel for this nation” as Cone claims?

Do we sometimes forget that the Cross is a paradox because it “inverts the world’s value system with the news that hope comes by way of defeat”? (p. 2) Does reading even this far in the book renew your understanding of the cross?

Cone says, “this dialectic of despair and hope defined black existence” (p.14). Can you think of situations today that embody this? What are some contemporary situations in the black community that might parallel the lynching era?

The classic question of theodicy - if God is good, why does suffering exist – takes on special poignancy when considering the plight of black people in the era of lynching. What became the refuge and comfort for them during this time? Are there contemporary examples of this kind of refuge?

Week Two: Chapter Two (“The Terrible Beauty of the Cross”)

Opening Song: “Were You There When They Crucified my Lord” (#288 UMH)

On page 30, Cone says that “the crucifixion was clearly a 1st c. lynching.” Discuss why he says this (see page 31 for some descriptions.)

On page 35, Cone reflects on Reinhold Niebuhr’s “transvaluation of values”. Do you agree that Jesus was crucified because people expected a Messiah “perfect in power and perfect in goodness”? How do you see Jesus?

On page 51, Cone asserts that Niebuhr’s failure to deal with racial issues is a serious failure by someone often called America’s greatest theologian. How well do you think the Church today treats issues of race? Discuss how your congregation is or is not addressing issues like mass incarceration, police brutality, and whatever local instances there may be of racism.

Would you agree with Cone’s statement that “groups don’t love” (p. 53) and that, therefore, “love is the motive, but justice is the instrument.” Reflect on what this means in practical terms.

On page 55 a Rabbi is quoted as saying, “the most tragic problem is silence.” (even more urgent than bigotry and hatred!) Do you agree? How can this quote guide our actions as congregations and as individuals?

Week Three: Chapter Three (Bearing the Cross and Staring Down the Lynching Tree”)

Opening Song: “O Christ , You Hang upon a Cross” (#3084 in *Worship & Song*)

Chapter Three begins with discussion of Emmett Till. Do you think that we, as a society, know enough about Emmett Till? Did you learn new things about that terrible situation in this book? Does describing Till as a “sacrificial lamb” (p. 69) add new resonance to the story?

Cone compares Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King, Jr. in this chapter, asserting that Niebuhr viewed Jesus’ love as an unrealizable goal – “a state of perfection which no individual or group in society could ever fully hope to achieve.....the cross was an absolute transcendent standard...and the most we can realize is “proximate justice.”” MLK, Jr., on the other hand, would not settle for what was practically possible – but, rather, called out for an idealistic pursuit of freedom. How does this comparison enhance your understanding of what the Cross means? Do you think that the saving power of the Cross can be understood rationally or is there an “eerie feeling of mystery and the supernatural?” (p. 75)

Cone engages in an extensive explication of MLK, Jr.’s view of suffering. Do you agree that suffering can be transformed into a creative force? (p. 86) Could giving value to suffering help to legitimize it? (p. 92) Does this tension help us better understand the Cross and the hope it provides?

On page 91, Cone says, “No matter what disappointments he faced, King still preached hope with the passion of a prophet...” How do you find hope in contemporary situations of suffering and oppression?

Week Four: Chapter Four (The Recrucified Christ in Black Literary Imagination)

Opening Song: “At the Cross” (#8 in *Songs of Zion*)

In this chapter, Cone focuses on some of the black writers, artists and poets who have portrayed the connections between the cross and the lynching tree; those who have tried to use art to convey that delicate paradox of victory in defeat; the ultimate power of the Paschal mystery. Ask the group if they have any favorite black writers. Do you think that mainstream culture is exposed to minority writers in a way that helps broaden our perspective and deepen our understanding of contemporary events? Ask the group to identify the examples of poetry in the book that they appreciated the most.

