

LENT

in the **Black Church Tradition:**
A 40-Day Justice Journey

POWERED BY



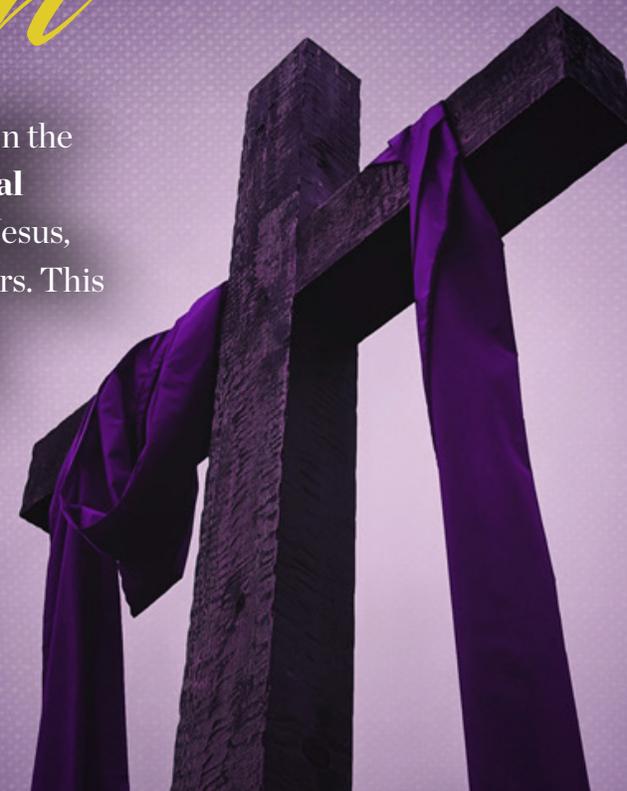
PNBC

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Introduction

Lent is a sacred season of reflection, repentance, and renewal. In the Black Church tradition, it has also been a time of **deep spiritual resistance and liberation**, echoing the prophetic witness of Jesus, the Hebrew prophets, and the freedom struggles of our ancestors. This 40-day devotional is designed to ground faith communities in **scriptural reflection, prayer, and direct action**, equipping us to confront racism, economic injustice, and the rise of white nationalism.

Each week includes a **scripture passage, prayer, reflection question, and action step**, guiding us to embody justice as an act of faith.



Week 3

Commentary by Rev. Dr. Keith Byrd, Sr.

This week we witnessed the **State of the Union address**. Among nearly two hours of pomp and circumstance, I kept wondering, “*Are we going to get to, How are the people?*” Finally, the conversation shifted to the economy and as a community and as a country, we were told everything is great. But I know that everything is not great for the people I serve.

That contrast reminded me of the story of **Cain and Abel**. In Genesis 4, after Cain murders his brother, God asks, “*Where is your brother?*” Cain replies, “*I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?*” In that brief exchange we see something tragically human: harm inflicted and harm denied. Lent invites us to sit in the tension between harm done and harm denied — and to name it honestly.

In the recent address, bold claims were made about economic strength. Independent fact-checking showed these claims were often misleading: assertions that the economy was “roaring” or that prices were falling did not align with the data. Growth slowed in 2025, the unemployment rate ticked up slightly, and prices overall continue to rise even as some indicators show modest improvement. The narrative of universal prosperity risks overlooking the experiences of millions who face economic strain daily.

Nowhere is the gap between rhetoric and reality clearer than in the massive downsizing of the federal workforce. Federal civilian employment has fallen sharply including the loss of tens of thousands of jobs across agencies — through a combination of buyouts, attrition, and firings that have shrunk the federal workforce to its smallest share in decades. The Department of Veterans Affairs alone **lost more than 40,000 employees**

in fiscal 2025, with 88 percent of those losses coming from health care staff such as doctors, nurses, and mental health providers. These historic staffing reductions are already driving longer wait times for care and eroding service quality, outcomes that will be felt for years.

These numbers aren’t just statistics. They represent the unraveling of support structures that people and communities depend on: veterans waiting longer for mental health care appointments, benefits claims delayed, and professional expertise lost. Each job lost in the federal workforce reverberates outward shrinking local economies, reducing consumer spending, and weakening the very ecosystems that sustain small business owners, barbers, childcare providers, and others whose livelihoods depend on steady employment and community stability.

The harm does not stop at federal cuts. Proposals that would tighten eligibility for basic social safety net programs, like the SNAP program, have seen changes that could remove food assistance from millions of families, including older adults and veterans. These policy shifts show compounded harm for those already struggling. These structural harms are often denied with rhetoric that emphasizes personal responsibility or suggests that hardship is an individual failure rather than a collective crisis.

During the early months of this current administration, DOGE under the direction of the infamous billionaire, Elon Musk, several persons in my congregation lost their jobs. One particular young adult was devastated by her firing. She had just transferred into her new position and was doing well when she received a letter stating that

she was furloughed and she was unable to return to her previous position. She felt as if she had been betrayed. She had done everything that she was supposed to do but somehow that wasn't enough. Now she would have to figure out her next steps, paying her rent, childcare, even the assistance she was providing for her mother. Thankfully she turned to her faith and her church. We were able to provide temporary financial assistance to her and others to help with some of their obligations until they were able to move forward. Again these are the names and faces that the statistics do not reveal. Real people dealing with real challenges as a result of the callousness of those in power who favor the rich at the expense of everyone else. This is the pain that cannot be denied but must be given full voice and for which there must be accountability.

Like Cain, our era often asks, “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” and then walks away from the answer, choosing denial over accountability. The weight of this denial reaches far beyond any single policy or speech. It shapes how families make ends meet, how communities hold together, and how faith communities understand their role in public life.

