
Partners
in
Mission
From Your
Door Steps...
2015 Easter Offering
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Bible Study

The First Sunday in Lent
Genesis 9:8-17

Today's passage comes at the end of the Noah's ark story and immediately follows a restatement of the revolutionary idea that all human beings, regardless of station in life, are created as the "image of God" in the world, empowered to govern in the earth as God governs in the universe.

This notion, introduced toward the end of the creation story that opens the book of Genesis, marked a radical departure from the prevailing political theology of the ancient world, which held that political power, economic prosperity, and military might were signs of divine favor. Obviously, the reverse was also true. Political, economic, and military weakness were signs of the gods' rejection. Kings and emperors ruled by divine right and embodied the power and authority of their patron and matron deities on earth. Men and women, in this view, are created to be slaves to the gods. The king, as divinely appointed overseer of the god's estate, is the "image" of the god on earth, a word (*tsalmû* in the language of the Assyrians and Babylonians, *tselem* in Hebrew) that normally described a picture of a king, carved into a stone pillar atop a proclamation of some sort and placed in a location as a symbolic claim of the king's authority and power there. It was the ancient equivalent of planting a flag, staking a claim, marking a territory, filing a copyright, attaching a brand. It meant, "this is mine. I have power here." In the prevailing political theology of the ancient Near East, the king was the "image" of god, the raised flag that represented the power and authority of the god in the earth and marked the extent of the god's rule. The king's power was the god's power on earth. Rebellion against the king was blasphemy against the gods. Treason threatened not just the political order, but the very stability of the created world.

An "image" of the Babylonian king Hammurabi (left) receiving authority from the sun god Shamash, god of justice. This image sits atop a cuneiform stele (a pillar monument) that contains Hammurabi's law code (ca. 1750 BCE). Taken at the Louvre, April 25, 2010 by Unknownctj71081 (Flickr: Hammurabi's Code) [CC BY-SA 2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons

The writers and editors of Genesis strike at the heart of this widespread political theology by asserting that, while kings may well claim to be the "image of God" on earth, they rightly do so only by virtue of their birth as a human being. God, the biblical writers assert, makes every human being, woman or man, to be "the image of God" in the earth and thus empowered to govern. We are not, as the imperial myths would have us believe, born to

be slaves — slaves to the gods and to their earthly surrogates, the kings and emperors of the world. We are, all of us, the “image of God” in the earth.
The lowliest slave girl in the humblest client state is just as much God’s image as the emperor who sits in splendor on the imperial throne. God-ordained political power, in this biblical view, flows from the whole people up, not from the king down. It’s a stunning, deeply radical notion for the ancient world.

Here, at the conclusion of the Noah’s ark story, the tale of God’s great uncreation and recreation of the world, the biblical writers reiterate the revolutionary idea of Genesis 1 that all women and men, simply by virtue of their birth are born for freedom and power.

It’s helpful to remember what’s happened so far in narrative of Genesis. After an initial story that describes the creation of the world and the creation of human beings as “God’s image,” Genesis tells a series of stories that explore the promise and the pitfalls of human society as a moral community. The “garden of Eden” story in chapters 2-3 describes the origin of human society in its most basic social unit, the family, and the birth of moral consciousness, the deep desire of all human beings to know the difference between right and wrong and to act on it — though often with limited knowledge and occasionally with tragic results.

The next story explores the all-too-common but bizarre propensity of human beings to exercise freedom by choosing violence. Obsessed by feelings of personal rejection, jealousy and resentment, the first child born on earth fans his own feelings of inadequacy into a raging fire of revenge that ends with the murder of his own brother. The response of God to this brutal act of violence is striking. Though angry at Cain for his murderous assault on his weaker brother Abel, God reacts to violence with an act of mercy, putting a protective mark on the perpetrator and issuing a strict warning to the rest of the human world against acts of retaliation and revenge. But God’s intervention is unsuccessful in the long-run. The chapter ends with the absurd lesson drawn by Cain’s descendent Lamech, who takes God’s mercy toward Cain as some kind of divinely ordained license to kill over even a minor affront. “I have killed a man for wounding me, a youth for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, Lamech will certainly be avenged seventy-sevenfold!” he boasts to his two wives. By the way, Lamech is the first man in the biblical narrative to decide he needs two wives rather than one!

The Priestly genealogy that follows this story in chapter 5 attempts a kind of genetic reboot, bringing to a final narrative end the genealogy of Cain that finally produced the sociopathic narcissist Lamech. The lineage of Adam and Eve restarts with Seth, born to the original couple as a replacement for the murdered Abel. Ironically, this refurbished genetic line leads back to someone named Lamech (5:25) — coincidence? Hmm! Lamech is the father of Noah.

Though himself a righteous man who had integrity and “walked with God” (6:9), Noah lived in a corrupt world, full of violence (6:11). The enormous potential of human moral conscience and freedom to choose had been corrupted by fear, resentment, and the

violence that so often results. Agonizing over the violence and destruction human beings had managed to bring on themselves and the rest of earth's creatures, God makes the stunning decision to uncreate the world and start all over again. In language that echoes the creation story in Genesis 1, God unleashes the primordial waters of chaos that God restrained at the beginning of creation to allow an ordered world to arise and life to flourish. The earth returns to the undifferentiated cosmic soup it was when God began to create the world (1:2). Then God starts over from scratch to populate the earth with people descended from Noah and with animals he rescued from the waters of chaos, during the great uncreation.

And now, at precisely this moment, the writers of Genesis reiterate the high calling of all men and women to live as "the image of God" in the earth, signs of divine governance and care in the world. But in this recreated, renewed, refurbished world that emerged from the universal flood, God adds a new twist to this fundamental human vocation.

God will now relate to the world through "covenant," a binding relationship of mutual responsibility and care. "Look, I am establishing my covenant with you and with your descendants who will follow you," God says (9:9). But here's the twist: the covenant extends beyond the human community to encompass "all the living creatures who are with you — namely, the birds, the beasts, every living thing on earth with you that came out of the ark, with every living thing on earth" (v 10). The covenant God establishes with human beings is at one and the same time a covenant with all life on earth. It is a multilateral, global, ecological, sacred and binding relationship that will be in force *l'dorot 'ôlam*, for all future generations (v 12).

