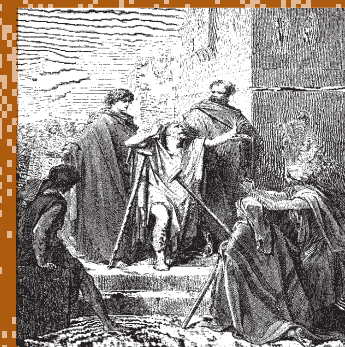


Hope and prayer in the new millenium

Daniel
Epp-Tiessen



A five-week worship, prayer and study guide

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study guide*

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Epp-Tiessen**



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Hope and prayer in the new millenium: A five-week worship, prayer and study is meant to serve as a resource for congregations in Mennonite Church Canada (formerly Conference of Mennonites in Canada). A similar resource is published annually by the Resources Commission. This booklet is intended to serve as a guide for Prayer Week services in Mennonite congregations, which usually happen sometime in January.

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Cover image: St. Peter and St. John at the Beautiful Gate by Gustave Doré, first published in 1865. In session 3, Dan Epp-Tiessen says, "The early church grew precisely because it was willing to resist the authorities. Peter and John were 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'...."

"As Christians we resist not because we set out to disobey earthly authorities, or because we want to be anti-social or destructive. We begin with a commitment to be faithful to God and to the vision which God has for this world."

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Foreword

As we approach the year 2000 one senses a mood of anticipation and some fear. Although we can only speculate what that imminent new future will be, we are convinced that the Bible says much that is relevant to encourage and guide us.

The Resources Commission of Mennonite Church Canada is confident that this guide written by Daniel Epp-Tiessen, will be appropriate for whatever the new year will bring. He encourages us to take a fresh look at the “the face of change,” “blessing the Lord,” “nurturing a spirit of resistance,” “living between reality and hope,” and proclaiming that “nothing can separate us” from the love of God.

The format of this guide gives congregations the flexibility to choose those parts that suit their needs and prayer traditions. He also provides an outline and other resources that can be used for Sunday morning worship services. He includes questions for reflection and discussion that can be adapted for study groups.

I invite all congregations in Mennonite Church Canada to take a close look at *Hope and Prayer in the New Millennium*. May God grant a spirit of hope and prayer to all who use this resource.

Justina M. Heese
Executive Secretary, Resources Commission
Mennonite Church Canada
October 1999

Introduction

As Christians we have even more reason than the rest of the world to celebrate the advent of the new millennium, because it marks the 2,000 year anniversary of the birth of Jesus. We should be enormously grateful for the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and for the remarkable fact that power still flows from these events some 2,000 years later. We should be grateful that a small movement, which was started by a carpenter who lived but a short life in an obscure part of the world, now encompasses people from every part of the globe.

Reflecting on the 2,000 year history of the church should lead to thanksgiving for times of faithfulness, and also repentance for times of unfaithfulness. Reflection and self-evaluation should also lead us to recognize that in most contexts, faithfulness and unfaithfulness are intertwined in church life in ways that are difficult to disentangle. As Paul observes, the treasure of faith is carried in “earthen vessels” (2 Corinthians 4:7, King James Version). Thanks be to God that these earthen vessels have passed on the faith for two millennia.

While each of the sessions in this booklet focuses on a somewhat different topic, each in its own way deals with matters that are important for the church as we enter the new millennium.

1. *In the face of change.* If we, as Christians, root ourselves in the story of Christ, sort out our loyalties, and live as a covenant people, then we can confidently face the incredible changes which our world will see in this new millennium.

2. *Bless the LORD, O my soul.* At the beginning of the millennium, it is helpful to remind ourselves that one of the most important things which we as a church can 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 the new millennium we are called to nurture a discerning spirit of resistance to the world.

4. *Living between reality and hope.* Our calling in the new millennium is to live between some of the painful realities of life, and the hope we have as Christians that with God new things are possible.

5. *Nothing can separate us...* The beginning of the

millennium brings some anxiety with it, because the future is so uncertain. We have the Bible's assurance that there is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God.

The meditations in this booklet have been written with several purposes in mind. I hope that the ideas presented in each chapter, along with the worship resources, provide enough "grist for the mill" for either January Prayer Week services or a series of Sunday morning worship services.

