



2009 Stewardship Resources
Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)

Dear Disciples Congregations,

On the following pages, you will discover four-weeks of stewardship worship resources for use in your congregation. Our writing team of Janet Long, Rick Lowery and Ellen Mitchell represent various ministries, practices and experiences as stewards within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). You are invited to use the resources as they are appropriate to your ministry setting. You may also download clipart and PowerPoint slides using the General Assembly logo at www.disciples.org/ga, then click promotions and scroll down the screen.

Additional Stewardship resources are available from the Ecumenical Stewardship Center at www.stewardshipresources.org. The Ecumenical Stewardship Center has long been a partner of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), educating generations of faithful stewards for the work and ministry of the church.

These and other stewardship resources are made possible by your congregations support of Disciples Mission Fund and the Easter Special Offering.

Thank you for your generosity and support as together, we seek the Healing of the Nations.

God's Blessings,



Rev. Dr. Todd A. Adams
Associate General Minister and Vice President

Life Shared in the Paradise of God

Revelation 22:1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (New Revised Standard Version)

Commentary

The picture of New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22 is drawn from the image of Paradise in Genesis 2-3. The new world God is creating in our midst even now is portrayed in Revelation as a return to the Garden of Eden. John makes clear throughout his report of the revelation he received from Jesus that the new world is even now breaking into our midst (Revelation 1:12-20) and will soon be completely born (1:3; 22:6-7, 10, 20). In this “in-between” time the church now inhabits, disciples of Christ are called to live by the rules of the new world coming (1:3; 22:7, 14, 17). The link between Revelation’s vision of a world transformed “for the healing of the nations” and the Genesis story of Paradise lost has significance for how Christians today should live our lives and how we should think about the nature and use of the wealth we create.

The Eden story is the second of two creation accounts that begin the book of Genesis. From the very beginning, we see that this is not a newspaper account of something that happened “somewhere over there, way back when.” It is rather a story of universal truth, a story that shows us what it means to be human whenever and wherever we are. The original human is simply Adam (*ha-‘adam*), “the Human.” His companion is Eve (*chavah*), “the Living One” or “the One Who Causes Life” -- i.e., the Mother of the Living. The precise but impossible geographical coordinates that chart the courses of the four branches of Eden’s river (2:10-14) define the outer boundaries of the known world in ancient Israel. The River of Eden thus encircles the entire earth as they knew it. The Garden of Eden then stands at the source of the whole inhabited world where the Original Couple once lived but can never return. This is a story about about the pain and joy of knowing right and wrong, of sensing that life could be better, but not completely knowing how to make it so. This is the story of us all.

Two basic problems move the plot: the earth is barren (2:5) and the human is alone (2:18). The departure from the first creation story is striking in this regard. In chapter 1,

humans are created from the very beginning in community, male and female. They come to life in a lush world, full of plants and animals. The Eden story, by contrast, begins with an earth that is universal desert, desolate because “there was no human to till the ground” (2:5).

God creates the human and places it in an oasis that even has a tree of immortal life in it. There is only one rule in Paradise: do not eat fruit from the tree of knowing right and wrong.

Up to this point in the Bible, the only thing God has ever really said about the world is that it’s “good” or “very good.” But now for the first time, God offers a negative assessment: “it is *not good* for the human to be alone” (2:18).

In the process of trying to correct the problem, God creates all the animals of the earth, none of which turns out to be a “corresponding equal” for the human. Finally realizing that the only suitable companion for a human is a human, God spits it in two and, for the first time in the Eden story, we get gender-specific language. The “corresponding equal” is “woman” (*ishshah*), and the Human now for the first time becomes “man” (*ish*).

Though distinct and different, the two come from one flesh and therefore are drawn to each other. This splitting of the human into different but equal beings and their need to reconnect forms the cornerstone of human social order, the household couple. Separation becomes the occasion for union; but it also sets up an ongoing dynamic between the two, as couples raise children who will leave them for other unions.

Unity between people, in this telling, is not a state finally to be achieved, but an ongoing activity, a never-ending process of coming together even as the cycles of life pull us apart.

By the end of the story, the human couple are alienated from one another, from God, from the serpent who urged them to seek wisdom, and finally from Paradise and its tree of immortal life. At the root of this series of disasters is the human desire to be wise, to know the difference between right and wrong, to be moral.

