

Living on the Edge



Creative Resources for Lent and Eastertide 2008

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Sacred Seasons:

Creative Worship Tools for Your Church

These unique worship resource packets are available for the liturgical year, four packets a year for \$150 (\$165 for non-US subscriptions), one packet for \$60 (\$75 outside of the US).

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Seeds of Hope, Inc., is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for the poor and hungry of God's world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. The group intends to seek out people of faith who feel called to care for the poor; and to affirm, enable, and empower a variety of responses to the problems of poverty.

Editorial Address

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Living on the Edge

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a word about this packet

The cover art for this packet is a new piece by Rebecca Ward, a highly acclaimed artist in Austin, Texas. Much of the other art is also by Rebecca—some of it new and some of it perhaps familiar to you. The packet theme is taken from Ken Sehested's sermon on page 5. You will find a sermon for Eastertide from John Ballenger, as well as several of his hymn lyrics. You will also find a variety of poems and meditations.

For Ash Wednesday services, or for Tenebrae or Maundy Thursday services, or Lenten activities for youth, please refer to earlier *Sacred Seasons* packets (particularly for Lent 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2002).

As always, the material in this packet is your congregation's to use freely. We have tried to pull together creative and inspiring resources that you can use to raise awareness of issues surrounding economic justice and food security (especially from a biblical perspective) in your congregation. We endeavored to choose a variety of age groups, worship areas, events, and angles, so that you would have a potpourri of art and ideas from which to choose.

We make a conscious effort to maintain a balance between the apostolic and the contemplative—on the one hand, the dynamic challenge to stay true to God's mandate to feed the poor and struggle for justice, and on the other hand, our own compelling need for nurture and healing while we work toward those dreams. May it be so.
Gratefully, *The Staff and Council of Stewards*

Why Did This Baby Have to Grow Up to Be So Hard to Follow?

art by Kate Moore

by Katie Cook

In years such as this one, when Ash Wednesday comes so early, it seems like we've barely had time to put away the Christmas things, and here we are, staring at six and a half weeks of Lent. It seems like we just sang the carols of Christ's birth, and now we're looking at his last trip to Jerusalem—and all that drama of blood and betrayal.

Why can't we linger a little longer in the stable and sing soft lullabies? Why do we have to face the anger of the Pharisees, and the wrenching goodbyes, and Pilate's whips so soon?

And why did this baby have to grow up to be so hard to follow? As we stood before his crib in the stable, as we saw the brilliance of the star and heard the angels filling the heavens with their song, we thought to ourselves, "I will follow this one to the ends of the earth."

But now we've gotten to the part where following him gets tough. And though it was actually dangerous in Bethlehem (what with Herod's paranoid killing spree) it seems more dangerous to us now. There doesn't seem to be much peace around our master. The religious leaders are clearly looking for an excuse to do away with him—and us, if we stand too close to him. The crowds are clamoring for him, but that won't last long. At this point, we mostly want to crawl under a table and hide from the whole thing.

But then we hear his voice, as he speaks gently to marginalized and mistreated people, as he tells us to feed the poor, to become like children, and, over and over again, to love. To love God, ourselves, and each other. Then we see him change the water into wine, the humble lunch into a feast, an empty net into the catch of

the year. We watch him heal people, Sabbath or no Sabbath. And we find ourselves saying, "I will follow this one to the ends of the earth."

God give us the courage.

—Katie Cook edits the *Seeds of Hope* publications *Sacred Seasons* and *Hunger News & Hope*, and also edits *Baptist Peacemaker*, a publication of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

Prayer for the Beginning of Lent

by Susan Shearer Ballenger

Our God,

It seems that we have just left the manger.
It seems that we have just finished celebrating your birth.
Now we stand in the shadow of the cross
and the shadow falls over all we have and have not done.

It seems that it is easier for us
to celebrate than mourn sometimes.

To enjoy the warmth of holidays
rather than the chill of the in between.
It is even easier for us to consider you
the babe shivering in the cold
than the man dying forsaken.

It is easier for us to see ourselves
as people doing the best that we can
than as those who live most often for themselves.

During this season gather us together
as those on a journey.

Keep our pace slow and deliberate.

Help us to not rush to celebrate,
for when we rush we miss out
on the deep gladness of the celebration.

Help us to face our own hollowness.
Help us to face our need for forgiveness.

Help us to face our need for you.

—Susan Ballenger is a minister in Baltimore, Maryland, who has spent the last few years caring for her two daughters and writing curriculum for churches.

This Kind Can Only Come Out by Prayer

a meditation by Argye Hillis

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. . . .

"What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.

A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech...."

I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

"Oh, unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you?"

How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

After Jesus had [healed the boy and] gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately,

"Why couldn't we drive it out?"

He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

Mark 9:14-29 and Matthew 17:19-21 (NIV)

Failure! And unexpected. The Lord sent them out and they had been on a roll, preaching, anointing the sick with oil, and driving out demons. Now suddenly—failure. The humiliation of a case over which they seemed to have no power at all. And not only that, but it happened in front of a hostile and argumentative crowd — at a time when the Lord had gone off to a high mountain with Peter, James and John and left them on their own.

How easy it is to forget that our ways are not God's ways — that no matter how good our intentions, it is God's will that matters. When Jesus did come and join them he seemed almost testy. How long shall I put up with you? After all, he was just coming down from the ultimate mountaintop experience. Nonetheless, he did heal the boy and then went aside in private with his disciples. So much to tell them and so little time.

Lord, who made the heavens in all their glory, who hold us in your mighty hands, help us to remember that you, not we, are God. Teach us the humility of knowing how little of your magnificent plan we see. As we struggle with difficult questions, help us not to be surprised or discouraged by our human failures, but

to open our hearts in faith so that, as you will, we may have some glimpse of your sustaining love and ultimate power.