Before we move on to the rest of the passage, it's important to underline what the storyteller emphasizes here. This sacred relationship is universal among human beings. The "covenant people" envisioned here is not a subset of humanity, a particular family or nationality or ethnicity or faith community. The covenant people are all human beings, all women and men who, by virtue of their birth, live as "the image of God" in the world and are therefore worthy of utmost respect and dignity. In God's covenant, all means all. All means all!

But the covenant relationship incorporates non-human life as well.

This is a very important point to help us understand what the Bible actually means when it says that human beings are created as "the image of God."

It is very clear from the wording of Genesis 1:26-28 that women and men are created as the image of God so they can rule, govern in the world. The language of governance is blunt and rather disconcerting to modern ears attuned to the devastating ecological destruction wrought through the years in the name of economic progress and military necessity: "Let's create a human as our own image-according-to-our-likeness so they can rule among the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and animals and all the earth and the creeping things that creep on the earth" (v 26). "And God said to them, 'be fruitful, become numerous and fill the earth, subdue it, and rule among the fish of the

sea, the birds of the sky, and every living thing that creeps on the earth" (v 28). In the view of Genesis 1, the "image of God" means the power to rule in the world. But it is very important to remember that this written with an ancient outlook that is deeply agrarian. The writers are city dwellers, but they live close to the land and are keenly aware of their dependence on farm produce. The farm families who were the economic backbone of ancient kingdoms struggled to eke out a living on small plots that had sustained their ancestors and would need to sustain their grandchildren and great-grandchildren into the infinite future. The language of Genesis 1 is rooted in the experience of subsistence farmers working land that was difficult to farm, under periodic threat from human and animal predators, in a climate that was precarious, subject to sudden flooding and prolonged drought. Genesis 1 dreams of a world where small farmers have a measure of power over their own fate.

It's also important to remember that the "dominion" language of Genesis 1 is tempered by the description of human vocation in Genesis 2, where God creates the human being from the very dirt, establishing a deep existential connection between humanity and the earth that is underlined by a pun: the human (*'adam*) is formed from the humus, the ground (*'adamâ*). According to this story, the earth began as universal desert, devoid of vegetation, because at first there was no human "to serve it" (2:5). The word is usually translated "till," but it means "to serve." God plants an oasis in the desert and puts the human there "to serve and protect it."

Now, at the recreation of the world after the flood, God establishes a new relationship with the world. Universal destruction now gives way to universal covenant between God and all human beings, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religious outlook, or social status that binds God and humanity to one another and to all life on earth.

What's especially significant, however, is that this universal covenant is based on an enduring divine commitment to non-violence. God makes the following pledge to humanity and all living creatures: "never again will all flesh be cut down by the flooding waters of destruction; never again will a flood of destruction bring the earth to ruin" (9:11). The problem of human violence and corruption has not been tamed despite God's repeated attempts to disrupt the escalating cycle of retribution. So God has taken a new tack. By establishing a covenant with all men, women and living creatures and making a pledge, stating an enduring commitment to non-violence, to heal rather than destroy, God leads by example. Human beings created as God's image must now strive to reflect the merciful, gracious God they represent in the world.

Alluding to common ancient Near Eastern creation mythology, God takes a dramatic step. In the imperial mythic pattern, the world was created from watery chaos when the storm god — Baal in the city-states of ancient Canaan, Marduk in the imperial capital of Babylon — defeats the god or goddess of the sea, the divine symbol of watery chaos. In the Babylonian story, Marduk defeats his grandmother Tiamat in a cosmic battle by blowing the four winds of heaven down her open mouth and shooting her with his bow and arrow. He's the storm god; so his arrows are bolts of lightning and his bow is the rainbow. Marduk creates the heavens and the earth from her corpse, and with the blood

of her slaughtered consort, he makes human beings to be slaves to the gods. Order is born of divine violence, overwhelming military might. The spectacular lightning and rainbows that came with the life-threatening, life-sustaining thunderstorms in this ancient, arid landscape served as constant reminders of the bloody foundation of the cosmic order.

But here, at the end of the Noah's ark story, the biblical writers add a poignant and ironic note to tweak the imperial myth. When God announces the universal covenant with all living creatures in a recreated and renewed world, God takes the divine bow and hangs it permanently in the sky as a sign of God's commitment to healing, life-giving peace. It was the ancient equivalent of a gunslinger hanging up his six-shooters. It is an enduring, powerful symbol of God's vision of a world where every human being, male, female, young, old, people of every ethnicity, nationality, every station in life live in harmony and peace with the whole living world and live lives of dignity, decency, and hope in ways that serve and protect the earth. By God's own example, this is a covenant for flourishing life for all, for generations to come.

Through the Easter Offering and our other giving to Disciples Mission Fund, we participate in our covenantal partnership with the whole church, the greater human family, and the earth that sustains us.

Our gifts help Disciples Home Mission partner with congregations and regions to value all human beings by providing support for immigrants and promoting laws and policies that respect their God-given dignity and express our covenantal obligation to them as fellow human beings created as the image of God. DHM provides legal support and advocacy for a more just and effective immigration system.

Through the Green Chalice program, DHM helps support the cutting-edge grassroots work of Disciples congregations across North America who are pledging to study, pray, and do the hard and rewarding work of making our meeting spaces and church practices more energy efficient and sustainable. Serving and protecting the whole human community and the ecosystem that sustains us, DHM seeks to embody in its mission the first covenant of our faith — the commitment by God to end violence and promote sustainable life for all people and all living creatures for generations to come.

Questions for discussion

What difference does it make to view everyone, ourselves as well as our neighbors and people we don't even know, as "the image of God"?

Are there policies or laws or church or business practices you can think of that might need to change to better reflect the respect due everyone as "image of God"?

The "covenant" God makes with Noah, all human beings, and all living things on earth is pretty general. It doesn't offer a laundry list of specifics. Name some things you think

should be on such a list. What are some “bottom lines” if we are really going to live in covenant will all people and all living things? Does anything on your list pose a challenge for you, your family, your congregation, our church, our nation? Explain. What are some of the things we can do to meet the challenge?