Adam is not a particularly admirable character in the story. The text says that he is standing right beside the woman the whole time she’s talking to the serpent (3:6). He doesn’t object when she suggests that they eat the fruit of knowing right and wrong. He just chows down. But as soon as he realizes he’s in trouble with God for what he and his companion decided together to do, he starts blaming the woman, the snake and even God! “The woman you put with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate” (3:12). Notice the sequence of pronouns and verbs: you put, she gave, I ate. We’re right to roll our eyes at this point; but in his comical attempt to deny his own guilt, Adam bumbles into an important truth: God shares part of the responsibility for the way things turn out in the story. The desire to know right and wrong becomes an issue only after the human is no longer alone. It is precisely the God-given social nature of human beings that makes wisdom, moral discernment necessary.

God's solution to the problem of human loneliness leads inevitably to the human desire, the human need to know the difference between right and wrong. When you're the only show in town, you can pretty much do whatever you want. It's when you have to live with someone else that you have to start figuring out rules, that you have to put limits on yourself and share resources. Human community is impossible without some sense of justice, some ability to figure out what's right and what's wrong, some way of determining how the good things of life will be shared. The plurality of human being, our social nature requires moral discernment.

Traditionally, Christians have spoken of the Garden of Eden story as the story of "the Fall." And in one sense that's the right way to think about it. We pay a steep price for the power of moral judgment. Shining the light of justice exposes the injustice that lurks in the shadows. It is painful to become aware that there are good things and evil things in this world. There are things we find out that we wish we didn't know. There are situations we face where there are no good options; where we want to do the right thing but have no idea what the right thing could possibly be; where whatever you do, whichever way you go, somebody's going to get hurt; where you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. Knowing right and wrong comes at a steep price. In a very real sense, it is a "fall."

But it's a fall upward. It's like stumbling up the stairs. It really is better to know than to not know. It's better to see what's wrong and to do the best we can to make it right. Ignorance is, in one sense, bliss; but it's better not to live our lives in a state of childish denial. And the truth of the matter is that we really don't have any choice but to grow up and take responsibility for the bad things as well as the good things of life.

The minute God solved the problem of human loneliness by creating community, the die was cast. The quest for wisdom, judgment, moral discernment, justice had already begun. Maybe that's why God put the tree there and the snake there and strolled off for awhile to let whatever would happen happen.

The woman and the man left alone with the tree and the serpent decided that having moral judgment was worth the risk of losing Paradise. They gave up endless life in utopia for the wisdom to live in human community, for the joy and the pain that come with human companionship and with knowing right and wrong.

Now that humans have the power to know the difference, the only thing separating them from God and the other heavenly beings is their mortality (3:22). So God expels the couple from Eden and puts two cherubim there to stand guard.

Elsewhere in the Bible, cherubim are the winged creatures that stand in the holy of holies at the center of the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exodus 25:18-22) and the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6:23-28). They are the guardians of God's throne, and all communication between God and the people comes "from between" them (Exodus 25:22; Numbers 7:89).

The story here seems to be making a connection between Paradise and the Jerusalem temple. The temple where the cherubim stand guard is the earthly point of contact, the Eden story implies, between the mundane world of mortal life and the heavenly world of God. At the temple, we catch a glimpse of Paradise, but we cannot enter in.

In the end, the story comes full circle and takes a surprising turn. Banished from Eden, the man and the woman go out into the barren world to till the ground. By choosing wisdom and leaving Paradise, the human couple becomes the solution to the problem that introduced the story. They enter the desert world where there is “not yet any plant of the field or herb of the field” because “there was no human to till the ground” (2:5), and they farm. With utopia now out of reach, humans venture into the world, wise to what is right and wrong, and they bring a bit of Paradise to the wasteland. With God’s help (4:1), by the work of their hands, the wit of their minds, and the community they share with each other, they create wealth, support families, and make the desert bloom.

The final vision of the book of Revelation (chapters 21-22) draws its images and themes from the story of Eden. In the new heaven, new earth, and New Jerusalem, John sees the gates of Paradise once again opening and the nations of the world now invited in.

We know from the letters to the churches at the beginning of the book (chapters 2-3) that Christians in John’s time were experiencing varying degrees of pressure to live by the values of imperial Roman culture. Some apparently had even died as a result of their attempts to resist (Revelation 2:13; cf. 6:9-11). John’s revelation is a vision given by God to show faithful Christians what’s really going on in all of this and “what must soon take place” (1:1). It is a “revelation of Jesus Christ.” It both belongs to him and is about him. By uncovering the spiritual reality that undergirds history in that difficult time, Jesus shows John and those who hear his report that the Risen Christ, though unseen with the naked eye, in fact stands with the churches as they struggle to keep faith in a time of distress and temptation, where courage, patience, and conviction is required for faithful Christian witness (1:12-20).

