

# Faith and Hope

in the midst of changing times



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Hymns and prayers referred to in this study and prayer guide can be found in:  
*Hymnal: A Worship Book (HWB)* ([www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/502](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/502))  
*Sing the Journey (STJ)* ([www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/70](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/70))  
*Sing the Story (STS)* ([www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/447](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/447))

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Since the fall of 1998, he has been a faculty member at CMBC and Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg. He feels immensely privileged to do the work he does and frequently tells people that he has the best job in the world.

Dan is a member of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies and the Society of Biblical Literature. Over the years, he has written numerous articles and book reviews in journals like *Vision* and *Direction* and magazines like *The Christian Century*, *Sojourners*, *Canadian Mennonite*, *The Mennonite*, and others. He has been co-editor of *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, since 2003, with a one-year break during his sabbatical. Dan is one of the contributing writers for the Second Mile adult Sunday school curriculum, and author of *Hope and Prayer in the New Millennium: A five-week Worship, Prayer and Study Guide*, commissioned by Mennonite Church Canada in 1999. This has now been reworked thoroughly as *Faith and Hope in the Midst of Changing Times*.

Dan is frequently invited to preach or teach in congregations or at special conferences and events. He has a passion for making the fruits of biblical scholarship available to the church, and for making the message of the Bible come alive for ordinary Christians. Having had a son who struggled with physical and mental disabilities, and who died of cancer, he is often invited to speak on topics related to disability, healing, pastoral care, and experiencing the grace of God during difficult times.

When not at work, Dan enjoys reading, running, biking, walking, gardening, bird-watching, and the occasional sporting event on television.

Dan and his wife, Esther, have three sons, Mark, Chris, and Tim (who died of cancer some years ago). They are members of Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg.



## About the Author

Dan grew up on a fruit and vegetable farm near Leamington, Ontario, where he learned to enjoy the outdoors and hard work at an early age. Because farming is a difficult way to earn a living, and because of his love for things biblical and theological, he decided to pursue higher education and attend Canadian Mennonite Bible College after high school.

Dan has a Ph.D. from the University of St. Michael's College, 1994 (Old Testament); an M.A. from the University of Manitoba 1981, (Biblical Studies, Theology); a B.A. from the University of Manitoba, 1977 (History); and a B.Th. from Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 1976.

After finishing his Masters degree, Dan worked as interim pastor at Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg for two years (1980–1981), after which he and Esther had the opportunity to serve as Mennonite Central Committee country representatives in the Philippines from 1982–1986. Living in a context of poverty and social injustice profoundly shaped his worldview, and deepened his commitment to a Christian lifestyle that promotes simplicity and justice.

Upon return to Canada, Dan began his doctoral studies in Toronto, while also being involved in raising a family and teaching courses at Conrad Grebel College, Wilfrid Laurier University, McMaster University, Knox College, and Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. From 1996–1998 he worked half-time as pastor at First Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ontario, while he continued his part-time teaching.

# Faith and Hope in the midst of changing times

A five session study and prayer guide,  
inspired by a variety of texts.

by  
Dan Epp-Tiessen



### Closing prayer

Dear God,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
we thank you that you constantly keep watch over us.

May we always find refuge in you,  
even during the earth-shattering events that befall us.  
In these changing and challenging times  
we give our concerns and anxieties over to you,  
and we ask you to transform them  
into confidence and courage.

We thank you for the assurance  
that there is nothing in all of creation  
that can separate us from your love.

May your love and your presence  
strengthen us in our weakness,  
comfort us in our grief,  
heal us in our brokenness,  
and empower us to live faithfully as your people.

We ask you to keep our going out and our coming in,  
from this time on and forevermore. Amen.

### Sending Hymns

HWB 433 *Go, my children*

HWB 526 *In the rifted Rock I'm resting*  
(or STJ 93 *Wehrlos und verlassen*)

HWB 616 *Children of the heavenly Father*

STJ 73 *The Lord lift you up*

STJ 76 *The Lord Bless you and keep you*

STJ 77 *The peace of the earth be with you*

5. How do we remain open to the possibility that God may send miraculous healing or deliverance, without creating false hopes that God will send such deliverance in every situation of need?
6. At our son, Tim's, funeral the pastor added to Paul's list of hardships in Romans 8:35: cancer, disabilities, chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and hospital stays. What hardships would you add to the list to make this verse apply more directly to your life?
7. How does your belief in resurrection and eternal life affect the way you live your present life?

**Entering into Prayer**

To begin and end your prayer time, sing one of the following short Hymns HWB 353 *Lord, listen to your children*, HWB 348 *O Lord, hear my prayer*, or HWB 358 *Oyenos, mi Dios*. These songs consist of musical prayer phrases that are good to sing at least three times, once with an intentional awareness of each person of the Trinity.

- Invite people into a time of prayer. Begin the spoken prayers by re-reading Psalm 121, or substitute Psalm 23, or 46. Acknowledge some of the concerns or anxieties people in your group may be experiencing, concerns that relate to their own lives, to their family members and friends, to the church, or to the larger community.
- Then invite people to voice their concerns or anxieties in a few words or a short sentence. If your group is large or individuals are hesitant to speak up, leave a time of silence for people to bring their concerns to God quietly.

As words of assurance read Romans 8:37–39 or Psalm 46:1–2.

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# Foreword

## Holy Words

In the introduction on the next pages, Dan Epp-Tiessen quotes Thomas Long's words, "Putting things into words is one of the ways we acquire knowledge, passion and conviction." To an extrovert who loves words and talking her way toward clarity, this makes eminent sense. But, all of us, no matter our personality types, are children of the God whose creation process we celebrate with the words, "And God said, let there be.... and there was" (Genesis 1). We know about the generative power words can have for many things, including faith. The Gospel of John introduces Jesus to us as The Word, or Logos, that was there at creation. God's words, and Jesus, The Word, clearly have divine power, but our words, as those who are created in the image of God, can also have great, faith deepening, power.

The words Dan Epp-Tiessen wrote for the 1999 Prayer week impressed those of us who are mandated to work in the area of Christian Formation at Mennonite Church Canada, as having a particular power and relevancy for Mennonite Christians in Canada and the challenges we are facing today. And so we asked Dan to revise that fine resource for this year's Season of Prayer materials. This new booklet, *Faith and Hope in the Midst of Changing Times*, integrates the last decade of Dan's spiritual journey so that those words have indeed become new, life-giving, and faith-forming words for the church in 2011 and beyond.

## Hymns

HWB 169 *I to the hills will lift my eyes* (based on Psalm 121)

HWB 567 *How firm a foundation*

HWB 578 *The Lord's my shepherd*

HWB 589 *My Shepherd will supply my need*

HWB 585 *In your sickness*

STS 49 *I will come to you in the silence*

STJ 26 *God is our refuge and strength*

STJ 103 *Why should I feel discouraged*

## Questions for Discussion

*Depending on the time you have allotted for this session, select the questions that are most important for your context, and that best prepare you for the prayer time that follows the discussion.*

1. What are your anxieties in these changing and challenging times? What forces in our society tend to fuel our anxieties? What scripture passages or aspects of faith help you deal with anxiety?
2. What "earth-shattering," or disastrous events have you encountered in your life? Have you experienced God's presence during such times? Or has God seemed to be strangely absent or silent? (This is also the experience of some of the biblical writers. See Psalm 22:1-2, for example.) What "earth-shattering" events do you expect to encounter in the future?
3. What explanations have you heard for why there is suffering in the world? How do you respond to these explanations?
4. How can we be grateful for and speak helpfully about divine care and protection, without creating the false impression that God will always protect us from calamity?

One reason suicide bombings are so difficult to prevent is because the bombers do not fear death. Death is the ultimate threat that we can hold over someone's head. Remove the fear of death and people become amazingly powerful.

Hope in resurrection and eternal life can make us otherworldly, but it can also lessen our fear of death and thereby empower us for faithful living in the here and now. We, too, can hold our lives lightly because death is not the end. Knowing that another life awaits us can free us from bondage to powers such as consumerism, and from the compulsion to satisfy all our whims and fancies and selfish desires. Knowing that not even death can separate us from the love of God frees us to serve God more fully in this life even when such service leads to hardship and suffering. We are free to make sacrifices for God's Kingdom because we know that this life, as precious as it is, is not the only life that we have to look forward to.

We do not know what these changing and challenging times will bring for us, our loved ones, our churches, our communities, or the world. But when difficult times come, we have the assurance that "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:2). Therefore, nothing in all of creation "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39). Praise be to God for this antidote to the anxiety of our time.

It has been a privilege to edit these sessions.

As we, who are formed by the Spirit and Logos of God, study and pray; read, study, adapt, talk about, and pray with these words, the "saving power of God, the transforming love of Jesus Christ, and the reassuring presence of the Spirit" will be believed and experienced more deeply, as Dan prays it will be in his introduction. That is also the prayer of the team that collaborates to produce this resource for each of you in our family of God. May God bless your use of this year's guide for study and prayer.



