

LENT

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

POWERED BY



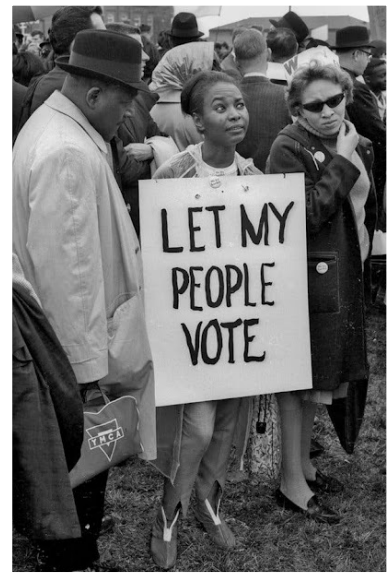
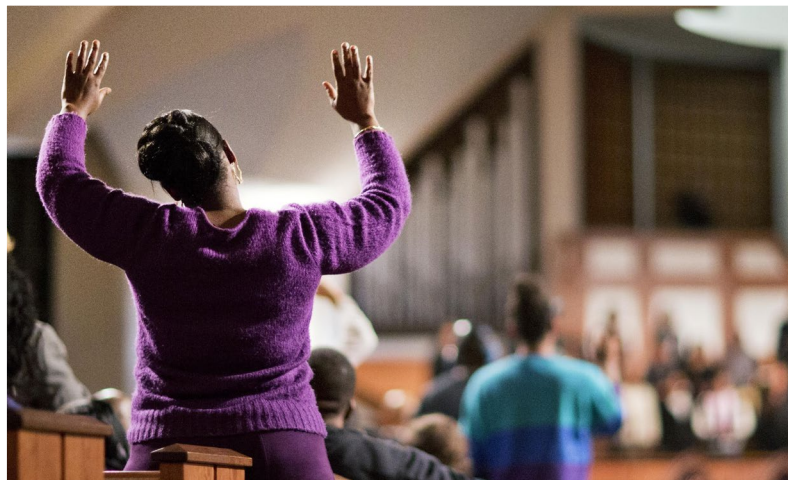
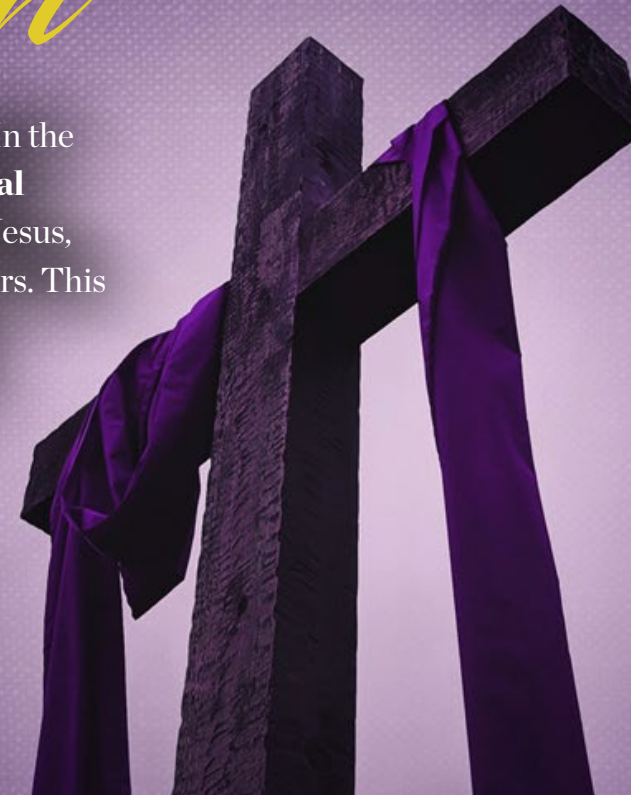
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PROGRESSIVE NATIONAL
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Introduction

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 5

Reflection: We Respectable Christians Must Grapple With Acceptable Slavery

I have lived long enough to see several versions of America's story about crime. I remember the Civil Rights Movement. I worked with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference when people were marching not just for voting rights, but for dignity. We were marching because a system had been built to keep Black people at the bottom—and we were determined to change it. I saw young people stand up to segregation and declare that Black life had value in a nation that had long denied it.

Then I saw another season rise up. The language of Black pride and Black power. A generation that refused to bow its head or apologize for being Black in America. But I also watched something else happen. I watched the system respond.

Neighborhoods were starved of investment. Public housing communities were underfunded and over-policed. Jobs disappeared. Drugs flooded the streets. And suddenly the answer from the government wasn't opportunity. It was prison.

