

BIBLE STUDIES FOR
PEACE AND JUSTICE

WCC 10th Assembly

Busan, 2013

God of Life



World Council
of Churches

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Bible Studies for Peace and Justice

Edited by Jooseop Keum



**World Council
of Churches**
Publications

GOD OF LIFE

Bible Studies for Peace and Justice

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Introduction

God of life, lead us to justice and peace” is the theme of the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Busan, Republic of Korea, 30 October–8 November 2013). In a world where the lives of people and the whole of creation are at stake, it is urgent to listen to the word of the God of life. It is vital to discern where and how God is leading God’s people to affirm abundance of life for all. So it is important to study how the people in the Bible responded to the leads and calls by God in their very different contexts and in various ways. It is important for reflection on our own contemporary responses, comparing them with the biblical responses. Where do we discern God’s life-giving work, and how are we enabled to participate together in God’s mission in unity today? How does God affirm life through justice and peace? Bible study is one of the ways in which the assembly is able to explore the theme and encourage mutual learning, growing and commitment to the calling of the God of life. It also allows participants to meet together daily around a Bible passage to reflect on their own contexts and the experience of the assembly itself. Thus they can discern together God’s will for themselves and the ecumenical movement.

This book invites you, not only assembly participants but also those who will pray for and with the assembly at home, to reflect on the assembly theme from a biblical perspective. It has been prepared by a WCC staff group under the guidance of the assembly planning committee. Six chapters, each consisting of a biblical text chosen to reflect the daily theme of the assembly, are presented for exegesis of the text, interpretation of its ancient and contemporary context, and questions for reflection and discussion—all in the interest of the application of biblical insights to your own life and to the witness of

your church. Each chapter concludes with a prayer, so that we can listen to God's message from the texts through spiritual reflection too.

Six contributors, women and men from diverse contexts and traditions in all six continents, provide studies to assist your readings. They have written in their own names, based on their personal perspectives and church experiences. One of the core values, and the beauties, of the ecumenical movement is that it offers a space for sharing rich diversities and creative challenges for the sake of promoting unity. Through listening together to the word of God and to the voices from different experiences we represent, let us pray that we may follow the "God of life" who "leads us to justice and peace" and affirm the fullness of all humanity and creation.

How to Use This Book

You can use these Bible studies for personal reflection, but we strongly encourage you to join with others in discussion groups in your local congregations and with friends and family, even before the assembly. For those who are attending the assembly, this will be a collaborative way of preparing yourselves, so that you may arrive at Busan already enriched by the insights of your friends and colleagues and filled with the Spirit of God's wisdom. For those who cannot travel to Busan and will be accompanying the assembly at home, these Bible studies will help you to join in the ecumenical spiritual pilgrimage of the assembly.

Working in a group requires careful preparation. At least one member should be thoroughly familiar with the material in order to guide the group. The discussion guide presumes that everyone has read the Bible passages and the reflection. There should be a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere. Sitting in a circle helps interaction. The first part of the process encourages you to begin with your own context and then broaden the conversation. Allow time for people to speak from their experience, but be aware that this may be painful for some. Remember that listening is as important as speaking and that violent words can be just as destructive as physical violence.

Each of the six Bible studies lists questions at the end for your personal and group reflection and discussion: How does this Bible study help us understand and respond to the assembly theme, “God of life, lead us to justice and peace”? Collect your answers and use them locally to challenge your congregation or parish, your denomination and council of churches to take action with you in accompanying and following up the assembly.

Build prayer into your time together. Use the prayers written for each Bible study, and add your own prayers. Continue to pray for God’s life-giving power to be at work in the assembly.

Contextual Bible Study

The method of Bible study used here is broadly one of Contextual Bible Study. It is a community-based, interactive way of studying the Bible that encourages advocacy for issues of concern within a given community. It cannot be “taught” because it is the voices of the participants that matter. The facilitator asks the discussion questions using the two major principles of biblical hermeneutics: *exegetical*: literary or historical-critical questions that draw on tools from biblical studies—finding the meaning of the biblical text within its historical and social contexts; and *interpretative*: community questions that draw on feelings, experiences and resources from the community, the socially located readers—the facilitator and the community concerned. Contextual Bible Study allows the biblical text to be in dialogue with the context of the reader (community). The major components of contextual Bible study, therefore, can be summarized in the five key *C*s. They are:

Community—it is important to receive an invitation from a community. Questions raised in the course of interpretation are answered by participants themselves.

- Responses from participants need to be recorded for their empowerment—to know that what they said was noted.
- The outcome is not an interpretation by an individual but an engagement of all voices with the text.
- The process of such an exercise is more important than its product.

Context—the social location of a reader.

- Serious consideration of the community realities that have become lenses through which the biblical text is read and interpreted.

Criticality—hermeneutical tools of exegesis and interpretation are used by the facilitator, who forms the questions for critical reflection.

- For a historical text, special interpretive tools must be used that might include socio-historical reconstruction, gender and ethnicity analysis, ethics.

Conscientization—raising awareness about an issue at the heart of the community.

- Christians often have a tendency to read the Bible with a hermeneutics of *trust*, guided by the understanding that the Bible is God's Word and therefore it is a tool of liberation, so they can find solutions through it. One of the aims of contextual Bible study is to see the Bible as a tool of liberation but also of oppression. For example, the Bible was used to justify apartheid and racism; it is still used by some to justify the political ideology that accounts for Israel's occupation of Palestine.

Change—awareness-raising leads to transformation.

Rationale for the Choice of These Texts

The texts chosen for this publication are all biblical examples in which life was threatened but justice and peace prevailed through God's grace, noting that stories are the most accessible types of texts. We aim at coherence of spiritual life through daily themes and images of the assembly:

- Bible Study 1: for Assembly Day 2; focus on Assembly theme; image: tree of life; text: Genesis 2:4b-17
- Bible Study 2: for Assembly Day 3; focus on Asia; image: drum; text: Amos 5:14-24
- Bible Study 3: for Assembly Day 6; focus on mission; image: water; text: Acts 8:26-40
- Bible Study 4: for Assembly Day 7; focus on unity; image: fire and wind; text: Acts 2:1-13

- Bible Study 5: for Assembly Day 8; focus on justice; image: food; text: 1 Kings 21:1-22
- Bible Study 6: for Assembly Day 9; focus on peace; image: flower; text: John 14:27-31

Bible Study 1

Assembly Day 2; Assembly theme; image: tree of life

Genesis 2:4b-17

The God of life created human beings from the earth with God's breath of life. The very nature of human life is in connection with God and creation. God entrusted us with the mission to look after the garden of life and forbade us to eat the fruits that tempt us to be like the Almighty God. The opening Bible study is a reflection on the nature of life and how to celebrate, sustain and affirm it in relation to the theme of the assembly. Diverse contextual readings of the text are possible.

Bible Study 2

Assembly Day 3; Asia; image: drum

Amos 5:14-24

Asia is the continent of suffering and hope. On the one hand, the text focuses on people's suffering and struggle for justice; on the other hand, it provides a vision of the reign of God. Moreover, it suggests concrete ways in which to live out kingdom values on earth through the achievement of justice and peace. Wrestling with the text to find ways to transform suffering, tears and despair into liberation, joy and hope, in the Bible and in our context, is the focus.

Bible Study 3

Assembly Day 6; mission; image: water

Acts 8:26-40

The text relates the mission of the Spirit to the symbol of the water of life. The Holy Spirit is the Life-giver, who sustains and empowers life and sends out God's people to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. How and where do we discern God's life-giving work, and how are we enabled to participate in God's mission today?

Bible Study 4

Assembly Day 7; unity; image: fire and wind

Acts 2:1-13

This text is often read from a mission perspective. How can we understand the Pentecost event from a unity perspective that can bring new insight, dynamism, and power to the ecumenical movement? The role of the Spirit in unity in diversity, as well as the relationship of Pentecost to justice and peace, are interesting to explore in today's changing landscapes.

Bible Study 5

Assembly Day 8; justice; image: food

1 Kings 21:1-22

The story of Naboth's vineyard challenges the concept of justice in our society. It introduces God's justice for the affirmation of life, a measure beyond the economic logic of King Ahab's theft in the name of efficiency and productivity. The text can also guide us in dealing with current issues of injustice in the global market and in discerning how to live out God's justice to safeguard life.

Bible Study 6

Assembly Day 9; peace; image: flower

John 14:27-31

At the Last Supper, Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you." When Jesus tells us about peace, the night before his betrayal and death, he is not speaking from a peaceful place in his own life. What manner and kind of peace are the church and the ecumenical movement talking about? God's peace is not temporary, and it does not have to do with happy events. Peace is a matter of life for those people who are yearning for it. At the end of the assembly, "go in peace" will be a biblical and missiological empowerment and mandate for us to bear witness to the vision of abundant life in the new heaven and earth.