Elsie Rempel, editor  
Director of Christian Nurture, Mennonite Church Canada

# Introduction

*We don't just say things we already believe. To the contrary, saying things out loud is a part of how we come to believe. We talk our way toward belief, talk our way from tentative belief through doubt to firmer belief, talk our way toward believing more fully, more clearly, and more deeply. Putting things into words is one of the ways we acquire knowledge, passion, and conviction.<sup>1</sup>*

Being somewhat of a pessimist by nature, and someone who does not particularly like change, I can easily think of a long list of changes happening in our world and societies that make me shudder. While positive changes are also unfolding, the negative ones tend to attract my attention. Perhaps I have written these meditations to talk myself into believing that, no matter what the world looks like and what crises loom on the horizon, as Christians we are never without hope and assurance in the midst of changing and challenging times. God provides a rock to stand on, a foundation to build on, a hand to reach out for, a cross and resurrection to cling to, a future to embrace. My prayer is that the meditations and worship sessions in this booklet will suggest words whereby we together can talk ourselves into believing and experiencing more fully, clearly, and deeply the saving power of God, the transforming love of Jesus Christ, and the reassuring presence of the Spirit.

The original version of these materials appeared in 1999 and was entitled *Hope and Prayer in the New Millennium*. Each of the reflections sought to help the church deal with the changes and challenges that a new millennium would bring. The beginning of the new millennium is by now distant memory, but the reality of change and the accompanying challenges are probably even more

in the sweet bye and bye.” God has placed us here on earth for reasons that go far beyond just preparing for life in heaven, and so we must not become so heavenly minded that we are of little earthly good. Yet our Christian belief in resurrection and eternal life is central to our faith, and can actually empower us to be of earthly good.

A number of years ago while attending an academic conference in Atlanta, I skipped out one morning to go visit the nearby Martin Luther King Center. To sit on the hard wooden pews of the old Ebenezer Baptist church and listen to tapes of King proclaiming the gospel, cheered on by the congregation’s “hallelujahs” and “amens,” was a deeply moving experience. From the exhibits at the Center I learned that white supremacists had frequently threatened King’s family and several times they had bombed his home. What gave King the strength and courage to continue proclaiming the gospel and working for God’s Kingdom in the face of such opposition and danger?

King came from a faith tradition forged in the suffering of African Americans. This faith sought God’s freedom, justice, and well-being in the here and now, but it also recognized that life on earth can be harsh and so it nurtured a profound faith in eternal life. This faith empowered King to continue his ministry in the face of danger and opposition. He could hold his earthly life lightly because he knew that there was a whole other life that awaited him.

If this life is all that there is, then we would be foolish not to live by the philosophy of “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” But as Christians, we know that this life is not all that there is, and this recognition can be enormously empowering. Such faith has sustained Christian martyrs throughout the generations and empowered faithful living in countless difficult situations.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (The Practice of Faith Series; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 6.



## Nothing Can Separate Us

We should not expect that God will always spare us from suffering, but we can experience God's care and presence in the midst of our suffering. This is the assurance of many biblical texts.

### Scripture Reading: Romans 8:35–39

From the way in which Paul asks the question in verse 35, it is clear that he assumes Christians will experience some of the afflictions which he mentions: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. Paul is speaking from personal experience here, since these are precisely some of the struggles he encountered in his missionary work (see 2 Corinthians 11:23–27). To emphasize that the Christian life will involve hardship, Paul quotes Psalm 44:22 and reminds his readers that persecution of the faithful is not a new phenomenon. Then Paul lists a whole series of adversaries that span the length and breadth of the cosmos, and declares that there is nothing in all of creation that can “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,” not even the greatest and last enemy we face, namely death.

In light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, passages like Psalm 121 take on a deeper meaning than they originally had. Verse 8 for example, “The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time on and forevermore,” becomes for us a promise of resurrection and eternal life in Christ. When we proclaim the final verse of Psalm 23 at a funeral, “and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever,” the meaning of these words goes well beyond the original intent of expressing the psalmist's desire to spend time in the Jerusalem temple.

### Eternal Life

The faith of many Christians is far too much “pie in the sky

real today than over a decade ago. I have thoroughly updated and re-written each of the meditations, to reflect both changing times and changes in my own faith over the last eleven years.

- 1. In the Face of Change:** If we as Christians are rooted in our story, remain God-centered, sort out our loyalties, and live as a covenant people, then we can confidently face changing times.
- 2. Bless the LORD, O My Soul:** One of the most important things we as a church do in any time and place is to offer our joyous and heartfelt praise to God.
- 3. Nurturing a Spirit of Resistance:** As God's people, we owe our primary allegiance to God. Therefore, in changing times we are called to nurture a discerning spirit of resistance to the world.
- 4. Living between Reality and Hope:** Our calling is to live between acceptance of some of the painful realities of life, and the hope we have that with God new things are possible.
- 5. Nothing Can Separate Us . . . :** No matter what crises we face either individually or collectively, the Bible assures us that there is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The sessions in this booklet have been written with several purposes in mind. Perhaps the ideas presented in each chapter, together with the worship resources and questions for discussion, can provide enough “grist for the mill” for January Prayer Week services, or a series of Sunday worship services, or adult Sunday school classes, or Bible studies. My prayer is that readers will find nourishment in the pages that follow, and words that God might use to help us talk ourselves into believing more firmly and living more faithfully in the midst of changing and challenging times.

Biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, unless indicated otherwise.

## Session 1

# In the Face of Change

*Focus statement: If we as Christians are rooted in our story, remain God-centered, sort out our loyalties, and live as a covenant people, then we can confidently face changing times.*

### Worship Resources

HWB 661, 672; STJ 119

### Gathering Hymns

HWB 25 *Jesus, stand among us*

HWB 26 *Holy Spirit, come with power*

### Introducing the Theme

We live in a world where the pace of change has become almost dizzying. Our technology is changing, the values of society are changing, the world economic and political order is changing, our communities are changing, the way we produce food and earn a living is changing, and creation itself is changing as a result of human impact on it. Some of the changes we are witnessing are positive, others are negative, and many have the potential for either great good or great evil. How do we as a

Suffering can result from many factors. There is suffering that comes as a result of our faith commitments. There is suffering that is the consequence of human sin, our own or the sin of others, or our collective human sin. There is suffering caused by natural disasters and illness. Whatever the causes, our world abounds with suffering, and this is not likely to change in the challenging times ahead.

We are led to wonder, “How can there be so much pain and sorrow in a world that is created by and ruled over by a loving God?” As Christians, we are sometimes tempted to give simplistic answers to this very difficult question. When a mother of three young children dies of cancer, or when the life of a promising teenager is snuffed out by a drunk driver, some Christians will say, “It is God’s will,” or “God must have some plan for a higher good.” Prominent Christian leaders have been known to ascribe a devastating earthquake or hurricane to the punishing hand of God. Do we really believe that God wants a young child to die of cancer, or that God’s plan is behind the death and destruction left in the wake of an earthquake or hurricane? As Christians, we must be willing to live without clarity on some issues. The question of how there can be so much pain in a world created by a loving God remains one of life’s unfathomable mysteries.

The book of Job struggles intensely with the question of human suffering. It rejects the simplistic explanations of Job’s friends that his suffering must be the result of some sin that he has committed and that if he would only repent, God would alleviate his suffering. However, the book offers no alternative answers. At the end, God utters two long speeches which highlight the limits of human knowledge compared to the power and sovereignty of God (38:1–40:2; 40:6–41:34). This represents an implicit acknowledgment that as humans we have no adequate explanation for the existence of suffering, but God remains sovereign LORD nonetheless and is worthy of our faith.

I heard many radio preachers make promises about Jesus' power to heal and deliver. When a young man in my congregation was critically injured in a car crash, I was absolutely convinced that God would miraculously heal him in response to my prayers and the prayers of the congregation. When that healing did not happen, I became severely disillusioned.

On the other hand, we should not promise each other too little of God's care and presence. A God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead can surely bring new life into your life and mine. God's involvement in our lives can and does make a difference. If it doesn't, then, in the words of Paul, "we of all people are most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

### **When the Mountains Tremble**

**Scripture Reading:** Psalm 46:1–3

Many a time, the opening verses of Psalm 46 have comforted and strengthened me. What I appreciate about this passage is its recognition that sometimes the earth as we know it changes, and even the mountains tremble. Yet the text asserts that God is our refuge and strength even in the midst of earth-shattering events.

Unless we lead some kind of charmed existence, all of us will in the course of our lives experience "earth-shattering" events. People we love dearly will die, sometimes far too early by our reckoning. A doctor will say to us, "I am sorry, but you have cancer." Some of us will acquire a disability, lose a job, go bankrupt, get clinically depressed, or experience broken relationships. As Christians, we are not promised that life will always be easy and pleasant. In fact, the New Testament promises the opposite. It explicitly emphasizes that following Jesus will have painful consequences, and it invites us to take up our cross and follow him.

church deal positively with changing and challenging times?

### **Going Forward Looking Backward**

Ours is not the first time in history that God's people have faced major changes. At the end of the book of Joshua, the Israelites find themselves in changing times. They have escaped slavery in Egypt, wandered for forty years in the wilderness, and finally they have conquered the promised land. And now there will be yet more change as the Israelites face the new challenge of learning to live justly and faithfully as God's people in this land. In preparation for this change, Joshua summons the Israelites to an assembly so that he can address them one last time before he dies. Joshua begins by telling the Israelites their story.