Now, let me be honest with you the way a Southern preacher might talk to his own family. Most of us have that one child, that nephew, that grandson... the one everybody whispers about at the family reunion. You know the one I'm talking about. He's sleeping on somebody's couch. Can't seem to keep a job. Always in some kind of trouble. And when that child gets caught up in the system, we shake our heads and say something like, "That boy just won't do right." "He knows better." "He needs to take responsibility."

Now don't get me wrong. Choices matter. But what we rarely talk about in church is everything

that happened **before** that young man ended up on somebody's couch. We don't talk about how generations of divestment create conditions where survival itself becomes criminalized! We don't talk about the school that never had the resources it needed; the neighborhood that lost its jobs thirty years ago; or the policies that flooded the streets with drugs and then criminalized the people caught in the storm! We end up doing something painful: We blame the child... because we have forgotten the story.

You see, the version of Christianity many of us inherited during slavery was very good at teaching individual morality. It told us to obey the rules. Respect authority. Behave ourselves. But it rarely told us to question unjust systems. That kind of theology made it easier for people to believe that if someone was suffering, it must be their fault. And that way of thinking followed us all the way into the modern criminal legal system. So, today America tells us a simple story: people are in prison because



they made bad choices. And we “Amen” that notion. But when you spend time inside those prisons, as I have, you discover something else. You find human beings whose lives were shaped long before they ever stood before a judge. You find poets. You find scholars. You find men and women capable of transformation. And you begin to see that the problem is bigger than any one person.

The problem is a system that learned long ago how to turn social problems into prison sentences; builds cages instead of communities; and that profits from captivity. Across this country, incarcerated people work for pennies an hour ... sometimes as little as 35 cents to \$1.00 an hour producing goods and services through programs like Federal Prison Industries. Those goods circulate through our economy: furniture, clothing, electronics, office supplies and call-center services. There are also companies whose entire business model depends on incarceration itself. And once captivity becomes profitable, something dangerous happens.

There is pressure to fill the cages.

If we are honest, the American prison system has become something our ancestors would recognize. A system that extracts labor. A system that cages bodies. A system that removes people from their communities and turns them into economic units. The old system called it chattel slavery. The modern system calls it “corrections”. But if we listen closely, we can hear the echoes: *Our children have become the new cash crop.*

Now here is where the church has to wrestle with its own soul. For too long we have spoken about the “prison industrial complex” like it is an abstract idea.

Rev. Darry Gray

Director General for Social Justice at Progressive National Baptist Convention

Sr. Pastor at Greater Fairfax Missionary Baptist Church

We talk about the “school-to-prison pipeline” as if it were simply an unfortunate trend. But this week, we invite you to a deeper exploration. We are not going to separate broken people from broken systems. **We are not going to hear the cries of the oppressed behind prison walls and shrug our shoulders and say, “Serves them right.”**

Instead, we are going to confront something uncomfortable: Our own complicitness.



Because the truth is that this country continues to feed its lust for two things: blood and money. And those two things meet in the same place: behind prison walls. This week, we are going to sit with difficult questions. Not just “What do prisons do to people?”, but “How our economy—and sometimes even our own investments—benefit from their captivity?”

This week we will ask you to refuse to profit from someone else’s chains.



Opening Prayer

God of justice and liberation,

We come before You confessing that sometimes we have accepted what should trouble us.

We have heard the language of “crime” and “punishment” so often that we stopped asking deeper questions.

We have accepted systems that cage our neighbors, profit from their labor, and discard their humanity.

Forgive us for the ways we have mistaken punishment for justice, and silence for peace.

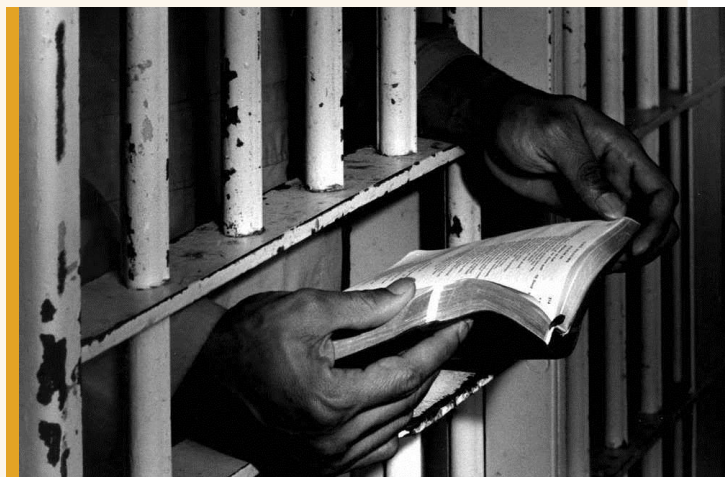
Open our eyes to the truth of the systems we participate in.

Open our hearts to the people behind the prison walls.

And give us courage—not only to pray for those who are imprisoned— but to confront the structures that keep them there.