The Second Sunday in Lent
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Today's passage from Genesis 17 follows the story of Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl Abram and his wife Sarai required to act as a surrogate mother to produce a male heir for the household. In chapter 16, Hagar flees into the desert after experiencing domestic abuse and encounters an angel who tells her to return to Abram and Sarai. The angel promises that she will become the mother of a great nation through the son she is about to bear. She is told to name the child Ishmael, "God will hear." Surprisingly, Hagar then "names" God (16:13) — the only time in the Bible a human is said to do so. God is "El-roi," she says, "God of seeing."

The story today describes an appearance God makes to Abram thirteen years after Ishmael is born. In other words, this story occurs around the time Ishmael reaches puberty, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood and fertility. It's an important symbolic moment in the process of determining the line of inheritance.

God appears to Abram. The narrator initially uses the proper name of God, "Yahweh," but when God speaks, God uses the name "El Shadday." It probably means "God of the mountains" or "God of the heights," but since ancient times, it's been translated "God Almighty." As the story progresses, the narrator shifts and uses the generic name for God, "Elohim." The multiplicity of God-names in this chapter indicates that its current form reflects multiple ancient versions of the story, a clue that this was a particularly important story, told over a long period of time in a variety of places by people from a diversity of interpretive traditions. It was a very important story in ancient Israel, and we should pay close attention to it.

God's opening instruction to Abram is noteworthy: "Keep walking before me and be whole." The form of the first imperative "walk" indicates continuous action. What God proposes here is not a one-time event. Abram is to walk and keep on walking before, in the presence of God. The syntax of the second imperative clause, "be whole," indicates purpose or result. The purpose, the result of continuing to walk in the presence of God is that Abram will be whole. The adjective here is often translated as "blameless," but its root meaning is to be whole, complete, entire, without defect. It's sometimes translated as "integrity" — that is, to be an integrated person, not fragmented, erratic, saying one thing and doing another. By continually walking in the presence of God Abram will be whole, integrated, complete.

The means by which Abram will walk and be whole is the "covenant" God now gives to him and his descendants. The word, *b'rît* (buh-reet) in Hebrew, refers to a binding agreement between two parties that establishes a relationship and outlines obligations. For God's part, God promises to make Abram the ancestor of a multitude of nations, to make his family extraordinarily fruitful and prolific, and to end the vulnerability of their life as immigrants. They will find a permanent home in the place they live and work. This two-fold promise — progeny and homeland — is yet another of a series of affirmations that appear throughout the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's family that

constitute the bulk of Genesis. Because God will produce many nations and peoples from the lineage of Abram — in v 4, God says Abram will become “father of a roaring crowd of nations” — God changes his name from “Abram” (which means something like “exalted father”) to “Abraham” (meaning unclear, but connected in v 5 with the title given him in v 4 — “father of a roaring crowd of nations”). A new name signifies the new covenant relationship God has established with him.

In the verses the lectionary cuts from today’s reading (vv 9-14), Abram discovers his obligation in this covenant: every male in the family will be circumcised as a sign of the covenant. What’s particularly noteworthy given the larger narrative context of the story is that this obligation includes household slaves as well (vv 12-13). We’ll come back to this in a minute.

The final two verses of the lectionary reading add a further fascinating twist, especially when read in larger narrative context. In v 5, God changed Abram’s name to signify his new covenant status. Now in v 15, God also changes the name of Abram’s wife. She will no longer be “Sarai” (meaning not completely clear). She will be “Sarah,” a word that connotes power and rule. It’s sometimes translated “princess,” but we might translate it, “Empowered!” God plans to “bless” this newly empowered woman so she will give rise to many nations. Kings of numerous peoples will be her descendants. God thus clarifies that the covenant with Abraham and his descendants is not a “boys only” club. The covenant is “whole” only with women and men engaged as power-sharing partners. A godly covenant requires the full participation of all.

Note that there is an implicit critique in this formulation of the covenant. The disturbing episode with Hagar in the previous chapter was grounded in a false assumption about the nature of covenant. Just before Abram and Sarai forced Hagar into sexual servitude and surrogate motherhood, God promised Abram that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (15:5). We’re told that Abram “trusted” God and thus was considered righteous (v 6). But trust had its limits in this case. Apparently convinced that Sarai was infertile, Abram and Sarai soon decide to give God’s promise the boost it needed to get beyond this unfortunate obstacle. They assumed that the promise of chapter 15 was to Abram, that the multitude of descendants would be Abram’s descendants, and that Sarai was not essential to the plan. A slave-girl would do just as well. Now in chapter 17, God appears to Abram and establishes a covenant that underlines the essential role Sarai will play in the fulfillment of God’s life-giving promise. This is not a covenant with Abraham alone. It’s a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, whose new name reflects her true status in the eyes of God. She is Sarah, a woman of power, the mother of nations, of great kings and peoples into the infinite future. God’s covenant will be fulfilled only with the full participation and empowerment of men and women.

This leads to a final point. Abram and Sarai thought they would further God’s promise by forcing a slave into sexual servitude. In this story, God rejects such a strategy. God’s covenant promise is not built on enslavement, on forced sexual servitude. It is built on mutually empowered women and men walking ever in the presence of God. This,

perhaps, explains the pains taken in vv 13-14 to emphasize that the sign of the covenant will mark slave as well as free.

Empowered by God, Sarah and Abraham will give rise to a roaring crowd of nations and peoples united in the loving care of God who makes us whole.

The Council on Christian Unity promotes this covenantal vision of wholeness in the human family, facilitating a variety conversations and experiences to promote the distinctive ecumenical witness of Disciples of Christ. Supporting a variety of international, national, and local ecumenical initiatives, including the Disciples-Roman Catholic bi-lateral dialogue, CCU seeks to further the vision of an open table accessible to all. CCU has pioneered a model, “Faithful Conversations,” for engaging divisive issues while maintaining our unity, with a particular emphasis on issues of war and peace. It has produced a series of resources on peace-making, caring for veterans and their families, and ethical issues related to the changing nature of warfare in our time. It has produced study guides and other resources on interfaith engagement and has taken the lead in the Disciples Identity Initiative. In a variety of ways, CCU promotes the vision of human empowerment and wholeness that lies at the heart of the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. Our contributions to Disciples Mission Fund support the work and witness of CCU.

Questions for Discussion

What do you think it means to be in a “covenant”? Give some examples of relationships that you would consider “covenantal.”

What do healthy covenants require of the parties to the covenant?