**Scripture Reading:** Joshua 24:1–13

Ironically, God's people go forward looking backward. We should not look back because we are nostalgic about recovering some supposed golden era from the past, or because we want the future to duplicate the past. There will and should be continuity between our past and our future, but there will also be profound change. We look back because it is our story that shapes us, that reminds of us of who and whose we are, and that provides guidance for understanding what God is calling us to become. In times of change and transition it is all the more important that we be firmly rooted in our story.

### **Getting the Story "Right"**

Telling the story of God's people is rarely without problems. In Joshua's version of the story, women are conspicuously absent. Joshua celebrates the massive slaughter and dispossession of the Canaanites, actions that we today would label as genocide and ethnic cleansing, and totally abhorrent.

When God's people tell their story, even in the Bible, it is generally a partial story, and the perspective is not always as broad and holistic as it should be. Therefore, we need to critically evaluate the story. This statement may trouble some of us (as it troubles me), but unless we carefully evaluate the story, we are in danger of repeating its sinful elements. On the basis of very real features of the biblical story, Christians have justified horrendous evils such as slavery, colonialism, crusades against their enemies, and the disempowerment of women.

Perhaps Jesus provides a model to follow. When the Pharisees observe that scripture allows a husband to rather easily divorce the wife he has grown tired of, Jesus makes the radical declaration that the law of Deuteronomy 24:1–4 does not reflect God's will but is rather a concession to human sinfulness (Mark 10:2–9). Jesus then points to the creation story to assert that in marriage, God joins a man and woman together as one flesh, and therefore marriage ought to be a permanent union. Jesus evaluates how the biblical story is told, recognizing that the Bible speaks with more than one voice on some issues. He remains deeply committed to and rooted in the biblical story, while still acknowledging that some parts of it reflect the limitations of our sinful human condition.

How we tell the story shapes the actions that flow from it. The story of the book of Joshua is so troubling because it encourages God's people to wage holy war against their enemies and to commit genocide and ethnic cleansing. European colonial powers were inspired by the book of Joshua to slaughter and dispossess indigenous peoples around the world. Several texts in Deuteronomy suggest a different way of telling the story of deliverance. These passages encourage the Israelites to remember their suffering as slaves in Egypt and to tell this story in such a way that it makes them more compassionate towards the suffering and vulnerable people in their own midst (5:14–15; 24:17–18, 21–22).

mean for Christians facing persecution, natural disasters, or the devastation of war?

I have a strong personal interest in the meaning of such passages. Our middle son, Tim, was born two months prematurely. He had breathing problems, severe food allergies, and significant physical handicaps. After an extremely difficult first two years, Tim was able to overcome many of these problems, but when he was three he became very ill with a brain tumor which required surgery, radiation treatments, and chemotherapy.

A year later, just when Tim was getting over the painful effects of the chemotherapy, there was bleeding in his brain. As a result of further surgery Tim suffered a stroke which robbed him of his vision and many of his physical and mental abilities. Despite all these health struggles, Tim was a delightful child who radiated much love and joy. Tim's cancer was in remission for five years, but then it returned very suddenly and he died a month later. In such a context, what do the assurances of God's care found in Psalm 121 mean?

During these difficult years, I believe that I did discover some of what passages like Psalm 121 can mean for us. One time during the six-week period when the radiation treatments were making Tim sicker and sicker each day, I was sitting in the hospital cafeteria. I sensed God's presence with me, and an overwhelming assurance came over me that God would always be near me and near our family, no matter what would happen. I was not promised that things would always turn out well, but I was assured that God would always be with us. That assurance has been with me ever since, and has sustained me through years of pain and grief.

As Christians, we should walk a fine line between promising each other too much of God's protective care and presence and promising each other too little. In my childhood and teen years,

## **Our Anxiety**

In changing and challenging times, we are anxious about the future. Despite (or perhaps because of) a level of wealth and technological expertise never experienced before, our western world is deeply anxious. We wonder what the future holds for us personally, or for those persons whom we love, or for those causes and institutions that we hold dear. We worry about such things as economic collapse, political turmoil, terrorism, and environmental devastation, all of which are very real dangers. The advertizing industry, military-industrial complex, and certain political powers stoke our anxiety, in order to convince us that we absolutely require the services they offer. Our society teaches that the way to deal with anxiety is to hunker down, hoard wealth and resources, increase military capacities, and look out for ourselves and our families, or at most our own country and local communities. But even as we do so we join in, and through our own selfishness and folly impose all kinds of anxiety on others, as well as on ourselves.

In contrast, the Bible teaches that true peace and security come from a deep trust and rootedness in God.

## **The LORD Will Keep You from All Harm**

What do the words of a psalm like 121 mean for us? Do the words of verse 7 for example, “The LORD will keep you from all harm” (the NIV translation best captures the original Hebrew here), mean that God will prevent any great calamity from ever striking us? This is how some Christians interpret biblical texts like this. Every Sunday, TV preachers promise me health, wealth, and prosperity if I but trust God (and them), and if I phone in to receive my “holy anointing water” or “green prosperity prayer handkerchief.” But do passages like Psalm 121 really mean that neither we nor our loved ones will ever die in a car crash, or be struck down by cancer? What do such words

## **Whose Story Is It Anyway?**

Joshua tells the story of the Israelites in a very particular way, so that it focuses on God and God’s saving actions. “I [God] took your father Abraham . . .,” “I sent Moses and Aaron . . .,” “I brought your ancestors out of Egypt . . .,” “I gave you a land . . .,” and so on. The story is really God’s story, and only secondarily is it about us human beings.

The early chapters of Genesis highlight how human sin and disobedience infect and damage God’s good creation. In response to this tragic history, God calls Abraham and Sarah to become the ancestors of a new people who will receive God’s salvation, and also the gift of God’s revelation so that they will know how to live in keeping with this salvation. God never stops caring for all of humanity and creation, but God’s strategy becomes to call forth a chosen people through whom God can grant blessing and salvation to all the peoples of the earth (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).

In the New Testament, God sends Jesus Christ to propel this saving project forward, and to invite all the peoples of the world into the new being-saved community that lives out of the story (Galatians 3:8, 14). Therefore, faithful telling of the story keeps God and God’s grand project at the center, and reminds us that God’s involvement and saving actions in our personal lives and in the life of the church are not just for our own benefit, but are intended to move forward God’s much bigger project to save all of humanity and even all of creation (Romans 8:19–23).

Another crucial reason to keep God at the center of the story is because we are so easily tempted to assume that the story depends primarily on our human efforts. Paul Scott Wilson is critical of much contemporary preaching because it focuses too much on what is wrong with us and the world and what we human beings must do to fix it, and in the process leaves us to

our own human resources.<sup>2</sup> Wilson asserts that God and God's saving actions ought to be at the heart of preaching, and that half of every sermon should deal with God's saving actions, as depicted in the biblical text as well as God's corresponding saving actions in our contemporary world. Wilson believes that the fundamental truth we ought to preach is that what God demands of us and we are not able to provide, God provides through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Living peacefully, pursuing justice, sharing our resources, and all the other aspects of discipleship are essential to the Christian life, but they do not begin with human effort. Discipleship represents our getting on board with and responding to God's redeeming and restoring activity in the world. The empowerment necessary to transform us into faithful disciples flows from the proclamation and embrace of God's redemptive activity, more so than it flows from exhortations to believe more firmly, love more deeply, and pursue peace and justice more energetically, all of which we should do. Keeping God at the center of the story points us to the source of our salvation and empowerment.

Because Joshua lived early on in Israelite history, he could summarize the story in twelve verses. For us the story has become much longer. We have to add the rest of the Old Testament story, and then the story of Jesus and the early church. Then there is the ongoing story of the church now stretching into the third millennium, including the story of our Mennonite people with its many sub-plots. As we live in changing times with all their potential and promise, and all their unknowns and dangers, we can do so looking back to the long story of God and God's people. This story can form and shape us, admonish and challenge us, empower us by pointing us to the

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<sup>2</sup> See especially his two books *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), and *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).

## Session 5

# Nothing Can Separate Us . . .

*Focus statement: No matter what crises we face either individually or collectively, the Bible assures us that there is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.*

### Worship Resources

HWB 663, 686, 696, 730, 737, 745, 768;  
STS 129; STJ 144

### Gathering Hymns

HWB 5 *There is a place of quiet rest*  
HWB 65 *Praise, my soul, the King of heaven!*  
HWB 42 *All people that on earth do dwell*

### Scripture Reading: Psalm 121

Ask members of the group to become quiet, take a few deep breaths, and focus on God.

Read Psalm 121 in the same meditative way as suggested for Psalm 103 in the beginning of chapter 2.

## Closing Prayer

God of new life and hope,  
we thank you that you have given us a new hope in  
Jesus Christ.  
Grant us strength, wisdom, and courage  
to live faithfully with the realities of our lives.  
Help us never to forget that present realities are not  
ultimate realities.

Fill us with your hope,  
Root us in your saving work through Jesus Christ.  
Empower us for living in your new reality  
in Jesus Christ,  
now and forevermore. Amen.

## Sending Hymns

HWB 343 *My hope is built on nothing less*  
STJ 78 *Sizohamba naye (We will walk with God)*

source of our salvation, and it can keep us rooted even in times when the world may seem to be coming apart at the seams.