Guidelines for Facilitators

1. Read the text aloud in your group. Appoint volunteers to read parts in the texts.
2. Ask the group what they think the central themes of the text are.
3. If relevant, ask the group, “What are the defining traits of each character?”
4. What do you see as the relevant historical or social factors in understanding the text in its context?
5. The first four questions focused on the text. It is now time to invite the participants to focus on how the text is read in contemporary contexts. Begin with a question about their own setting related to this text, as well as similarities and differences from then till now
6. In what tangible ways can we respond as individuals, churches, and nations to the contemporary relevance of this text?

I hope that all participants, both in the assembly and elsewhere, find these Bible studies enriching in their own spiritual life and actions for God’s justice and peace. Finally, I offer my deep thanks to our contributors for their excellent work. They worked with each other and with the Assembly Bible Study Group, which initiated and guided the process of creating these Bible studies. These latter include Theodore Gill, Tamara Grdzeldze, Carlos Ham, Lawrence Iwuamadi, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Nyambura Njoroge, to whom I am deeply grateful.

Bible Study 1

Do *Just* This—Protect Life!

Genesis 2:4b–17

⁴In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; ¹²and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

The text for this reflection opens the second biblical creation narrative (Gen. 2:4b-3:24), which explains to humans what is expected

of them: to care for the ground from which they were formed (i.e., their origin) and to which they will return (i.e., their destiny), and to value and protect life and living. The text therefore calls for the protection of life, and for this to be done justly.

Life is God's gift breathed over the ground (land, *'adamah*) and its waters, and into human (*'adam*) and other living creatures. Gen. 2:4b-17 is part of a narrative that serves the same functions as the myths of origin found in all cultures: they help people make sense of who they are, how and why they think, value, desire and act in the ways they do.

The Text in Its Context

Tilling Genesis. Gen. 2:4b-17 opens that second biblical myth of origin and is part of a larger story (Genesis—2 Kings) and scriptures (Old Testament, Bible). It tells of Yhwh God kindling life from and on the ground. This is not the story of a manicured garden, but of a wild one. Like a tree in a healthy forest, this narrative too grows wildly.

The first biblical myth of origin (Gen. 1:1-2:4a) separates things—light from darkness, night from day, dry land from sky and water, and so on—but this second one weaves things together—land, water, humans, plants, animals, and so forth. The second narrative invites readers to look for what is needed for the ground to come to life, to green up. It develops toward closure with the expelling of humans in order to protect the Tree of Life (3:23-24).

No plants and no herbs had yet grown because Yhwh God had not yet sent rain and there was no *'adam* to “till the ground” (2:5). The lack of rain is resolved in the next verse, and the English translations are suggestive: the amount of water provided ranges from “mists” and “streams” to “flow” (NJPS, New Jewish Publication Society) and “flood” (NEB, New English Bible). NEB implies that *'adamah* was “cracking up,” so dry that a flood was needed to quench its thirst. A flood would be a blessing if that were the case, but floods are devastating in other biblical (e.g., Gen. 6-9) and contemporary settings.

The lack of water was resolved not from above (rain from the sky) but from below (the ground). The narrator carefully describes the river that flowed from Eden to water the land, then branched into four directions over what might have been the world as known by first readers (2:10-14). Water was crucial for life and living then, as it still is now. Water is the soul of the sky, land and sea, and it flowed freely in God's garden. These days, water is commodified, contested and controlled in many places, and brackish in island wells.

The lack of *'adam* to till the ground is met in 2:7. Yhwh God formed *'adam* out of the dust of the now watered ground, then breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, so that he became a living being. With water and *'adam* available, Yhwh God made all kinds of plants, pleasant to look at and good for food, to grow. Yhwh God then placed *'adam* in the garden so that he might “till the soil” (NJPS) or “work the ground” (NRSV, New Revised Standard Version). Yhwh God is the landlord and gardener, with *'adam* as an assistant, like a caretaker or hired labourer.

In Gen. 2:5 *'adam* was to till/work the ground, and in 2:15 he is to also “care” for (NEB), “tend” (NJPS) or “keep” (NRSV) the garden. NRSV prefigures the response Cain gave later, “Am I my brother's keeper?” (4:9). Juxtaposing these two narrative moments suggests that *'adam* was placed in the garden in order to make it live, rather than to kill it off. The Geneva Bible is suggestive: God placed *'adam* in the garden to “dress it” (clothe, heal, bind, nurse). Fulfilling these expectations brings peace to the *'adamah*. The text thus closes with a picture of what peace on earth can look like—all kinds of pleasant and edible plants and herbs grow wild, water is plentiful, and *'adam* is there to till, keep and dress the ground. If humans do our part, life will prevail and peace will endure. Peace, here, is about fulfilling responsibilities to life and for living.

Yhwh God also placed two trees together in the middle of the garden (2:9): the Tree of Life, and the Tree of Knowing Good and Bad. The Tree of Knowing Good and Bad was good to look at (cf. 3:6) but not good for eating (2:16-17). A limit is stated, but no reason is given. There is a hint only: To violate this limit is to break the peace

with God and with *'adamah*. We humans are free to sustain or break the peace with God and *'adamah*. Our freedom, however, is not limitless. Our freedom allows us to be responsible to God and to *'adamah*. It is therefore worth asking: Do we use our freedom responsibly in what we, as believers, citizens, relatives and companions, do and say? What about our churches? our societies? our nations?

What is deadly about knowing good and bad? If knowledge is power, this text is critical. The text implies that knowledge is not for the sake of controlling lands, minds and peoples, but for understanding how to affirm life. The fruit of wisdom in the Tree of Knowing is death, and death becomes the destiny of life. Humans are destined to return to the soil from which *'adam* was taken. The cycle comes full circle, with death woven into the fabric of life. Dying is not the denial of living, but the destiny of life. In this connection, the limit that God set upon the first human couple suggests that God preferred life for humanity.

The Tree of Life was *not* off-limits (until 3:24), and so it was available for picking. Its fruits too were free! “The narrator leaves us asking: what if the first humans had chosen the fruit of the tree of life rather than the tree of knowledge?”¹

Placing Genesis. This narrative comes from around the time of King Solomon, the apex of whose reign was the building of the temple, establishing Jerusalem as the city of David and the religious-political centre of Israel. Solomon’s was a time of political and economic stability, of social peace and confidence in God’s power. The fruits of Solomon’s garden, so to speak, were pleasant to behold and good for consuming.

There is an elevated view of humans in this patriarchal narrative. Humans started from dust and end up not much “less than god” (Ps. 8), with the responsibility to care for God’s garden. The world (the garden) is like a huge Christmas tree dressed with many ornaments and gifts, and streams of lights flow like rivers through it. The world was dry, but now it is satisfied. It was barren, but now it is greened. It was deserted, but now it is teeming with creatures. Humans are placed in the world to keep it ticking, flashing and greening.

*The New African Bible*² affirms that the world was good when created, that human labour (including peasant farming) is dignified collaboration with God, that humans belong to *'adamah* and to God's breath, and that all living beings are equal in dignity. Humans were created to partner with God in "dressing" life and living. "Together, God and humans are responsible for preserving the earth; God sustains and humans maintain."³ Solomon's religious and imperial building projects were banging in the background, and he needed taxes and forced laborers for his building projects. Solomon was not too different from King Ahab in 1 Kings 21. Peace and justice in his time were selective. So, by contrast, this narrative is a backhanded way of saying that human hands are for tending the ground (the origin and destiny of both water and humanity) rather than for making bricks out of clay (as in Egypt). In the rhythms of Amos and Micah, this narrative challenges the building of empires and instead encourages tending the ground, life and living. The same critiques apply to nations that build walls to divide people or wage war out of fear, or threaten to use nuclear weapons. Open for critique, also, are faith communities that tame believers into apathy, that do not work to make justice roll and God's peace available to all.

The Text in Our Context

Gendering Genesis. Many questions surround the matter of gender because the man's network of relations, in which power is played out, extends from God and the ground, plants and herbs, toward woman and animals. A woman does not appear until later in the narrative (2:18-24), but her impact is never far from the minds of readers.

Constructive attention to sex and gender is not a recent yearning. Origen of Alexandria (c. 184–254 CE), who was ousted by church authorities, so that he lived as a refugee in Caesarea after 231, understood texts to have multiple meanings and asserted in his *Homilies* on Genesis that each person is both male/spirit *and* female/soul. While Origen was conditioned by his patriarchal setting, he did not reject women as evil and fallen.