In the name of the One who came to set the captives free.

Amen.



Contemporary Leader Spotlight:

Michelle Alexander



Michelle Alexander is a civil rights lawyer, legal scholar, and public theologian whose groundbreaking book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* reshaped the national conversation about the American prison system. Alexander argues that the modern criminal legal system operates as a racial caste system, replacing earlier systems of control such as slavery and Jim Crow with a new structure that legally excludes millions of people—particularly Black Americans—from full participation in society.

In her work, Alexander challenges the dominant narrative that incarceration is simply the result of individual bad choices.

Alexander reminds us that the line we draw between “law-abiding citizens” and “criminals” is often thinner than we imagine. Yet only some people are arrested, prosecuted, and permanently labeled as offenders—often with lifelong consequences that include barriers to employment, housing, voting rights, and social belonging.

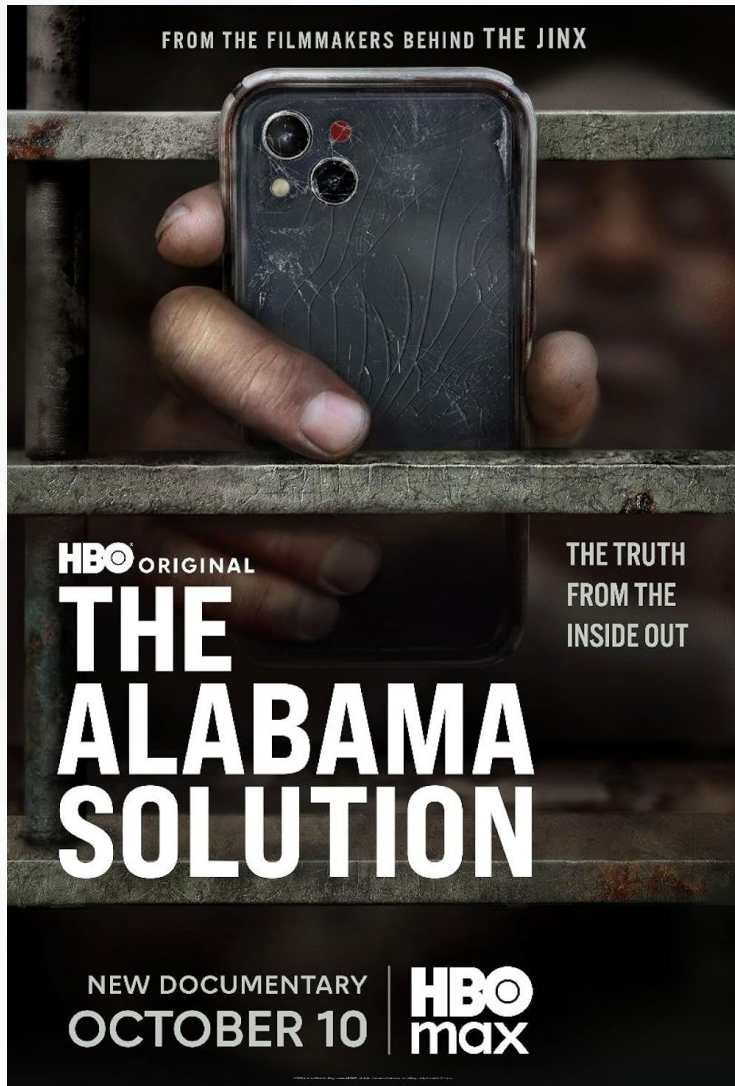
A Reading from *The New Jim Crow*

“The genius of the current caste system... is that it appears voluntary. People choose to commit crimes, and that’s why they are locked up or locked out, we are told. This feature makes the politics of responsibility particularly tempting, as it appears the system can be avoided with good behavior. But herein lies the trap. All people make mistakes. All of us are sinners. All of us are criminals. All of us violate the law at some point in our lives. In fact, if the worst thing you have ever done is speed ten miles over the speed limit on the freeway, you have put yourself and others at more risk of harm than someone smoking marijuana in the privacy of his or her living room. Yet there are people in the United States serving life sentences for first-time drug offenses, something virtually unheard of anywhere else in the world.”

REFLECTION QUESTION

If the story we have been told about incarceration focuses on individual failure, what truths might we be ignoring about the systems, policies, and economic interests that shape who ends up behind bars? What responsibility do communities of faith have to challenge those systems rather than simply judging the people caught in them?

Public Witness on the Injustice System



Watch & Reflect: [The Alabama Solution](#)

This week we invite you not only to read and pray—but to **watch and witness**. The Oscar-nominated documentary *The Alabama Solution* does more than tell a story.

It **documents reality**.