## “Choose This Day Whom You Will Serve”

In the Bible, the story of God’s people is never told simply for the sake of providing historical information. The story is told in such a way as to invite commitment to the story and participation in it. After reading the book of Exodus, for example, the hoped for response is not, “Isn’t this an interesting story of how a band of slaves escaped from Egypt?” Rather, the hoped for response is, “Wow, what an amazing story of God’s compassion and deliverance. I want to commit my life to this God and join the community of faith that worships and serves this God.”

## Scripture Reading: Joshua 24:14–15

After you have heard the story, you cannot be neutral. You have to decide whom you will serve. Will it be the God, of whom the story speaks, or the gods your ancestors worshipped beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites (Canaanites) among whom you now live? Joshua realizes that the Israelites will be tempted to worship the gods that have been part of their past experience, as well as the gods they will come to know in the new land. Therefore, Joshua admonishes the people to go into the future absolutely clear about whom they will serve.

Sorting out allegiances is a task God’s people face in any time and place. We, too, are tempted to serve gods other than the God of the Bible. Some of these gods may be structures, traditions, and ways of doing things from our past. Some of these gods may be the values, causes, and loyalties worshipped by our society. We face an ongoing temptation to value and pledge allegiance to causes that are of less than ultimate significance. In

changing times we are called to sort out our loyalties so that we can be more totally devoted to the God who is doing new things in our day. Then we can face changes and challenges knowing what we are committed to, and even more importantly, knowing whom we are committed to.

### “We Also Will Serve the LORD”

Becoming part of the story of what God is doing on earth, and choosing whom we will serve, naturally leads to covenant making.

### Scripture Reading: Joshua 24:16–18, 25–28

Joshua helps the Israelites make a solemn covenant with God (24:25–26). Over and over the Bible portrays God as a covenant-making God, as a God who wants to have an intimate relationship with a particular group of people. In turn, God’s people are called to be a covenant-making and a covenant-keeping people. We and God are firmly bound to each other. That doesn’t mean that things will always turn out well. In the book of Judges which follows the book of Joshua, the Israelite story is characterized by unfaithfulness and recurring disasters. However, renewal is always possible because God and Israel are firmly bound to each other by covenant.

We can go forward into changing times looking backward, rooted in a long story of faith and God’s saving and guiding actions. We face change as a people who seek to tell our story faithfully, sorting out our loyalties and commitments. We go forward as a covenanting people, confident in the new covenant we have in Jesus Christ, knowing that there is nothing in all of creation that “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). (For more discussion of this last point see chapter five.)

### Entering into Prayer

To begin and end your prayer time, sing one of the following short Hymns HWB 353 *Lord, listen to your children*, HWB 348 *O Lord, hear my prayer*, or HWB 358 *Oyenos, mi Dios*. These songs consist of musical prayer phrases that are good to sing at least three times, once with an intentional awareness of each person of the Trinity.

Begin the spoken part of your prayers with a meditative rereading of Jeremiah 29: 4-7 and 32:6– 15, as described in the beginning of session 2.

The prayers for this session could again be verbal, silent, or a combination of the two. See the instructions for prayer in chapter one.

- Begin by thanking God for the hope that we have in Jesus Christ, and for the healing and redemption that we experience in him.
- Invite people to silently name and bring to God some of the painful realities which they live with.
- Confess some of the sinful realities of our world and our lives that God calls us to repent of.
- Ask for strength and guidance as we seek to build homes, plant gardens, raise families, nurture relationships, and promote the welfare of our communities, amidst these realities.
- Ask God to empower us for buying fields of promise and for living in the hope that we have in Jesus Christ.
- Pray that we might avoid the temptation to rely on our own human efforts but instead remain rooted in God’s saving work through Jesus Christ.



1. What painful or difficult realities is God calling you to personally live with and make the best of? What realities is God calling your congregation and the Mennonite Church as a whole to live with?
2. How do we distinguish between realities which we are simply called to accept, and realities which we are called to resist because they are not in keeping with God's reign? What are some realities that we Christians have too easily made peace with?
3. In discussions around lifestyle and discipleship, we often place all the emphasis on what we humans must do; forgetting that relying on our own human resources is a recipe for disaster. How can we remain centered on hope and on God's work through Jesus Christ as the source of our healing, empowerment, and discipleship?
4. What does it mean for us as individuals and as a church to build homes, plant gardens, raise families, and seek the welfare of our communities, in the midst of the painful realities which confront us? What are some concrete ways that we as a church and as individuals can live on the basis of God's new reality in Jesus Christ, even within the limitations of the old reality?
5. What fields of hope and promise should we as individuals, as congregations, and as a denomination be buying? Are we sometimes called to invest in symbolic actions of hope that may have few tangible results, or should we devote all our energies to kingdom work that will yield practical results?
6. "Because Jesus Christ frees us from bondage to the sinful and painful realities of the present, we can proclaim the good news, feed the hungry, work for justice, promote peace, and care for God's creation, even when we know there may be little chance of earthly success." How do you respond to this affirmation?

## Hymns

HWB 398 *I love to tell the story*

HWB 582 *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah*

HWB 163 *Obey my voice*

STS 89 *Christ is alive*

STJ 35 *O Breath of Life*

## Questions for Discussion

*Depending on the time you have allotted for this session, select the questions that are most important for your context, and that best prepare you for the prayer time that follows the discussion.*

1. What changes do you see happening in the church, in society, and in the broader world, which hold much promise? What changes do you believe pose great danger?
2. What are some of the ways in which the Christian story shapes the identity of the church? What happens when the church holds too strongly to its story, or to a particular version of its story?
3. How do we tell the biblical story, the 2,000 year story of the church, and the story of God's Mennonite people so that it renews, inspires, and welcomes newcomers, while also confessing some of the dark moments that are part of the story?
4. How do we tell the biblical story and the story of the church keeping God and God's activity at the center? How do divine and human initiative and actions interact in the story?
5. When have you heard the story of God's people told in a healthy way that invited others to make a commitment and join the story? Conversely, when have you heard the story of God's people told too narrowly or with a perspective that is too limited? Whom do we tend to leave out in our telling of the story?

6. How does the story of God's people shape, challenge, and empower you?
7. How do you react to the suggestion that even the biblical story needs to be read critically? Are there particular biblical texts that you think reflect the limitations of our sinful human condition?

### Entering into Prayer

To begin and end your prayer time, sing one of the following short Hymns HWB 353 *Lord, listen to your children*, HWB 348 *O Lord, hear my prayer*, or HWB 358 *Oyenos, mi Dios*. These songs consist of musical prayer phrases that are good to sing at least three times, once with an intentional awareness of each person of the Trinity.

Reread Joshua 24: 14-15 slowly, and meditatively, inviting people to receive it prayerfully, before moving on to more personal prayers.

The outline below provides a guide for spoken and/or silent prayer. If the group will be praying silently, explain that you will be suggesting a series of things to pray about, allowing time after each item for silent prayer. Begin the prayer with a few sentences of praise and thanksgiving to God, and then invite people to pray about the following.

the new eon. God's reign is a kingdom of righteousness, peace, and justice and so as people of hope we pursue those things that make for peace and justice, even when we know that our efforts may have limited impact on the principalities and powers. In God's new eon there is food and drink for all, and so as people of hope we do what we can to feed the hungry, even though we know that there will always be more empty stomachs than we can fill.

In changing and challenging times, our hope is rooted in what God has done through Jesus Christ, what God continues to do through Jesus Christ, and what God will do some day through Jesus Christ. Such hope empowers us to accept painful realities; whether these are realities we cannot change or are realities we need to repent of. Such hope empowers us to buy fields of promise and to build for God's life-giving reign. Such hope empowers us to live faithfully in times of pain, struggle, and disappointment. Even when death waits at the door, we live by hope because we know that what God accomplishes through Jesus Christ is not confined to the bounds of this present existence.

### Hymns

HWB 323 *Beyond a dying sun*

HWB 66 *O worship the King*

STS 108 *View the present*

STS 124 *My soul cries out*

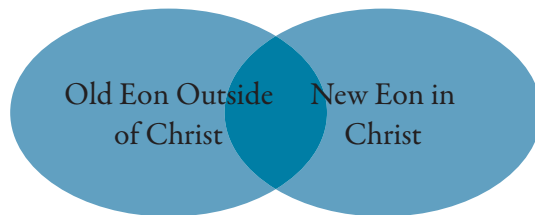
STS 121 *Nothing is lost on the breath of God*

### Questions for Discussion

*Depending on the time you have allotted for this session, select the questions that are most important for your context, and that best prepare you for the prayer time that follows the discussion.*

work to free humanity and the rest of creation from bondage to sin, death, and decay. God's decisive intervention came when Jesus Christ inaugurated the kingdom or reign of God, thereby unleashing the redeeming power of God into our world and initiating God's intervention to renew and heal creation. Therefore, followers of Jesus embrace and experience God's salvation now, even though the fullness of salvation awaits God's final intervention.

The diagram below illustrates the New Testament worldview. The old age/eon/reality is outside the realm of Christ and here the powers of sin and death still hold sway. But because Jesus Christ has initiated the Kingdom of God here on earth, the new age/eon/reality of God's peace, justice, healing, and shalom has broken into our world. God is already at work to establish divine rule over the creation that rightly belongs to God. Some day Christ will return to complete the ministry he began at his first coming and then he will complete his defeat of the destructive powers. The new eon will expand to encompass the old, and only one reality will be left standing (1 Corinthians 15:24–28).