A thousand years later, Christine de Pizan (c. 1364–1430), a lay poet and author who challenged misogyny, affirmed that God created woman as “a most noble creature.” The woman had the rightful claim to Paradise because she was created in Paradise, whereas the man was created before the place became Paradise. Christine chastises men who think less of women. Those men distort their nature and are “merciless” and “lacking any thought of thanks.”

In 1506 Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo (1475–1564) to “colour” the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. The central section of the ceiling consists of nine frescoes depicting three scenes each from the Creation, Garden, and Flood narratives in Genesis (see <http://mv.vatican.va>). The best known is the depiction of the creation of *’adam*, in which the hovering God points to a naked man’s drooping hand as if to zap him into life. In the depiction of the creation of the woman, she comes out of the side of the man with her hands pointing prayer-like toward God, while the man awkwardly falls onto a dead stump. The man has fallen, and at least one tree has died in the garden. In the fresco where the serpent gives a fruit to the woman, the man is upstanding. His left hand flexes and holds strong, while his right hand reaches to the Tree of Knowing Good and Bad, as if to pick its fruits. The man is neither passive nor unknowing.

The so-called fall of humanity has often been blamed on the woman, a view held firmly in many quarters on account of the garden narrative. Michelangelo’s frescoes suggest a shared blame, thus inviting us to reconsider our readings. If we read the narrative as having to do with gaining wisdom (knowing good and bad) rather than sin, then apologies are owed to the woman and the serpent. Michelangelo’s “colourings” invite us to see how readers have not done justice to the text, and to the character of the woman.

Questions about identity and gender will continue to well up, more intensely in some reading communities than in others. It is necessary to engage those questions because they bring our attention to the issues of peace and justice. Do we take into account the experiences and realities of women when we define life, justice and peace?

Colouring Genesis. There is another “colouring” aspect to this narrative. Seeing that all kinds of plants and herbs grew wildly in the garden, we may safely assume that the soil was rich. Its colour would have been black (as rich soil is in my context). What colour would someone created from such soil be? The narrator did not consider my question, but it is important in my contexts.

This is not a question about race and ethnicity, but about colour and the tendency to discriminate against people of darker skin colours. Indigenous and marginalized people have darker skin colours, but fair skin is favoured (in Oceania too). From where and why do we buy into colour-based discriminations? To which colour(s) are we blind? How might we, in our readings, break the chains of stereotyping so that we may build communities that are just and inclusive?

In Oceania, skin colour is associated with work. Labourers of the land have blackened skin, while workers of the sea have darker golden skin. As natives of darker complexion, they face the worst of colour-discriminations. The garden narrative, on the other hand, locates the origin and destiny of life in the blackness of the ground, and in work.

The narrative returns again and again to the ground, and so does this reflection, this time to the Tree of Life. It is named but not delimited. What does it signal? At the end of the narrative, Yhwh God felt that it was necessary to protect the Tree of Life. God does not come across as being stingy, as if God did not want to share. Life and the Tree of Life were, after all, freely given at the beginning of the narrative. The end of the narrative testifies that life and living were important to God, and it was necessary to protect them. The narrative thus asks of us: How do we tend, keep and dress our settings so that all creatures receive God’s gift of life? What do we do to *protect* life and living? Whose life do we protect?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

For further engagement, in light of the foregoing reflection, these questions are starters:

1. What encourages and protects life and living in your home settings?
2. What forms of labour dignify life in your home settings?

3. With what views on women and gender are you [not] at peace, and why?
4. What default position toward people of dark skin colours are *just* to you, and why?
5. If you had the opportunity, what might a fresco based on Gen. 2:4b-17 look like?

Prayer

*God of life, give us the courage
to value and protect life
to commit, act and live justly
mindful of differences
for gender and colour divides are deep
but deeper are the currents of inclusiveness
and to do more than pray
for life is your gift to us
for living is our gift for all
God of life, courage and destiny
lead us to justice and peace
that we may affirm who we are. Amen!*

About the Author

Jione Havea, a native minister in the Methodist Church of Tonga, encourages readers to engage scriptures critically and imaginatively. Jione reads and presents literary texts as rhythmic, visual and performative events. He is Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies at United Theological College, Charles Sturt University, Australia.

Notes

1. Norman Habel, *The Birth, the Curse and the Greening of Earth* (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2011), 51–52.
2. *The New African Bible* (Nairobi: Paulines, 2011).
3. Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 48.

Bible Study 2

Roll Justice

Amos 5:14–24

¹⁴Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. ¹⁵Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

¹⁶Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord: In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, “Alas! alas!” They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing; ¹⁷in all the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through the midst of you, says the Lord.

¹⁸Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. ²⁰Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The Text in Its Context

In Amos 5:14-24, the prophet proclaims a judgment against the inhabitants of the land who fail to fulfill ethical obligations incumbent upon them. This text begins with Amos confronting his audience with

the word of Yahweh, as if Yahweh were delivering the oracle. Amos says that even though the people can bear witness to safe escapes from hurt, harm, and danger in the past, and can testify to how Yahweh defeated the enemies of the Israelites by military might, the people have become morally reckless in dealing justly with one another.

Contrary to popular opinion, the theme, *roll justice*, announcing what is required in a covenantal relationship between God and God's people, has been and always will be more of a problem for insiders than for outsiders. The reason for this, according to Amos, the eighth century BCE prophet, is that it is far easier for religious insiders to deceive ourselves about living faithfully than it is for women, men, and children not engaged in a divine-love connection. Living authentically as Christian disciples is difficult for us to actualize twenty-four hours per day, seven days each week, especially when we get lost in religious self-security, mesmerized by forms of worship that deceive us mightily.

Therefore, the heart of Amos's message foretells the judgment of defeat and exile through which Israel must pass in consequence of its disobedience to the standards demanded by Yahweh.

Admonition and Warning. Amos 5: 14-15. If the Israelites want Yahweh to be with them, then they are obliged to act decisively in relation to this symmetrical mandate "to seek good and not evil . . . to hate evil and love good." It is important to remember that Amos does not mention the word *covenant*. But he implies that life is not to be regulated by law and legal agreements; instead, the loving relationship between God and God's people should cause us to turn from sin and live. The central idea in these verses is that the special relationship of Yahweh to the people is essentially a call for discernment between good and evil.

Proclamation and Lamentation. Amos 5: 16-17. The excruciating image of broken-hearted sorrow and gut-wrenching anguish portrayed in verses 16-17 is that the city and countryside will be submerged in expressions of grief—high pitched cries of pain, uncontrollable

wailing, incessant bawling and babbling, full of excruciating sounds of deep distress. Situating this condition of proclamation-lamentation in its historical-cultural context, Hans Walter Wolff says that the eighth century ceremonial funerary requirements consist of fasting, rending clothes, wearing sackcloth, shearing the hair, and sprinkling dust on the head. Due to the prophesied catastrophic loss, unrestrained misery will fill up all living places and spaces. And in turn, the people will need to call on professional mourners to assist them during this devastated time of bereavement.

The brief, terse statement at the end of verse 17 underscores that instead of Yahweh passing by and sparing the people, this time Yahweh will come front and centre, exacting punitive action in the people's interior core.

Gloom and Doom. Amos 5: 18-20. The gloom and doom of “darkness, not light,” are code words for fatal devastation. Amos' woe-oracle is sharp and dramatic. Three times he repeats the refrain, “the day of Yahweh.” Amos seeks by unusual and varied means to draw the audience out of the confines of its self-disillusionment and ritualistic repetitiveness.

Hans Wolff says those who eagerly wish and yearn for “the day of Yahweh” embark on a perilous desire. “This precise catch phrase, “day of Yahweh” originally referred to traditions of victorious holy war. But, here, “day of Yahweh” is subsumed under funerary lamentation. According to the prophetic threat of Amos, the “day of Yahweh” will not be a triumphant time, but, the “day of Yahweh will be the inescapable, gloomy judgment day, Israel's final defeat.”¹

Verse 19 has been recognized as a story that should be interpreted as an allegory. This brief sketch tells of someone who twice escapes from life's dangers, fleeing from a lion only to be suddenly confronted by a bear. The person pursued is able to escape from both dangerous animals, and even manages to flee safely into a house. When the person leans his hand against the wall, as much from exhaustion as from relief, an unnoticed snake fatally bites him. Precisely at the moment when the person feels secure, he dies.

Renunciation and Alienation. *Amos 5: 21-23.* Amos was a fearless champion of the oppressed. He lived during a time when judicial proceedings were deplorable, when wealthy, affluent upper-classes dispossessed the poor, and when priests placed undue emphasis upon offerings, rituals, and sacrifices with only slight attention to moral conduct. Amos objected to divorcing religious ritual from ethical living. For Amos, the antithesis of covenantal norms were (1) persecution and victimization of honest people, (2) drunkenness, (3) lack of humanitarian virtues, and (4) religious feasts celebrating the material gains wrung from the needy. Indeed, central to the whole issue is confrontation with the inescapable reality of the living God, who demands justice and righteousness and who announces Yahweh's imminent intervention.