A repetitive cycle of visions follows the letters to the churches, in various ways dramatizing the current predicament of the faithful as the tip of the iceberg in a cosmic battle between forces of good and evil. The visions come to a climax with the disappearance of the current world of injustice and suffering. In its place, a new heaven and earth appear (21:1). In contrast to the tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 (and to popular apocalyptic scenarios today), humans do not “go up” to be with God. God “comes down” to be with humans. A new Jerusalem descends to earth from heaven, the gift of God who comes to live with mortals on earth (21:3). On the renewed earth, in the renewed Jerusalem, there is no temple, no cherubim to guard the tree of life, to gate-keep access to God, because God’s presence is immediate, unmediated, through all and in all (21:22).

The Human and the Mother of the Living who lost Paradise to gain moral discernment, to live in human community have, with God’s help, given birth to the nations of the earth. They have built great cities, created great wealth, become mighty empires. Knowing right and wrong, they have all-too-often chosen violence and evil. They have

allowed fear, jealousy, and greed to consume them, to drag them into the burning sea, the bottomless pit of destruction and death (Revelation 19:20; 20:1-3).

But in the new world that God is bringing to earth, in the New Jerusalem that is appearing in our very midst in this very time, the gates of Paradise are opening and the nations are invited in. They walk by the gleaming light of the holy city filled with the presence of God. The nations stream in, the rulers of the earth bring their glory through gates that never close (21:24-25) because there is no night there. God is their everlasting light.

Like Eden, the city of God has a river. It flows out from God, but, unlike the river of Eden, the river of New Jerusalem does not leave Paradise. There is no need, because God has created a new heaven and a new earth and Paradise has no end.

The river of life flows through the middle of main street to water the tree of life whose luscious fruit blooms year-round and whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

Thus the biblical story comes full circle. The end returns to the beginning. Paradise lost in the first times is finally found in the last, not by reaching to the heavens, but by living now in the unmediated presence of God who comes to earth and lives with mortals.

In the final analysis, nations healed, people reconciled, God and humans at one are not goals to be achieved by human effort, but gifts to be received from the hand of God and shared throughout the world.

As the heavenly vision makes clear, that gift is not a heavenly reward in a far-off future. It is immediately near (22:6-12). Wholeness is not a distant result we may someday achieve. It is a way of living on earth now in the presence of the Risen Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end and everything in between. In this vision from God, at long last we see that we are free to bring the wealth and glory of once-barren earth back into Eden -- some of it ill-gotten, some of it justly won, a hodgepodge of good and evil, even as we are a mixture of right and wrong. At long last, we are free to love, to give without fear, to live boldly, to drink from the pure river of life, to eat sweet fruit from the tree that grows there, to touch the leaves of the tree of life and be healed.

Possible Sermon Points

- At the end of the Garden of Eden story, human beings give up a life free of problems and concerns to do the hard work of living in real community. Living together means living with limits. But working together brings blessing and prosperity. It “makes the desert bloom.” The vision at the end of Revelation calls us to join all the nations in bringing our wealth and “glory” to God’s work of healing the world.
- We tend to have a bifurcated view of wealth. On the one hand, we celebrate the super-rich and harbor suspicions about the moral worthiness of the poor. On the other hand, we unleash populist anger at the well-to-do and are tempted to think of wealth as inherently “dirty” or “evil.” We rightly make judgments about degrees of evil and

good. A small personal slight is not morally equivalent to genocide. Going 10 miles over the speed limit is not the same in God's eyes as murder or rape, as some versions of "original sin" would hold. The Eden story doesn't say that, but it does insist that none of us is pure. Our wealth and our production of it are the results of our best impulses and our worst ones. Our material goods exist in the world because we have rejected utopia and accepted the responsibility of living in human community that is a mixture of right and wrong. That's just the truth of the human condition. Revelation's vision of a new world, an open-gated Paradise God is creating in our very midst, calls us to use our wealth, as good and as bad as it is, to live as best we can by new rules of healing, sharing, and life-giving love.

Worship resources

Call to Worship

God is our light! The gates are ever open! Let the nations stream to the city of God! Let the peoples drink from the river of life. Let everyone eat from the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations!

Amen! Come New Jerusalem! Come Lord Jesus!

Opening Prayer

O God of Wisdom and Life,
we answer your call.

**We enter your gates
with thanksgiving
and praise.**

Accept us now
and the fruits of our labor.

**Make holy the gifts
we now place before you
for your work of healing the world.**

Amen.