— Argye Hillis is a retired biostatistician in Waco, Texas. This meditation was originally written for the Seeds of Hope publication Roots of Hope, Volume II.



art by Rebecca S. Ward

Fasting, Casting out Demons, and Living on the Edge

a sermon by Ken Sehested

Text: Mark 9:14-29

My first experience with fasting came when I was a freshman in college in the early 1970s. I honestly don't remember what the motivation was. Maybe late-adolescent desire to be different. I had recently given up my football scholarship, so maybe I was looking for a new challenge.

Or maybe it was part of my struggle to find new footing for my religious convictions, because the path I was on was surely crumbling under my feet. All I really remember was the curiosity. I didn't know what it meant to be hungry—*really* hungry—not just the feeling that comes when lunch gets pushed into mid-afternoon.

For some reason, I thought the experience would teach me something I needed to learn, something that my advanced education wouldn't provide.

For four days I lived on water and fruit juice. I didn't tell anybody. I didn't need to be reminded about what Jesus said to his followers, in the Sermon on the Mount: "When you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces to show others that they are fasting" (Matthew 6:16).

The first day was the hardest, as it always is—just breaking the psychological habit. The second day wasn't quite as bad. On the third day, I remember getting light-headed in a pickup basketball game on campus. And on the fourth day, to end the fast, I took a couple of good friends to dinner, to tell them about the experience.

I was looking forward to gorging myself and was surprised that I couldn't finish a second slice of pizza. It hadn't occurred to me that my stomach would shrink. I thought my taste buds would be delirious with the delight, but instead they were quite unresponsive.

Off and on, over the coming years, I experimented with fasting. For a time a group of friends covenanted to skip lunch once a week as a way to focus on our work against poverty and hunger. But the discipline didn't take root.

However, for reasons I can't fully explain, the

idea of fasting became intensely important to me as the US-led coalition prepared to invade Iraq in 1991. I was an organizer, working with a network of Baptist peace and justice activists, scrambling to find a way to mount popular resistance to the proposed invasion.

As a way to galvanize opposition to the impending war, we organized a "Call to Prayer and Fasting" project, urging our members to pray daily and fast weekly as we assembled a resource packet of historical/political analysis, Bible study, worship aids and other action-oriented material. We also began planning a January 15th prayer service in Washington, DC, featuring Rev. Jesse Jackson, who would link the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to the impending conflagration in Iraq.

Iraq. Environ of Eden's Garden. Birthplace of Abram and Sarai. Land where Daniel faced down King Nebuchadnezzar's lions; and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego marched unscathed through fiery furnace. Political geography which shaped Israel's early anti-imperial confession and, likely, the place from which Matthew's Magi (of "We Three Kings" fame) began their star-dazzled journey to Bethlehem.

Iraq. Nation-state created by British fiat and, later, further molested by Saddam's regime (courtesy of US covert operations which continue to torture the way to "democracy and freedom").

Many people—myself included—thought we had a politically realistic chance of altering the first Bush Administration's plans for war. We were wrong.

The service in Washington was on a Monday. On Tuesday I spoke at a large anti-war rally in a church in Durham, North Carolina. By Wednesday I was back home in Memphis, Tennessee, about to leave for our church's Wednesday night dinner and prayer meeting. Then the news came that the 500,000 US troops mustered in Saudi Arabia had been unleashed into Kuwait.

At church that evening I was asked to voice a prayer. Before I finished, I broke down, sobbing and weeping uncontrollably. It was embarrassing—for everyone. It provoked a kind of speechlessness. Or maybe it uncovered the speechlessness we all felt.

Today's text, in Mark 9, is the story about Jesus' healing of a boy possessed by a violent form of speechlessness—a condition that Jesus' disciples assumed they could alter. They were wrong.

Often, in unison with the despairing disciples, we ask Jesus, "Why could we not cast out this spirit?"

The body-convulsing lament that captured me that Wednesday evening led, in the following week,

Today's text, in Mark 9, is the story about Jesus' healing of a boy possessed by a violent form of speechlessness—a condition that Jesus' disciples assumed they could alter. They were wrong.

to the idea of expanding my own weekly fast. I decided to fast throughout Lent, beginning in mid-February's Ash Wednesday and going until Easter morning. For 46 days I would subsist on bread and water.

The choice of bread and water was intentional; this is a traditional image of the prisoner's fare. During this time, I wrote about how our own nation's imprisoned perceptions and aspirations, by our insulation from the rest of the world, by our self-absorbed, consumptive habits. As W.H. Auden wrote, "We are lived by forces we scarcely understand."

I don't believe, by and large, that we intentionally set out to oppress others. It's not that we are ruthless and cold-hearted. There is plenty of evidence that as a people we are kind and generous and tender-hearted. But there is a structural blindness that blocks our capacity to see—a deafness to the voices of those trampled beneath our domestic and international policies. It renders those on the margins speechless, casting them into "Shock and Awe" fires, and into water-boarding cells, to be destroyed.

The ancient voice from Scripture pleaded, "Who can deliver us from this body of death?"

And we ask, "Why can we not cast out these demons?"

Today's text is as rich as it is complex. The story is included in a larger section of Mark's Gospel that belongs to the so-called "apocalyptic" writings, a genre of ancient literature wrapped in obscure references and a worldview that is not only strange but is also offensive to modern sensibilities. It isn't easy for us to get our heads around its meaning.

The text does include, however, one of the great lines that captures our own struggle for faith, the line voiced by the possessed boy's father who, when confronted by Jesus, exclaims: "Lord, I do believe—help thou my unbelief." It's comforting, in a strange way, to know we share company in our ambivalent faith.

Let me draw your attention especially to the descriptive effect on the boy possessed by the demon. The text says that the evil spirit convulsed the child, "casting him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him" (verse 21).

The odd thing is that these destructive threats—being scorched by the fire, being drowned by water—are also, in other places, the redemptive marks of the God Movement: being immersed into the waters of baptism, marking resurrected life; being touched by the flames of the Holy Spirit, at Pentecost, marking the birth of the community of forgiveness and mercy.

The earth's abundance has this same ironic character: the boy's speechlessness infects us, hindering our ability to speak out against fear-plagued habits in the human community. It's not our pleasure in eating that deforms some and demeans others.