A number of biblical scholars agree that singing was not being rejected by means of renouncing a cultic decision; instead, this injunction demands the immediate removal of songs and harps, and the sheer, ecstatic tumult of the singers at the harvest festivals, because the sound is referred to as a roaring noise, a word also used to describe the din of battle. The culmination of Amos' line of reasoning is his denunciation of Israel's overconfidence as God's special darling, resulting in the people's apostasy against Yahweh. In essence, the relationship between God and God's people is revocable. Salvation history can definitely be reversed, cancelled altogether.

Wolff notes that nowhere but here do we find immediately juxtaposed these harshest of renunciation statements, "I hate, I reject." Wolff understands that directly following upon this fundamental statement, which passionately and sweepingly rejects all sacrificial offerings, liturgical gifts, and the cultic festivities, is a clarification of the divine attitude as well as of the festal activities in question.

*But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an everflowing stream.*

The focal point of this scripture lesson is that instead of the noise of cultic praise, something altogether different was to be heard and, consequently, practiced in the assembly of Israel: the two foci of prophetic ethics, righteousness for justice's sake.

The Text in Our Context

“Roll justice” is an instructive, ethical mandate. It is a call for moral agency. Justice is the framework that gives form and substance to the social life of the religious community. Indeed, the distinctive stamp of the Yahwist theology preached by Amos is that the essence of faithfulness requires us to live daily in accordance with the moral principles of equality.

Amos makes this point abundantly clear when he tells the story about the person who escaped safely from both the lion and bear, but loses his or her life while resting in false security. Far too often, religious people get lost in formalities of worship and neglect acting in just ways.

The relevant message in Amos’s prophecies for contemporary Christians is a call to renew our covenantal commitment, wherein we actualize an embodied faith that is effective in serving the present age. To make this point another way—if we want it to be well with our souls, then the emphasis for religious renewal is on the ethical quality of right-relating with each other in our daily living, rather than on the quantity of our participation in ceremonial rituals and festival assemblies. If twenty-first-century ecclesiastical communities want justice to “roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream,” there must be consistency between our words and our deeds.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. If we desire to live and worship authentically as religious women, men, and children who adhere to covenantal ethics, then take a justice inventory. Let us ask ourselves what are we doing so that justice can roll in terms of the following everyday realities:
 - innocent people victimized and persecuted in judicial court procedures
 - poor, needy, and oppressed people arbitrarily exploited by the demands of the rich
 - individuals traumatized by violence, extortion, physical and sexual abuse
 - inequitable practices of taxation and

- dehumanizing elements entrenched in globalized technocratic, digitized systems of production in our church communities
2. What stands out in your life-journey as situations of doom and gloom?
 3. How does this Bible study lead you to new considerations regarding faithful discipleship applicable to situations in your daily life?
 4. Share examples of the work of justice in the twenty-first century.

Prayer

*God, our Creator and Sustainer,
we are grateful for Christian unity.*

*Show us how to express the graces of faith, hope, and love in private
and collective endeavors.*

*In the midst of creedal and organizational diversity,
keep us mindful of the needs of local souls
and the transcending boundaries of universal justice.*

“Give us courage to seek good and not evil, that we may live.” Amen.

About the Author

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Notes

1. Hans Walter Wolff, *A Commentary on the Books of the Prophet Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 256.

Bible Study 3

Living Water

Acts 8:26–40

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.*

*³³In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.*

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch

saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is one of the most insightful and fascinating in Scripture. Acts 8:26-40 falls into the middle of the overall theme of the book: the spreading of the gospel according to the great commission given by Jesus in Acts 1:8. The good news has already been proclaimed in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) with tremendous results, and the followers of Jesus have just recently begun to expand into Judea (Acts 8:1-4) and into Samaria (Acts 8:5-25). The story serves as a bridge between the people of God and the uncircumcised world; it demonstrates God's role in initiating the community of faith's mission to people who were not Jewish and were on the margin of the growing Jesus movement.

The Text in Its Context

Philip, after having great missionary results in Samaria, is commanded by a messenger of God to leave and move into a new place and a new mission. Acts 8:27 provides a brief introduction to the partner of Philip in the story. He is described as an "Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasury." Ethiopia, in ancient documents, referred to the countries south of Egypt, present-day Sudan and probably farther south. Homer referred to the Ethiopians as people "who are at the world's end" (*Odyssey* 1.23). Therefore, it is safe to assume that people living in the countries south of Egypt were referred to as Ethiopians. The region was known in Old Testament times as Cush. During the Roman period, it was referred to as Nubia. According to Herodotus (II.22.3), the men in Ethiopia were black. The dark-skinned people from Africa fascinated the Greeks and Romans. The part of Africa from which this Ethiopian came can be safely assumed, since the text refers to the Candace.

The man is described as "a eunuch." Greco-Roman audiences would have heard the word "eunuch" (ευνούχος) as a reference to a castrated male. Ancient constructions of masculinity were produced

by intersecting discourses of gender, sexuality, social status, and race, and eunuchs troubled and destabilized each of these discourses. Therefore, as figures in texts, eunuchs had the potential to make visible the arbitrary and constructed character of ancient masculinities. On the other hand, the man was “a court official of Candace” and he “was in charge of all her treasury.” He was a minister or secretary of finance. This means he was well-to-do and a man of authority (although a slave). He came to Jerusalem *to worship*. This fact raised some questions about the religious identity of the man. Scholars are not in agreement about his religious status. According to Deuteronomy 23:1, a eunuch may not enter the assembly (קָהָל, *qāhal*; LXX, εκκλησια) of the Lord.

However, going to the intertext that is explicitly recited in Acts 8, we observe that in the book of Isaiah, Isaiah prophesied that eunuchs who keep the Sabbath, who choose the things that please the Lord God and who hold fast to the Lord’s covenant will go to God’s holy mountain. They will be made joyful in God’s house of prayer, and their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on the altar, because the Lord’s house “shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:4, 7-8). So this prophecy reverses the prohibition in Deuteronomy. Another option is that the eunuch was a God-fearer—a person who became a follower of Judaism but was not circumcised. Scholars opposed this idea because the God-fearers were introduced to Christianity in Acts 10, with the conversion of Cornelius. Acts did not say that the Ethiopian was a God-fearer, as they did with others (Acts 10:1–3, 22; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 16:4; 17:4, 17). It seems that the eunuch was an adherent of Judaism. Probably, there were people in Ethiopia who associated with Judaism through the line of Menelik I, before Christ. There is no doubt that Judaic influence and an Old Testament reflection had reached Ethiopia long before the introduction of Christianity in 340 CE and before the Bible was translated into Ethiopic.

The passage of scripture which the eunuch has read, and which Philip expounds upon, is Isaiah 53:7-8, a text taken from the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah. The content of Philip’s discourse is not related

in the text, and it is possible that the writer of Acts was unaware of the actual words used by the evangelist. One can deduce from the text that it was at least the simple εὐαγγέλιον, good news, gospel, that the eunuch heard, based on the Greek terms included and the eunuch's response in verse 36. In the Gospel of Luke there is reference to "all flesh" seeing the salvation of God (Luke 3:6), to repentance and forgiveness of sins being preached to "all nations" (Luke 24:47) and to people coming from "east, west, north and south" to sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Luke 13:29).

The eunuch's reply to Philip's question was that he did not comprehend what he was reading and he was open to assistance. Therefore the eunuch's statement can be understood as a plea for understanding and teaching. The eunuch decides to be baptized, and the command was issued to bring the chariot to a halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and consummated the conversion. The giving of the order to halt could indicate a driver, which would give a witness to this event. The phrase "Philip and the eunuch went down into the water" (κατέβησαν ἀμφότεροι εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ) is suggestive of immersion; and when coupled with the most basic definition of the word "baptize" (βαπτίζω) it seems quite clear that a water burial took place here. The opening statement of verse 39 compounds the implication of immersion: "they came up out of the water" (ἀνέβησαν ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕδατος). It would seem that Acts is stressing the eunuch's baptism as the proper response to the gospel message by including within the text what could be seen as at least six references to the subject.

The Spirit once again comes and ushers Philip away from the eunuch and on to another mission. With this, as in verse 29 prior, the direct intervention of God is implied. The phrase "Spirit of the Lord" is found in Acts 5:9 and Luke 4:18, and the Spirit (rather than an angel) transporting a person is found in 1 Kings 18:12, 2 Kings 2:16 and Ezekiel 3:14. The fact that the eunuch went on his way *rejoicing* probably implies that he indeed received the Spirit.