What can make a covenant “go off the rails”? What must be done to make sure that doesn’t happen? Or to get things “back on track” if they “derail”?

If church is a covenantal relationship, what does that mean as a practical matter for us as individuals? As a congregation? As a region? As a denomination? What are some of the obligations we have to each other?

The Third Sunday in Lent
1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Today's lectionary passage lies at the crux of a larger point Paul is making about divisions between various factions that have developed in the Corinthian church. Apparently rooted in different schools of theological interpretation, the Corinthian fight reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the gospel in Paul's opinion. He sees in the willingness of the church factions to divide the body of Christ over differences of interpretation a fundamental arrogance that violates the very character of the Christian witness. Urging the factions to be "united in mind and purpose" (1:10) in spite of their theological disagreements, Paul points to the counter-intuitive character of the gospel they proclaim: "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us being rescued, it's the power of God" (v 18). Crucifixion makes the Christian witness "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles," though to Jews and Gentiles who are called by God, it is the power and wisdom of God (vv 23-24).

To understand Paul's point here, it is important to understand the prevailing political theology of the Roman world, which in its broad outlines was fairly typical for the ancient world. In fact, it continues to this day to be a common understanding of God.

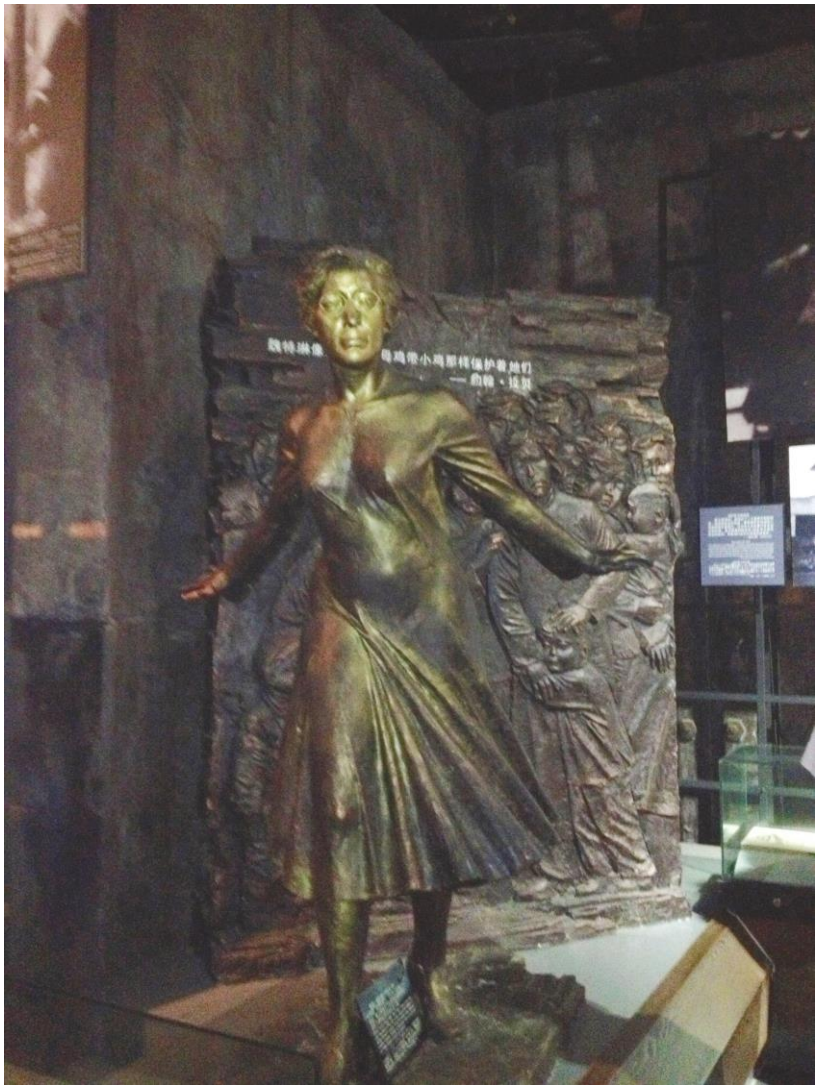
In the ancient world, the earthly political realm was thought to closely mirror the divine realm. Historical realities — the rise and fall of kings, war and peace, prosperity, famine, and economic collapse — were thought to reflect heavenly developments. Political, military, and economic success were signs of divine favor. Catastrophe and failure were signs of divine punishment. The rich and the poor each, in some way, deserved their fate. The powerful and the powerless received their station in life by the will of the gods.

Needless to say, this prosperity theology well served the interests of the people who had political and economic power. This was especially true in Paul's day. The Roman empire, in fact, had a permanent and extensive public relations campaign to promote the idea that the Emperor's political and economic power was divinely ordained. Elaborate public buildings, statues and monuments, even the money required for the essential transactions of everyday life sent the message that Caesar enjoyed the favor of the gods. His rule was the link between the will of heaven and the security and prosperity of the earth.

It stood to reason that those who resisted Caesar's rule, who challenged the pillars of this "best of all possible worlds," were blasphemers as well as traitors. With the very will of heaven, the gods-given structure of the world at stake, the Romans devised a particularly gruesome form of public torture and execution for those who challenged the emperor's authority or the extensive slave-based economic system that made imperial rule possible: public crucifixion. It was a very effective form of state terrorism, a brutal demonstration killing designed strike fear into the hearts of anyone who would challenge the existing political and economic order. It was reserved for cases of high treason and slave rebellion.

Caesar, the coins of the empire proclaimed, was the “son of god.” He was “lord of lords,” the “savior of the world.” The closer in the social-economic structure you were to Caesar, the closer to the gods you were. The further from Caesar you were, the further from the divine. In the Roman world, the furthest you possibly could be from heaven was at the place of maximum distance from the gods, the traitor’s cross.