A Litany for the World

Chalice Hymnal 664

Call to offering

Paradise eludes our grasp; but God throws open the gates and invites us to enter. Let us bring the fruits of our labor, the gifts of our hearts and lay them beside the river of life. Let us share living water, taste the fruit of life, and thus consecrate our wealth and our work to God for the healing of the nations.

Call to communion

At this table, we share healing fruit, we drink from the fountain of life. Here our eyes are opened and we see Paradise taking shape in our very midst. A new world is born in our very midst! Come to the table of Paradise! Eat the bread of healing! Drink the cup of life! Share the feast of the Risen Christ!

Benediction

May God Embrace Us

Chalice Hymnal 449

*May the God who dances in creation,
who embraces us with human love,
who shakes our lives like thunder,
bless us and drive us out with power
to fill the world with her justice.*

Possible selections from *Chalice Hymnal*

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee | 2 | |
| Shall We Gather at the River | 701 | |
| Pues Si Vivimos (When We Are Living) | 536 | |
| Lord, You Give the Great Commission | 459 | |
| God of the Fertile Fields | 695 | |
| All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly | 419 | |
| Now We Come Before God's Presence | 410 | |
| For the Fruit of All Creation | | 714 |
| For Beauty of Meadows | 696 | |
| This Is My Song | 722 | |
| Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ | 422 | |
| I'm Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table | 424 | |
| We Are Walking (Siyahamba/Caminando) | 442 | |
| Psalm 100 | 752 | |
| Psalm 67 | 744 | |

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God Dwells With Human Beings

Revelation 21:1-3; 22:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them....'

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.... The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face... and there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light...." (New Revised Standard Version)

Commentary

In Revelation 21 and 22, John describes the coming of a new world, with a "new Jerusalem," descending from heaven (21:2; cf. 3:12). The new city is paradise on earth. A shining river with life-giving water flows through its center. The tree of life grows on the banks of the river, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations who stream through city gates that never shut.

City gates of course are typically open in the daytime and closed at night. The gates are never closed in New Jerusalem, because there is no night there. The radiance of God lights the city, and God is ever present.

In 21:3, we're told that God's home will now be among humans. God will dwell with us and be our God.

In Greek, the words "home"¹ and "dwell"² in this passage are based on the same root word. It refers to a "tent" or "tabernacle." This, by the way, is the same word that appears in John 1:14, "the word became flesh and *dwelled* among us." In the new world now emerging, God is "pitching tent" with human beings; living where we live; going where we go.

¹ *skene*, pronounced skay-nay

² *skenosei*, pronounced skay-no-say

The idea of God pitching tent with human beings recalls the wilderness tradition in the Hebrew scriptures. Between the time God liberated Israel from slavery and the time they entered the land of Canaan, they spent a long period living more or less as nomads in the desert wilderness east of the Jordan River. According to biblical tradition, during this time of wilderness wandering, God camped with them, traveling with them from place to place in a tent, a tabernacle (see, for example, Exodus 26; 36; and 40; Numbers 1; 3; and 9).

It was an uncertain time for the people. Their unsettled life left them unsure what the future would hold. They constantly fought the urge to panic, to hoard, to idolize material wealth. They grumbled against their leadership and even griped about being free. With revised memories of what it was really like to be a slave, they longed for the “good old days” of slavery, when at least they could count on having something to eat.

But, in spite of all that, the Bible also views the wilderness as a time and place of total reliance on God. In the wilderness, God provides miraculous food, “manna,” that has a curious quality. People who are weak and people who are strong are able to gather different amounts of the stuff. But when they get back to their tents to eat their supper, they discover that everyone has exactly what they need. No one has too much, and no one has too little (Exodus 16:17-18). Wilderness manna can't be hoarded. In fact, it rots if you try. The only exception to this rule comes on the day before the people's mandated period of unemployment, the sabbath. On that day, the people get a double portion, food for today and tomorrow as well.

Wilderness food has another curious feature related to its use in the the wilderness tabernacle, the tent where God was thought to reside. A table sat in front of God's throne chair which was shrouded in curtains at the center of the tent (Exodus 25:23-30; Numbers 4). A lampstand stood opposite the table to illuminate the room (Exodus 25:31-40). The table was for the “bread of the presence,” twelve loaves of bread representing the “twelve tribes” (that is, the whole people). The priestly representatives of the people were told to place twelve new loaves on the table every sabbath day, as gifts to God. But an odd thing happened when the priests offered these gifts on behalf of the people. The gifts were transformed, reversed: “Aaron will set them before God as a commitment of the people of Israel, as a covenant forever. The loaves will be for Aaron and his descendants, who will eat them in a holy place” (Leviticus 24:8-9).