The Text in Our Context

The text offers a marvelous portrait of God's intervention in the first-century mission effort through *the angel* (vs. 26) and the *Spirit* (vv. 29 and 39). Acts expands the theme of the universal gospel traveling to all peoples, as the Ethiopian represents not the beginning of the Gentile mission but the inclusion of the marginalized people of God as foretold in prophecy. Furthermore, the natural response to the preaching of Jesus from the scriptures is reiterated in a veiled and abrupt manner that not only serves as an intimate insight to the eunuch's heart but also as a reinforcement of the necessity of including water baptism in the gospel message.

Baptism is Christ's invitation to people to abandon their old life, in which they were under the sway of sin and death, and to enter into a new life, in which sin and death have been defeated. Baptism, therefore is the sacrament of healing *par excellence*, a healing aimed at the whole person: spirit, body and soul. Water, in baptism, becomes the symbol of new birth and life. The image of water runs through the Bible from the book of Genesis to Revelation. Water brings forth and sustains life not only physically but also symbolically. The crossing of the Red Sea and the deliverance from Pharaoh's army became a touchstone of the Israelite's faith and life. The disciples' feet washing was not only an act of cleansing but also a commissioning of the twelve disciples to serve people in humility. Therefore we understand the importance and necessity of water when Jesus describes himself as "the living water." Water is a gift of God that is a fundamental human right. In the early twenty-first century, there is a deepening global water crisis. Poverty, abuse of power, unjust political systems and inequality are at the heart of the problem. We Christians should promote the preservation, responsible use and just distribution of water for all. The tsunami of 2004 and recurring flooding in India have raised crucial questions to the Christian churches about water and how people can take water as a serious category for theological reflection and action. It is crucial and necessary to redeem water from its oppressive and exploitative uses and restore it back to its original life-giving and life-sustaining properties.

From the very beginning, Jesus' community has been a *worshipping* community. While the church places much emphasis on its fundamental unity, it also promotes the diverse ways that people in various cultures worship and praise God. Contemporary theological reflection rightly repeats that globalization entails a westernization that weakens local cultures. Evangelism should not mean homogenization that undermines the varied expressions of liturgy. Liturgy, in all Christian traditions, is strongly connected with action and transformation of the injustices of the world. The eucharist, the heart and the fulfillment of liturgy, remembers those for whom Jesus had particular affinity, especially the poor, the powerless, the marginalized and rejected:

The Liturgy is not an escape from life, but a continuous transformation of life according to the prototype Jesus Christ, through the power of the Spirit. If it is true that in the Liturgy we not only hear a message but we participate in the great event of liberation of sin and of *koinonia* (communion) with Christ through the real presence of the Holy Spirit, then this event of our personal incorporation into the body of Christ, this transfiguration of our little being into a member of Christ, must be evident and the proclaimed in actual life. The liturgy has to be continued in personal everyday situations. Each of the faithful is called upon to continue a personal "liturgy" on the secret altar of his own heart, to realize a living proclamation of the good news "for the sake of the whole world." Without this continuation the liturgy remains incomplete.¹

Furthermore, the church of Jesus Christ is a *hermeneutical community*, with many and different hermeneutical voices, but with a common faith in Christ. It is always asking, like Philip: "Do you really understand what you are reading?" Church understands the Bible to be God's divinely inspired word, expressed in a human way. This sounds similar to how it describes Jesus Christ: God's Word, humanly expressed. The scriptures share with Jesus Christ a divine-and-human, a "theanthropic" character. They are timeless, yet very much marked by the time that produced them. The exegesis (the

reading and understanding) of scripture is the exegesis of Christ. Christ is the hermeneutical or interpretative key of scripture and the whole life of the church.

The mission of the Church is, thus, the responsibility of interpreting the narrative of Jesus' life and death now and here, proclaiming his message as the message of God's creative power. The churches, today, should speak *prophetically*, rethink and re-evaluate theologically and practically not the institutional character of the mission and church but their eschatological awareness of being a glimpse and a foretaste of the kingdom of God, a proleptic manifestation of this ultimate reality that should always determine their approach to history. Mission calls churches to the task of forgiving, overcoming fear and hesitance, reconciling and defending justice for everyone, especially in contexts where the people of God suffer from violence, oppression, poverty and war. Mission should involve the whole people of God in sharing, serving and renewing one another in a spirit of love and respect for humanity and for the whole of God's creation. If churches and their faithful are unable to transmit through mission this gospel, which is not of the world, and thus not a reflection of civilization, wealth and knowledge, but the glory of God as it is revealed in the mystery of *kenosis*, of resurrection and of Pentecost, then they have nothing essential to offer to the world. The work of mission is not simply the proclamation of some ideas or an invitation concerning a few individuals. It is to bring together from division—as he did—all the nations of earth to build *one* community of faith and spirit that overcomes barriers of gender, race, culture, social and economic position or caste. It is an invitation to *a common journey*, to *a liturgy of transformation* of the whole world.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Imagine you are the Ethiopian. What are your feelings after listening Philip's explanation of prophet Isaiah?
2. Write four words that express your thoughts and feelings regarding Philip and his missionary method.

3. The new mission statement, *Together towards Life*, para. 59, declares: “Living out our faith in community is an important way of participating in mission. Through baptism, we become sisters and brothers belonging together in Christ (Hebrews 10:25). The church is called to be an inclusive community that welcomes all. Through word and deed and in its very being, the church foretastes and witnesses to the vision of the coming reign of God. The church is the *coming together* of the faithful and their *going forth* in peace.” Can you reflect on the paragraph in connection to our story?

Prayer

*Our Triune God,
 deliver us from tribulation, wrath, danger and necessity.
 Help us to understand what we read.
 Give us guides, to lead us into paths of light and wisdom.
 Help us to proclaim in words and deeds your good news now and ever,
 God of life, lead us to justice and peace
 as you did with Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Amen.*

About the Author

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Notes

1. Anastasios Giannoulatos, *Mission in Christ's Way: An Orthodox Understanding of Mission* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2010), 95-96.

Bible Study 4

Being and Becoming Church: The Spirit-Filled Genesis

Acts 2:1–13

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

The Acts of the Apostles describes a powerful process, the growth of the early Jesus movement in the ancient Mediterranean world. Transforming people, the good news of Jesus Christ spread beyond the bounds of Palestinian Jewish communities into the Hellenistic Gentile world of the Roman Empire. At the outset of his description of the energetic development of the Christian movement, Luke presents the Holy Spirit as the vitalizing enabler for

creative and courageous Christian witness. Acts is a story of the first Christians who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, defied the gravity of geographical, cultural, political, and spiritual restrictions with astounding inner strength, both individual and communal, to become witnesses of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8).

The initial chapters of Acts describe the formation and nature of the first church in Jerusalem in the power of the Holy Spirit. The same author wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, and the two volumes are to be read as one literary unit. The prophetic tradition, especially the prophetic Spirit, is one of the thematic consistencies in Luke-Acts. It is only natural that Luke, who portrayed Jesus as a Spirit-gifted prophet who “brings good news to the poor, proclaims release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, lets the oppressed go free, and proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19), also conceived of the first faith community of Jesus’ disciples as a Spirit-filled prophetic community, practicing justice and love.

The Text in Its Context

Staying Together (v.1). This text is situated at a strategic initial point in Luke’s overall description of the formation and life of the Jerusalem church in Acts chapters 1-5. The opening verse of the present passage catches our eye because of Jesus’ disciples’ evident intent to stay together: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1). They had just undergone a series of traumatic and incredible experiences, the meaning of which they were yet to grasp. They had tragically lost Jesus (whom they had believed in and trusted as the Lord and Christ who came to usher in the kingdom of God) through crucifixion, considered the most severe form of capital punishment in the Roman Empire. Worse, they must have felt ashamed of the unbearable fact that one of the insiders betrayed the Lord and that they themselves failed to be faithful disciples when exposure of their relationship to Jesus might have endangered their own safety and survival. Before long, however, they experienced the unexpected and extraordinary events

of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. They seemed not to know what to do, and their inability to grasp this series of unique experiences at once is reflected in their gesture of “gazing into heaven” as Jesus went up (Acts 1:10).

The disciples’ response to this series of remarkable experiences, which were beyond their understanding, was to stay and pray together. It didn’t matter that they were a heterogeneous group of fishermen, tax collectors, Zealots, men and women. “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14, RSV). They gathered there as a bewildered community, not with the expectation of being endowed with mystical or supernatural powers but to celebrate together their hope in God amidst fears, anxieties and uncertainties.