It is our habit of eating alone, without regard to others, that leads to a spiral of violence and enmity. Either we come to the communion table of blessing and bounty together, with seats for all, or we sow the seeds of our own destruction.

One unfortunate thing about our gluttonous culture is that fasting, typically, is associated with dieting. Or, for others, fasting is associated with a form of religious piety that images God as a demanding, petulant, and fickle deity who takes pleasure in human suffering.

Fasting, of course, is a common discipline to every faith tradition. The truth is, though, that when someone says "discipline," one of the things that comes mind is a trip to the principal's office for a paddling. "Discipline" equals "hurt." But the Latin root of the word "discipline" is actually "learning."

Have you ever stopped to ask directions and got the response, “Well, you can’t get there from here”? First, you have to go somewhere else. This is one way to think of Jesus’ strange response to his disciples’ frustration and failure.

Before you can cast out this demon, you have to go to another place. You have to find a different point of leverage, a different angle of vision. As Albert Einstein said, major problems can’t be solved on the same plane in which they were created. Prayer and fasting are means to a new imagination. They lead to the ability to see the world in a completely different way. This is undoubtedly what led the novelist Kurt Vonnegut to say:

I want to stay as close to the edge as I can. Out on the edge you can see all kinds of things you can’t see from the center.

It’s at the edge that we can understand and alter the forces that drive our lives toward entropy. The call to prayer and fasting is an invitation to move to the margin. It’s from the margin, only from the margin, that life can be reimagined in ways that counteract the spiral of violence.

But moving to the margin requires effort and often discomfort. Moving there feels like a transition into a fierce wilderness, feels like abandoning security and safety. But what we discover is that God is there, that manna is provided, that grace is sufficient. And that very desert, says the prophet, is the place that one day will bloom, one day will flow with milk and honey, one day will be abundantly watered. This is the hope that sustains us. It is the beauty, not the duty, that steels us for the journey.

—Ken Sehested is a co-pastor of the Circle of Mercy Congregation and a stonemason in Asheville, North Carolina.

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Twenty-four Hours with the Homeless

Note; During Holy Week, members of the Open Door Community in Atlanta, Georgia have traditionally participated in a rare form of spiritual discipline. They spend 24 hours with the homeless people of their city. Stan Saunders, a New Testament professor at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, writes of this tradition:

There are many folks, even in the churches and perhaps among the homeless themselves, who might regard this exercise as foolish, or not worth the risks, or as merely a token gesture. The Bible indicates otherwise. Among many biblical passages that affirm the importance of this spiritual discipline, the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 stands out:

*...who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave...
(Philippians 2:6-7)*

Paul’s use of this hymn, in fact, suggests that anything short of this kind of embodied witness to the power of the cross falls short of his definition of what it means to be Christian. More importantly, the hymn points us toward a foundational form of discernment and witness to who God is, namely, “solidarity with the humiliated.”

I need to warn you about this passage. There is good historical reason to conclude that immersion into it has the potential to shape our imagination and practice in decisive ways...

—from *Hospitality*, the newspaper of the Open Door Community

Lectionary Readings for Lent and Easter

Year A

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
or Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 51:1-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17
or Matthew 17:1-9

Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

Fourth Sunday in Lent

1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

Liturgy of the Palms

Matthew 21:1-11
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Liturgy of the Passion

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Matthew 26:14-27:66
Matthew 27:11-54

Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16-25
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9
John 18:1-19:42

Easter Sunday

Acts 10:34-43
Jeremiah 31:1-6
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18
Matthew 28:1-10



art by Rebecca S. Ward

Ash Wednesday

by C. W. Christian

Ash Wednesday, and shadows all around me, lives lived in shadows and emptiness, longing for substance, aching to be filled. But there is no one and nothing to fill them—nothing save ashes. Nothing to give joy and hope, nothing to brighten their eyes, to make them glitter in the anticipation of another day. It is as the poet has told us, “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day ‘til the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.”

Ash Wednesday and a world bereft—bereft of hope, of love—eyes that seem to see nothing at all and yet seem as old and as all-seeing as the sages. It is a fallen world, full of old men unnoticed by those who pass by, old men with sunken cheeks and bent backs sitting by the wayside, waiting—for what?

Ash Wednesday! A world of business tycoons and kings of oil and industry who are fiduciary visionaries and moral myopics. A world filled to weeping with children, children who might in any moment be dissolved in a flash by dynamite or torpex, or eaten away slowly to nothing by want and neglect. A world full of nursing mothers who have no milk and pious priests who have no comfort to bestow.

Ash Wednesday! The color again is purple, not the joyful purple of royalty, the color of a coming king, but the purple of blood and of deep sorrow. For I have sinned, O Lord. I have seen this dark world and have remained silent. I have lived in the shadows and done little to dispel them, to scatter the encircling gloom with the light of truth.

Ash Wednesday! It is not so much the ashes on my brow that are most with me, but the taste of ashes in my mouth, the flavor of sin and death. Where do I look, Lord? Where is the horizon? When will it glow with the light of hope and resurrection?

—C. W. (Wally) Christian is a retired theology professor living in Waco, Texas. He taught for many years in Baylor University’s Department of Religion.



palm branch by Rebecca S.