At the wilderness table of God's presence, the offering of the people to God becomes the gift of God back to the people. At the table of God's presence, giving is a two-way transaction. We reach out and give to the work of God in the world. But the work of God is the feeding and healing of the people. In God's presence, gifts given become gifts received.

John received his vision in a wilderness time for the churches of Asia Minor. Christians were being pressured by people outside the churches and even inside the churches to succumb to the values of Roman imperial culture, to participate in the worship of wealth and power, to follow the elaborate social rules that kept people divided from one

another, rigidly “in their proper place” in the hierarchies of wealth and prestige that made many people slaves, that kept women beneath men, that kept a few people rich beyond measure while many others starved to death. At least one Christian John knows has been killed for his refusal to renounce the values of Christ and adopt the values of the empire (Revelation 2:13), and John expects more of this to happen (6:9-11; 7:9-17; 20:4). These are uncertain, disconcerting times. But John receives a vision of a world being transformed even now.

He describes it at the beginning of Revelation as the throne room of God, illuminated not just by one lampstand, but by seven (1:12), corresponding to the seven churches to whom John writes. The lampstands are the seven churches (1:20), and in their presence stands the Risen Christ (1:13)!

At the end of Revelation, John describes the immediate presence of God as New Jerusalem, descending from heaven. But in New Jerusalem, there is no temple because God is “pitching tent” with human beings. Intimately, completely, eternally present, God chooses to camp where the people are.

Times are often difficult. But John’s vision reminds us that God is in our midst. Even now, a new world is being born. There is no time, the Risen Christ tells John, to seal up the words of this vision for publication at some far-off date (22:10; cf. Daniel 12:4, 9). The time is now! The new world of God’s unmediated presence is breaking into history now.

And at the table of God’s presence, miracles happen. Our gifts to God become God’s gifts to us. Manna is given. Loaves abound.

Excursus: Daily Bread

Matthew 6:9-15

You should pray in this manner: "Our father in heaven, holy is your name. Let your kingdom come! Let your will be done – as in heaven, so on earth! Give us today our bread for tomorrow. Release us from our debts, as we also release our debtors. Do not lead us into trial, but save us from evil." For if you release others from their false steps, your father in heaven will also release you. But if you do not release others, your father in heaven will not release your false steps.

Luke 11:2-4

He said to them, "Whenever you pray, say, "Father, holy is your name. Let your kingdom come! Give us each day our bread for tomorrow. And release us from our sins, for we also release everyone who is indebted to us. And do not lead us into trial."

The reference to bread in the Lord's prayer alludes to the manna story in Exodus 16. It is difficult to know just how to translate the Greek term *epiousios* that tells us exactly what kind of bread this is. It means either "what's necessary for each day" ("daily") or "what's necessary for the following day" ("tomorrow"). As an allusion to the manna story in Exodus, the ambiguity is rather nice, because manna lasts only a day before it rots, except on the sixth day when you can collect "tomorrow's" bread and have it keep through the end of sabbath.

When read the Lord's prayer alongside the New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21-22, an even more interesting meaning comes more clearly to light. Requesting tomorrow's bread today becomes a prayer of hope and confidence that God's new world is in fact being born in our very midst in the here and now. Such a reading makes sense in the broader context of the prayer Jesus gives his disciples: "Let your kingdom come! Let your will be done -- as in heaven, so on earth!" Tomorrow's bread is already baked and ready for distribution today. God is even now bending the world to play by new rules of abundant life for all.

Possible sermon points

- If we really are living in God's presence and sitting at God's table, we can be confident enough to share our possessions with joy. In sharing, we ourselves are blessed.
- In many ways, our church and our world finds itself in a wilderness. The situation is frightening sometimes, but we have signs that God really is present -- name a few. At the table of presence our willingness to share our possessions freely becomes nourishment and blessing for us as well.
- Explore ways we can cultivate an attitude of trust and hope. Discuss how such an attitude might have an impact on the way we view and use the wealth we have.
- Go to the Division of Overseas Ministries or the Week of Compassion websites and read about the work and witness of our partners in Congo or Haiti or Bosnia or among

Iraqi refugees in the Middle East or among hurricane survivors along the Gulf Coast. Lift up ways our sisters and brothers in these difficult circumstances find hope and use their possessions.