A Spirit-Filled Community (vs.2-4). The day of Pentecost came. Pentecost is originally the Greek name for the Jewish Festival of Weeks, which concluded the period of seven-week grain harvest with the presentation of an offering of new grain and other offerings to the Lord (Lev. 23:15-16; Deut. 16:9). On that very day, the disciples were baptized with the Holy Spirit (vs.2-4), as Jesus promised (1:5). The Holy Spirit came upon them “like the rush of a violent wind” and “as of tongues of fire.” In the biblical tradition wind is an emblem of the Spirit of God, which is life-restoring and spontaneous (Ezek. 37:9-10; John 3:8), and fire is the form of God’s descent upon Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:18). The coming of the Holy Spirit receives its metaphoric depth in association with the baptism with fire: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).

The Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to speak in other languages. Unlike the unintelligible glossolalia at the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 14; 2 Cor. 12:1-4), despite differences they experienced an ability to communicate with one another, a basic necessity for building community. The curse of Babel is removed (Gen. 11:1-9). While what happened in Babel was the loss of communicability and reciprocal comprehension due to diverse languages, what took place at Pentecost was the restoration of communication and the opening

of the possibility of mutual understanding. It was a celebration of their diversity, which is a gift of God as they saw themselves as one in faith, witness and hope. The Holy Spirit comes down upon them in the form of gushing wind and tongues of fire. These are images associated with fury, force, destruction, purification and also transformation and change. Does this suggest that their coming and being together has a purpose distinct from other community formations?

An Alternative Community (vs.5-11). Now the scene shifts from inside to outside the house, from speakers to hearers (2:5-11). The multitude of Jews, whether they are pilgrims from the diaspora or residents of Judea, gathered at the compelling sound that the Holy Spirit fostered. A long list of countries and peoples is enumerated to suggest “every nation under heaven.” Broadly speaking, the list moves first from east to west, then from north to south, generating the impression that the scale of Christian mission has something to do with “the ends of the earth” (1:8).

What is prominent here is the importance of the “Galileans.” To their embarrassment and amazement, the diaspora Jews found that the leaders of this event were Galileans (2:7). The mission to proclaim “God’s deeds of power” (2:11) thus begins from the margins. It was the despised and marginalized Galileans who experienced the power of the Holy Spirit and served as its pioneering instruments. In the ensuing story the Galileans, once regarded as not worthy of respect (John 1:46), are now addressed as “brothers” (2:37) and later acknowledged as leaders who provide teaching for the community (2:42). The coming of the Holy Spirit effected the restoration of these marginalized people and their transformation into creative agents, to open up the possibility of unity among people with linguistic and cultural diversities. Not only the age-old socio-psychological convention of stereotyping was overcome but also reversal of centrism took place. It was an experience of unity, a genuine human togetherness that was not governed by unhelpful dynamics of hierarchical power but by mutual affirmation and responsibility.

Unity is strong and real only in situations where the power of some does not overwhelm others. We are overwhelmed by many expressions and experiences of oppressive forms of unity. Genuine unity is sustained in a spirit of humility, honesty, accepting each other's difference and shaping together shared visions and goals. It is only then that the unity we have in Christ becomes a gift of the Spirit. As the three synoptic gospels record, when Jesus rejects power, he receives the Holy Spirit and announces the good news of the reign of God. When we reject power that dominates and destroys, the Holy Spirit finds its way to us, effecting new possibilities that benefit the larger community and not just individuals or individual self-fulfillment.

The mission of the church is not confined to the task of reaching out to witness but is to draw people and communities to become open, just and inclusive communities. An upper room, a humble corner at the margins of Jerusalem, thus became the birthplace of Spirit-filled creative movement—the church. This mission from the margins continues in the next chapters of Acts and is executed in the footsteps of the life-giving mission of Jesus Christ himself, who came to serve, not to be served (Mark 10:45).

The last two verses demonstrate two opposing responses to this astonishing manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit through the Galileans (12-13). Some, in amazement and perplexity, began to seek the meaning of this new event, while others, remaining numb and apathetic, intensified their deep-rooted traditional prejudice and insulted the disciples by dubbing them as drunkards. This new community finds itself with those on the margins and not those in places and positions of power and privilege, so it becomes an object of suspicion and sarcasm.

A Prophetic Community (vs.14-36). This passage, though not part of the text for our reflection now, is the threshold to a subsequent story about the genesis and nature of the first church, born of the prophetic Spirit. In a following address (vs.14-36), Peter not only quotes from the prophet Joel, who proclaimed a Spirit-endowed

egalitarian vision. Peter himself also functions as a prophet who criticizes the ignorant and arrogant authorities, Jewish and Roman, for having killed Jesus (v. 23). What sustains their unity is their mutual accountability and responsibility, and their courage to differ and to resist the existing oppressive and unjust norms and values.

A remarkable trait of the faithful community of the Holy Spirit was the sharing of possessions (vs.37-47). The first church “had all things in common; they would sell their possession and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (vs.44-45). Sharing of possessions was not so much a compulsory regulation as a spontaneous and compassionate voluntary act, repeated as “any had need.” Luke’s portrayal might be an attempt to present the first church as both an ideal community in which the Greek and Hellenistic philosophical ideal of true friendship is attained, and as a faithful community in which the promise of Jewish scripture that “there will be no one in need among you” is fulfilled (Deut. 15:4; Acts 4:34). What matters is that the act of sharing goods and possessions itself embodies the vision of justice which creates true peace. The first church practiced the prophetic alternative economy of compassion and sharing.

The Text in Our Context

Many Christians tend to think of the work of the Holy Spirit almost exclusively in a narrowly individualistic way, mostly in terms of the miracle of speaking in tongues. But the true miracle that the Holy Spirit performed was in building the faith community that lived up to the prophetic alternative vision of justice and peace. Luke, who described Jesus as the Spirit-anointed prophet in the Gospel, demonstrated in Acts that God’s prophetic ministry continued in the life of the Jerusalem church individually and communally. Jesus said, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). This was the wisdom that guided the first church, enriching it instead with abundance of life, joy and praise. The first church did not know the so-called individualistic “prosperity gospel” (5:1-11).

Recapturing the biblical understanding of the Holy Spirit is crucial for the church in the twenty-first century. The prophetic Spirit is the mother of the church, and this church is called to be a community with difference in its being and actions. Too often an individualistic and exclusively charismatic perspective eclipses the prophetic face of the Holy Spirit and impoverishes our understanding of the richness of the Holy Spirit. From Luke's perspective, personal healing, bold proclamation of the gospel message, and the practice of prophetic alternative community are inseparably intertwined in the life of the church (Acts 2–4). The therapeutic, the kerygmatic, and the prophetic dimensions are interwoven.

Luke employed a vivid metaphor of wind and fire to describe the descent of the Holy Spirit. The historical creativity of the Holy Spirit, bringing the first church into existence, is somehow reminiscent of its cosmic creativity. The Holy Spirit, who created the faith community in one of the civilized urban hubs in the ancient world, also contained within its own sacred energy the forces that operated beyond human control, even evocative of the untamable wilderness (Acts 8:26). In the end, the first church was not so much a closed and self-sufficient institution as a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), open to the transcendent space of life that the Spirit generates. Neither an exclusively charismatic understanding nor a closed rationalism does justice to the richness of the Holy Spirit. What sustains unity is a common vision of Spirit-led community.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. When and how is unity a gift of the Spirit?
2. How do we re-imagine power in relation to genuine expressions of unity?
3. What characteristics enable you to assert or deny the prophetic character of your church?
4. A litmus test for true unity is its power to effect the common good and to create new realities for all, particularly for the marginalized and the discriminated against. Share inspirational examples of true unity in your own context.

5. Is your church inclusive enough, especially for people with disabilities?
6. What are the examples of the stereotyping of “the other” in your own community and culture? How can we avoid getting caught in these oppressive cultural traps?
7. How do we view the reality of migration—as an obstacle or opportunity for unity?

Prayer

*God of abundant life,
we remember the day of your creation of the church
as the amazing day of a new beginning in the power of the
Holy Spirit.*

*Bless us to be renewed and empowered
by the healing and prophetic energy of the Holy Spirit,
so that we may serve you and the world in joy, strength, and unity.
Give the church the courage to struggle for justice and peace,
as witness of your creative work of grace and love. Amen.*

About the Author

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Bible Study 5

Struggles for Justice in an Ambiguous World

1 Kings 21:1–22

¹Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. ²And Ahab said to Naboth, “Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.” ³But Naboth said to Ahab, “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.” ⁴Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, “I will not give you my ancestral inheritance.” He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

⁵His wife Jezebel came to him and said, “Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?” ⁶He said to her, “Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, ‘Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it’; but he answered, ‘I will not give you my vineyard.’” ⁷His wife Jezebel said to him, “Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”

⁸So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. ⁹She wrote in the letters, “Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; ¹⁰seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, ‘You have cursed God and the king.’ Then take him out, and stone him to death.” ¹¹The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the

letters that she had sent to them, ¹²they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. ¹³The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, “Naboth cursed God and the king.” So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death. ¹⁴Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, “Naboth has been stoned; he is dead.”