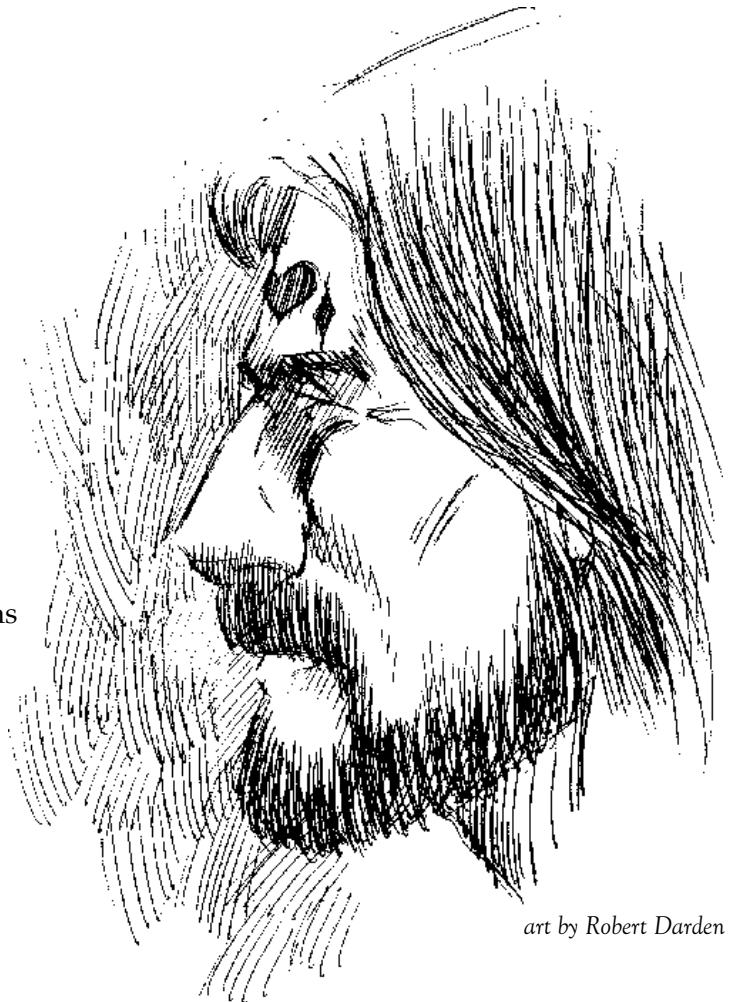
When Jesus Went to Nazareth

John Ballenger, b. 1963

CORONATION C.M.
Oliver Holden (1765-1844)

Texts: Mark 6:1-13, Luke 4:16-21

1. When Jesus went to Nazareth
they would have crowned him King!
The height and depth and width and breadth
of their love they would sing.
With joy they'd join all that has breath
and let their praises ring.
2. They had their careful stratagem,
they wanted to be blessed
They want him to honor them
as those who knew him best.
Their wrong desires did condemn—
and to their sin attest.
3. Then Jesus healed a leper there,
and made the blind to see.
But those who saw were unaware
of how they were set free
and in their awe would not beware
of power's tyranny.
4. For Jesus would not play their games;
he would not love them most.
but showed them Scripture's clearest aims
that they no more should boast.
No acts of pow'r enhanced his claim:
good news must be foremost.
5. We do admire the powerful—
the mighty and the proud.
And acts of pow'r do have their pull—
with strong appeal endowed.
But Jesus shows his own faithful:
love turns worlds upside down.



art by Robert Darden

—John Ballenger is a pastor in Baltimore, Maryland.

Passion Sunday

entry from a reporter's journal

by David Wilkinson

I was engrossed in my Sunday morning ritual of a Starbucks latte and *The New York Times* when I was interrupted by a call on my cell phone with a tip that Jesus had been spotted on the outskirts of town. I jumped in the car, called a photographer, and left a message for my editor.

After parking several blocks from the location the caller had given me, I joined a stream of people, all abuzz with excitement. Word spreads quickly in these poor neighborhoods, and Jesus' popularity among marginalized people of every stripe and color has been skyrocketing.

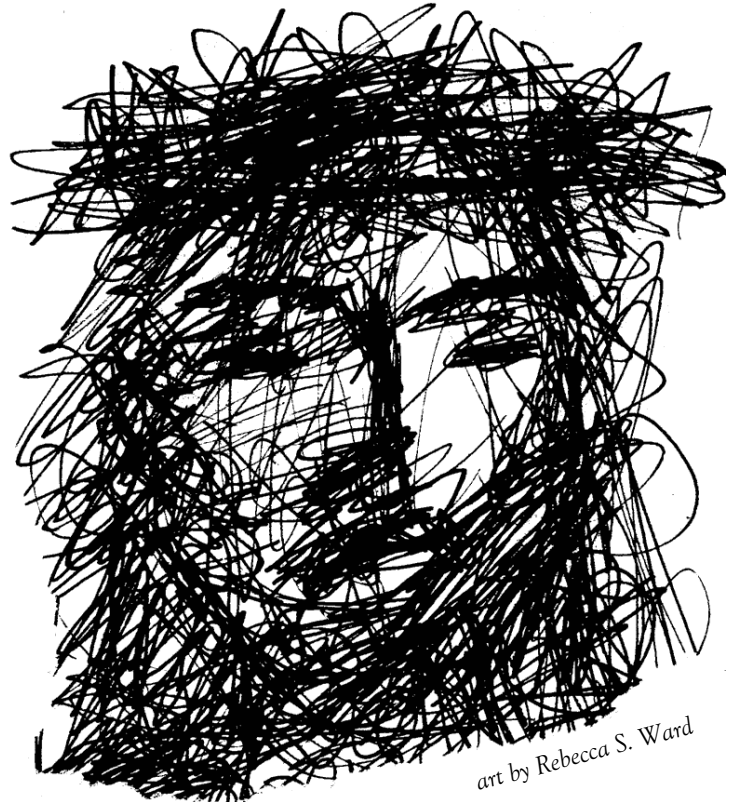
One the other hand, his reputation among the state's business and religious leaders has been taking a beating, especially after a controversial speech at one of the nation's biggest Baptist colleges. Though a hit with the students, Jesus managed to embarrass the administration, offend most of the faculty, and enrage some of the school's deepest-pocketed donors.

I rounded the corner, wriggled through the crowd, and tried to comprehend the scene before me. Jesus may be a celebrity, but he steadfastly avoids the customary trappings. He was obviously the focus of the impromptu parade. But, instead of waving from a glistening black limo, there he was, perched on a couple of bales of hay in the back of a battered old pickup with a barely decipherable "Datsun" on the mud-caked tailgate.

I scribbled some notes, did a few interviews and then filed the story from home. Later, as I reviewed photos the photographer had emailed me, I was drawn to an image that still haunts me. It was a tight shot of Jesus' face. His eyes reflect a deep sorrow, as if he is seeing past all the adulation into some dark and foreboding future.