I hope that the questions at the end of each chapter also make the booklet a suitable resource for an adult Sunday school or Bible study class. In most cases I have included several suggestions for hymns, prayers, or calls to worship. I assume that users will feel free to choose and adapt material as is appropriate for their context.

Hymns

All the numbers for hymns and calls to worship refer to *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1992). Biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, unless indicated otherwise.

My prayer is that readers will find spiritual nourishment in the pages that follow, and that in some small way this booklet might help Christians live with faith and hope during the new millennium.

Daniel Epp-Tiessen

Prayer Service 1



In the face of change

Call to worship

HWB 661, 672

Gathering hymn

HWB 25 Jesus, stand among us

HWB 26 Holy Spirit, come with power

Introducing the theme

In the 1960's there was a popular Bob Dylan song called, "The times they are a changin'." Whether we like it or not, our world is changing, our technology is changing, the values of our society are changing, and even our churches are changing. At the beginning of this new millennium, we live in a world where the pace of change has become almost dizzying. 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 church entering a new millennium, deal positively with change?

Going forward looking backward

Ours is not the first time in history that God's people have faced major changes, and perhaps we have some things to learn from the biblical story about how we can deal with change in a positive manner. At the end of the book of Joshua, the Israelites

find themselves in changing times. They have escaped from slavery in Egypt, they have wandered for forty years in the wilderness, and finally they have acquired 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 their promised land.

In preparation for this change, Joshua, the faithful leader whose life and ministry are fast coming to a close, summons the Israelites to an assembly so that he can address them one last time. 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. Certainly there will be continuity between our past and our future, but there will also be profound change in this new millenium. We look back because it is our story that shapes us, that reminds us of who 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 as Christians be rooted in our story.

Telling the story of God's people is rarely without its problems. In Joshua's telling of the story, women are conspicuously absent from the story. The wholesale slaughter and dispossession of the Canaanite people is portrayed as a glorious event. (Today we would label this genocide and ethnic cleansing.) When God's people tell their story it is generally a partial story, and the perspective is rarely as broad and wholistic as it should be. Yet it is still the story of God's people, with the goal of discerning how God has been at work in the ongoing life of this people.

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 which must always stand at the center of our story. Then there is the ongoing story of the church now stretching into the third millenium, and the story of our Mennonite people with its many sub-plots. It is indeed a long story.

As we enter this new millenium with all the potential and

promise, and all the unknowns and dangers of these changing times, we can do so looking back to the long story of God's people. This is the story that can form and shape us, that can admonish and challenge us, that can encourage and energize us, that can keep us rooted as "the times they are a changin'."

Choose this day whom you will serve

The Bible does not tell the story of God's people 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.

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 our 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 pledge allegiance to causes that are less than ultimate, and to value things that are of less than eternal 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 the changes of the new millenium knowing to what we are committed, and even more importantly, knowing to whom we are committed.

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.

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.

In times of change and transition it is all the more important that we as Christians be rooted in our story. Telling the story of God's people is rarely without its problems.

We can go forward into this new millenium confident in the new covenant we have in Jesus Christ. In the good times we can celebrate and give thanks for this covenant. In our times of struggle and uncertainty we can look to this covenant as a source of strength, comfort and renewal.

Summary

"The times they are a changin'." In this new millenium we move forward looking backward, rooted in a long story of faith. We face change as a people who seek to sort out our loyalties and commitments. We go forward as a covenanting people who know 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.)

Hymns

HWB 398 I love to tell the story
HWB 582 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah
HWB 163 Obey my voice

Questions for discussion

1. At the beginning of this millenium, 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? Does the church sometimes hold too strongly to its story, or to a particular version of its story?
3. How much emphasis should we place on the biblical story, the 2,000-year story of the church, the story of our Mennonite people? How do we tell the story in such a way that it renews and inspires, but does not cover up some of the dark moments in our past? How do you personally allow the story of God's people to shape, challenge, and energize you?
4. What are some of the ways in which you have heard the story of God's people told in a positive manner, so that others are invited to make a commitment and join the story? How do we sometimes tell the story of God's people too narrowly or with a perspective that is too limited? Whom do we tend to leave out in our telling of the story?
5. Who or what are the "gods beyond the river" and the "gods of the Amorites" to whom we are tempted to pledge our allegiance?
6. What does it take for us to be a covenant-making and a covenant-keeping people? Can the covenant we have with God through Christ be broken?