¹⁵As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, “Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.” ¹⁶As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

¹⁷Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: ¹⁸Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. ¹⁹You shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: Have you killed, and also taken possession?” You shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.”

²⁰Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” He answered, “I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, ²¹I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; ²²and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin.”

The Text in Its Context

The Books of Kings record that Jezebel, a princess from Phoenicia whose ancestors were Canaanites, is brought to the northern kingdom of Israel to marry King Ahab, son of Omri (1 Kings 16:31). Jezebel’s father is Ethbaal of Tyre. Baal was the agricultural and fertility deity of the Canaanites, while Yahweh was the deity of the

Israelites and of King Ahab whom Jezebel married. Unlike Ruth, who declares when she chooses to stay with Naomi “Your God shall be my God,” Jezebel brings with her her God Baal and his consort Asherah. 1 Kings 16:31-33 shows that Ahab readily accepted Baal and even builds an altar for worship:

³¹And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him. ³²He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. ³³Ahab also made a sacred pole. Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.

We are urged by scholars (and the Deuteronomistic writer) that it is within *this* context (a context of opposing religious beliefs) that the story of Naboth’s vineyard needs to be understood: That Jezebel acts according to her “idolatrous” religious beliefs and obtains land through evil and murderous ways. In other words, there is room for more than one interpretation of the text, depending on the perspective from which one views the story. We may be challenged to imagine the circumstances as a reader with different presuppositions might understand it.

In 1 Kings 21:2, Ahab asks Naboth to give him his vineyard, and he will pay him accordingly either with another vineyard or the worth of the land in money. Naboth refuses to sell or trade: “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.” King Ahab, who has apparently according to earlier accounts “converted” to the worship of Baal, seems nevertheless convinced by Naboth’s insistence that Yahweh has given him this ancestral land and therefore he cannot part with it. The idea that it is Yahweh who apportions land and that families are to maintain their land is found in Numbers 27:5–11.

By asserting that Ahab can still acquire the land because he is king, Jezebel shows no respect for Yahweh’s law and instead simply invokes the “right” of the king to grab this property. Furthermore, as Francis Anderson points out, even if the owner dies, the inheritance

still goes to the family, according to the Law. Here, however, the land is simply given to the king. Ironically, Jezebel invokes the law of blasphemy to have Naboth killed on trumped-up charges. Naboth is stoned according to law found in Leviticus 24:13-16.

Anderson asserts that: “Readers of the story of the judicial murder of Naboth in 1 Kings 21 share the indignation of the historian of this dastardly outrage and readily endorse Elijah’s sentence against Ahab.” He goes on to say that, “Commentators have rightly seen in the episode a clash of Israelite and Canaanite ideas of kingship, of citizenship, and of property. Naboth refused to relinquish his patrimony (vs.3); Jezebel thought that the king could do anything he pleased (vs.7).”¹

The Text in Our Context

On this reading, King Ahab with the support of Queen Jezebel was trying to drag Israel into line with the world of the market, where land could be bought and sold rather than held in perpetuity by a single family. One of the king’s subjects, Naboth, was resisting him, not because the price was too low or even because he wanted to hold on to a vineyard. The land had been allocated to his clan in ancient times as part of the Israelites’ covenant with God as a community of liberation. Here two economic systems are competing with each other: the economy of Yawheh and the economy of Baal. King Ahab was introducing his modernization plan in the name of efficiency, productivity and prosperity. The Baal economy recommended by his wife from Tyre was a perfect ideology to pursue the plan. However, for Naboth, justice, equality and communality in the Yawheh economy inherited from the Exodus community were a nonnegotiable matter of faith.

While this seems to be the “common-sense” view of the story, based as it is in a socio-historical reading of the text—that is, “evil” Jezebel and “good” Elijah—Phyllis Tribble has troubled this polarity through a literary reading of the text. She suggests that while the Deuteronomists draw the lines very clearly between the two polarized figures, the actual text remains “malleable . . . ever open to new configurations.”²

Perhaps a fair reading of the text requires us to oscillate between the two scholarly readings. On the one hand, Jezebel is the “evil queen” who murders an innocent man so that her husband could grab land that did not belong to him. On the other hand, we have to be aware of whose lenses we read the text through. Tribble asserts that:

In a pro-Jezebel setting Elijah would be censured for murdering prophets, for imposing his theology on the kingdom, for inciting kings to do his bidding, and for stirring up trouble in the land. The epitaph for him would be, “See now to this cursed male . . .” By contrast, Jezebel would be held in high esteem for remaining faithful to her religious convictions, for upholding the prerogatives of royalty, for supporting her husband and children, and for opposing her enemies unto death. The epitaph for her would be, “My mother, my mother! . . . Opposites converge. Gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and land: dissimilarities produce similarities to unite the incompatible.”³

Therefore it is possible to consider this text to be more complex than it at first appears. We must closely scrutinize our own notions in the many struggles for land and justice that we find today in Palestine, Zimbabwe, Iraq, and elsewhere, including places where indigenous peoples are trying to reclaim land taken from them by “legitimate,” legal means. Our very ideas of property, ownership, acquisition, need, and rights to land merit real scrutiny in light of this text. Any conclusions we draw deserve to be tested in the light of alternate viewpoints held by neighbours of other communities, traditions, classes or genders. In the end, through the prophetic intervention of Elijah, King Ahab questioned his own actions, repented of them (1 Kings 21:27) and sought justice in the land.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Read the text aloud in your group. Appoint volunteers to read those parts that are assigned to them in the text. Invite volunteers to be dramatic—Narrator, Ahab, Naboth, Jezebel, Jezreelites, God, Elijah.

2. Reflect on what you think the themes of the text and defining traits of each character are.
3. In what ways are we as individuals or communities aligned with Jezebel and with Elijah and the Israelites in current-day contexts?
4. In what tangible ways can we repent as individuals, churches, and nations for our confiscation of other peoples' inheritances and rights?
5. Does the ecumenical movement need to be prophetic even in the market? What is the difference between God's justice and "market justice"?

Prayer

*God of life,
 in whom we live and move and are:
 Speak to us clearly, that we may live wisely.
 Open our ears, that we may hear one another.
 Forgive us our confusion and our many wrong choices;
 lead us to repentance when we err
 and empower us in a renewed struggle for your justice. Amen.*

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Notes

1. Francis Andersen, "The Socio-Juridical Background of the Naboth Incident," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1966), 46.
2. Phyllis Trible, "Exegesis for Storytellers and Other Strangers," *Journal of Biblical Interpretation* 114/1 (1995), 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 17 -18.

Bible Study 6

Go in Peace

John 14:27–31

²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. ²⁸You heard me say to you, “I am going away, and I am coming to you.” If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. ²⁹And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. ³⁰I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; ³¹but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.

Jesus offers an alternative, a difference, a dilemma: the peace he offers contradicts peace as the “*world* understands it.” In this way, he endows the word *peace*—itself powerful and highly significant in the Israelite tradition—with new meaning, new sense. He leaves us questioning and deciding what value it will have for our lives, knowing that this peace unites us with Jesus’ presence and love. This peace is his person, as the Apostle Paul acknowledges: “For he is our peace” (Eph. 2:14). It is with this in mind that we approach this Gospel text.

The Text in Its Context

This text concludes the first part of Jesus’ farewell discourse but also includes promises of his return. Verse 26 affirms the everlasting presence of the Spirit Paraclete as a condition in which the living memory of Jesus will endure in the community (John 14:26). The farewell should not cause sadness, for it is the fulfillment of Jesus’ mission. At the same time, it is a way to prepare

the disciples for the dramatic events to come. This explains the words that accompany the gift of peace: “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (v. 27). This move constitutes the reunion of the Father and the Son. The text reveals an emerging doctrine of the Trinity.

Fear may be caused by the rulers of this world, who could arrive at any moment and temporarily overshadow the presence of the Messiah. The power of the rulers of this world is completely different than the power of Jesus (“He has no power over me”). To live fearlessly is a gift of confidence in the Messianic presence.

The expression “ruler of this world” has been interpreted variously. Many commentators recognize in it the devil, the “father of lies” (John 8:44). He is the power of darkness who had reached into the heart of Judas Iscariot (13:2). Others see it as a reference to the power of the Roman Empire. Indeed, “ruler” (*archon*) is one of the titles of Caesar, who proclaims to be himself the sovereign of this world. Hence, when Jesus is confronted with the imperial power in his discussion with Pontius Pilate, he says that his kingdom, unlike Pilate’s, does not proceed from this world, nor is it imposed by military force (18:36). If Jesus’ kingdom were like that of Caesar, he would also use force. There is much similarity between the two interpretations: Roman imperialism, for many, manifested satanic powers.

