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## THE ACTIVE DIMENSION

### [SUMMARY]

In this class we're considering spirituality from the perspective of a pilgrim. We recognize that we all come from very different places, but we share a common interest: uncovering or discovering or stumbling into the treasure buried in the field of religion—Jesus of Nazareth.

Together we are exploring four dimensions of Jesus brand spirituality: the **active** (doing) dimension, the **contemplative** (being) dimension, the **biblical** (learning) dimension; and the **communal** (relating) dimension.



Today, we begin with **the active dimension**. Whatever you believe about Jesus, whatever you think about this or that aspect of personal morality, however you feel about this or that Christian institution, **Jesus has an agenda that inspires an active response to the problems of the world**. You can draw one step closer to knowing him by understanding what he's up to and lending him a hand. Healing may even come your way as you help him heal the world.

*(Note: please read chapters 3 & 4 in Jesus Brand Spirituality for background on this class session.)*

[READY, AIM, FIRE...?]

If you read the primary source documents of Christianity, the Gospels (which record the life and ministry of Jesus spanning a very short period no longer than three years), you notice something very interesting. **The first disciples of Jesus**, his followers or "students," **were invited to help him accomplish what he came to do**, long before they had a very clear understanding of who, exactly, he was.

Instead of the more usual "ready, aim, fire" approach, Jesus seemed to follow the "ready, fire, aim" approach. **He invited people to help him do what he felt called to do, and those who came along learned more about him in the process**. While the earliest followers were helping him manage the large crowds who came to hear him teach—feeding the masses, traveling from one place to another, caring for the sick—he talked with them about his understanding of God and his mission in the world. He entertained their questions, however lame the questions seemed, and "along the way" they came to a deeper understanding.

It turns out that's how we human beings often learn best. We learn by **doing**. We learn along the way. Which raises the obvious question: **What was Jesus' own understanding of his mission?** What was he *doing* that he invited others to help him do?

## [ JESUS' MISSION: THE INAUGURAL ADDRESS ]

For that, we turn to what has been called the Mission Statement or Inaugural Address of Jesus of Nazareth, found in Luke's gospel, chapter four.

*Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.*

*He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:*

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

(Luke 4:14-19, TNIV)

It's plain from this text that Jesus is *up to something*. **What is it?**

*(Be careful! How you answer this question will determine a great deal about how you understand the Jesus path.)*

Some might say that Jesus is primarily about helping us get to heaven when we die. But the fact is, Jesus didn't talk about leading us to heaven when we die very much or very often. **Instead, he talked about wanting to bring heaven down to earth.** That's what's meant in what we call the Lord's Prayer, where we're to pray, "May your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (see Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4)

This Inaugural Address underscores that theme. The language Jesus uses is borrowed from one of the old Hebrew prophets (see Isaiah 61:1-2) who

expressed God's heart **to bring justice to the world**: announcing good news to the poor, bringing freedom to those who are oppressed, helping those who are most vulnerable.

**Jesus is about repairing the world, starting now, and moving us toward its ultimate renewal.**

### [REPAIRING THE WORLD]

What's wrong with the world that it needs repair?

*[At this point the speaker may wish to tell a story along the lines of the story about Angie referenced in Jesus Brand Spirituality, p. 48, as an example of what's gone wrong in the world. The story works best if it illustrates the need for personal forgiveness as well as the need to actively work for justice through care of the poor, etc. Or, the speaker can walk through Angie's story with the class, highlighting key details. Alternatively, the speaker could solicit input from class members about various examples of "things wrong with the world" that need repair, from their perspectives, observations, and experiences.]*

Every injustice leads to a cry for justice to be done.

As followers of Jesus concerned with repairing the world, certainly we can start by working for justice, so that what's happened in the world's tragic stories doesn't have to be repeated. After all, instituting justice is central to what Jesus is up to in the world.

But what about the lingering effects of injustice that's already happened? What about the people who suffer losses that don't seem possible to replace, especially those who lose their lives? Are they beyond repair?  
**How is justice done for them?**

### [A NEW LIFE – A NEW CREATION]

This brings us to one of the most daring aspects of Jesus brand spirituality: **the claim that Jesus died and was raised from the dead.** This event is

related to what Jim Collins, in his book Good to Great, calls a "big-hairy-audacious goal" (one of the marks of successful companies).