Closing prayer

In this session and the ones that follow, you may want to experiment with singing the same short hymn before and after the prayer, as a way of bracketing the prayer time. Appropriate hymns include: HWB 353 "Lord, listen to your children," 348 "O Lord, hear my prayer," 358 "Oyenos, mi Dios." It often works well to sing the hymn several times.

The outline below could guide a spoken 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:

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 as we enter the new millenium, changes in:

- our personal lives (aging, job security, health)
- the lives of people we know
- our congregation and denomination
- our community and country
- the larger world (ethnic intolerance, environmental devastation, war, unrestricted technology)

Ask God to guide change in positive directions

Ask God for wisdom and guidance to deal with change in healthy ways

Thank God for our Christian faith which gives us strength, courage, and confidence at the outset of a new millenium

Close with the following:

Dear God, we thank you for the privilege we have of being part of the long story of your people. May that story guide us, inspire us, admonish us, and renew us in an ongoing way. May we learn to tell the story in such a way that others will also come to know you. Help us, O God, to leave behind those things that prevent us from being loyal to you. Help us to live confidently as your covenant people in the changing times of this new millenium. Amen.

Sending hymn

HWB 328 O God, our help in ages past

HWB 546 Guide my feet

HWB 425 Come, come ye saints

Prayer Service 2



**Bless the LORD,
O my soul**

Call to worship

HWB 660, 680, 821 (Psalm 100)

Gathering hymn

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

Because of its moving praise of a loving and gracious God, Psalm 103 has become one of the best loved of all the psalms. 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 (see *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* [New York: Seabury Press, 1981], pages 60-61).

A biblical text can be read slowly, meditatively, even repetitively, leaving periods of silence between verses or sections. The leader should practice reading the text out loud many times so that she or he can read the passage effectively.

I suggest opening with this kind of reading of Psalm 103. 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 cares and 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 use the times of silence as an opportunity to allow themselves to

This kind of reading can be very effective in helping people encounter the biblical text as God's word directed to them personally.

experience the text. This kind of reading can be very effective in helping people encounter the biblical text as God's word directed to them personally. Nouwen writes, "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' lead to the silent pastures where we can dwell in the

loving presence of him in whose Name the preacher speaks." Ibid., p. 61.

Introducing the theme

As we enter the new millenium, it is helpful to remind ourselves that in any time and place, one of the most important things which the church does is to offer its joyous and heartfelt praise to God. I want to explore three reasons why praise is so important in our life of faith, especially as we enter what feels like a new era.

Praise is remembering God

Psalm 103 opens with a self-exhortation to praise (verses 1-2) which alludes to one of the reasons why praise is so central for God's people. "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits" (verse 2). All praise involves a remembering of God, and such remembering is of course at the basis of our Christian life. 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" (*The Psalms: Structure, Content and Message* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980], p. 6).

To praise is to remember and to celebrate the good things that we have received from the hand of God. Through praise we both remind ourselves of God's salvation and we root ourselves

in that salvation. Especially at the beginning of this new millenium, we should give praise for the power which still flows from the life, death, and resurrection of Christ which happened 2,000 years ago.

Praise is an act of defiance

A second reason why praise is so important is that praise is an act of defiance in the midst of the suffering and evil in the world. Since this new millenium is not likely to witness any less pain and suffering than the last one, praise will continue to be an important way for the church to both nurture and proclaim its faith.

A number of years ago I attended the funeral of my wife's Aunt Irma. Aunt Irma was a gifted and energetic woman who was struck down far too early in life by that horrible disease we call cancer. During the funeral there was a table at the back of the church displaying some of the objects that were important to Aunt Irma. Her Bible was there, open to Isaiah 40 with verse 31 highlighted.

*but those who wait for the LORD
shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

I was struck by the contradiction between what these words said, and the event which had brought us together. How can we read such passages at a funeral? How can we sing hymns of praise during some of life's most painful moments, as we often do at funerals?

Praise can be an act of defiance in the midst of suffering. Praise can be a declaration that despite the pain and difficulty we are experiencing, we will continue to believe that "the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting" (Psalm 103:17). Despite the horrendous evil and injustice and suffering that plague our world at the beginning of this new millenium, we will continue to have faith that, "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" (Psalm 103:19).