I wonder what will become of this Jesus and the unorthodox, grassroots movement he likes to associate with the Kingdom of God. Twenty-seven years as a reporter has taught me volumes about the fickleness of fame. I wonder whether a year from now anyone will remember his name, much less his message.

— At this writing, David Wilkinson was the minister of education for Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas. He now works in the development office of the Baylor University School of Social Work.



art by Rebecca S. Ward

The Law as Jesus Taught It

John Ballenger, b. 1963

AURELIA 7.6.7.6 D.
Samuel S. Wesley (1810-1876)

1. They gathered 'round the woman
with stones enough for all
for she was judged and guilty
according to the law.
She had no hope of rescue;
her tears fell to the ground
Then he reached down and raised her,
and what was lost was found.
2. They left him by the roadside
expecting him to die.
The priest and Levite passed him;
their law let them walk by.
He had no hope of rescue;
his blood now stained the ground.
Then he reached down and raised h
and what was lost was found.
3. And all around us neighbors
are crying out in need.
The law must help us help them
to be the law indeed.
They have no hope of rescue,
the insight is profound:
if we reach down we are raised
and what was lost is found.
4. The law as Jesus taught it
is truth and grace combined.
They cannot be divided,
nor can they be denied.
Our eyes with truth see clearly;
our lives with grace set free.
Let this be the beginning
of living differently.



art by Robert Darden

—John Ballenger is a pastor in Baltimore, Maryland.

Quotes, Poems, & Pithy Sayings

Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.
—Martin Luther King, Jr.

A faith of convenience is a hollow faith.
—Father Francis Mulcahy, M*A*S*H, "A Holy Mess"

It ain't supposed to make sense; it's faith. Faith is when you believe something nobody in his right mind would believe.
—Archie Bunker, "All in the Family"

Worship is dangerous. It is not a retreat from reality, but a direct engagement with ultimate reality: God. Genuine worship is a response to God and what God has done; in it we make ourselves vulnerable to the story of Israel and Jesus. Sham worship attempts to manipulate and transform God, but true worship praises God as God is and calls Christians to risk the transformation of themselves and the world.
—Robert Webber and Rodney Clapp, *People of the Truth*

All right, so Jesus is alive; what does that mean? Is he going to come back? Are we going to follow him around again like we have for the last three years? Add to the impressive stories? So he's alive; what now?
—John Ballenger

The dominant note in the early Christian worldview is joy, because something has happened as a result of which the world really is a different place. They're living out of that; they don't really care if they get

put in prison or beaten up or whatever because something has happened that now determines who they are.
—N. T. Wright

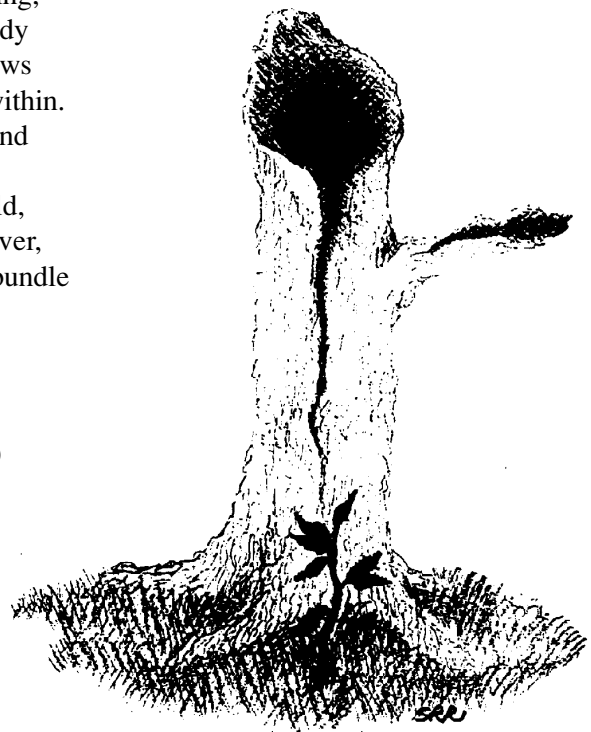
All of creation is practicing resurrection, over and over and over again, and is teaching us to do the same.
—Dawn M. Ripley

Soulspring

by Dale Carmen, OEF

Nothing
But dry, tasteless,
Sterile stick
Up until a few weeks
Ago. Then a swelling;
A thickening of body
Like a woman knows
When life grows within.
The stick softens and
Cracks outward to
Deliver to the world,
For the first time ever,
A (still wrinkled) bundle
Called leaf.
It is a miracle.

So is God in me
Being born (again)
For the first time
Ever.



art by Sharon R. Rollins

—Dale Carmen, a United Church of Christ minister, is one of the founders of the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans. She drives a significant distance to preach for four churches each Sunday in and around Carson, North Dakota.

Within the Storms

John Ballenger, b. 1963

GALILEE 8.7.8.7
William H. Jude (1851-1922)

Text: Mark 4:35-41

1. The disciples, in their terror,
woke the Master from his sleep.
“Do you care not? Won’t you save us
from the fierce and stormy deep?”
2. Jesus rose and asked what they feared.
“have you still no faith to claim?”
Then he turned to wind and water
and said: “Peace now in God’s name.”
3. Jesus left the stormy weather
for the storms that humans bring.
With tomorrow waiting for him,
Jesus stormed death’s very sting.
4. When the winds blow—when the tears flow,
and the tempest does not cease,
still within that very horror,
we will find the truth of peace.
5. The disciples looked in wonder
“Who is this the winds obey?
Oh, my God, what have we wakened
what will happen from this day?”
6. When we ask our hardest questions
and no answers we receive,
then the mystery of the question
is the heart of our belief.
7. The assurance of the presence
of the God who’s always here
is the faith that in our storm’s path
helps us overcome our fear.

—John Ballenger is a pastor in Baltimore, Maryland.