Filmed over six years, the documentary exposes conditions inside Alabama's prison system using footage secretly recorded by incarcerated people on contraband cell phones. What they captured reveals a system marked by severe overcrowding, chronic understaffing, violence by guards, deaths inside prisons, and widespread forced labor.

What emerges is a difficult truth: the prison system is not simply about correcting behavior. It is about **power, labor, and control**. And though the documentary focuses on Alabama, the filmmakers make clear that what happens there reflects larger patterns across the American carceral system.

For people of faith, this raises a pressing question: If prisons are meant to correct behavior, why do so many systems produce **cruel and unusual punishment instead of restoration?**

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Luke 4:18

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free.”

At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus publicly announced this scripture as his mission. He described his work as bringing good news to the poor and proclaiming freedom for captives and the oppressed.

In other words, the work of God is not only about saving individuals.

It is also about confronting systems that crush, imprison, and exclude people.



Rethinking Prison Through the Gospel

Throughout Scripture, prison is not always a place reserved for “bad people.” Very often it is a place where the empire sends the people it fears.

Prophets were imprisoned.

Apostles were jailed.

Entire communities were threatened with destruction when they challenged the power of the state.

The Bible repeatedly shows that systems of power often criminalize and contain those who threaten them.

When we read the story of incarceration through that lens, Jesus’ mission begins to sound very different.

Action Step for the Week

A Spiritual Challenge: Divesting from Mass Incarceration

Lent is a season of repentance, reflection, and **turning away from systems that cause harm.**

Throughout history, communities of faith have practiced forms of **economic resistance** when systems of injustice refused to change

- During the **Montgomery Bus Boycott**, Black communities withdrew their dollars from a segregated system.
- During the **anti-apartheid movement**, churches and universities **divested from companies operating in South Africa.**
- In recent years, movements like the **Target fast** used economic pressure to demand justice.

Jesus declared that his mission was to **“proclaim liberty to the captives.”** Following him means more than sympathy. This week we are not only praying for the imprisoned. We are asking a harder question:

Are we benefiting from the system that cages them? It means examining our own participation in systems that profit from captivity. This week’s action step asks us to examine how our dollars, purchases, and investments may be connected to incarceration.

Investigate. Divest.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

CORPORATE PROFIT FROM PRISON LABOR

Cheap Prison Labor Feeds Corporate Supply Chains



PRIVATE PRISON COMPANIES

Profiting from Incarceration



IS YOUR RETIREMENT PROFITING FROM PRISONS?

Check Your Investments



PRISON LABOR MEANS PROFITS—ARE YOU INVESTED?

Private Prison Investments and Retirement Portfolios

Check Your Pension or Retirement Fund

Many people unknowingly hold investments in private prison companies through **retirement funds such as 401(k)s or pensions.**

Historically, public retirement systems across the United States have held millions of dollars in stock from private prison companies.

How to Check

1. Log into your 401(k), pension, or retirement account.
2. Review the mutual funds in your portfolio.
3. Look up those funds online to see if they hold shares in:
 - CoreCivic
 - GEO Group
4. If they do, ask your retirement plan manager about switching to a fund that does not invest in private prisons.

Some investors use tools such as [Prison-Free Funds](#) databases to identify funds that avoid the prison industry.



A Prayer for Courage, Perseverance, and Liberation

Liberating God,

You are the One who hears the cries of the oppressed and remembers those the world has forgotten. Your Word declares that the Spirit of the Lord anointed Christ to **bring good news to the poor and proclaim liberty to the captives.**

Today we lift up those who are imprisoned—those whose names we know and those the world refuses to see.

Comfort them in their suffering.

Protect their dignity.

Remind them that even behind prison walls they are still Your children.

Lord, we also pray for the church.

Give us wisdom to **reimagine prison ministry**—not only visiting the prisoner, but transforming the systems that keep cages full.

Help us build ministries that restore families, advocate for justice, and proclaim that no human being is disposable.

God, strengthen our resolve.

When we are tempted to spend money in places that exploit prison labor, give us discipline to walk away.

When our investments benefit from incarceration, give us courage to divest.

When convenience whispers that our actions do not matter, remind us of the power You have already placed in our hands.

For we know that change has never come through silence alone.

You have given us **people power:**

Our people — to organize and stand together.

Our vote — to shape the laws that govern our communities.

Our money — to refuse to fund systems that harm us.

Our story — to tell the truth about injustice and demand change.

Lord, give us perseverance to use every lever of that power faithfully.

Let us remember the witness of those who came before us— those who faced giants, confronted empires, and refused to bow to injustice.

And as we continue this Lenten journey, make us a people who refuse to profit from chains and instead labor for the day when every captive is free.

Until justice rolls down like waters and freedom flows for all Your children.

In the name of Jesus,
who came to set the captives free.

Amen.