But we must be careful with our praise, because praise in the face of suffering and evil can easily turn into denial. If all we

do during difficult times is to praise, then our theology 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 sometimes dishes out to people.

Many of the psalms are hymns of praise. But even more are what scholars call laments, which are in essence prayers for

Such praise reminds us that evil and suffering are not the ultimate realities in this world. We need lament to help keep our theology realistic and to prevent our praise from becoming denial.

Praise as defiance is important because such praise reminds us that evil and suffering are not the ultimate realities in this world. God’s steadfast love, of which Psalm 103 speaks, is the ultimate reality. Praise reminds us that God’s love and grace are strong enough to carry us through life’s difficult experiences, and that God’s love is even strong enough to carry us from this life into the next. Praise reminds us that evil and suffering will not have the last word here on earth, but some day there will be a truly new millenium, when God’s reign will come in all its fullness (see Psalm 96:11-13; 98:7-9; Revelation 21:1-4).

Praise connects us with God

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. Praise helps us to experience what we sing and speak of in our praise. This is why the meditative reading of Psalm 103, suggested at the beginning of this chapter, can be so powerful. Claus Westermann observes, “The secret of praise is its ability to make contact with God; through praise one remains with God” (*The Psalms*, p. 6).

When I stumbled upon Westermann’s statement several years ago, it helped me to understand a very important experience in my own life. Five years ago our eight-year old son Tim died of cancer. During the last month of his life, Tim was unconscious and my wife and I took turns sitting at his bedside waiting for him to die. I had a lot of time on my hands, and so I worked my

way through the hymnal, singing all the hymns I was familiar with.

To my surprise, it was the hymns of praise that spoke most meaningfully to me. I still remember singing, “Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices,” with the tears streaming down my face. I remember feeling both crazy and guilty for singing such songs while I was watching my son die.

But now I understand. Praise puts us in touch with God, and this connection is precisely what I needed during this painful period in my life. I needed to draw close to God and experience God’s love and grace and strength surrounding me. When we praise we open ourselves to experiencing the power and mercy and love of God that we extol in our praise. Through praise we abide with God.

Summary

In this new millenium it is more important than ever that praise be central to the life of the church. Through praise we remember and root ourselves in God’s salvation. Through praise we affirm and proclaim our faith in the face of suffering and evil. And through praise we abide with God.

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

HWB 596 And I will raise you up

Questions for discussion

1. What do you experience as you hear Psalm 103 read meditatively? Does it become the word of life for you?
2. What kinds of things does Psalm 103 “remember” about God? What kinds of specific things is it important for us to “remember” in our praise of God, especially at the beginning of this new millenium? Are some things too trivial to praise God for?
3. How do we as a church keep our praise lively and enthusiastic, rather than allowing it to become routine and tedious?
4. What examples have you observed of praise as an act of defiance in the face of pain and struggle? Have you experienced examples of praise that have turned into a denial of life’s painful realities?
5. Look at some of the lament psalms, perhaps 13 or 79 or 88. Some of the biblical laments are difficult for us to use because

of their preoccupation with enemies and their call for vengeance upon the wicked (e.g. Psalm 109). How can we today, especially in our worship, balance our praise with an acknowledgment of the painful side of life?

6. Does praise help you make contact and abide with God? What have been some of your experiences with corporate or personal praise? What forms of praise do you find most moving?
7. What are some reasons for why praise of God is so important in our life of faith?

Closing prayer

Invite people into a time of prayer, and inform them that today the group will be devoting considerable time to prayer. Begin the prayer with another meditative reading of part or all of Psalm 103. Other Psalms like 23, 33, 96, 145, 148, or 150 could be substituted.

After the reading, invite people to call out in a word or brief statement, things for which they are thankful. After this you may want to read Psalm 55:1-8 meditatively. Then allow opportunity for people to share in a word or two, things they want to lament.

If the group is large or people do not feel free to voice their laments, invite people to bring their pain and sorrow to God during a period of silence. Close with the following prayer or compose your own.

Dear God, we praise you for your steadfast love which is from everlasting to everlasting, and for your kingdom which 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, God, that you seek justice for all who are oppressed, and that you have revealed your ways to your people. Help 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. Give us a spirit of defiance so that our praise will never be silenced. May our praise always be strong and lively, so that we can ever abide in you.

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.” Amen.