As followers of Jesus, we live in the overlap between the two eons. Christ has delivered us from the painful and sinful realities of the old eon and yet we still live within their midst, subject to many of their limitations. But we also live within the realm of Christ, and our identity is shaped by this new eon. To be people of hope means to live within the old realities on the basis of the new reality in Christ. We must accept certain realities of the old eon, but as people of hope, our primary identity is shaped by

Thank God for the positive changes happening in:

- Our personal lives
- The lives of people we know
- Our congregation and denomination
- Our community and our country
- The larger world

Acknowledge some of the changes people are anxious about, changes in:

- Our personal lives (e.g.: aging, job security, health)
- The lives of people we know
- Our congregation and denomination
- Our community and country
- The larger world (e.g.: economic turmoil, ethnic intolerance, environmental devastation, war, unrestricted technology)

Ask God to:

- Guide change in positive directions
- For wisdom and guidance to deal with change in healthy ways
- For determination to keep God at the center of our story

Thank God for our Christian faith which gives us strength, courage, and confidence when we face changes and challenges.

## Closing Prayer

Dear God of long-range plans and purposes,  
who redeems us and frees us  
from the powers that seek to bind us,  
we thank you for delivering us  
and inviting us to join  
the long story of your people.  
May that story guide us,  
inspire us,  
admonish us,  
renew us,  
and empower us in an ongoing way.

May we learn to tell the story in such a way  
that others will also come to know you.  
Empower us, O God,  
to leave behind those things  
that prevent us from being loyal to you.

Help us to live confidently,  
without fear and anxiety,  
as your covenant people  
in these changing and challenging times. Amen.

## Sending Hymns

HWB 328 *O God, our help in ages past*

HWB 425 *Come, come ye saints*

HWB 546 *Guide my feet*

STJ 73 *The Lord lift you up*

## A Living Hope

The letter of 1 Peter was written to Christians experiencing persecution, yet its author can declare that God has, “given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3). Christian hope is not quite the same as optimism. Optimism involves looking on the bright side of things and believing that matters will turn out well. Optimism is valuable and important, but in the face of persecution, or natural disaster, or terminal illness, or when our collective human sin leads to catastrophe, we can hardly be optimistic that everything will turn out well. In such situations we need Christian hope.

When our present reality consists of pain, suffering, or deep anxiety, it is difficult not to let that pain and suffering and anxiety overwhelm us and take control of our lives. To be people of hope means to open our lives to a different reality, the power of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. This is what it means to say that God has, “given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

Christian hope does not mean believing that all our pain or trouble or all the troubles of the world will disappear. The writer of 1 Peter certainly did not expect that life would suddenly turn rosy for his readers. Christian hope means being able to look beyond pain, suffering, and sin to what God has done and continues to do through Jesus Christ. Christian hope means being rooted in the grace and love of Jesus Christ, so that we live our lives, not on the basis of old realities, as persistent and painful as these may be, but live our lives on the basis of the new reality as revealed and inaugurated by Jesus Christ.

According to the biblical worldview God created the world good, but sin entered the picture and became a horrendously destructive power (Genesis 3). Ever since, God has been at

confessing the sin that we are a part of, letting go of a destructive worldview and way of life, and reorienting our lives.

### **Buying Fields of Promise**

Accepting reality is only part of the story. As God's people, our lives are not determined only by the realities of this world. We are people of hope, especially in difficult and changing times. Several years after Jeremiah wrote his letter, Judah rebelled and the Babylonian army besieged Jerusalem. Jeremiah was thrown into jail for announcing that the city would be captured and destroyed (32:1–5). While he was in prison, his cousin Hanamel came and asked if Jeremiah would buy a plot of land in the family's hometown village of Anathoth, a small community just a few kilometers north of Jerusalem.

### **Scripture Reading:** Jeremiah 32:6–15

At this point, Anathoth was behind Babylonian army lines, and so we can imagine what real estate values were like there. But Jeremiah bought that piece of land, not as an investment for his retirement, but as a sign of God's promise that "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (32:15). Some day God would make a new beginning, bringing an end to the devastation and pain of the present.

During the darkest moment of his people's history, Jeremiah dared to believe in God's promise and live by hope, because he knew that present realities are not ultimate realities. There is another power at work in this world besides the painful realities of the present, and that is the healing power of God. Therefore, our actions need not be determined only by the realities of the present. We are a resurrection people, empowered by a vision of God's salvation to buy fields of promise.

## **Session 2**

# Bless the LORD, O My Soul

*Focus statement: One of the most important things we as a church do in any time and place is to offer our joyous and heartfelt praise to God.*

### **Worship Resources**

HWB 662, 670, 680, 684, 721, 821 (Psalm 100);  
STS 138; STJ 125

### **Gathering Hymns**

HWB 51 *Let the whole creation cry*  
HWB 46 *I sing the mighty power of God*  
HWB 37 *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty*  
HWB 22 *Lord Jesus Christ, be present now*

### **Meditative Scripture Reading**

There are many ways to read and use scripture passages. Psalm 103 lends itself well to the kind of meditative reading

suggested by Henri Nouwen. A biblical text can be read slowly, meditatively, even repetitively, leaving periods of silence between verses or sections. “The simple words ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ can be spoken quietly and persistently in such a way that they become like a hedge around a garden in which God’s shepherding can be sensed.” “Thus, the words ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ leads us to the silent pastures where we can dwell in the loving presence of him in whose Name the preacher speaks.”<sup>3</sup> It is critical that the leader practice reading the text out loud many times and absorb its content so that she/he can read the passage in a way that embodies and communicates the reality to which the text points. Because Psalm 103 is somewhat long and because we often experience a biblical text more powerfully if we hear it in different voices, I suggest that two persons read alternating sections, vv. 1–5, 6–14, 15–19, 20–22.

Ask members of the group to become quiet and take a few deep breaths. As they do so, invite them to focus on God and leave behind for the next moments the cares and concerns which they have brought with them, not because these concerns are unimportant, but only because for the next while we want to focus on God. Read Psalm 103 as suggested above, and invite people to let the words of the psalm wash over them and penetrate to the core of their being.

### **Introducing the Theme**

Psalm 103 became one of my favorite psalms more than thirty years ago when I studied Hebrew with Charlie Newcombe. Charlie had just had a brain tumor removed, and then undergone an aggressive round of radiation treatments, all of which took their toll on Charlie’s brain. Afterwards he was never quite as sharp as he had once been, and his mind tended to wander.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), p. 61.

Claiming that natural or human disasters are a result of human sin is always dangerous business, and I would hesitate to oversimplify history by saying, like Jeremiah did, that the destruction of Judah was a result of its sin. But surely prophets like Jeremiah are not entirely wrong when they see a connection between human sin and nasty consequences.

The ecological disaster in the Gulf of Mexico and many other forms of environmental destruction are a direct consequence of the lifestyles we choose to lead— our overconsumption of resources, the kinds of vehicles we drive, the recreation we engage in (motorboats, snowmobiles, air travel to exotic vacation sites), and the wasteful way in which we produce and dispose of goods. The false prophets of our time tell us that our sins are not serious and that we can carry on with the capitalist consumerist lifestyle as usual, just like the false prophets of Jeremiah’s time told their people that all was well and there was no need to repent. Jeremiah accused these prophets of announcing shalom (well-being) when there was no shalom, thereby deluding the people and intensifying the complacency that was leading to catastrophe (6:14; 23:16–17).

Jeremiah announced that the old way of life was bankrupt, mincing no words in diagnosing his people’s sins and declaring that the only way to avoid calamity was radical conversion to a new way of life (7:1–15; 26:1–19). When disaster struck, Jeremiah said that the people must let go of the old way of life, accept exile as divine judgment, and use the time there to seek God and repent (29:12–14). Accepting reality involved conversion to a radically different form of life.

We are called to accept and make the best of the challenging realities of our lives. In some cases this will involve living faithful and healthy lives in the midst of difficult and painful realities that we cannot change. In other cases, accepting reality means

building houses, planting gardens, raising families, and seeking the welfare of the broader community.

In any time and place, it is the calling of God's people to be realistic about their situation. We, too, are called to build homes, plant gardens, raise families, and seek the welfare of our communities. Even when circumstances are not to our liking, we are called to carry on with the everyday mundane tasks of human existence that make a healthy life and a healthy society possible.

As a Christian community, we live with much pain and brokenness. Some of us struggle with physical or mental illness or chronic pain, some of us carry a deep woundedness from painful experiences of the past, some of us are grieving, some of us are lonely, and some of us agonize over broken relationships. Our context is somewhat different than Jeremiah's because we would not necessarily say that our struggles are a result of God's judgment. Still, we do experience painful realities, and we don't do God, or ourselves, or anyone else a favour by denying these realities. It is precisely in the midst of painful realities that God calls us to build homes, plant gardens, nurture relationships, and seek the welfare of our communities. We sometimes think that God's work in this world requires grandiose actions, and perhaps sometimes it does, but most of us are pretty ordinary people with pretty ordinary lives. To carry out the simple everyday tasks and chores that sustain life, nurture relationships, and build healthy communities, is a divine calling that contributes significantly to God's purposes for the world.