In 2003, James Allen’s collection of lynching photographs, *Without Sanctuary*, was published. Cone calls these photos “a type of pornography” because they were originally sold for profit as souvenirs. Do you think that these photos should have been exhibited and published? In response to *Without Sanctuary*, the U.S. Senate issued an apology to the families of the more than 5,000 lynching victims for failing to enact anti-lynching legislation 105 years ago. Cone says, “An apology, although important and welcomed by many blacks, is not justice.” (p.99) What problems are associated with these kinds of apologies? Can you think of other ‘famous’ apologies? As Christians, what do we ask as part of an apology? **(N.B. *Without Sanctuary* is available [here](#). Please be aware that the graphic nature of these photos is deeply upsetting and may not be appropriate to view.)**

On page 101, we hear of an artist who painted a black Christ on the cross. Cone says, “Simply turning him from white to black switched the visual signifiers, making him one with the body of lynched black people of America.” Have you ever seen a picture like this? Do you think that creating new meaning can be this simple?

At the end of the chapter (p. 118), Cone reconstructs a very brief “history” of black Christian tradition, saying that black slaves were cut off from their African religious traditions and only had white Christianity as a resource, but nevertheless saw the Bible as “stories of God siding with little people just like them.” How accurate do you think this interpretation of the Bible is? Do white theologians today agree with this? Do you think that this “commonsense” theology of the grassroots has had an influence on mainstream Christianity?

Week Five: Chapter Five (“Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep”)

Opening Song: “Strange Fruit” (listen to it in Billie Holiday version here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs>

Having just listened to “Strange Fruit” performed by Billie Holiday, reflect on how her performance affected you. Does this song still resonate today? One of the characteristics of the blues is that it speaks about the tragic and the comic, sorrow and joy simultaneously. How is this similar to our Christian faith?

In this chapter, Dr. Cone draws attention to the fact that women, too, were victims of lynching – both directly and indirectly since when men were killed their families suffered greatly. He says, “although women constitute only 2 % of blacks actually killed by lynching, it would be a mistake to assume that violence against women was not widespread and brutal.” What other kinds of violence were women subjected to? Women, too, struggled to maintain faith in God in the midst of so much suffering and injustice. Many blacks, both male and female, identified strongly with biblical figures like Job and Jeremiah. Do you think that such identification is limited to one particular race or group? What character in scripture do you identify with? Have you changed your affinity to bible stories over time or in response to different situations in your life?

On p. 125, we read, “The faith of black women gave them courage to fight, patience when they could not, and the hope that whatever they did, God would keep them “from sinking down.”” Various faith declarations are mentioned, like: “God may not come when you want but God is right on time” or “making a way out of no way”Do you have a favorite faith declaration or saying?

On p. 139, the theologian Howard Thurman is quoted as saying, “ a person has to handle...suffering or be handled by it.” If there is time, invite sharing on this idea.

Traditional atonement theory about the cross can be problematic because it seems to lift up suffering as redemptive. Cone says, “What is redemptive is the faith that God snatches victory out of defeat, life out of death, and hope out of despair, as revealed in the biblical and black proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection.” (p.150) As you have read this book over the last few weeks, have your thoughts about the Cross and its meaning changed?

Week Six: Conclusion: Legacies of the Cross and the Lynching Tree

Opening Song: When I Survey the Wondrous Cross (#298 UMH)

This short chapter is a pithy summary of many of the themes from the previous sections. Especially, Cone returns to the paradox of the meaning of the cross and “salvation”. He says, “The real scandal of the gospel is this: humanity’s salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity’s salvation is available *only* through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst.” (p. 160) Discuss the ramifications of this statement.

Over and over, we hear that the cross is “an opening to the transcendent” – something that is available to all. And yet, we also need “the imagination to relate the message of the cross to one’s own social reality.....” What are some of the social realities of today that reveal the cross?

Cone suggests that a new kind of “lynching” is taking place in the criminal justice system of our country, “where nearly one-third of black men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight are in prisons, jails, on parole, or waiting for their day in court. Nearly one-half of the more than two million people in prisons are black.....” (p. 163) Were you aware of this situation? (more statistics are easily available [here](#) and other sites online.) Did you know that the New York Annual Conference has passed a resolution to commit our church to ameliorating this situation? (copy of resolution at end of this document) As a group, discuss what might be some steps that your church could take to learn more about this “lynching without a rope and a tree” and do something about it.