Sending hymn

HWB 580 My life flows on
HWB 86 Now thank we all our God

Prayer Service 3



Nurturing a spirit of resistance

Call to worship

HWB 681, 677, 669, 820

Gathering hymn

HWB 16 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

Accommodation and resistance

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 governments, our society, and other institutions.

But it belongs to the fallen nature of human life that our nation states, our institutions, and the values of our society, often ask that they be at the top of our list of loyalties and that we do things which are in conflict with our Christian faith. The beginning of a new millenium is an appropriate time to remind ourselves that no matter how tolerant a society we live in, nurturing a spirit of resistance is always part of our calling as God's people. The reason for this is very simple.

We should be very grateful to live in a society which is quite tolerant of different religious positions. Christians in many

places of the world are not so fortunate. In contexts where society is markedly anti-Christian, it may sometimes be 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 by society, nurturing a spirit of resistance often becomes part of the church's self-understanding. In a tolerant context such as ours in North America we easily 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.

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. Most Christians appreciate hospitals, schools, old age pensions, and many other social services, even though these human institutions are never run perfectly. As Mennonites we have sometimes resisted accommo-

dation in less-than-healthy ways by focussing on such things as language, dress, vehicles, or use of electricity.

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, or society, or human institution that is not tainted by oppressive elements. Even relatively peaceful and progressive societies marginalize and take advantage of certain individuals and groups. This is why Christians should nurture a *discerning spirit of resistance*.

After Joseph, times changed in Egypt. Several generations later, another Pharaoh asked for cooperation with one of his social programs, but this time two Israelite women said an emphatic "No!"

Stories of resistance

Pharaoh was anxious that the high birthrate of the Israelites posed a threat to Egypt, and his proposed solution was infanticide (Exodus 1:9-10,16). The two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, deliberately defied his orders because they recognized that allegiance to God sometimes prevents us from being loyal to the powers that be. Twice the text tells us that the reason the midwives acted so courageously was that they feared God (1:17,21).

In English, "to fear" means to be afraid of something, and the word generally has this meaning in Hebrew as well. However, this meaning is not at the fore in the common Old Testament expression "fear God," which actually means to revere, to respect, to be in awe of, and to obey God. This story of the midwives' resistance raises the question, "Whom will we fear—God or earthly powers?" As the church enters the new millennium, this is an important question to keep before us.

The Bible contains many other stories of resistance—we have Moses and the Israelites who resisted Pharaoh, we have prophets like Elijah and Jeremiah who resisted Israelite kings, and we have Daniel and his friends who resisted foreign emperors. Jesus resisted the religious and political authorities of his day, and many of his early followers paid 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.

The early church grew precisely because it was willing to resist the authorities. Peter and John were arrested and ordered not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:17-18). They responded 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 returned to the believers, they all joined in a prayer which focused on how the nations and their rulers opposed Jesus Christ and the reign of God (4:24-30). These believers simply assumed that the message of God's salvation would engender opposition from the world. So they did not ask that the threat be removed, but rather they asked God for strength in continuing to boldly proclaim the word despite the threat (4:29).

Shortly thereafter, Peter and several other apostles were

again arrested and reminded of the gag order imposed on them (5:27-28). The apostles' response was 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 many Christians persecuted

We begin with a commitment to be faithful to God and to the vision which God has for this world.

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, have their infants baptized, or join the military. Some modern resisters include Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Corrie Ten Boom, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Oscar

Romero. Let us pray that the new millenium will continue to see courageous acts of resistance from the church and from individual Christians.

Today we would label the actions of the Hebrew midwives and other forms of resistance mentioned above as "civil disobedience." One problem with this expression is that it emphasizes the negative, the disobedience part. (See Kathleen Kern, "Against the System: Civil Disobedience and the Biblical Record," *The Mennonite* [April 20, 1999], pp. 4-5.) The biblical story begins with the positive. The Hebrew midwives fear God. Peter and the apostles are committed to obeying God.

As Christians we resist not because we set out to disobey earthly authorities, or because we want to be anti-social or destructive. We begin with a commitment to be faithful to God and to the vision which God has for this world. But because the world contains evil powers that are at war with the reign of God, our faithfulness will inevitably lead to conflict with some of the authorities, norms, and values of our society.