Some painful realities are not of our own making and must simply be accepted, but others are sinful and ought never to be accepted. Sometimes being realistic about our situation requires confession and deep soul searching. As I write these words, thousands of barrels of oil a day are spewing into the Gulf of Mexico after an explosion destroyed a drilling platform.

Once a week several of us met at Charlie's house and tried to keep his mind on track so that we could go over our Hebrew translations for the week. One evening, on one of his tangents, Charlie took us to Psalm 103, and he talked about how this psalm had brought him strength and comfort during the darkest moments of his illness. And then he read part of the psalm for us, with a passion and engagement that could only have come from someone who had allowed the words of the psalm to penetrate to the core of his being and do their work there. Psalm 103 helped Charlie face his cancer, and eventually it helped him to die. I have never heard Psalm 103 in the same way again, and for this gift I am profoundly grateful to Charlie.

In his hour of need, Charlie Newcombe found strength in a hymn of praise. Psalm 103 begins with a self-exhortation to praise God (vv.1–2), and then it provides a long list of reasons why God is worthy of praise (vv. 3–19). It closes by calling all of creation to join the psalmist in praising God (vv. 21–22). How can praise help someone face cancer, and even death?

Psalm 103 provides an opportunity to reflect on four reasons why praise is a foundational Christian practice, and how praise can help us face the challenges of life.

### **Praise Reminds Us of God Our Creator and Sustainer**

A first reason we praise God is simply because God is God. God is our Creator and Sustainer and therefore God is ever worthy of our praise. God has created this unbelievably vast, and complex, and magnificent universe, and God continues to rule over and sustain this universe in far more ways than our limited human minds will ever grasp. In the words of the psalm, "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" (v. 19). God has created us human beings, in the very image of God, and God has initiated the story of salvation to free us and all of creation from the destructive powers of sin and

death. God showers us with love and grace in far more ways than we can count. And so we praise God as a way to acknowledge that God is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

The flip side to such praise is that in the same process we acknowledge that we are God's creatures, beloved and cherished creatures, but creatures nonetheless. In our contemporary world, humanity so often usurps those things that belong to God and thinks of itself as being the center of creation. Praising God as Creator, and in that process acknowledging our creatureliness, can be a radical counter-cultural practice. We human beings are not free to impose our moral order on the world. We are but creatures and so our calling is to live by the moral order created and revealed by our Creator. We human beings are not free to do whatever we wish with the rest of God's good creation. We are but creatures. We human beings are not free to take human life, either born or unborn. Human life is a precious gift of the Creator and so it is not ours to take.

To praise God simply because God is God, our Creator and Sustainer, and in this process to acknowledge our creatureliness, is a foundational Christian practice whereby we acknowledge who God is and who we are in relation to God.

### **Praise Is Remembering God**

A second reason we praise is simply because praise is a form of remembering God. "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and **do not forget** all his benefits" (v. 2). As Claus Westermann comments, "only those who praise do not forget." "Forgetting God and turning away from God always begins when praise has been silenced."<sup>4</sup> Lively and energetic praise turns us towards God and is the antidote to forgetting. Such praise reminds us of who God is, of what God has done for us, and of our need for God. Much

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<sup>4</sup> Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), p. 6.

marked by sin and suffering, but we are a resurrection people who live in this broken world with the hope that the painful realities we see around us are not ultimate realities.

### **Accepting Reality**

Jeremiah was a prophet during the darkest period of his people's history. He witnessed the nation of Judah reduced to a tiny state dominated by the hated Babylonians. When Judah revolted, the Babylonian troops swept through the land destroying all the major towns and besieging Jerusalem until their battering rams finally smashed through the walls. The Babylonians looted and murdered, leveled Jerusalem's walls, temple, and buildings, and sent several thousand people off to exile.

Some ten years before this final disaster, a smaller group of Jews had already been dragged to Babylon. Despite this setback, many of Jeremiah's contemporaries were convinced that God would soon intervene to destroy Babylon and allow the exiles to return home. Jeremiah proclaimed that the exile represented God's judgment on the nation for its worship of false gods, injustice and oppression, and its refusal to live by God's guidelines. The painful conditions of the present were going to persist for a long time and so the exiles must accept their situation. On one occasion, Jeremiah sent them a letter with the following advice.

### **Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 29:4–7**

(For the entire account read 29:1–14)

Other prophets were declaring that the exiles would soon be returning home (see 28:1–4; 29:8–9), and some of these exiles did not want to unpack their suitcases. Jeremiah told them to be realistic and accept their situation. Their divine calling at this point in time was to settle in for a long stay in Babylon by





## Session 4

# Living Between Reality and Hope

*Focus statement: Our calling is to live between acceptance of some of the painful realities of life, and the hope we have that with God new things are possible.*

### Worship Resources

HWB 670, 673, 711; STS 137, 169; STJ 158, 159

### Gathering Hymns

HWB 36 *God of our strength*

HWB 59 *Sing praise to God who reigns*

STJ 9 *Come, now is the time to worship*

### Introducing the Theme

In changing and challenging times, Christians are called to live between the realities of this world, as painful as they sometimes are, and our hope that with God new things are possible for us and the world. We live within the limitations of a world deeply

of Psalm 103 consists of precisely this kind of remembering. It may be helpful to re-read selected verses of the psalm as you invite people to close their eyes, listen, and “remember” the reality to which the words testify.

As we face a world that may at times seem like it is spiraling out of control, praise is a way to remember and become rooted in the reality and grace of God.

### Praise Can Be an Act of Defiance

Praise can be an act of defiance whereby we affirm and nurture our faith even in the midst of deep suffering. At the funeral of Robin Jutzi, who died of cystic fibrosis at the age of forty, we joined family members at the gravesite as they said their final farewell. The family asked us to sing “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” not the modest version we sometimes sing as table grace, but the grandiose version affectionately known by many Mennonites as 606 (HWB 118). This was praise as defiance. In the face of enormous pain, the Jutzi family wanted to declare and cling to their faith in a God from whom all blessings flow.

Praise can be a declaration whereby we look the horrendous evil, sin, suffering, and pain of this world straight in the face and acknowledge that these things are real and they hurt all too deeply, but they will not destroy our faith in “the steadfast love of the LORD [which] is from everlasting to everlasting” (v. 17). I think that this is how Charlie Newcombe had come to experience Psalm 103. Charlie had been through a very difficult life experience and I suspect he knew that his days on earth were numbered, and yet he could proclaim with deep conviction,

Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and do not forget all his benefits—  
who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the Pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, ... (vv. 2–3)

But we must be careful with such praise, because praise in the face of suffering and evil can easily become denial. If all we do during difficult times is praise, then our faith becomes “God is great and good and isn’t life wonderful.” But life is far from wonderful for many people, and we must never minimize the pain and suffering which life dishes out to so many people.

Many of the psalms are hymns of praise, but even more are laments, prayers for deliverance from life’s troubles.<sup>5</sup> These lament psalms recognize that life can be full of struggle, and that horrible things sometimes happen to good people. We need lament to keep our faith realistic and to prevent our praise from becoming denial.

When George died rather suddenly at the age of seventy-five, the minister had a smile on his face throughout the funeral service and kept reassuring us and the family that there was no need to be sad. George was a good Christian man and he had now gone home to be with his Maker. I needed no convincing that George had gone home to be with his Maker, but that meant he wasn’t going home with Mary anymore. That evening

## Sending Hymns

HWB 226 *You are salt for the earth*

HWB 420 *Heart with loving heart united*

STS 40 *Som’landela (We will follow)*

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<sup>5</sup> For some examples see Psalms 10, 13, 22, 42, 55, 69, 70, 79, 88, and 129. Spending time with these lament psalms could form the focus of an additional session of study and prayer. If you choose to do so, read Psalm 55:1–8 meditatively. Then allow opportunity for people to share in a few brief words things they want to lament. If the group is large or people do not feel free to voice their laments, invite people into a period of silence during which they bring to God their own pain and sorrow and the sorrows of the larger world. Close with the prayer on page 26 or compose your own.

- Today's prayer could again be verbal, silent, or a combination of the two. See the instructions for prayer in chapter one.
- Begin by thanking God for sending Jesus to defeat the powers of this world that oppress and enslave
- Thank God for the salvation that we have experienced
- Pray for a stronger desire to be totally committed to God
- Pray for individual Christians and churches who are paying a high price for resisting
- Pray for greater courage and strength on our part to resist evil
- Pray for wisdom to discern when and how we ought to resist

### Closing Prayer

Gracious God,  
 Creator, Sustainer, and Sovereign Lord of this world,  
 we thank you for the inspiring stories of faithful resistance  
 in the Bible and the history of the church.

Grant us a deeper commitment  
 and desire to be faithful to you in all things.  
 Grant us the courage of the Hebrew midwives and the  
 early apostles.

Inspire us with a vision of your reign  
 of peace  
 and justice  
 and righteousness,  
 so that we might be faithful to you  
 in these changing and challenging times. Amen.

when she went home, the house that she and George had shared for more than fifty years was going to be big and lonely, the bed cold and empty. There lay the pain that cried out in vain for some kind of acknowledgment. This funeral had an abundance of praise, but the praise was shallow, lacked integrity, and functioned as denial, because it was not balanced by lament.

