

# God Enters the Mess of Human Life

## Sample lesson plan using the SEE Approach

**Audience:** High school or college-aged students

**Topic:** Incarnation and Redemption

**Goal:** Learners will be able to explain God's response to human suffering and sin in the person of Jesus.

**Suggested reading assignment:** Gospel of Luke 19-24

**Materials:**

1. Audio player (computer, phone, etc.)
2. PowerPoint with Scriptural images (optional)

**Prep:** Cue "Mess is Mine" audio track/music video

**Time:** 60-75 minutes

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### Movement 1: Stimulate the imagination

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1. Pose the following generative question to learners for their consideration throughout the lesson: **How do we overcome suffering in this life?**
2. Listen to "Mess is Mine" by Vance Joy (4 minutes)
3. Discussion with teacher comments (5 minutes): "Vance Joy suggests that our lives can be a mess sometimes. What kinds of messes do you encounter in life?" Allow students to offer examples and then offer some of your own, especially recent examples (e.g., illness, suffering, politics, violence, relationships, stresses of work and school). You might show corresponding images in order to generate a simulated experience of these messy situations in the students. "Sometimes the mess of life overwhelms us and we feel we can't manage on our own. What can save us from mess?"
4. Pair and share (Students discuss the following in pairs and then share comments with the entire class.): "Think of a time you or someone you know was in a real mess or really suffering: In what ways do people try to help that actually aren't helpful? What does help?" After students have shared, reiterate responses focused on being compassionately present to the suffering person. (10 minutes)
5. Writing exercise (Students respond in writing to the following.): How do you tend to deal with the suffering you encounter (e.g., run away, distract yourself, confront it)? How far would you be willing to go to help a friend who made a mess of their life by means of addiction, ruining relationships, etc.? (3 minutes)

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## Movement 2: Expand the imagination

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1. Teacher comments (1 minute): “According to the Christian tradition, the cause of the worst messes in life is sin. How does God respond to the mess human beings have created by sinning? We see God respond in different ways throughout the Bible—by banishing Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden (but also clothing them), by starting afresh with a great flood, by raising up a people who will mediate God’s salvation to all the world. However, in the Christian understanding, God responded in a definitive way when God Himself entered the human mess by become human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.”
2. Discussion: “What were some of the ‘messy’ aspects of Jesus’ life?” (10-15 minutes)
  - a. After students offer suggestions, point out any of the following that they do not mention: Being conceived by an unwed mother in a time when this was a sin punishable by death; his birth in a stable; living in Nazareth, a backwater town; associating with prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, and other people deemed unclean or undesirable by his society. The most poignant example is the manner in which Jesus died. (Note: Teachers can enhance this discussion by showing artwork representing each of the above.)
  - b. “How does Jesus’ life end? Why did he die?” Allow several minutes for students to discuss and react to Jesus’ Passion and crucifixion as described in Luke 23.
3. Teacher comments (5 minutes):
  - a. “Clearly Jesus was no stranger to the messiness of life. The Christian doctrine of **‘Incarnation’** encapsulates this idea that God took on human flesh and all the messiness of human life. Christians believe that Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, became human in every way that we are human, including experiencing the temptation of sin, though he never succumbed to that temptation. In this sense, the Vance Joy song we listened to makes a good them song for Jesus: “Hold on, darling / This body is yours, / This body is yours and mine / Well hold on, my darling / This mess was yours, / Now your mess is mine.” As some of you noted earlier, this is often what we find most consoling when we find ourselves in a big mess – for someone to simply stick with us in the midst of our suffering. This is what Christians believe God has done for us.
  - b. “But there’s also a difference between what we can do for someone who is suffering and what God can do. The Gospels suggest that God doesn’t just empathize with us. God saves us from our suffering and sin, even from death. How? Rather than retaliating for the violence unjustly inflicted upon him, Jesus breaks the cycle of violence, showing that God loves us so much that He was willing to undergo this suffering and even death for our sake. (By the way, Jesus’ non-violent approach was the inspiration for great historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.)”

4. Discussion in pairs (3 minutes): “Can you imagine loving someone so much that you would die in order to alleviate their suffering? What if that same person was the cause of your suffering? Of your death?”
5. Teacher comments (2 minutes): “When we consider these questions, we recognize the depths of God’s love. As St. Paul says, ‘rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:7-8). This helps us to make sense of the Christian doctrine defined at the Council of Chalcedon (451AD) that Jesus was both fully human and fully God. Jesus does what no other human can do. If you can’t swim yourself, you’re not going to be able to save a drowning person. Sympathy is nice, but it’s not enough to save us from sin. As both God and human, Jesus does not just sympathize; he also saves. He not only became human and suffered with us; he also rose from the dead and made it possible for us to rise from the dead.”

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### **Movement 3: Embrace a new way of imagining**

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1. Discussion (5 minutes): Begin by allowing time for students’ questions and reactions. Then discuss the following: “What do you think of Jesus’ response to human suffering and sin? Does it seem helpful? What do you make of the Christian claim that only Jesus can save us from suffering, sin, and death because he alone shares in both our human condition and God’s divinity?”
2. Comprehension Check (3 minutes): How did Jesus overcome human suffering and sin? (Students write down their answer and then the teacher clarifies the answer.)
3. Writing exercise (5 minutes): Jesus didn’t try to fix the mess of human life from a safe distance. He made the human mess his own and healed it from within. What messes do you encounter in your life (school, work, service, relationships)? How will you respond to them? Can you see yourself taking an approach like Jesus (or Gandhi or Martin Luther King)? When might you have the opportunity to do so this week? (The teacher might replay “Mess is Mine” while students work.)