- Disciples pastor Vic Hunter retells a story about the Jewish mystic Isaac Luria and a sincere couple who fled the Spanish Inquisition. The heroes are Jacobo and Esperanza and of course Rabbi Luria. It's a moving tale about sharing bread and how God's work is done when we are willing to give. The book is Victor L. Hunter, *Desert Hearts, Healing Fountains: Gaining Pastoral Vocational Clarity* (Chalice Press, 2003).

Worship resources

Call to Worship

God is our light! The gates are ever open! Let the nations stream to the city of God! Let the peoples drink from the river of life. Let everyone eat from the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations!

Amen! Come New Jerusalem! Come Lord Jesus!

Opening Prayer

God of presence who leads the people through wilderness times, make your home with us this day. Lead us, feed us, and make us your people. Give us generous hearts that mirror your heart, O God of compassion, blessing, and love.

Amen.

Call to offering

In the wilderness, God feeds us. To the city of light, God calls us. Let us bring our gifts for the work of God, the healing of the nations. And in so doing, may we be fed and healed.

Lord's prayer -- the version your community typically says or the following:

God in heaven, you are like a father and mother to us. Holy is your name! Let your kingdom come! Let your will be done – as in heaven, so on earth! Give us today our bread for tomorrow. Release us from our debts, as we also release our debtors. Do not lead us into trial, but save us from evil.”

Call to communion

At the table of God's presence, our gifts are transformed. We freely offer and are richly fed. Here our eyes are opened and we see that we stand in the presence of the Risen Christ, wounded by the greed and hatred of the world, but not defeated. The Lamb that was slain lives! A new world is born in our very midst! Come to the table of the presence of God! Eat the loaf! Drink the cup of life! Come to the table! Be nourished and healed.

Possible hymns from *Chalice Hymnal*

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly | 419 |
| This is the Day of New Beginnings | 518 |
| Leaning on the Everlasting Arms | 560 |
| Precious Lord, Take My Hand | 628 |
| Now We Come Before God's Presence | 410 |
| Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ | 422 |
| I'm Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table | 424 |
| We've A Story to Tell to the Nations | 484 |
| Love Divine, All Loves Excelling | 517 |
| We Are Walking (Siyahamba/Caminando) | 442 |
| Lead On, O Cloud of Presence | 633 |
| God Be with You Till We Meet Again | 434 |

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IS CHRIST THE KING?

Lectionary reading -- John 18:33-37

Last Sunday after Pentecost

November 22, 2009

In many churches throughout Christendom, today is observed as “Christ the King Sunday.” Today’s gospel reading from John fits that theme. It is a text that may seem out of context to us, since we connect the reading with the events of Holy Week. Hold the turkey and pumpkin pie. Before we celebrate Thanksgiving on Thursday and move into the First Sunday of Advent next week, we need to get to the heart of “Christ the King Sunday” by backtracking to Holy Week.

Jesus has been brought before Pilate to be interrogated. “Are you the King of the Jews?” Like many times when Jesus is questioned, he replies with a question. He answers, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate responds with yet another question: “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?”

Now Jesus shares some insights into his life’s work: “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Other-worldly. Hold that thought.

Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Now come the questions for us: Do we belong to the truth? Do we listen to Jesus’ voice? Are we other-worldly?

If we belong to the truth and listen to Jesus’ voice, we are going to hear him say some things about money—some things that may make us uncomfortable:

- “...to whom much has been given, much will be required.”
- “...as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”
- “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”
- “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
- “You cannot serve God and wealth.”
- “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”
- “...your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

If we belong to the truth and listen to Jesus' voice, we are going to be other-worldly. We are going to adopt heaven's values instead of earthly ones. We will live as those whose true home is in heaven. Instead of living with both feet firmly planted in this world (or with one foot in the grave!), we will live with one foot in heaven. Becoming other-worldly means we are going to have to make some changes. We will have to take responsibility for the way we treat the earth, for the way we treat one another and for the way we treat the wealth God has entrusted to our care. Instead of comparing ourselves with those who have more, we will look at those who have less and share with those who have little. Instead of responding to the church's stewardship efforts with a half-hearted response—same as last year, same as the year before that—we will make a true offering of our lives and resources. Instead of treating money as holy, we will approach ministry as holy. God has placed great trust in us. Will our giving show that we trust God?

We who happily receive blessing upon blessing, mercy upon mercy and grace upon grace are often slow to live out the generosity of heart and spirit that is part of our DNA as Christians. If we belong to the truth and listen to Jesus' voice, we will look for ways to give more...and more...and more...