This is the background for Paul’s comment to the Corinthian followers of Jesus. The man they proclaimed was true “lord,” “savior,” and “son of God” was “foolishness,” a “stumbling block” to those who were “wise” in the common sense of imperial Roman culture. A working class Jewish rabbi and healer who had been tried, convicted, and crucified for rebellion against the Roman Empire was surely as far from the divine as was humanly possible to be. Saying that someone like that was “son of God” and committing your life to following his example no doubt struck most people as absurd — and probably bad for your health! Of course, it was completely consistent with the far-fetched claim of Jewish faith that the creator of the universe was none other than the God of tiny, powerless Israel, constantly dominated and oppressed by the much more powerful imperial powers of the ancient world, was a God who liberates slaves, stands with victims, and favors the vulnerable poor. Biblical faith was inconsistent with the



Statue at Nanjing Massacre Museum in Nanjing, China, honoring Disciples missionary and educator Minnie Vautrin, a professor at Ginling College. With arms spread to protect the women and children behind her, she is depicted defiantly confronting soldiers. Vautrin and Disciples educator Miner Searle Bates protected about 10,000 Chinese women, girls, and children from rape and murder at the hands of marauding soldiers during the Japanese invasion of Nanjing in 1937. Their courage in the face of the terror campaign no doubt struck many as “foolish,” but it was rooted in the counter-intuitive gospel that life triumphs over death, justice sometimes requires sacrifice.

common sense of the ancient world, the theology of prosperity that associated God with success, power, and great wealth. Looking for God among the poor and vulnerable, among the rejected and despised was counter-intuitive, “foolish,” a “stumbling block” to the “wise.”

But Paul reminds Corinthian Christians that such “foolishness” lies at the heart of the Christian witness.

The “foolishness” he calls them to remember is not an anti-intellectual abdication of reason, a rejection of education, science, and knowledge. It is the “foolishness” of biblical faith, of Jesus discipleship that calls us to stand with the weak and vulnerable against the powers of oppression who threaten them. Such solidarity is counter-intuitive in a world so deeply influenced by prosperity theology — and it is risky. The way of Christ may well be the way of the cross. But this is our calling as disciples of Jesus.

Disciples of Christ Historical Society helps us keep and celebrate the stories of our churches’ daily witness to the “foolish” gospel of God’s love for all people and special solidarity with those who are weak and vulnerable. Preserving and cataloguing countless records of congregational life and the varied evangelistic witness and mission of Disciples of Christ and other churches in the Stone-Campbell movement since our birth on the American frontier, the Historical Society helps us understand and learn from our past that we may more faithfully witness to the liberating, healing love of God in our present world.

Pictures of Disciples educators Miner Searle Bates and Minnie Vautrin at the Nanjing Massacre Museum in Nanjing, China.

Its archives have recently helped the people of China retrieve the amazing history of resistance to mass rape and slaughter in the ancient Chinese capital Nanjing when the Japanese army invaded in 1937. A group of foreign missionaries, educators, and business leaders resisted the rampaging troops by establishing a international “safety zone” to protect Chinese women, girls, and children from rape and murder. At enormous personal risk and constant threat of summary execution, Disciples missionaries and educators Miner Searle Bates and Minnie Vautrin protected thousands of women and girls, challenging soldiers and at times physically pulling them off their victims — courage now memorialized at the Nanjing Massacre museum in Nanjing. The Historical Society, working with Global Ministries, helped Chinese researchers tell the story of their courage on behalf of the Chinese people for the sake of the gospel witness that God stands with the vulnerable.

Questions for Discussion

What are some ways living a Christian life may seem “foolish” to others?

Do you see examples today of “prosperity theology”? If so, list a few. How is the gospel view different?

Can you name times that you or the church has taken a risk to stand with someone who was vulnerable? Are there situations now that you think might call you or the church to take such a stand? Explain. What should you or the church do?

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
John 3:14-21

Today's passage from John 3 contains one of the best known passages in the Bible, John 3:16, usually translated something like this from the New Revised Standard Version: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." We'll take a closer look at these powerful words after a bit of reflection on the broader context in which they occur.

Our reading comes toward the end of a key episode at the beginning of John's gospel that's nestled between two central events in the life of Jesus: Jesus driving money changers and merchants out of the Jerusalem temple (2:13-25) and his baptism by John the Baptizer (3:22-24). In the other gospels (Matt 21:12-17; Mk 11:15-19; Lk 19:45-48), Jesus' disruption of temple business came at the end of his earthly life, a few days before he was arrested, tried, and executed for treason against the Roman Empire. In fact, it's the event that finally brought Jesus to the attention of the brutal Roman governor Pilate. But for John, it's one of Jesus's first public acts — what scholars refer to as a prophetic "sign-act," a kind of public "guerrilla theatre" where the prophet acts out the prophecy. Shortly after Jesus's sign-act in the temple, according to John's take on the story, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptizer, a prophet whose very life was a sign-act that preached a radical message of resistance to the collaborationist leadership in Jerusalem. It was a message that finally led to his own execution. Sandwiched between these two episodes in the gospel of John is an encounter Jesus has with a Jewish leader named Nicodemus who comes to him in secret to try to understand the nature of his ministry. Our passage today is the culmination of that conversation, the bottom-line word on Jesus and his ministry.

John opens the story with a seemingly minor but significant detail: Nicodemus came to Jesus "by night" (3:2). Throughout John, but especially in these opening chapters, the writer makes a contrast between light and darkness. The story of Jesus, John says, is the story of light shining in the darkness: "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome (or comprehend or understand) it," John declares in the first paragraph of the book (1:4-5). He uses a nice double entendre here — the darkness neither comprehends, gets its mind around the light nor overpowers it.

Nicodemus, a religious leader, comes to Jesus in darkness, "by night," to seek enlightenment. The conversation they have is surprising and strange. Jesus speaks of a "rebirth" that must happen among the people for them to move from the "kingdom" rule of Rome to the "kingdom of God" that is even now breaking forth in the world. The necessary rebirth will be accomplished by power "from above" (v 3) — unpredictable, untamable, like the wind. You can hear it and see its effects, but you can't capture and control it (v 8).

The idea of it blows Nicodemus's mind. "How can these things be?" he asks (v 9). And in a revealing shift in v 11, Jesus switches from the singular "I" to the plural "we." "I tell

you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony." Jesus now speaks with the voice of the Christian community John writes to encourage. Those who trust the apostolic testimony about Jesus are enlightened. Those who cannot or will not trust continue to live "in the dark."

Admittedly, the testimony is counter-intuitive. God has appeared in the world in the form of a backwater Jewish healer and rabbi who was arrested and executed for treason against the Roman Empire? No doubt lots of people thought the idea sounded crazy. But for John and other early followers of Jesus, the crucifixion of Jesus was not an inconvenient truth to be hidden in the footnotes. It was, paradoxically, the proof that God was in fact at work in Jesus to bring healing from destruction, life out of death.