The key word of this Bible study is *peace* (Hebrew: *shalom*; Greek: *eirene*). *Shalom* is a rich term in the biblical tradition. The complex meaning of the Hebrew word does not allow for just a single translation. The Greek translation (Septuagint) tends to use *eirene* for *shalom*. But, depending on the context, it translates it with other words: *soteria* (salvation, in Gen. 26:31 and others, especially when it is referred to sacrificial offerings); *eleos* (mercy, Gen. 43:23 and others); and *hygiaino* (to be healthy, in Ex. 4:18; Ps. 25:6).

Shalom is used as a greeting when friends run into each other daily; it is an expression of friendship with which the guest is received or when a visitor announces his or her arrival. Also, sleeping into death is regarded as *shalom* (Gen. 15:15). But in its depth,

shalom of God is about life, not death. It is a proclamation of joy about the best things in life: images that illustrate the word *peace* in Hebrew texts go well beyond the state of quietude and tranquility. The complexity of its meanings includes fullness, well-being, prosperity, a blessed life (Psalm 128, despite the patriarchal tone typical of that time). The concluding phrase, a summary of Psalm 128, calls for *shalom*, peace (“Peace be upon Israel!”).

For this very reason, peace is not possible as long as injustice prevails: there is no peace without justice, one requires the other (Ps. 85:10). Both peace and justice are gifts from God in response to the faithfulness of God’s people; they are proclaimed as the highest expression of God’s will (Ps. 72:3). Peace is part of the Messianic promise (Isa. 9:7).

Both the psalms and the prophets reveal the infidelity of the people of God, especially in breaking God’s will by the powerful, who violate judgment and distort justice. Those who proclaim false peace in order to conceal their crimes are denounced (Psalm 28:3). Jeremiah says the same thing, when announcing the imminent destruction of Jerusalem (6:14). There are many similar passages in the Bible, which also sound relevant today.

In the Israelite tradition there is no peace without blessing; there is no peace when one in power abuses the powerless or when vulnerable people are deprived of their possessions. Again and again, prophets and poets remind us that the *shalom* God offers is not stillness or immobility but, on the contrary, it demands energy, action for the sake of the divine purpose in creation, a power that sustains life. God brings about peace (well-being, blessing) and believers commit themselves to be active witnesses of God’s will.

Western languages do not express the same connotation in the word *peace*. Outside the biblical context, *eirene* indicates a period without conflict, the absence of war, concord among persons, factions and peoples by virtue of which stable relationships are maintained without aggression. In other words, it becomes a virtue of relative stillness or tranquility that makes it possible to live without strife. Hence, in ancient, pre-Christian Greek texts the word *eirene*

is accompanied by other words to complete its meaning: “peace and prosperity,” “peace and security,” “peace and honor.”

In the time of Jesus the word *peace* was part of the imperial propaganda. The *Pax Augusta* justified imperial rule. The imperial motto substantiated the fact that *Pax romana* was a gift (an imposed gift) that Rome offered to other peoples. This peace was identified as *Pax deorum*, the consent of the gods to bless the Roman legions with the glory of victory.

This Roman ideal of peace, which has been copied up to the present day by the empires that succeeded it, is reflected in the proverb: “*vis pacem, para bellum*” (if you want peace, prepare for war). This is how people in power, conquerors, justified their perpetual wars. According to the Roman historian Tacitus (56–117 CE), destructive peace is denounced in the speech of Calgacus, the Briton chief, proclaimed prior to his defeat, noting that the Romans “make a solitude and call it peace” (*Life of Agricola*, 29–32). The “peace and security” offered by the world rulers, in fact, brings about violence and fear. Also Paul expresses it clearly in his First Letter to the Thessalonians (5:3-5).

It is this distinction that Jesus introduces: peace that he offers is contrasted with the world’s peace, the peace imposed by the “ruler of this world.” The latter is based on violence and thus is not a genuine peace. Violence will bring death to the body of Jesus, the Christ. In contrast, his peace does not imply any expression of superiority or imposition of power or need of war; he proposes himself as the abundance of life for everyone, as loving equality and shared freedom. It is not merely an individual virtue but rather a way of understanding the meaning and purpose of human life. This peace, granted to all who has faith in him, makes it possible to overcome the fear of peace imposed by armed forces. It is the peace that is achieved in being united with the Father and with brothers and sisters as all are commanded to do. It is the way in which Jesus himself builds peace: he does what his Father commanded him.

The greeting with which the Risen One met his disciples (John 20:19–23) is precisely *shalom*, a declaration of peace that is fulfilled

in three acts: life as a gift from God to be proclaimed to all peoples (“so I send you”), the presence of the Holy Spirit that revives creation (“receive the Holy Spirit”), and forgiveness that restores human relationships (“If you forgive sins of others, you will be forgiven”).

While interpreting the meaning of Jesus’ messianism, Paul draws new conclusions, seeing that the Kingdom of God multiplies in fruits of peace. This thought is expressed most deeply in the letters to the Ephesians (Eph. 2:14–17). Notwithstanding, humankind (including most of the Christian peoples) continues to think that separating and strengthening border lines are warrants of peace. The ways of Jesus’ peace is left aside in favour of the peace of this world.

The last phrase of this passage is a call to action: “Rise, let us be on our way.” Peace is not simply a nice and comforting discourse, but a witness to bear and a task to fulfill.

The Text in Our Context

The passage in discussion from the Gospel of John has also been interpreted as a contrast between internal, personal peace and a worldly sense of anxiety. Although the personal dimension of peace as a divine gift is part of this message, it is different from the “peace of the world” that holds together various dimensions of the messianic peace (including social and political).

The opposition that Jesus establishes between his peace and that of the world does not belong to by-gone days: the idea that peace imposes itself through military superiority or can be secured by means of a “pre-emptive” war (as if a “preventive” war is not already a war) still dominates international politics. Exacerbating repression and the belief that the dissuasive force can replace a dialogue or the quest for justice and equity has been a repeated fallacy that has never brought peace; rather, it begets the next conflict. But the arrogance of empires, of their allies and protégés prevents them from seeing the dehumanizing consequences of these attitudes.

Before the colonial conquest, the native Americans greeted one another by wishing the peace. The Guaraní said *sauidi*, showing unarmed hands; the Sioux invited their visitors to smoke the peace

pipe. This did not prevent both peoples from being attacked by the Christian invaders who came to bring their “peace” How credible will the Christian message of peace be for these peoples, and others who suffered similar experiences? Christianity has a history of denying the central affirmations of its faith. We cannot ignore history or actions as if they did not occur.

“*Hao ren yi sheng ping an*” is a frequently-used phrase in Chinese culture. It literally means “Peace for a good person.” It announces that a good person lives in peace, harmony and security. It is a classical expression, also artistically represented by the traditional Chinese calligraphy and often seen hanging on walls of Chinese homes. According to the Korean language, the idea of peace is linked with sharing and equality, with a sense of communion. Hence, different cultures have searched for various expressions of peace.

Today in the world created and continually loved by God, physical and symbolic violence has taken over. Greed and pride, being far from the peace or justice of God, have become more powerful. Consequently, the cry for peace must be searched in the pain of those vanquished, those who suffered discrimination, victims of violence. The peace of the empire cost Jesus his life; it cost the lives of many of his disciples and of thousands of innocent people. It continues to do so. The catchword of new empires and their ideological justification is precisely the peace that they intend to bring, but the actual result is destruction and war.

Carlos Mesters speaks about the gospel as a “defenceless flower.” It is precisely what comes to one’s mind regarding peace in the face of belligerent powers that cause poverty and discrimination worldwide. A soldier who dies (because he was going to kill) is a hero, but innocent civilians bombed are “collateral damage”; in fact, it is peace that has been bombed. The words of the prophet resound again, as peace prizes are awarded to those who support war. Wars and injustice provoke horror and fear, but we are called to become faithful witnesses to God’s peace in today’s world.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How can we identify paths to the genuine “peace of Christ” in our day-to-day lives, in our faith communities?
2. How has the violence seen at the global level influenced the violence we find also at local levels?
3. In a consumer society anxiety comes forth; can “the peace of Christ” bring an answer to it?
4. How can our churches show signs of repentance for the various ways in which they have promoted violence (racial, gender, colonial) through history and today?
5. “Peace is a defenceless flower”; yet flowers produce seed. How can we sow the seed of peace in our children and young people?

Prayer

*God, give us courage
to denounce the false peace of the world
and to announce the peace that makes us whole
in your presence.*

*God of life, by your grace,
make us witnesses of your peace
and lead us to justice and peace. Amen.*

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