

**Lenten Study for: Varick Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church**  
**“Engaging in Ministry While in the Shadow of the Cross”**  
**(Matthew 26:40-45)**

**Lesson Aim:** We will learn how to continue operating in our God-given assignments in the midst of difficulty.

**Quotes by John Wesley While in the Shadow of the Cross:**

"The best helps to growth in grace are the ill usage, the affronts, and the losses which befall us. We should receive them with all thankfulness, as preferable to all others, were it only on this account, -- that our will has no part therein."

"The readiest way which God takes to draw a man to himself is, to afflict him in that he loves most, and with good reason; and to cause this affliction to arise from some good action done with a single eye; because nothing can more clearly show him the emptiness of what is most lovely and desirable in the world."

"If we suffer persecution and affliction in a right manner, we attain a larger measure of conformity to Christ, by a due improvement of one of these occasions, than we could have done merely by imitating his mercy, in abundance of good works."

**Introduction: In the Shadow of the Cross**

- Place of pain
- Place of sacrifice
- Place of betrayal
- Place of frustration
- Place of prayer
- Place of isolation
- Place of avoidance
- Place of confusion
- Place of preparation

**Scriptural Foundation:** After there was a plot to kill Jesus, the anointing at Bethany, Judas' agreement to betray Christ, and the Last Supper, Jesus prays in the garden before faces the Sanhedrin Council and given to Pontius Pilate for execution. Jesus and His disciples went to Gethsemane. Jesus asked His disciples to watch while He prayed but He took Peter as well as the two sons of Zebedee with Him. Jesus was "feeling some type of way" about what was about to happen to Him. He was very sad and distressed to the point that it felt like death. While Jesus was in prayer, He fell on His face asking God to take away His assignment but He wanted to submit to the will of God even in the Shadow of the Cross. As Jesus was praying, His disciples were sleeping and did not follow Jesus' initial instructions. He shared with them that if they did not watch and pray then temptation would capture them because the spirit is ready to pursue the things of God but the flesh is weak. Jesus asked another time for God to remove what He was

feeling and what He was about to go through but He still was in a place of submission. He found His disciples sleep again and He shared with them that He was about to be betrayed.

**The Humanity of Jesus:** Jesus was experiencing intense grief and in extreme pain about what He was facing. The pain was “killing Him softly”. Three times Jesus wanted the journey to His assignment to be removed because it would be a hard journey. God was silent each time which led Him to a place of obedient.

**Side Note:** *Take comfort in knowing that if Jesus had real feelings about the pain of engaging in ministry then it is acceptable for Christians to have emotions about the difficulty in their lives while engaging in ministry but we notice that Jesus did not stay “in His feelings”. We have to move beyond our emotional state when we are in crisis and focus on what God has called us to do. Therefore, we do not dismiss reality but we also do not dwell in our present predicament.*

**Jesus’ Assignment:** Save humanity from the consequences of sin through the ultimate sacrifice of dying on the Cross.

**Jesus’ Example:** Even though we see how dark Jesus felt about His assignment, He continued to carry it out. Jesus realized that His assignment was greater than Himself. He also realized that God had chosen Him for the assignment. He trusted God even in the midst of the darkest moment in His life. Jesus also understood that His present predicament (crucifixion) was preparation ground for His destination (resurrection). So this was His mindset in the shadow of the cross. Can we do the same?

**The Christian’s Assignment Today:** An assignment is a task assigned to someone. Our ultimate assignment is to embody the character of Jesus Christ. As we embody His character, He also expects us to witness and share with those who are lost. God has assigned a task or purpose to each one of us which connects to our ultimate assignment. He gives us different methods and ways to carry out the ultimate assignment through our various gifts and graces. The Christian Assignment is unconditional.

**Examples of Engaging in Ministry while facing difficulty in Scripture:**

Daniel’s Story- Daniel 6

Three Hebrew Boys- Daniel 3

David- 1 Samuel 17

Paul- Acts 16:1-34

**Think about how you react when faced with difficulty:**

- a. Do you give up?
- b. Do you use it as a learning tool?
- c. Do you use it as a preparation strategy?
- d. Do you seek what God is trying to reveal?

**“Your Assignment is greater than your Adversity”-** Pastor Cary Beckwith

### **Shadow of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cross:**

- Lack of resources
- Dysfunctional Family
- Rebellious Children
- Loss of Job
- Divorce/ Separation
- Grief
- Betrayal
- Jealousy
- Opposition
- Confrontation
- Fear
- Discouragement
- Low Self Esteem
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Mental Illness
- Stress
- Violence in the Community
- State of the Country
- Spiritual Warfare

### **How to Engage in Ministry in the face of Turbulent Times:**

- Be honest or real about how you feel about difficulty
- Understand the Nature of your Assignment
- Understand that it's bigger than you
- Discerning what God is seeking to do in turbulence
- Reflect upon your Foundation
- Realize that turbulence is not always demonic
- Shut out negative noise and people
- Find healthy ways to cope with difficulty
- Be intentional in staying consistent through Spiritual Disciplines (worship, study, prayer)
- Remember the Sacrifice
- Seek to be faithful
- Put all things in perspective
- Listen intently
- Receive the HELP that the Holy Spirit offers

**Conclusion:** Ministry will not be effective without a Cross. The Cross molds, shapes, and empowers us to experience the will of God. Do not shun the Cross but embrace your season being in the midst of the Shadow of the Cross because God is perfecting and preparing you for Greater works. Persecution releases purpose. Misery produces ministry. Tests awaken testimonies. Attacks confirm your anointing.

**Questions to Ponder and Reflect Upon:**

What is my specific purpose and assignment?

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What is God requiring of me even in the Shadow of my own Cross?

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What do I need to do to ensure that I do not buckle under the pressure of the season that I'm in while operating in ministry?

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### Biography

Rev. Jonathon D. Counts was born in Trenton, New Jersey but was raised in South Brunswick, NJ. He was educated in the South Brunswick Public School System. Graduated with honors with a Bachelor of Social Work Degree from Clark Atlanta University. Rev. Counts is also a graduate of the University Of Maryland School Of Social Work with a Master of Social Work Degree specializing in Children and Families. He also graduated from Wesley Theological Seminary with a Master of Divinity Degree. While at Wesley, he has been groomed in Homiletics by the Rev. Dr. H Beecher Hicks, one of the greatest pulpiteers of our time. Rev. Counts has a passion for education and believes that when God calls us to ministry, He also calls us to prepare ourselves. He is a licensed practitioner in the State of Maryland working in the Baltimore County School District as a School Therapist.

Rev. Counts accepted the call to preach at the tender age of 13 under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Keith D. Tillett pastor of the St. Paul A.M.E. Zion Church, Ewing NJ where he was born and spiritually nurtured. Currently, Rev. Counts is the Pastor SG Spottswood A.M.E. Zion Church in Landover, Md. He is rebuilding the ministry internally and externally while training disciples to experience victory in every area of their lives.

He has a social media ministry via Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram where he shares the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those in his generation and beyond. He has a very unique anointing that is multigenerational. Rev. Counts is a published writer in the African American Lectionary entitled, "Ministry Beyond the Barriers" where he discusses how to minister to youth who deal with mental illnesses. He combines his ministry and profession to empower individuals to become delivered, transformed, renewed, as well as restored. He also is very serious about the calling that God has placed on his life and this seriousness has never wavered since entering the ministry. Rev. Counts is married to the former Darlene Butler who serves alongside him in ministry. He is a husband, preacher, teacher, pastor, practitioner, worship leader, and intercessor but most importantly he is a Friend of God!