Be not conformed to the world

The New Testament emphasizes that Christians are called out of the world. When used this way the word "world" does not mean society as such, but designates the anti-godly forces at work in the world. A striking statement is found in James 4:4 where it says, "friendship with the world is enmity with God." 1 John 2:15 states, "Do not love the world or the things in the world." Other passages which emphasize the opposition between Christians and the world include: Mark 4:19; John

15:18-19; 17:14-19; 1Corinthians 2:12; James 1:27; 1 John 4:4-6; 5:4-5,19.

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 as a result the church is a community where the transforming power of Christ allows us to nurture a spirit of resistance to the world (see 1 John 5:4-5).

Despite our lofty calling, we should never become smug or arrogant in our perception of ourselves as the church over against the world. There are times when the morality of God's people sinks 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 is given a lecture on morality by an Egyptian Pharaoh (Genesis 12:18-20), and again by 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 (egs. 1 Corinthians 1:10-12; 5:1; 6:1,7; 11:18-22; Galatians 4:8-11).

Summary

As individual Christians and as the church we continue to participate in the fallenness of the human condition. Nevertheless, nurturing a discerning spirit of resistance continues to be our calling in this new millenium. "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).

Hymns

HWB 366 God of grace and God of glory
HWB 535 Who now would follow Christ
HWB 401 This little light of mine (for the children)
HWB 374 O young and fearless prophet

Questions for discussion

1. What are some ways in which we as a church can in this new millenium 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?
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 examples of where the church is resisting when we should be more accommodating? Can you think of modern examples where the world has had or still 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. In the name of divine obedience 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 refugees whom the government has ordered deported, participating in illegal marches and demonstrations, hiding Jews from the Nazis. At what points should our Christian resistance lead us to disobey laws or political authorities?

Closing prayer

Today's prayer could again be verbal, silent, or a combination of the two. See the instructions for prayer in session 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 and guidance to discern when and how we ought to resist

Close with the following:

Gracious God, we thank you that you are the 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 can be faithful to you in this new millenium. Amen.

Sending hymn

HWB 226 You are salt for the earth
HWB 420 Heart with loving heart united

Prayer Service 4



Living between reality and hope

Call to worship

HWB 670, 673

Gathering hymn

HWB 36 God of our strength
HWB 59 Sing praise to God who reigns

Introducing the theme

I believe that in the new millenium our calling as Christians is to live between the realities of this world, painful as they sometimes are, and the hope we have that with God new things are possible. The prophet Jeremiah offers us some helpful insights about how to live creatively between reality and hope.

Learning to accept 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 against the Babylonians, the city of Jerusalem was besieged and eventually captured. Its walls and buildings, including the temple, were destroyed, and many of the people were killed or exiled to Babylon.

Some ten years before this final disaster, a smaller group of Jews had already been dragged into exile in Babylon. Despite

this setback, many of Jeremiah's contemporaries were convinced that God was still on their side and would soon intervene to destroy Babylon and allow the exiles to return home. In this context, Jeremiah's message was that the present calamity represented God's judgment. Because the difficult conditions of the present were going to persist for a long time, the people had better accept their situation. On one occasion Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles with the following advice.

*Scripture reading: Jeremiah 29:4-7
(read 29:1-23 for the story and entire letter)*

While other prophets were telling the exiles that they would soon be going home (see 28:1-4; 29:8-9), Jeremiah advised 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 building houses, planting gardens, raising families, and seeking the welfare of the larger community.

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

Even when circumstances are not necessarily to our liking, we are called to carry on with the everyday tasks of human existence that make possible a healthy life and society.

I am often struck by how much pain and brokenness we live with as a Christian community. Some of us struggle with physical or mental illness or chronic pain, some of us carry a deep woundedness resulting from painful experiences in the past, some of us are grieving, some of us are lonely, some of us know the pain of broken relationships, some of our churches are not the kind of communities that they ought to be, and so on. Our context is different than Jeremiah's, because we would not say that all our struggles are necessarily 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. As Christians we are not called to live with our heads in the clouds, but with our feet firmly planted on the earth. And we know that on this earth life will never be quite the way either we or God want it to be. It is precisely in the midst of painful realities that God calls us to build our homes, to plant our gardens, to nurture our relationships, and to seek the welfare of our communities. To carry on with daily tasks represents faithfulness to a divine calling.