Lent calls us to **radical truth-telling** to name suffering without shame, to acknowledge pain without retreating into despair, and to resist simplistic narratives that dismiss structural harm as personal failure. We must lean into honesty about the present moment before we can imagine something better.

But truth-telling alone is not enough. If we stop at naming harm, we risk becoming prophets of grief without becoming architects of hope. The next step is **radical imagination** — envisioning a version of freedom, liberation, and abundance that refuses to replicate systems that have failed our neighbors. We need not only to restore what was lost, but to *build toward what is just, equitable, and life-giving for all.*

May this season of Lent be a time when we sit together in truth and from that place of shared witness, begin to chart new paths forward for systemic reboot, compassion in policy, and faithful solidarity with the least of these.

Rev. Dr. Keith Byrd, Sr
Zion Baptist Church, Sr. Pastor
1st Vice-President, PNBC



Contemporary Leader Spotlight:

James H. Cone — *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*

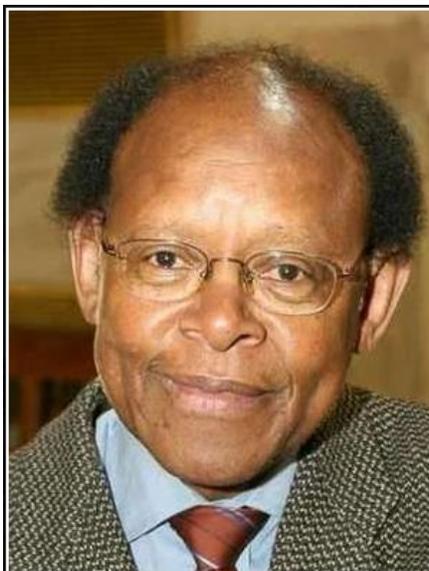
In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone draws a profound connection between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of Black Americans in the United States. He argues that both were public spectacles of violence designed to terrorize and dehumanize, yet both also reveal God's presence with those who suffer and resist. Central to his theological vision is the need to see Jesus not apart from these realities but within them, identifying crucifixion firsthand with the experiences of oppressed communities. In this work, Cone reminds us that the lynching tree, a symbol of white supremacist terror, and the cross, the symbol of Christ's sacrificial love, together reveal how God stands with those who are crucified by society's structures. This theological lens invites us to name not only physical terror, but systemic harms: economic stripping, social neglect, and policy violence as spiritual and moral cruelties that call for transformation.

Cone's insights challenges the church to recognize how symbols of suffering point us toward an authentic encounter with God in the midst of systemic harm, not above it.

Key Quote

“The cross can heal and hurt; it can be empowering and liberating but also enslaving and oppressive. ... The lynching tree should have a prominent place in American images of Jesus’ death.”

— James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree**



To sing about freedom and to pray for its coming is not enough. Freedom must be actualized in history by oppressed peoples who accept the intellectual challenge to analyze the world for the purpose of changing it.

— James H. Cone —

AZ QUOTES

James Hal Cone (1938 – 2018) was a pioneering theologian and the founder of Black Liberation Theology, which asserts that the gospel cannot be separated from the struggle for justice and liberation for oppressed people. His work consistently emphasized that God identifies with the marginalized and that theology must confront structures of violence, injustice, and denial of dignity in society.

Opening Prayer

O God of truth and justice,
You see what we often deny —
the hidden wounds of policy decisions,
the losses that go unnamed,
the people whose voices are muffled.
As Jesus taught, “whatever you did to the least of
these, you did to Me.”
Open our eyes to our own stories of harm —
the ways we have overlooked pain, denied need,
or accepted narratives that mask suffering.
Grant us courage to speak truth,
and imagination to seek a freedom worthy of Your name.

Amen.

(Based on Matthew 25:40 and Genesis 4:9)



Reflection Vignette: *“Where is your brother?”*

In the parable of Cain and Abel, Cain commits the deepest harm and then refuses accountability, denying even that his brother’s life mattered. God’s question, *“Where is your brother?”*, exposes not just the act of harm but the deeper refusal to see one’s neighbor. (Genesis 4:9)

Today, as federal workforce cuts reshape lives, this dynamic still plays out. Tens of thousands of positions across government agencies have disappeared through attrition, buyouts, and layoffs, shrinking essential public services and weakening community support systems. When government structures shrink in ways that leave people without care, without stability, without dignity, it is not simply an economic shift, it is a moral moment that asks us: Are we our brother’s and sister’s keeper? This week, consider not only who has been harmed by policies but where you have experienced harm that you have dismissed or minimized internally, in community discussions, or in your own assumptions about who deserves care and protection.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Personal Witness:

When have you experienced harm or hardship that you did not fully acknowledge, even to yourself or God, because you believed someone else's pain was worse? What feelings arise when you name that experience honestly?

Policy and Public Life:

Consider a policy change like federal workforce reductions or tighter eligibility for safety net programs that have affected people in your community. How have you seen these effects in everyday life, perhaps through delayed care, service disruptions, or strained local economies? What truth is waiting to be spoken?

Imagination and Next Steps:

In the hush harbor tradition, Black people gathered in secret spaces to tell the truth, find strength, and imagine freedom beyond oppression. In this season, what collective truth do you feel called to speak? What would a community agenda grounded in dignity, care, and shared prosperity look like for your neighbors?

Affirmational Prayer for the Week

God of justice and mercy,

May we see what we have denied.

May we speak what we have hidden.

Grant us the strength to recognize our own experiences of pain,
and the courage to stand with others whose pain we once overlooked.

Through honest witness and steadfast love,
lead us into creative paths toward abundant life —
not merely restoring what was,
but imagining what could be when Your people rise in truth and freedom.

Amen.

