

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

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 and reflection.

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

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 don't stop to think about 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 "deep 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 really 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, which naturally spills over into the actions that characterize one's life.

One modern example of this Spirit-filled faith is found in the story of an orphan empowered through ZOE's program whose name is Alfred. Like thousands of other children living in the country of Kenya, Alfred lost both of his parents. 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 being an orphan living in poverty, leaving him and his family ostracized and isolated.

Thankfully, through the Zoe Empowers program, Alfred was able to learn vocational skills as well as revitalize his farm to grow food. Most importantly, experienced the deep love God has for him and his fellow orphan community. Alfred was so transformed by this love that he felt called to adopt a three-month-old orphan girl who had been abandoned. This authentic faith results 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 obedience faith?

Pray

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

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 something that you would not have been able to catch on your own!

Learn

To learn more about Zoe Empowers and the ways our organization partners with orphans in Africa, visit www.zoeempowers.org!