At the beginning of today's lectionary passage, Jesus makes the point with a fascinating analogy from scripture, the odd story from Numbers about Moses and the "bronze serpent." In that story (21:4-9), the Israelites grumble against God and Moses about their miserable condition in the wilderness. God gets angry and sends poisonous snakes into the camp that bite and kill many of them. The people cry out for deliverance, and God instructs Moses to make a bronze statue of a snake and put it on a pillar. People who suffer snakebites will be healed, God says, just by looking at the statue of the very thing that poisoned them. It's certainly counter-intuitive. On the other hand, in our world today, we inoculate against life-threatening disease by injecting benign versions of the virus directly into the bloodstream; so there is a certain logic to it.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that the rebirth "from above" is like the bronze serpent. The very thing that's threatening to kill you is in fact the thing that will save you. The way to "eternal life" is the very same way that would lead to Jesus's brutal death. The mental image of the bronze snake offers a subtle but powerful double entendre. The lifting up of the bronze serpent on a pillar parallels the lifting up of Jesus on the Roman cross. As is the case throughout the gospel of John, the words and actions of Jesus from beginning to end foreshadow the surprising "glorification" of the resurrected Christ that is accomplished through his crucifixion. Just as healing life comes through the lifted-up bronze image of the deadly serpent in the wilderness, "eternal life" and healing come to the world through the lifted-up, crucified Christ. It defies common sense, but it's powerfully true.

The two verses that immediately follow (vv 16-17) get to the heart of the matter when it comes to the "kingdom of God" emerging in the world. "For God so loved the world that he sent his unique son…; God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but so the world might be rescued through/by him."

The word sometimes translated "only begotten" refers to a quality, not a number. In Genesis 22, Isaac is described as Abraham's "only" son, though Ishmael was also Abraham's son. The point is not that Abraham had only one son. It's that Isaac is "only son that counts" in the particular case of God working out the promise made to Abraham. The point in John 3:16 is not that God has only one son Jesus. What matters

is the unique quality of this particular son. This is the one through whom the world will be rescued.

The word typically translated “saved” in v 17 at root means to rescue, to heal, to restore something endangered or damaged to its prior state of safety and health. The purpose of the unique son is that the world — the Greek word is *kosmos* — will be rescued, healed, restored from the life-threatening danger posed by the rulers of this world. It will be given new life that is “eternal” (*aiōnios*, the word we get “eon” from). The distinction here is qualitative. Life lived in “darkness” is broken, damaged, sick. It doesn’t work right. Life lived in “light” — the light embodied through the “unique son” — is healing and restorative. It sets things right. It moves the cosmos from a way of life that is deadly to a way of life that is life-giving and “eternal.”

This life-giving way of life is available now to those who “trust” in the son (v 16). Though usually translated “believe,” the Greek word *pisteuō* has a much deeper, richer meaning than mere intellectual assent. It means to believe in something or someone the way a father does when he tells his daughter, “I believe in you!” He’s not saying that he believes the child exists. He means that he has confidence, puts trust in her. John 3:16 is not about “belief.” It’s about deep, enduring trust, confidence in the way of life illuminated by the light that has come into the world to heal, rescue, and transform it. The gospel of Jesus which “we know,” “we have seen,” and we “testify to” (v 11), isn’t a death sentence, a verdict of condemnation for the world. It’s the healing light that leads to life “eternal.”

To a world imprisoned and unaccustomed to the light, it’s sometimes hard to look at and see. It is counter-intuitive. It violates the normal principles of power as domination and control. It is free, untamed, often misunderstood, but never overcome. And we who know, who see, and who testify to its healing power are called in the here-and-now to live life eternal, to participate in God’s healing, saving, restoring work in the world.

Through Disciples Mission Fund, North American Pacific/Asian Disciples gives witness to the healing, restoring work of Christ in the world, celebrating wholeness and helping the church and the world welcome the glorious diversity of the human family to an open table of healing love.

Worship at NAPAD Convocation 2014 at the University of Chicago.

Supporting the establishment of new Pacific/Asian congregations and welcoming established congregations to affiliation with Disciples, NAPAD participates in witness for social justice through cooperation with ecumenical mission partners at home and abroad and promotes the Disciples vision of wholeness in a fragmented world.

The National Benevolent Association partners with congregations and regions throughout the church to create communities of compassion and care, bringing the light of the healing, transformative gospel to a hurting, broken world. It partners with Disciples health and social service ministries to help them strengthen and grow. It initiates new ministry programs related to health and social services and connects providers for mutual education, collaboration, and growth.

Our contributions to Disciples Mission Fund supports these two vital ministries as they witness to the light that heals the world, that makes the fragmented whole, that defies the logic of division and death and leads the world to life eternal.

Questions for Discussion

What do you think it means that God is at work in Christ to “rescue” or “save” or “heal” the world? What would a “rescued/saved/healed” world look like?

What do you think it means that God is “rescuing” or “saving” or “healing” the world “through” Christ?

What’s the difference between “believing” and “trusting”?

Thinking of John’s metaphors of “darkness” and “light,” name some places in your community that need to have light shined on them? What should the church do to help shine that light?

Name some places in our national life. How can the church help bring light to these situations?

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Jeremiah 31:31-34

Today's lectionary reading from Jeremiah originates in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE. The political, economic, and religious leaders of the city have been forcibly exiled hundreds of miles away in the heartland of Mesopotamia. The prophet Jeremiah who had been a constant thorn in the side of the leadership in Jerusalem in the years leading up to the disaster now faces his own impending exile. His warnings had fallen on deaf ears, but they had proven tragically accurate.

Now with the destruction of the city and its temple an accomplished fact, Jeremiah suddenly shifts tone. His preaching, some of the gloomiest and shocking words found anywhere in scripture, takes a sudden turn toward hope. He envisions a nation healed and restored by the loving power of God.

Today's passage, one of the most famous and beloved in the book of Jeremiah, speaks of God rebuilding the world from the individual human heart up. Truth and justice and peace will soon be "written" on the very mind, in the very heart of every human being. We will be "hard wired" with the mind and will of God through a "new covenant" God will make with the world.