Gethsemane

by Ann McGlashan

Against the breeze that night would surely bring
I wrapped myself up close in cloak and hood,
And waited for my master's beckoning,
That I might try to soothe his strange, dark mood.
But excess took its toll on good intent.
I slept, not feet from where my master prayed.
I slept while he was whipped, his garments rent,
His body nailed to wood, flesh scourged and flayed.
I slept through sword and scimitar and spear,
Machete blade and bullet, oven's flame,
Atomic fallout, famine, hatred, fear,
The constant roar of anger, spite, and blame.
I slept, and still I sleep, and feel no pain.
Why ever would I want to wake again?

— Ann McGlashan, a native of Falkirk, Scotland, teaches in the Modern Foreign Language and Baylor Interdisciplinary Core departments at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Always the Women

by Louis Mazé

Why is it always the women? I recently realized that it was to the women that the message of his resurrection was granted, just as it was to Mary that the first news of his coming was announced—not to any man.

Yes, we men lit out for the hills, after our Master was taken from us—we were sure we'd be next, and yes, we were afraid, and our minds were perplexed. That, at any rate, is our story, and, for the record, we are sticking to it.

But it was the women who stayed and who went to the tomb. I supposed they could have been arrested, too, but they went anyway.

It was their work, after all, their duty.

Oh, all right, I have to admit, they were not afraid—or at least not so afraid as to shirk.

In a word, they were *stronger*.

Our Lord taught us that we are all alike, men and women, which isn't how I was raised, and I accept that teaching now. We complement each other, we make a unity, both of us created in God's image.

And yet, we are different. And I want to know how, and in what ways, and why it is that it was to the women that the message was vouchsafed—why they were chosen, for there is a reason for everything.

Try as I may, I can never know what it is to bear a child, to give birth to a new life in pain, to love that new life with a love that can only come from that pain and joy.

Nor can I understand what it must be then to see that life snuffed out, much less extinguished in torture and torment, degradation and agonizing death.

And yet she, the mother, stood at the cross with a strength that I, a man, have not.

There is in each man something of a woman, and in each woman a man, and if I am to understand my Lord's message, I must somehow find the mother in me, the wife, the lover, sister, daughter—the one

who cares beyond caring, who bears beyond bearing, who carries on when there is no dawn. Only then will I see what our Savior meant and love all people and accept that he truly died for me, who ran away.

—Louis Mazé is a professor at Texas State Technical College in Bellmead, Texas.



art by Robert Askins

A Children's Sermon for Holy Week

by LeAnna Bryant

Materials needed: illustrations of the metamorphic stages of a caterpillar/butterfly and butterfly stickers

Show the children pictures of a caterpillar. Ask them what they know about caterpillars. Ask questions like, "Did you know the caterpillar is not always going to look like this?"

Next, show the children pictures of a cocoon. Ask "Do you see a caterpillar in this picture? What happens to this caterpillar?"

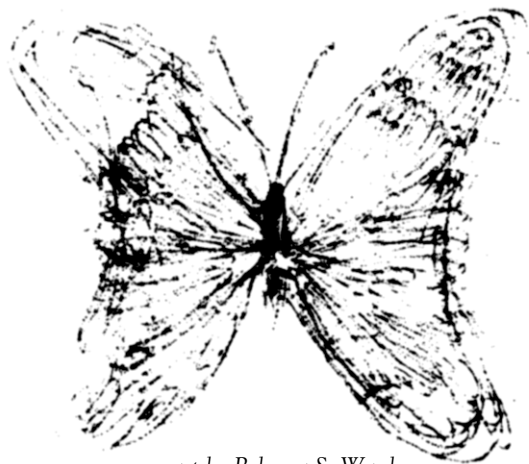
Then show pictures of a butterfly coming out of the cocoon. Ask "What's happening in this picture?"

Tell the children that the Easter story is similar to this caterpillar becoming a butterfly. Say something like, "Jesus lived many years serving God. Many people did not like what he did and

taught, so they did a bad thing and killed him. But, just like the caterpillar doesn't stay in the cocoon, Jesus did not stay in the tomb where they buried him. And just like the butterfly is beautiful when it comes out of the cocoon, Jesus was also beautiful when he came out of the tomb."

Give each child a butterfly sticker and say something like "This sticker is to remind us that Jesus is alive and beautiful. When we act like Jesus, we are beautiful, too."

—LeAnna Bryant is a graduate student in Curriculum and Instruction and plans to teach elementary school children in Atlanta, Georgia.



art by Rebecca S. Ward

The dominant note in the early Christian worldview is joy, because something has happened as a result of which the world really is a different place.

They're living out of that; they don't really care if they get put in prison or beaten up or whatever because something has happened that now determines who they are.

—N. T. Wright



art by Rebecca S. Ward

Easter Thoughts

by William Cooper

The gospel accounts of the final days Jesus spent in Jerusalem are filled with tension, although the disciples seem to be unaware of what was really at stake. However, those responsible for Temple worship and for keeping the Roman authorities at bay were aware of the tensions, and they wanted to get rid of the person responsible for stirring up the trouble.

They won out. They got rid of Jesus. Even the disciples were convinced it was over. He died on the day he was crucified, and Joseph, a member of the Council, buried him.

On the day after the Sabbath, fully expecting Jesus' body to be in the tomb, some of the women went to dress the body. It was early in the morning, shortly after sunup, and they were wondering who they could find to help them roll back the stone that covered the tomb. As they approached the tomb, they saw the stone was already rolled back.

They must have wondered who had done that, and with some apprehension they stepped into the tomb. At the same time, they saw a young man sitting in the tomb, all dressed in white. After a brief pause, he told them Jesus had been raised and would meet them back in Galilee.

This was totally incomprehensible. The contradiction and unexpectedness must have been too much, and as Mark gives the account, they were overcome with terror and amazement. They ran from the tomb, and out of fear they said nothing, to anyone.

This account ends with a terrifying silence, a silence that could not remain silent. For when the women got back home their terrified demeanor and amazement would have been clear to their family and friends. Questions would have been pressed upon them, the same questions we would have pressed upon them and press upon them still.