Buying fields of promise

Accepting reality is only part of the story. As God's people, we are called to live not only on the basis of the realities of this world. We are called to be people of hope, especially at the outset of a new millenium. Several years after the writing of Jeremiah's letter, Judah rebelled and the Babylonian army besieged Jerusalem. Jeremiah was thrown into prison for announcing that the city would be captured and destroyed (32:1-5).

While 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

Anathoth was at this point behind Babylonian army lines, so we can imagine what had happened to real estate values there. But Jeremiah buys that piece of land, not as a financial investment, but as a sign of God's promise that "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (32:15).

In other words, some day the devastation and pain of the present will be over and God will make a new beginning. During the darkest moment of his people's history, Jeremiah dared to believe in the promise and live by hope, because he knew that present realities are not ultimate realities. Sometimes there is more to life than we see on the surface.

There is another power at work in this world besides the painful realities of the present. As Christians we believe that this is the power of God, and because of this faith our actions are determined not only by present realities, whether they be pleasant or painful. We, too, are empowered to buy fields of promise.

A living hope

The book 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.

To be people of hope means to let a different reality take over our lives, and that is the power of Christ and his resurrection.

Optimism is valuable and important, but in the face of persecution, or natural disasters, or when a terminal illness is near its end, 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 and suffering, it is difficult not to let that pain and suffering overwhelm us and take control of our lives. To be people of hope means to let a different reality take over our lives, and that is the power of 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 and troubles 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 our pain to what God has done and continues to do through Jesus Christ. Christian hope means being rooted in the grace and love of Jesus, so that we live our lives not on the basis of old realities, as persistent and painful as these may be, but we live on the basis of the new reality as revealed in Jesus Christ.

In the new millenium, it is critical that we as a church nurture Christian hope. Such hope makes us receptive and attentive to the new things which God will accomplish here on earth in the coming years. On the basis of such hope we can buy fields of promise and invest ourselves in God’s future. Such hope also allows us to live faithfully in times of pain, struggle, and disappointment.

Even when death waits at the door, we can have hope because we know that what God has done and continues to do through Jesus Christ, is not confined to the bounds of this earthly existence.

Summary

As Christians at the beginning of this new millenium, we live between reality and hope. On one hand our calling is to accept present realities and in the midst of these realities to make the best of life. On the other hand, we are people of hope who know that present realities are not ultimate realities, and so we are called to buy fields of promise and live in light of God’s new reality in Jesus Christ.

Hymns

HWB 323 Beyond a dying sun

HWB 66 O worship the King

Questions for discussion

1. What painful or difficult realities is God calling you personally to live with and make the best of? What realities is God calling your congregation and the Mennonite Church as a whole to live with at the beginning of this millenium?
2. At the beginning of this millenium, 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 those painful realities which confront us?
3. How do we distinguish between realities which we are called to accept, and realities which we are called to resist because they are not in keeping with God’s reign? (Remember the discussion in the previous session.) What are some of the realities in our time with which we as Christians have too easily made peace?
4. What fields of hope and promise should we as individuals, as congregations, and as a denomination be buying in this new millenium? Consider whether we are called to invest in symbolic actions of hope that may have few tangible results, or only devote our human and financial resources to kingdom work that will yield practical results.
5. In concrete terms, how do we as a church and as individuals live on the basis of God’s new reality in Jesus Christ, even in the midst of the struggles that we face? What does Christian hope mean for us?
6. Christian hope is empowering. Because our faith and life are not determined only by the painful realities of the present, we can seek to feed the hungry, work for justice, and promote peace, even when we know that there may be little chance of earthly success. To what extent do you agree with these statements?

Closing prayer

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

Begin by thanking God for the hope that we have in Jesus Christ

- invite people to silently name and bring to God some of the painful realities with which they live
- ask for strength and guidance as we seek, amidst these realities, to build homes, plant gardens, raise families, nurture relationships, and promote the welfare of our communities
- ask God to help us buy fields of promise, and to live on the basis of the hope that we have in Jesus Christ

Close with the following:

Dear God, we thank you that you have given us a new hope in Jesus Christ. Give us strength, wisdom, and courage to live faithfully with the realities of our lives. But help us never to forget that present realities are not ultimate realities. Grant us hope, and may we be so deeply rooted in your love and grace, that we can live in light of your new reality as revealed in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sending hymn

HWB 343 My hope is built on nothing less

Prayer Service 5



Nothing can separate us...