Chapter 31 begins with God promising to rescue Israel and Judah from the destruction and exile they have suffered at the hand of the Babylonians. "I have loved you with an everlasting love," God says, "therefore I have continued my covenant faithfulness to you" (v 3). In the aftermath of exile, God and Israel will start over. The imagery evokes marriage between God and "virgin Israel," who will be decked out with ornaments and tambourines, dancing with joy on their wedding day (v 5). The people will come home. Their exile will end. "See, I am bringing them from the land of the north and collecting them from the farthest reaches of the earth," God proclaims (v 8). "I will turn their mourning into joy. I will comfort them and bring them joy out of their sorrow" (v 13). Noting that the sound of "lamentation and weeping" is now heard in Ramah, because "Rachel is weeping for her children" and "refuses to be comforted" for them "because they are no more" (v 15), God urges her — a metaphor for the nation of Israel — to stop crying, to wipe away her tears, because there is a reward for her work: "They will return from the land of the enemy! There is hope for your future…. The children will return to their own territory!" (vv 16-17). "Ephraim," symbolizing the people of the ancient northern Israelite kingdom, is a rebellious son, the first to suffer destruction and exile at the hand of a hostile foreign empire. Ephraim now realizes the error of his ways and pleads with God to take him back (vv 18-19). God responds with compassion and love: "Is Ephraim my precious son, the child I take delight in?" "I certainly still remember him! Therefore I am deeply moved for him. I will certainly have mercy on him!" (v 20). The following verses promise restoration and assure the people that they have a new start with God: "I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and animals. Just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant" (vv 27-

28). The slate will be wiped clean. The painful betrayals of the past will not govern the future. “In those days, they will no longer say, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’” (v 29).

Today’s lectionary passage describes how this dramatic new relationship will be accomplished. God is making a “new covenant” with the people. Unlike the covenant broken by the ancestors, this covenant will be seared into their minds, deeply imbedded in the very structures of their souls. “I will put my instruction (“my torah”) within them; I’ll write it on their heart (or “their mind”).

Although this passage from Jeremiah is where get the idea of a “new covenant,” a term later adopted by Christians to describe the new relationship with God they experience in Christian community, it’s not really a departure from the traditional understanding of Israel’s covenant with God. In fact, the idea of a covenant “written on the heart” is a key element of the “Shema” (“Hear, O Israel!”) in Deuteronomy 6. “You will love Yahweh your God with your whole heart (or “mind”), with your whole life, with all your strength!” (v 5). These words should be “on your heart” (v 6), recited to children, discussed at home and away, when you lie down and when you get up (v 7). With a wonderful series of metaphors, the writers describe the all-encompassing nature of the covenant and its instructions for happiness and well-being: “Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as bands between your eyes, write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates!” (v 8). Some Jews take it quite literally, strapping animal-skin boxes with small copies of key scriptures (including Deut 6:4-9) on their foreheads and wrists. And many Jewish homes attach a “mezuzah,” from the Hebrew word for “doorpost,” to the front doorpost with a tiny copy of the Shema in it. The writers of Deuteronomy 6 probably had something more metaphorical in mind. The hand is a symbol of the power to do work. The eyes symbolize your outlook on life. Doorposts mark the threshold of the home, where domestic life and public life meet. Israel is called to do all its work through the covenant, to view the world with “Torah-colored glasses.” In public, in private, in all walks of life, the faithful must live and breath the covenantal way of life.

In the aftermath of Jerusalem’s destruction, in the wake of Babylonian exile, Jeremiah sees a new era dawning, a new phase in God’s relationship with the people. Now at last, the people’s hearts can change. A new level of intimacy is possible between the people and God. “I will be their God, and they will be my people,” God exclaims. “I will put my instruction deep inside them. I will write it on their hearts” (Jer 31:33). The people will know God in a deeper, more intimate way because “I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more!” (v 34).

On the far side of disaster, through years of suffering and pain, the people now enter a new era. They embrace new life and find new hope, a future marked by the transformative love of God.

Through Disciples Mission Fund, we participate in a global mission of “critical presence” with more than 270 partner churches and organizations in about 70 countries around the world to receive and share the good new of Jesus Christ, working together for

justice, reconciliation and peace. Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ share a unique covenantal partnership through Global Ministries, supporting missionaries and programs around the world and empowering local congregations and regions in the US and Canada to engage in global mission through a variety of programs and partnerships. Through these relationships, supported in part by the Easter Offering, we share the love of Christ and participate in God's mission to build a new world from the individual human heart up. Standing with our partners around the world in the hands-on work of compassion, healing, and justice transforms their hearts and ours. In the words of one of the people we support, "Working in prison ministry in Guadeloupe, I know that it's very difficult to spend much time in God's presence without being transformed."

The Easter Offering also supports mission here at home. Hope Partnership for Missional Transformation helps identify, train, coach, and provide peer support for new church planters. It works with existing congregations to evaluate and plan for transformation, with a focus on God's mission.

These ministries and all the ministries supported by the Easter Offering help us share God's mission to heal the world from the individual human heart up, to be and to share the good news of Jesus Christ from our doorstep to the ends of the earth.

Questions for Discussion

What do you think it means to have God's "instructions," God's covenant "written on our hearts"? As a practical matter, what difference does that make?

Name some times you, the church, the community, the nation have had the opportunity to make a "new start." Was it hard to do? What were some of the signs that things were now different?

Are there things like that that need addressing today?

The Sixth Sunday in Lent
Philippians 2:5-11

In today's passage from Philippians, Paul includes an extended quote from an early Christian song familiar to the Philippian church. So this is one of our oldest surviving hymns. In the chapter that leads up it, Paul indicates that Philippian Christians are facing external opposition and persecution (1:28-29) that parallel — in kind, if not in degree — his own imprisonment by the imperial guard (1:7, 12-14, 30). Paul acknowledges the difficulty of their situation, but assures them that the suffering is worth it, because it actually helps spread the gospel, encouraging other Christian sisters and brothers "to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear" (1:14).

Chapter 2 turns specifically to the life of the Philippian community. Paul begins by urging them to "make my joy complete" by being "of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (2:2). This unity of purpose will come only if they look to the interests of the whole community and not just of themselves as individuals (v 3). This whole-church attitude, Paul says, is part of the very logic of the gospel they proclaim. They must have "the mind of Christ Jesus," he says. To describe what that means, he quotes the hymn, a strikingly radical song when heard against the background of its ancient culture.