Jesus, are you the King? If Jesus is to be the King of your life and mine, it's time to put our money where our mouths have been. We've made the good confession of faith: we've proclaimed Jesus as the Christ, the son of the living God, and we've proclaimed him Lord and Savior of our lives and of the world. Now it's time to act on that confession and to tithe – to give proportionally in relation to what we have received.

Today, on Christ the King Sunday, I invite you to proclaim Christ your King by pledging him what you hold dearest, in an act of grateful praise.

WORSHIP RESOURCES

Call to Worship

We gather to give thanks to the God who made heaven and earth.

We gather to pray for the healing of the nations.

We gather to offer ourselves to the one to whom we belong.

We gather to worship the gracious and generous God of our salvation.

Prayer of Invocation

God of all mercy, Giver of all gifts, we are grateful for life itself and for friendship, love, faithfulness, and forgiveness. Teach us how to return thanks by lives of service, deeds of hospitality and acts of generosity. May we allow you to rule in our hearts, that we may serve you with joy all our days, in the spirit of Christ. Amen.

Suggested hymns

Now Thank We All Our God (Chalice, 715) *Marching to Zion (Chalice, 707)*
We Gather Together (Chalice, 276) *Lead On, O King Eternal (Chalice, 632)*

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For the Healing of the Nations Stewardship Sermon for 2009 General Assembly

Scripture: Revelations 22:2

Sub-theme elaboration: We all hope to experience God's healing and to be a part of His wholeness. Like a puzzle piece, we want to find a place to fit; to be able to use the gifts that are unique to us and help heal a fragmented world.

Call to Worship

O God, we live in a fragmented world

We search for a place to fit

Shower us with your love

Open your arms to hold our brokenness

Be our companion in a journey of faith

All: Heal us, teach us to extend the witness and help everyone to experience your redemptive love and wholeness in life.

Invocation

Breath of Heaven, refresh us this day. Fill our lungs with your life-giving spirit. We realize we are truly weary living in this fragmented world. Accompany us in our journey, grow our faith, and help us to find a place to fit; to be a part of your wholeness. May we experience the music, words spoken and communion this very day like never before. May we realize that the very seed is planted within each one of us to use our gifts for healing. This we pray in the name of Jesus whom we have come to know as our Christ, Amen.

Children's Sermon

(Items needed: puzzle pieces)

What do I have in my hand?

A puzzle piece

You are right. What do we do with puzzle pieces?

We use them to finish a puzzle

Have you ever been working with your parents or grandparents on a puzzle and discovered you are missing a piece; realized that you cannot finish without it?

Yes

What did you do?

We looked all over the house for it.

That's right. You can't finish the puzzle until you have every piece. Each piece is important. That is how God is with each of us. He created each one of us like we are

that important, missing piece. Each of us is different like each of the pieces I am sharing with you now but each is needed to finish the puzzle. Each one has a place to fit so the puzzle can be complete. Have you ever worked on a big puzzle?

Yes

How about a little puzzle?

Yes

Well, whether the puzzle is big or little, each piece needs to touch another to fit together. God wants that for all of us; regardless of what size the project we are working on, He wants us to work together and find the place to fit—not only for us but for everyone else.

Let's pray. God, may we always remember that you created each one of us and that while we are different, you want us to work and play together so that we all have a place to fit in your world. Amen

Hymn Suggestion

Page 609 in the Chalice Hymnal "Take My Life"

Offertory Statement

God, it is at this very table we come to be filled with your love and your healing. It is here we are reminded of how we were created in your image. It is here we recognize that to journey forth; to make a difference in a fragmented world, we must give of ourselves—we must share of the bountiful gifts that mean our very lives are shared out so that others may know your wholeness. Touch our hearts and hands. Make us instruments in your design to extend the witness.

Communion Mediation

It is written that Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it and then gave it to the disciples. And likewise, he took the cup and when he had given thanks, he shared that with them. Our Christ again and again showed us how to give; groomed us to share and gave proof that we were special in God's sight. Out of the mosaic of all of life, he truly made a place for us to fit AND to be able to share our own unique gifts so that others may find wholeness as well. It is at this communion table that we are asked to remember; to be replenished and to go and serve.

Sermon: Healing the Nations—One \$5 Iron at a Time

A few years ago our younger daughter was working with her father on a puzzle. It sat on the coffee table in the living room waiting for the next passerby to notice a puzzle piece sitting all alone along the edge of that work surface and offer it just the right place to fit. Of course, that puzzle piece could not fit in just any open space that existed. No,

that puzzle piece had special edges, special colors that evidenced it was meant for *just the right place*.