But the questions end up being brushed aside because the response comes from an

unanticipated direction and fills us with amazement.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

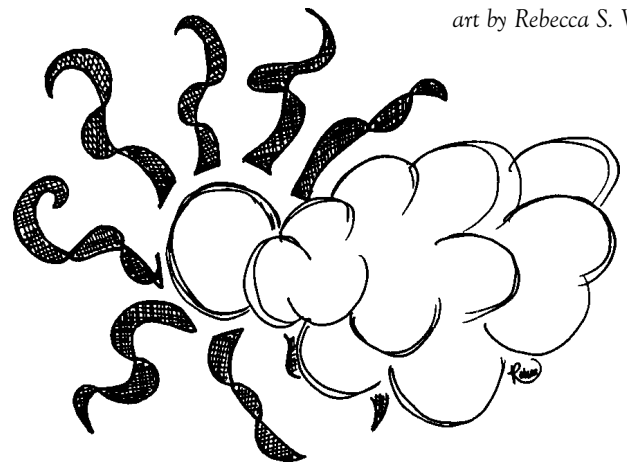
"Go and tell my brothers:"

"Two of them on the road to Emmaus..."

"Peace be with you."

"And see, I am sending upon you what my father promised...the spirit of truth and power from on high."

—Bill Cooper is a retired dean and professor of philosophy in Waco, Texas.



The resurrection is not a denial of the past,
It is a sacrament of tears shed, pain sustained,
and death remembered...

to celebrate the sacrament of life
in the face of death
is an act of faith.

to believe in life resurrected
from the ruins of human conflict
comes from God who is the power
of transformation

And to work toward change
in the human condition
is a calling in response to
the vision of God's reign.

—C. S. Song

All for One and One for All

a sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter

by John S. Ballenger

Texts: Acts 4:32-35, Psalm 133, 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

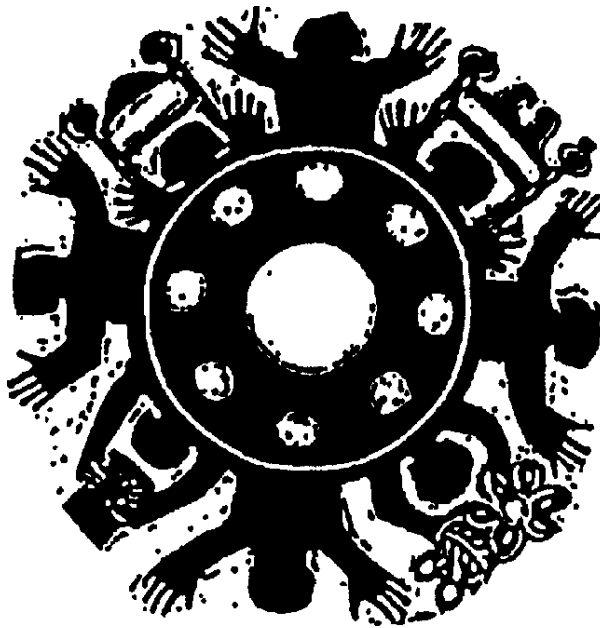
Last week we celebrated resurrection. And we did it up right. The music was wonderful. Alleluias resounded. When we had our responsive affirmation, "Christ is risen indeed," the sound of voices in unison filled this place. The pews were packed. We felt good about who we are and what we do. But, as my former pastor once said on Easter Sunday, "What good does all this do if we go out from here and are silent?"

This is the second Sunday of Easter. What difference does it make today that it was Easter last week? At a very practical level—so what? I once tried to answer that in a college department discussion and had difficulty coming up with other than religious affirmations. So it's important to the way we verbalize our faith, and to the liturgical year, but how does it affect my life?

Can you imagine the disciples in the confusing aftermath of Easter, not knowing, you know, what Easter meant—that Easter meant ultimate triumph and joy—there in that locked room, maybe the same room where some of them had celebrated the Passover on Thursday, trying to figure out how everything could have changed so profoundly so quickly.

The trauma of the betrayal and arrest, the trial and death of Jesus, the dawning awareness of how each one of them had let Jesus down. And what were they supposed to do now?

Then there's the shock of resurrection news. Mary's probably in that room—head in her hands,



frustrated as all get-out—wondering how Jesus put up with these guys who don't listen to what you say and who don't believe what they hear, but she's still trying to convince them that she wasn't hallucinating when she saw Jesus in the garden.

The disciple Jesus loved—well, he believes. He's off in some corner muttering to himself: "How do I put this? Where do I start? Let's see, in the beginning was...what?"

Some are in shock. Some in rather violent discussions about things Jesus said and what those things might have meant or what those things might mean.

And then Jesus is there. In the locked room. "Peace," he says, and as many commentators as there are who say this was the normal greeting of the time, I maintain that it's a good bit closer to 'Fear not' than to 'Hi guys.' And he goes on, "As God has sent me, so send I you."

Seven days later, notice how much progress the disciples have made. They're still locked up in that room. Still trying to figure things out. Still not sure what's happened—what any of this really means.

All right, so Jesus is alive, what does that mean? Is he going to come back? Are we going to follow him around again like we have for the last three years? Add to the impressive list of neat stories and cool miracles? So he's alive, what now?

And what are Caiaphas, Annas, and Pilate going to think of this? "If he won't stay dead, let's see about some of the others!" That could get nasty pretty

quick. Everyone's trying to figure out what it means for them that Jesus is alive, except, of course, for Thomas, who doesn't believe that Jesus is alive.

And here he is again.

We have this image of a calm, controlled, quiet Jesus. I am as convinced that Jesus had a mischievous streak a mile wide as I am that at least one of the disciples had prematurely gray hair and that several had irregular heartbeats due to repeated shock. "Peace. Hi, guys. Fear not. What are you all still doing here? Hi, Thomas."

And here we are. The week after Easter in our enclosed room. Trying to figure out what Easter means to us. What does it mean to us to say that

All right, so Jesus is alive, what does that mean? Is he going to come back? Are we going to follow him around again like we have for the last three years? Add to the impressive list of neat stories and cool miracles? So he's alive, what now?