Call to worship

HWB 663, 662, 686

Gathering hymn

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

Psalms 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 was suggested for Psalm 103 in session two.

Introducing the theme

At the beginning of a new millenium we can hardly help but contemplate the future. Such contemplation may lead to some anxiety. We cannot predict what the future holds for us personally, or for those persons whom we love, or for those causes and institutions which we hold dear. The Bible contains many passages which speak to our fears and anxiety.

‘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 Christians sometimes interpret biblical texts like this. But does such a passage really mean that neither we nor our loved ones will ever be in a car crash, or be struck down by cancer? What do such words mean for Christians facing persecution, natural disasters, or the devastation of war?

I have a strong personal interest in the meaning of such passages. Thirteen years ago our middle son Tim was born two months premature. He had breathing problems, severe food allergies, and several 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—or perhaps because of—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 does it mean for us to utter the assurances of divine care found in Psalm 121?

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. That assurance has been with me ever since, and has sustained me through years of pain and grief.

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.

In this new millenium most of us will probably experience “earth-shattering” events of some kind. As Christians we are not promised that life will always be easy and pleasant. The New Testament explicitly emphasizes that following Jesus will have painful consequences, and it even speaks of discipleship as taking up our cross and following him. There is suffering that results from our Christian commitments, but the bulk of suffering in the world is caused by such things as injustice, natural disasters, war, accidents, illness, brokenness in personal relationships, and so on.

We are led to wonder, “How can there be so much pain and sorrow in a world that is created by a loving God?” As Christians we are sometimes tempted to give simplistic answers to this very difficult question: “It is God’s will,” or “God must have some plan for a higher good in mind.” But 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 caused by an earthquake or hurricane? As Christians we must be willing to live with unclarity on some issues. The question of how there can be so much pain in a world ruled 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 in his life. However, no alternative answers are offered. At the end of the book, God utters two long speeches which highlight the limits of human knowledge compared to the power 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.

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 a passage that has become very important to me over the last years.

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.

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). Yet despite such suffering, Paul asserts that there is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from God's love, not even the greatest and last enemy we face, namely death.

Knowing that not even death can separate us from the love of God, frees us to serve God more fully in this life

In light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, passages like Psalm 121 take on a somewhat different meaning than they originally had. When we read in verse 8, for example, "The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time on and forevermore," this becomes for us a promise of eternal life in Christ.

For some people, the Christian faith has become too much of a "pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye" religion. I believe that God has placed us here on earth for reasons that go far beyond just preparing our souls for heaven, and so we must not become so heavenly minded that we are of little earthly good. Yet I have over the years developed a much greater appreciation for our Christian belief in eternal life. One of the reasons this belief is so important is precisely because it allows us to be of earthly good.

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 we know that this life is not all that there is, and this recognition can be enormously liberating. It can free us from bondage to 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. This is

something which Christian martyrs have always known. We are free to make sacrifices for a higher cause, because we know that this life, as good and important as it is, is not all that we have to look forward to.

Summary

We do not know what this new millenium will bring for us and our loved ones, for our congregations and our denomination, for our communities and our country.

But if difficult times should befall us, or our families, or our churches, or our communities, we have the assurance that "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:2). Therefore, 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).

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 or *589* My Shepherd will supply my need

HWB 585 In your sickness

Questions for discussion

1. What anxieties do you have in the face of the new millenium? Do the three scripture passages discussed above help you deal with these anxieties?
2. What "earth-shattering" events have you experienced 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.)
3. What explanations have you heard to the question of why there is suffering in the world? Do you agree with them? What are some helpful responses to the explanations we sometimes hear?
4. How can we speak helpfully about, and be grateful for, divine care and protection, without creating the false impression that God will always protect us from calamity?
5. How do we remain open to the possibility that sometimes God does send miraculous healing or deliverance, without creating false hopes that God will send such deliverance in every needy situation?
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 eternal life affect the way you live your present life?

Closing prayer

Invite people into a time of prayer. Open the prayer 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 at the beginning of the millenium, 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 8:38-39 or Psalm 46:1-2. Close with the following:

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. As we begin this new millenium, 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, God, to keep our going out and our coming in, from this time on and forevermore. Amen.

Sending hymn

HWB 433 Go, my children

HWB 526 In the rifted Rock I'm resting

HWB 616 Children of the heavenly Father



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