Praise as defiance is very different. Defiant praise acknowledges the deep suffering and pain of this world but reminds us that evil and suffering are not the ultimate realities of this world. God's steadfast love of which Psalm 103 speaks is the ultimate reality. Praise reminds us that God's steadfast love is strong enough to carry us through life's difficult experiences, strong enough to empower us for faithful discipleship even in the face of persecution, and strong enough to carry us from this life into the next. Defiant praise reminds us that evil and suffering will not have the last word, but some day God's reign will come in all its fullness and God will renew all of creation (see Psalm 96:10–13; 98:7–9; Revelation 21:1–4).

### Praise Connects Us with God

Claus Westermann observes, "The secret of praise is its ability to make contact with God; through praise one remains with God."<sup>6</sup> Intuitively we recognize and experience that praise connects us with God, and that is one of the reasons why praise is so central to our worship and our Christian life. One of the mysteries of worship is that praise may help us experience some of the love, grace, and power of God that we celebrate in our praise. This is one reason why the kind of meditative reading of Psalm 103, suggested at the beginning of this chapter, can be so powerful.

Stumbling upon Westermann's statement helped me to understand a significant experience in my own life. A number

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<sup>6</sup> *The Psalms*, p. 6.

of years ago our eight-year old son, Tim, died of cancer. During the last month of his life Tim was unconscious and so Esther and I took turns keeping watch by his bed waiting for the inevitable. To fill the time I worked my way through the hymnal, singing all the hymns that I knew. I began to notice something that I thought was quite odd. It was the hymns of praise that spoke most meaningfully to me and that I sang over and over. I remember one time how the tears were streaming down my cheeks as I sang “Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices.” I remember feeling guilty and wondering if I was going crazy. How could I sing hymns of praise while I was watching Tim die?

Praise puts us in touch with God, and this connection is precisely what I needed during that painful period in my life. I needed to open myself to God and experience God’s love and grace and strength surrounding and sustaining me. Those hymns of praise were doing their work on me even though I was not consciously aware of how they were impacting me.

Tom Long uses the analogy of parents reassuring an anxious child who is headed off to kindergarten for the first time.<sup>7</sup> “You will be fine at school; your teacher will care for you; Mommy or Daddy will pick you up.” Such parental assurances create a world of trust in which a child can live in security and confidence. “Mom and Dad will always love me. They will never abandon me. I am of infinite worth to them.” Similarly, our words of praise create a sturdy world in which God is present and can be trusted, a sturdy world in which we ever abide in God’s care, no matter what storms of life may rage around us.

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (The Practice of Faith Series; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 10–11.

3. What are some of the oppressive features of our society, of our institutions, and even of our churches, that we should be resisting?
4. Are there areas where the church is resisting in which we should be more accommodating? What are some contemporary examples where the world has some things to teach the church?
5. What stories of resistance from the Bible, church history, or modern times, inspire and motivate you?
6. How do you respond to the suggestion that our expectations for church members are too low and that such low expectations contribute to the decline of the church?
7. In the name of obedience to God, some Christians have resisted by: damaging military equipment, harboring escaped slaves, evangelizing and printing Bibles illegally, refusing to pay that percentage of their income tax which is devoted to the military, hiding Jews from the Nazis, or sheltering refugees whom our government wishes to deport. At what points should our Christian resistance lead us to disobey laws or political authorities?

### Entering into Prayer

To begin and end your prayer time, sing one of the following short Hymns HWB 353 Lord, listen to your children, HWB 348 O Lord, hear my prayer, or HWB 358 Oyenos, mi Dios. These songs consist of musical prayer phrases that are good to sing at least three times, once with an intentional awareness of each person of the Trinity.

- Begin the spoken part of your prayers with a meditative rereading of Acts 4:23-30, as described in the beginning of session 2.

feeble than courageous. We are always in the process of being saved by God's gracious actions through Jesus Christ.

As we seek to embrace Paul's challenge, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2), we remember that we are ever a "being-saved" community. And so we live in hope and confidence that what God demands of us and we are not able to provide, God provides through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### Hymns

HWB 366 *God of grace and God of glory*  
HWB 535 *Who now would follow Christ*  
HWB 401 *This little light of mine*  
HWB 374 *O young and fearless prophet*  
HWB 580 *My life flows on*  
STS 39 *Will you come and follow me*  
STS 81 *When we are tempted*

### Questions for Discussion

*Depending on the time you have allotted for this session, select the questions that are most important for your context, and that best prepare you for the prayer time that follows the discussion.*

1. What are some ways in which we as a church can nurture a healthy and discerning spirit of resistance?
2. How can we open ourselves to the transforming power and grace of Christ, so that we have both the discernment and strength necessary to resist? How can we frame our resistance in terms of what we are committed to, rather than in terms of what we oppose?

**"Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name.**

### Hymns

HWB 600 O bless the Lord, my soul (based on Psalm 103)  
HWB 166 I'll praise my Maker  
HWB 584 They that wait upon the Lord  
STS 107 Fill now our life, O Lord  
STJ 15 Santo (Holy)  
STJ 88 Haleluya! Pelo tsa rona

### Questions for Discussion

*Depending on the time you have allotted for this session, select the questions that are most important for your context, and that best prepare you for the prayer time that follows the discussion.*

1. What do you experience as you hear Psalm 103 or other biblical texts read meditatively? Did specific phrases connect with your present reality? If so, which ones? Did you feel comforted by or challenged to respond to any of its words?
2. What kinds of things does Psalm 103 "remember" about God? What specific things are important for us to "remember" in our praise of God, as we live in changing and challenging times?
3. How do we as a church keep our praise lively and enthusiastic, and prevent it from becoming routine? Given our convictions about God, what forms of praise are most fitting and faithful? Do some forms of praise trivialize God and our faith, or is it the attitudes with which we use the forms?

4. How have you observed, or participated in, praise as an act of defiance in the face of pain and struggle, or as a denial of life's painful realities?
5. Does praise help you connect with and abide with God? What have been some of your experiences with corporate or personal praise?
6. Can you think of additional reasons why praise of God is so important in our life of faith?

### Entering into Prayer

To begin and end your prayer time, sing one of the following short Hymns HWB 353 Lord, listen to your children, HWB 348 O Lord, hear my prayer, or HWB 358 Oyenos, mi Dios. These songs consist of musical prayer phrases that are good to sing at least three times, once with an intentional awareness of each person of the Trinity.

Begin your spoken prayers with another meditative reading of part or all of Psalm 103. Feel free to substitute with praise Psalms 23, 33, 96, 145, 148, or 150. After the reading, invite people to call out, in a word or brief statement, things for which they wish to praise God. You may want to conclude or intersperse your spoken praises by singing one of STS 87, STJ 11, 17, or 41.

### Closing Prayer

God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,  
 your steadfast love is from everlasting to everlasting,  
 and your kingdom rules over all.

We thank you that you crown us with steadfast love and mercy,  
 and that you do not deal with us according to our sin.  
 We thank you for the ways in which you seek justice

and public witness of the church suffer.<sup>11</sup> According to Stark, high demands result in high levels of commitment, which empower a church community for a variety of collective actions including outreach and service. He claims that one reason the early church grew so rapidly was because it called members to a countercultural lifestyle that demanded much more than the Greco-Roman religions asked of their adherents.

### A “Being-Saved Community”<sup>12</sup>

Despite our lofty calling to be a countercultural community, we should never become smug or arrogant in our perception of ourselves as the church over against the world. There are many times when the morality of God's people sinks well below that of the world, and the world actually has some things to teach us. When Abraham forgets about the importance of honesty and integrity, he receives a lecture on morality from an Egyptian Pharaoh (Genesis 12:18–20), and again from a Philistine king (20:8–10), who later admonishes Isaac in a similar way (26:9–11). Some of Paul's letters address serious problems in the churches, and illustrate that there is still plenty of the world within the church (e.g.: 1 Corinthians 1:10–12; 5:1; 6:1,7; 11:18–22; Galatians 4:8–11). Contemporary church life is embarrassingly rich with shameful behavior and support for destructive political, social, and economic policies and values.

The well-known saying that the church is not a home for saints but a hospital for sinners helps explain why there is always so much of the world in our midst. We are not the “saved community,” for even at our best we always remain the “being-saved” community. We always see through a glass dimly when it comes to distinguishing between the ways of God's Kingdom and the ways of the world, and our resistance is generally more

<sup>11</sup> Rodney Stark, pp. 174–79, 188–89.

<sup>12</sup> This is David Buttrick's favorite expression for the church. See *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), especially pp. 40–41, 254–55.

years later.<sup>9</sup> The higher status and respect given to women, marriage, and male sexual fidelity in the Christian community, compared to the surrounding culture, attracted women who then converted their husbands and family members. In the face of illness and devastating epidemics, Christians cared for each other and neighbours, at the risk of also becoming infected. As a result, Christians survived at a higher rate than the general population, and their care for each other and neighbours attracted new converts. Christians valued human life as a gift of God and so they refused to practice infanticide and abortion. Because normally baby girls were the ones left to die, the Christian community had a higher proportion of women than the surrounding society. Some of these women married non-Christian men who were then drawn into the church. Christian mutual aid and leveling of the social hierarchies, so prevalent in the surrounding culture, also attracted converts.