The hymn addresses head-on the most controversial aspect of the new Christian faith, the undeniable fact that their leader had been arrested, tried, and executed for treason. It's not surprising that those like Paul who publicly recruited people to follow in the footsteps of this convicted enemy of the Roman state were thrown in prison and even executed themselves. Nor is it surprising that recruits to the new movement would find themselves under a cloud of suspicion and even outright hostility from the authorities and their patriotic neighbors. This song would have done nothing to soothe the minds of the Christians' opponents.

From beginning to end, the song makes a contrast between the political-theological claims of Roman imperial culture and faith in Christ. The challenge is issued in the opening words of the song. Christ, "though he was in the very form of God" didn't consider equality with God a thing to be "plundered" or "seized and held by force." The Greek word *arpagmos*, often translated as "grasped" or "exploited," refers to something seized by violence or military victory. To fully appreciate the image, it's important to know a little bit about Roman imperial history and the political-religious ideology that supported the political and economic power of the imperial family.

The story begins in 44 BCE with the murder of Julius Caesar by a mob of senators on the floor of the Roman Senate — and you thought partisan gridlock in Washington was bad! The assassination set the stage for a civil war between competing political factions that ultimately swept up the entire Mediterranean world. In 42 BCE, with a pro-Caesar faction now in control, the Senate voted to make Julius a god. It sounds odd to us, but not to them. Octavian, the adopted son of Julius, led one of the factions and used his father's wealth and reputation to promote his own political and military agenda. He

hosted a huge athletic event in Rome to commemorate the death of Julius. As luck would have it, a comet appeared in the sky during the games. Romans, like many people of their day, took unusual astronomical events to be heavenly signs. The coincidence was astounding in this case. And Octavian put it to good use, promoting the idea that the comet was in fact the divine body of Julius flying up to join his brother and sister gods in the sky. Of course, if Julius was now divine, then Octavian was "the son of god."

Both sides of a denarius from the time of Augustus (Octavian). The front is a picture of Augustus. The back says "Divine Julius" on a picture of a star. The squiggly lines around the ray shooting straight up indicate motion. This is a depiction of the comet taken as a sign of Julius joining the gods in heaven. Similar coins described Augustus as "Divi Filius," "son of god."
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The Mediterranean world war raged across three continents off and on for more than a decade, but began to come to an end with Octavian's decisive military victory over the combined forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, Greece, in 31 BCE. This is usually recognized by historians as the moment of transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. In 27 BCE, to celebrate the battle of Actium, the end of the war, and the establishment of the new era of *Pax Romana* (the "peace of Rome"), the Roman Senate voted to give Octavian a series of new titles to represent his military, political, and religious power. He was now *Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus*. *Imperator* (Emperor) is the word Roman soldiers shouted to celebrate their general after a military victory. Caesar is the family name of Julius, now taken by his adopted son. *Divi Filius* is "son of god." And *Augustus* is the word we get "augment" from. It carries the idea of something greater, an increase of some kind. Augustus was "Mr. Big." Augustus Caesar, emperor and son of god, had literally earned his way to divine status by force of arms — first, by the murder of his adopted father by their enemies, then by his own military might. The "peace of Rome" he brought to the world was built on a foundation of absolute military victory. Victory led to security, justice, and peace — in that order. Caesar, the "lord of lords," had become the "savior of the world" because through superior force he brought peace out of chaos.

This imperial ideology served the interests of an interlocking hierarchy of patronage that linked the entire empire from the local household up to the emperor's family. It was an economic and political hierarchy built on the labor of slaves who comprised an ultimately unsustainable proportion of the overall population. The fundamental purpose

of the imperial theology was to promote the notion that the slave-supported economic and political hierarchy had divine sanction. To resist imperial rule was to commit blasphemy as well as treason. Those who were closest in status and loyalty to the imperial house were closest to the gods, represented in the earthly political order by the "son of god," Caesar. Those who were lowest on the social stratum were farther away from heaven. The farthest from the gods were those who actively challenged the interests of the imperial system, especially rebellious slaves and slave revolt leaders. The Romans developed a particularly gruesome form of public torture and execution for them: crucifixion. In the Roman imperial theology, the last place on earth you would expect to find God was on the traitor's cross.

So you see the problem for early Christians and their message.

The Philippian hymn heads straight into that thicket. Christ Jesus was "in the very form of God," but "did not consider equality with God a thing to be seized by force." The authority of Christ does not come through force of arms. There's no battle of Actium here. Christ's authority comes through self-emptying, through humility and submission, the complete opposite of shock-and-awe, arrogance and bluster. But the language is fascinating. The hymn says that Christ "emptied himself" by "taking the form of a slave." It is an astonishing description, but it makes a radical claim about Jesus's death. It was the death of a runaway slave or perhaps someone who preached the liberation of slaves. Jesus, "though in the very form of God," so identified with the lowest of the low, the farthest away from "divine Caesar" and the blessings of heaven, the most hopeless and despised, the slave, that his solidarity led to his torture and death. Ironically, when you consider the prevailing political theology of the day, this is the very thing that led God to "highly exalt" him and give him a name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is lord."

The contrast could not be more sharply drawn. The power of Roman imperial might is now overcome by the power of solidarity with the lowest of the low, the battered and bruised, the poor and enslaved. This is the vision and mission of God in the world.

We, from our sisters and brothers in ancient Philippi to you and me today, are called to stand in solidarity with the endangered and enslaved, live lives of bold witness to God's surprising, amazing work to transform the world for peace, justice, and freedom, to bring hope and comfort to all who yearn to be free.

Our Easter Offering supports efforts around the world to bring hope and freedom to those in danger. Disciples Women, through education and direct action, stand against human trafficking and stand up for women and children threatened by slavery and abuse. Through our giving, we support this important ministry. We act with the mind of Christ who took the form of a slave and stood in courageous solidarity, giving his very life that all may be free.

Questions for Discussion

Name some ways that life in Christ call us to stand against the values of the larger culture.

Describe a time you have experienced the power of God in an unexpected place or from an unexpected person. What was surprising about the experience?

Who are some of the “vulnerable” in the world today? How can we stand in solidarity with them?