Dr. Cone says, “The cross is the most empowering symbol of God’s loving solidarity with the “least of these”, the unwanted in society who suffer daily from great injustices. Christians must face the cross...and discover in it, through faith and repentance, the liberating joy of eternal salvation.” (p. 156) As we end this study and enter Holy Week, do you have a new vision of what the Way of the Cross means both in scripture and in the world?

The Conference Board of Church and Society will be sponsoring a New York Annual Conference Symposium, “When I was in prison....” on Saturday, October 1, 2016 at Grace UMC in Manhattan. Please **save the date** and consider participating so that you can continue to deepen your understanding of the intersection of the cross, race, the criminal justice system and our faith in today’s world.

Prayer Suggestions

Dr. Cone says that Psalm 13 embodies some of the spiritual anguish that black people (and all) can feel. This new *Common English Bible* translation may help us identify with this paradox of despair and hope:

Psalm 13

How long will you forget me, LORD? Forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

²How long will I be left to my own wits,

agony filling my heart? Daily?
How long will my enemy keep defeating me?
³ Look at me!
Answer me, LORD my God!
Restore sight to my eyes!
Otherwise, I'll sleep the sleep of death,
⁴ and my enemy will say, "I won!"
My foes will rejoice over my downfall.
⁵ But I have trusted in your faithful love.
My heart will rejoice in your salvation.
⁶ Yes, I will sing to the LORD
because he has been good to me.

The "Suffering Servant" passages of Isaiah are also scripture that oppressed people identify with and that form a part of Lenten biblical references. Here is one of these "suffering servant" passages, Isaiah 53, that could be used as a prayer or meditation:

Isaiah 53

Who can believe what we have heard,
and for whose sake has the LORD's arm^[a] been revealed?
² He grew up like a young plant before us,^[b]
like a root from dry ground.
He possessed no splendid form for us to see,
no desirable appearance.
³ He was despised and avoided by others;
a man who suffered, who knew sickness well.
Like someone from whom people hid their faces,
he was despised, and we didn't think about him.
⁴ It was certainly our sickness that he carried,
and our sufferings that he bore,
but we thought him afflicted,
struck down by God and tormented.
⁵ He was pierced because of our rebellions
and crushed because of our crimes.
He bore the punishment that made us whole;
by his wounds we are healed.
⁶ Like sheep we had all wandered away,
each going its own way,
but the LORD let fall on him all our crimes.
⁷ He was oppressed and tormented,
but didn't open his mouth.
Like a lamb being brought to slaughter,
like a ewe silent before her shearers,
he didn't open his mouth.
⁸ Due to an unjust ruling he was taken away,
and his fate—who will think about it?
He was eliminated from the land of the living,
struck dead because of my people's rebellion.

⁹ His grave was among the wicked,
his tomb with evildoers,^[c]
though he had done no violence,
and had spoken nothing false.

¹⁰ But the LORD wanted to crush him
and to make him suffer.

If his life is offered^[d] as restitution,
he will see his offspring; he will enjoy long life.
The LORD's plans will come to fruition through him.

¹¹ After his deep anguish he will see light,^[e] and he will be satisfied.

Through his knowledge, the righteous one, my servant,
will make many righteous,
and will bear their guilt.

¹² Therefore, I will give him a share with the great,
and he will divide the spoil with the strong,
in return for exposing his life to death
and being numbered with rebels,
though he carried the sin of many
and pleaded on behalf of those who rebelled.

Prayer to end a session

Gracious God who sees into our hearts,
guide us as we go forth from this meeting.

We have delved into a confusion of ideas and truths.

We have learned new things and faced old fears.

Help us to see our struggles as growth and a search for wisdom.