We tend to de-emphasize resistance to broader cultural values in the interests of making it easy to become Christian. Jesus seems to have operated with the opposite strategy. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Perhaps one reason for the decline of many denominations in Canada, including Mennonite Church Canada,<sup>10</sup> is the lack of expectations which the church places on its members. Stark argues that when it is easy to be a church member, the overall energy, vitality,

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<sup>9</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> While hard numbers have not been collected on an overall decline of congregational membership, Mennonite Church Canada is aware of a slow decline in this area. The numbers of congregations the Resource Centre has been able to track from 2000 – 2009 are as follows: 238, 232, 232, 232, 232, 232, 225, 225, 218, 215. This and the lack of expectations Stark refers to is further reflected in a gradual decline in the number of participants at Youth and Adult Assemblies. Wondering if we will meet quorum has become a normal part of preparing for Assembly.

for all who are oppressed,  
and that you have revealed your ways to your people.

Empower us to keep your covenant  
and live by your commandments.  
Keep us ever near to you,  
especially during the difficult and painful experiences of life.  
Grant us a spirit of defiance  
so that nothing will silence our praise.  
May our lively and energetic praise  
create a world of trust in which we ever abide in you.  
“Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name.” Amen.

### **Sending Hymns**

HWB 580 *My life flows on*

HWB 86 *Now thank we all our God*

STJ 73 *The Lord lift you up*

### Session 3

## Nurturing a Spirit of Resistance

*Focus Statement: As God's people we owe our primary allegiance to God. Therefore, in changing times we are called to nurture a discerning spirit of resistance to the world.*

#### Worship Resources

HWB 677, 820; STS 163, 169, 192, 196; STJ 153, 157

#### Gathering Hymns

HWB16 *God is here among us*

HWB 68 *O come, loud anthems let us sing*

HWB 13 *Blessed Jesus, at your word*

**Scripture Readings:** Exodus 1:15–22; Acts 4:18–21, 23–29; 5:27–32

### Be Not Conformed to the World

The New Testament emphasizes that Christians are called out of the world. The term “world” does not mean society as such, but designates the anti-godly forces at work in the world. James 4:4 declares, “Friendship with the world is enmity with God.” 1 John 2:15 states, “Do not love the world or the things in the world.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus tells his followers that in the world they can expect persecution, “But take courage; I have conquered the world” (John 16:33). Christ has won a decisive victory over the world, and so the transforming power of Christ energizes the church to nurture a spirit of resistance to the world (see 1 John 5:4–5).

The book of Revelation portrays the Roman Empire with its propaganda machine and exploitative political and economic system as the Dragon-Beast team and as Babylon, the quintessential evil empire doomed for destruction (see especially chapters 13 & 17–18). The economy of the Roman Empire relied heavily on slavery, oppressive taxation of the poor, and on a trade system that sucked resources out of the hinterland into Roman cities, not unlike the ways global capitalism currently sucks wealth and resources out of poor nations into wealthy western urban centers. Revelation admonishes believers, “Come out of her [Babylon=Rome] my people, so that you do not take part in her sins” (18:4). Revelation unmasks, critiques, and encourages resistance to an oppressive economic, political, and social order.

Sociologist Rodney Stark identifies the early church’s resistance to at least some of the common values and practices of the Greco-Roman world as one of the factors contributing to the phenomenal growth of the church, from 120 persons in the year 30 C.E. (Acts 1:15) to approximately six million 300

<sup>8</sup> Other passages which emphasize the opposition between Christians and the world include: Mark 4:19; John 15:18–19; 17:14–19; 1 Corinthians 2:12; James 1:27; 1 John 4:4–6; 5:4–5,19.



Peter and several other apostles are arrested again and reminded of the gag order imposed on them (5:27–28). The apostles' response is unambiguous, "We must obey God rather than humans" (5:29, my translation).

Stories of resistance do not end with the New Testament. The first centuries of the church saw some Christians persecuted and even martyred for their resistance. The Protestant Reformation began with Martin Luther's resistance to political and religious authority. The Anabaptists resisted and acted illegally when they refused to swear oaths, baptize their infants, or join the military. Some modern resisters include Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Corrie Ten Boom, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and ordinary folks who refuse to pay that percentage of their income tax that goes to the military.

We sometimes describe actions like those of the Hebrew midwives and other resisters as "civil disobedience." This expression, as well as the language of resistance, is a bit misleading in that it emphasizes the negative, the disobedience. The biblical story begins with the positive. The Hebrew midwives are so committed to God and God's saving purposes that they refuse to act in ways that undermine these purposes. Jesus is so committed to inaugurating the new Kingdom of God in human history that he cannot help but run afoul of the authorities that defend business as usual. Peter and the apostles are so grateful for the new life they enjoy in Christ that they cannot help but share the good news with others.

As Christians, we do not begin with a desire to resist. We begin with gratitude for God's saving actions in our own lives and in the world, which leads us to become disciples of Christ who embrace the redeemed life of God's Kingdom. Because the world is rife with evil powers seeking to undermine the good purposes of God's reign, our faithfulness will inevitably lead to conflict with some of the economic, political, and social structures and values of our society.

## Accommodation and Resistance

Changing and challenging times provide an opportunity to remind ourselves that nurturing a spirit of resistance is always part of our calling as God's people. There are at least two reasons for resistance. The fundamental reason is that as God's people we owe our primary allegiance to God. In many cases, loyalty to God does not conflict with the responsibilities we also have to our government, our society, and various institutions. But in this fallen world, economic structures, societal values, and political systems will often demand first place on our list of loyalties and will ask things of us which conflict with our allegiance to God.

A second reason for resistance is because God's great agenda is the creation of a countercultural people who will mediate God's salvation to the world. As discussed already in session one, the early chapters in Genesis depict how sin infects all of humanity and wreaks havoc on God's good creation. In response, God calls Abraham and Sarah as part of a strategy to bring healing and redemption to a hurting world. God's project from Genesis 12 on is to create a people who receive the gift of salvation and revelation, so that their life will be both a foretaste and showcase of the redeemed life that God wishes to grant all of humanity. Because God's great purpose is to free Israel and the church and all of creation from the evil and oppressive powers that cause pain, suffering, and desolation, God's people are by definition countercultural. To resist is integral to our identity.

Accommodation to, or cooperation with, the world is by no means entirely negative, because there are many features of our society that we should support. We ought to appreciate hospitals, schools, old age pensions, and many other social services, to name but a few examples, even though these human institutions are never perfect. There is much about our society that is in keeping with God's plans and purposes for the world.

The book of Genesis tells us that when Joseph went to Egypt, he could in good conscience cooperate with Pharaoh. The opportunity to store food during the bountiful years and then distribute it during the years of famine allowed Joseph to save many lives. But even this life-giving social program became oppressive when Joseph used the hunger of the Egyptian peasants to enslave them and acquire all their land for Pharaoh (Genesis 47:18–21). There is no government, society, or human institution that is not tainted by the consequences of sin, and even relatively peaceful and progressive societies marginalize and oppress certain individuals and groups, as First Nations people in Canada have experienced. This is why Christians should nurture a *discerning spirit of resistance*.

We should be very grateful to live in a society which tolerates religious convictions and practices. Christians in some parts of the world are not so fortunate. In contexts where society is markedly anti-Christian, it is generally easier to distinguish between Christian and non-Christian ways because the alternatives are so stark. (This does not mean that it is necessarily easier to **act and live** in a Christian manner, because the consequences of such action can be costly.) Where Christianity is not tolerated, nurturing a spirit of resistance usually becomes part of the church's self-understanding. In a tolerant context we easily acculturate and slip into a mode of accommodation to the values and ways of our society. Opposition to the reign of God can take the form of persecution, but in our context it is more likely to take the form of seduction.

### Stories of Resistance

After Joseph, times change in Egypt, and several generations later, another Pharaoh asks for cooperation with one of his social programs, but this time two Israelite women utter an emphatic “No!”

Pharaoh worries that Israelite fertility poses a threat to Egypt and so he proposes infanticide as the solution (Exodus 1:9–10, 16). Two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, deliberately defy his orders because they recognize that allegiance to God sometimes conflicts with obedience to the powers that be. Twice the text tells us that the midwives act so courageously because they fear God (1:17, 21). The common Old Testament expression “fear God” does not mean to live in terror of God but means to revere, respect, stand in awe of, and obey God. The midwives' resistance raises the fundamental question, “Whom will we fear—God or earthly powers?”

The Bible contains many other stories of resistance. Moses and the Israelites resist Pharaoh. Prophets like Elijah and Jeremiah resist oppressive Israelite kings. Daniel and his friends resist idolatrous foreign emperors. Jesus resists the religious and political authorities of his day, and some of his early followers pay a high price for continuing that resistance. Even Paul, who urges obedience to earthly authorities (Romans 13:1–7), must have frequently resisted some of these authorities or else he would not have been flogged and imprisoned so often during his missionary work (see 2 Corinthians 11:23–25).

The early church grew partly because it was willing to resist. Peter and John are arrested and ordered not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:17–18). They respond by telling the authorities, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God” (4:19, NIV). When Peter and John return to the believers, they all join in a prayer focusing on how the nations and their rulers oppose Jesus Christ and the reign of God (4:24–30). These believers simply assume that the message of God's salvation will engender opposition from the world, and so they do not even ask that the threat be removed, but rather they ask God for strength to continue proclaiming the word boldly despite the threat (4:29). Shortly thereafter,