**Jesus had a "big-hairy-audacious goal": *to renew human life and the world as we know it.***

The movement that bears Jesus' name is rooted in the faith that in his **death**, Jesus mysteriously took on all the powers of evil. That he absorbed them into himself as a rescuer might suck the poison from a snake bite in order to save a life—only, Jesus swallowed the poison and succumbed. Three days later, however, his body was missing from the guarded tomb. Rumors began to circulate that he had appeared to some disciples, gloriously risen from the dead and in a transformed human existence (see Matthew 28; Luke 24; John 20-21; Acts 1).

Christianity is a movement sustained by these rumors.

Faith in the resurrection of Jesus is **faith that he entered a new form of life that doesn't end**—a transformed life with a transformed body—as a **kind of first installment of coming attractions**. The coming attractions are God's plan to mysteriously transform the entire creation and bring about a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1).

This is, of course, wildly beyond our understanding. But then, if God is God, all things are possible. No one would have thought the universe likely, or even possible, for that matter, before it burst into existence, right? But being beyond our understanding makes it no less real. The same is true of Jesus' resurrection.

**This is the hope we're offered.** Hope that the essence of someone like Angie is held in God's mind and heart. A day is coming when what is now "outside of our time frame" intersects our time frame, and there is wonderful renewal. *And Angie gets her life back, transformed.*

Because without the empty tomb, there is no justice for Angie. Without the resurrection, there is no ultimate **Justice**. Period.

You don't have to close your eyes and believe it against all evidence.

If it's true, it's up to Jesus to make it known. In fact, *only Jesus* can make it known—and only if it's true. There is no external proof apart from his making it known, and there aren't any experiments that can be conducted to externally verify such a proof. It is, like so many important things in life, **a matter of trust or faith.**

Which leads us to the process of getting to know Jesus, one step at a time. The primary context for learning about Jesus is not a class on Christianity but **an active engagement with a world in need of repair.** So as we begin to pitch in and lend a hand we find that we're also beginning to know him better.

**Jesus is also about mending our hearts along the way**—the personal stuff. The stuff that often gets us interested in God in the first place. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are those who know their need of God. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." As we participate with Jesus in mending the world, we find that he has mending intended for us as well—mending of our hearts, our bodies, our souls, our minds. It's all part of what God's up to.

This is not a formula, but an unfolding story. A different story for each of us.

Here's my story—how Jesus has begun to mend my heart...

*[The speaker here may share his/her story of coming to faith in Jesus, drawing out themes developed in the book ]*

## [DISCUSSION GROUND-RULES]

Just a reminder...

1. **What's shared in the group stays in the group.**
2. **No one is expected to share on any given topic; it's fine to pass.**
3. **No unsolicited advice giving.**
4. **Take your fair share of the time.**
5. **Be respectful of the viewpoints of others.**

## [QUESTIONS TO GUIDE DISCUSSION]

*Note on discussion questions: questions are drawn from both the book and the class, so feel free to develop your own questions if class attendees haven't read the book.*

1. The author depicts contempt as incompatible with Jesus Brand Spirituality (see pp. 41-44). What are some experiences you've had on the giving and the receiving side of contempt over matters of spirituality or religion?
2. What do you think of the author's view that a concern for justice is at the heart of Jesus' message? Does this differ from your impression or understanding of the Christian message?
3. Why do you think care for the environment is consistent or inconsistent with the teaching of Jesus?
4. The author describes coming to a point of eagerness to follow Jesus without understanding or accepting doctrinal formulations that many would consider essential for authentic faith (see pp. 61-66). What do you think of this? Is it possible to be a disciple of Jesus while remaining unsettled about what many consider core issues of faith?
5. The author describes an experience of awakening to a sense of God's nearness as a father (see pp. 68-73). Have you ever felt a sense of God's nearness, and if so, what was it like?
6. If you or someone you know has experienced help from a twelve step recovery program and wish to share about it, how did it affect your/their understanding of spirituality?