Help us to be open to the pull of the Spirit.

Breathe into us a restlessness for justice and the courage to pursue it.

We ask all this in this holy season where we prepare to celebrate the paradox of the Gospel,
where Love snatches victory from defeat

where absurd faith triumphs despite suffering and death.

May your gifts deepen our love for You and all your creation. Amen.

Resolution from New York Annual Conference:

PRISON INITIATIVE

Whereas, the United States has the largest prison population in the world and the highest level of incarceration per capita among the major industrialized countries (With less than 5% of the world's population, we house nearly 25% of the world's prisoners¹); and

Whereas, the population of New York State prisons is approximately 70,000, of which 80% come from New York City and Buffalo, and most of these are Black and Latino; and

Whereas another 24,000 prisoners are detained by New York City on Riker's Island and many more are incarcerated in county jails around the State; and

Whereas, the New York State Department of Corrections currently operates approximately 70 prisons and one drug treatment campus within an overall system that is primarily focused on retributive justice, rather than restorative justice, with neither correction nor rehabilitation as its primary task; and

Whereas, the gospel calls us to visit those in prison (Matt 25: 36, 39-40, 43-45), a call embraced throughout our Methodist history and tradition; and

Whereas, the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church affirm that we should seek restorative rather than retributive justice, holding offenders accountable to the victimized person and the disrupted community, seeking to “repair the damage, right the wrong, and bring healing to all involved, including the victim, the offender, the families, and the community. The Church is transformed when it responds to the claims of discipleship by becoming an agent of healing and systemic change;”²

Now therefore, be it resolved that the New York Conference shall embark on a broad-based Prison Initiative, inviting local churches and Conference agencies and entities (for example, United Methodist Men, United Methodist Women, or the Cabinet), including those already engage in some kind of prison ministry, to partner with incarcerated persons by entering a Prison Initiative Covenant; and

Be it further resolved, that the Covenant shall include a commitment by the signatory churches to engage in prison ministries, including at least two of the following types of ministries:

“Prison Pal” letter writing and personal visitation programs;

Teaching in prison educational programs such as Rising Hope, Hudson Link or the Sing Sing Master's degree program of NY Theological Seminary;

Participating in The Kairos program;

Leading worship services and Bible studies in a prison on a regular basis;

¹ <http://umc-gbcs.org/faith-in-action/what-if-its-not-the-prisoner-who-needs-forgiveness>

² ¶164(H), Social Principles, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (2012).

Inviting incarcerated persons to become members of local churches by correspondence, preferably, but not limited to, churches near their home neighborhoods;

Welcoming the formerly incarcerated into congregational life;

Addressing issues of criminal justice in teaching and preaching;

Setting up church study groups using books such as *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander, or *The Lynching Tree* by the Rev. Dr. James Cone, as well as resources on restorative justice; and provide opportunities for forums or dialogues with the formerly incarcerated and their families;

Set up or participate in existing ministries that support prisoner re-entry into society such as The Exodus Transitional Community, and/or personally mentoring/befriending the formerly incarcerated persons through the ups and downs of post-incarceration life; and

Be it further resolved that in the absence of a congregational commitment, we urge individual members, lay and clergy, to make an individual covenant to do at least one of the above; and

Be it further resolved that the Conference Board of Church and Society, in cooperation with the New York Conference Office of Connectional Ministries and other Conference constituencies, shall encourage, promote and support this Conference-wide Prison Initiative; and

Be it further resolved that we ask specifically that the Conference Board of Church & Society and the Office of Connectional Ministries publicize this initiative to local clergy and lay leaders; and

Be it resolved that we ask specifically that the Conference Board of Church & Society employ a survey instrument on participation in this initiative and report to the next three Annual Conference Sessions on the nature and extent of our Conference's participation in this Prison Initiative.

Respectfully Submitted,

The New York Annual Conference Board of Church & Society

Methodist Federation for Social Action- NYAC Chapter

John Collins

Mary Ellen Kris

Paul Fleck