Then as the puzzle was nearing completion over the next days and weeks, it became obvious that this project would never be done if we did not find that “**missing piece**.” It, of course, has slid under the edge of the nearby couch waiting patiently until someone noticed it was needed to finish the masterpiece.

I am reminded again of that puzzle when I read our text for today from Revelations. It goes right to the heart of healing and wholeness. Like that puzzle, many of us sit at the edges of life. Some of us wait patiently. Some of us scream out to be noticed. Some of us do not know what to do to help ourselves or others. But, regardless, each of us comes to a sense that down deep *until* we are a part of something whole, we can never reach our destiny; never chase away the loneliness or ever feel healed.

In a recent publication on home decorating (of all things) that came to my house by mistake, I read an article about five inspiring women. They were already leading the lives of caregivers for their families and friends but each had been prompted in unique ways to start a movement for wholeness in this fragmented world. All five saw a problem yet *refused to remain indifferent*. Each one suffered from problems that served as catalysts to seek solutions. Each one found that love is not only something you feel, but is something you **do**.

I want to share two of their stories. The first one comes to mind as a direct link to the scripture for today. In Revelations 22:2 we read “...And the leaves of the trees shall be for the healing of the nations.”

When Sharon was growing up in a neighborhood in Milwaukee, she was surrounded by sturdy old homes, plentiful gardens, large families and trees that extended their branches and leaves like canopies over it all. It is easy to picture the neighborhood, the families and to somehow sense the peace of it all.

Like many of us, she grew up, married and moved away to a different city and state. When she got the chance to move back to Milwaukee, however, she discovered that the years had not been kind to her childhood neighborhood. Now the area experienced prostitution, gangs and drug activity that resulted in fear and fatalities. Gone were the once stately looking homes. Houses were boarded up and empty lots were now filled with trash.

But there, like a puzzle piece under the edge of the couch, they found Emma who refused to move out of the troubled neighborhood even when she was shot at in the streets. Emma was the *missing piece* alright. She inspired Sharon, her husband and others. Together they organized for change—for healing. Now, more than 1,000 people help rehab old houses, build new ones, converting a drug house into a neighborhood center and yes, even planting trees. The urban canopy is once again there to offer shelter not only to Sharon, her husband and Emma but to others seeking healing and a place to fit. Out of the fragments that Sharon found when she came back

home and out of the strength of Emma who “stood her ground,” wholeness could be found again.

The next story led to the title of this message for you today. Becky was a busy mother of nine when tragedy struck. Her daughter committed suicide! How could this end of a precious life offer healing to anyone. But as Becky went through her daughter’s things, she discovered her loved one had been a lifelong champion of the underdog. She had been sending funds to an orphanage in India. Becky was touched and asked that memorials be given to the orphanage in her daughter’s name. Generous gifts came and Becky was actually asked to serve on the board of directors for the orphanage.

Sure, when Becky made her first trip to India she felt the 120 degree heat and certainly noticed all of the beggars who swarmed her cab. Many were leprosy-affected moving about somehow without limbs or eyes. Then it happened. The cab came to a stoplight and a woman without legs crawled up asking Becky not for help for herself but help *for her children*. The encounter haunted Becky in India and when she came home for she was puzzled how she could help. She was not a doctor who could heal and had certainly never run an organization that could pull efforts together to make a difference.

But Becky refused to be indifferent. She had fed and cared for her large family at the kitchen table so that is where she started. She invited friends to meet at that very table. It was there that she did, in fact, start her own organization which now works with 44 colonies of leprosy-affected Indians through support of education of children in India, a traveling medical clinic and a micro-loan program. And it is the micro-loan part of her work that has helped adults forsake begging and turn to starting their own businesses. One such woman learned how to gain independence with the gift of a \$5 dollar iron.

A young child working on a puzzle knows it. Each piece counts if you want to finish that puzzle. And, Sharon and Becky know it. This world is fragmented—here at home and across the miles. *Each of us* can find a place to fit in God’s masterpiece of healing and wholeness—whether we help turn a neighborhood around or place a \$5 iron in the hands of someone seeking to build up their own life. *We just have to refuse to be indifferent and use the unique gifts that God has given to each one of us.*

Before I close, let’s refer one more time to our scripture for the day from Revelations and ponder for a moment. If we are all the leaves on the tree of life, can we not each one offer our God-given and unique gifts and skills and together be a canopy of healing of the nations. Very likely, one of us here today is the missing piece that could help this congregation complete one of God’s masterpieces. It is you?

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