Jesus is alive? Because it should matter, shouldn't it? After all, it's what most of us say is basic to who we are as Christians. But maybe it shouldn't just be a triumphant, beautiful sense of peace, a definitive clarity of dogma, but a scary proposition—confusing—unsettling, and infinitely mysterious.

"Fear not. Leave these enclosed rooms. Get out from behind these locked doors. As God sent me, so send I you."

And John's over in the corner still muttering—trying to pull it all together: "In the beginning was the—in the beginning was the—in the beginning was *the word*, and the word was—the word was *community*. And everything that was made was with God and God was with everything.

And the man and the woman were the stewards of all that is, and there was mutual responsibility—interdependence. In the beginning was community—full of grace and truth." And John scratches his head. "Well, it's a first draft."

It's not the draft that "took," of course, but it's not bad. Not bad at all. As you look through the biblical record, community is one of the major dreams of God for humankind. As T. S. Eliot puts it in *The Rock*: "What life have you if you have not life

together?" Community is a part of creation, as Matthew Fox writes: "Creation is all things and us. It is us in relationship with all things" (*Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts of the Peoples of the Earth*.)

It's part of the law, and we read in Deuteronomy commandments to take care of each other. It's integral to Jesus and basic to the epistles. Remember one of our texts for today: "If we walk in the light, we have fellowship with one another." In the beginning was the word and the word was community.

Community is one of those things we like to think we're good at. We tend to define it as the sentimental, warm, fuzzy circle of friends that make the hard times bearable and the good times even more fun. And I in no way mean to "knock" that. That's incredibly important.

But there are perhaps even more important levels of community beyond that. And we do have some sense of this. We go on to define community as ever-larger, concentric circles of which we're a part: family, friends, workplace, church, neighborhood, town, country.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was community. But it comes as no surprise how early in the experience of community the question comes up: "Am I my brother's keeper?" A question, you might notice, that God doesn't even deign to answer—which doesn't keep people from asking it over and over again: "Am I my brother's keeper? Am I my sister's keeper?"

And close on its heels is the next question: "All right, then who is my brother? Who is my sister? Who is in my circle?" And Jesus looks at us quizzically in our closed room. "There was a man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell among thieves." Remember the lawyer who prompted the story of the Good Samaritan? "Who is my neighbor?"

God isn't too pleased with those who seek to set limits on those we're supposed to care about. C. S. Song writes of "the tenuous nature of what is called community in which people, to use a Chinese expression, 'have different dreams in the same bed'" (C. S. Song, quoted in *The Living Pulpit*.) God looks beyond the circles we draw. And let's be honest, church is a circle we draw.

"Fear not," Jesus says. "Leave these enclosed rooms. Get out from behind these locked doors. As God sent me, so I send you, in the name of the Holy Spirit."

We're pretty good at taking care of the circles we've chosen—the circles in which we're comfortable in times of crisis. In the movie *Starman*, the alien played by Jeff Bridges says at one point, "The interesting thing about you humans is that you always seem to be at your best when things are at their worst."

We're pretty good in times of crisis, but what does it say, to say community can't survive good times? What does it say when in times of war, crisis, disaster, when there's an external force working on us, we do well? It means there's a good reason the readers and hearers of the epistles are so often addressed as little children. It's true that it's a term of affection. It's also true that it's a reminder that we have yet to grow up.

An important part of the process of maturing—of growing up into responsible adults—has to do with the transition from external motivation and validation to a motivation and validation that is internal. As children it's okay for us to work for the praise of our parents or teachers, but at some point, we're supposed to grow into doing things because it's what we need to do—for ourselves and for others.

What does it say, to say we do well in times of crisis? It says that we need to work toward a time and a way of being where we can do well without the external factors making us do well.

A friend of mine who pastors in Richmond, Virginia, was telling me about how his church banded together with an African-American church and how the church members would patrol the most dangerous streets of the city late at night—by their presence indicating that they had something to say about what was allowed to happen in this neighborhood, about what was tolerated and what would not be tolerated.

Go beyond your circle. As God sent me, so send I you. Practice community. Practice being uncomfortable in a circle that seems beyond you.

In the 1994 July / August issue of *Salt* magazine this story appeared:

When racism rears its ugly head in the form of a hate crime, the first response of a lot of communities is to downplay the significance of the problem. That's not how the folks in Billings, Montana, handled their problem with racism.

Racist flyers attacking Jews, Native and Hispanic Americans, African Americans, and homosexuals were left in mailboxes and under

windshield wipers. The situation became even more serious when neo-Nazi skinheads began making appearances at services in African-American churches, and a swastika was nailed onto the front door of a synagogue.

That was enough for Police Chief Wayne Inman. "Hate crimes and activity will flourish only in communities that allow them to flourish," he later told the New York Times. Inman and other community leaders made sure that Billings responded quickly to hate crimes; a corps of volunteers from a painters union began repainting homes and garages that had been

Go beyond your circle. As God sent me, so send I you. Practice community. Practice being uncomfortable in a circle that seems beyond you.

spray-painted with swastikas.

When homes were vandalized because they displayed Hanukkah menorahs, local Christian communities distributed paper menorahs that began to appear in thousands of windows throughout the city. At the same time, church, civic, and business leaders loudly condemned the hate crimes.

Other sporadic incidents followed, including vandalism at a Catholic school that had displayed the paper menorahs. But each incident triggered a vociferous reaction from the community.

Billings has learned that while a community on its own cannot eradicate the sin of racism, a quick, aggressive, unified and noisy response to hate-violence can at least intimidate the hate-mongers. As a billboard rented by one Billings business, the Universal Athletics Company, put it: "Not in our town! No hate. No violence."

Practice community. The stakes are frighteningly high. As a Catholic Worker poster put it: "When they come for the innocent without crossing over your body, cursed be your religion and your life."

So how do we practice? Have you ever done that thing where you read "for God so loved the world," but instead of "the world," you fill in your name? What if you were to read a newspaper, and as you read the stories of the day, you inserted the name of someone you know and love into each story?

What if you filled that building that blew up with your family reunion? That car accident with your neighbors? What if Darfur was a story about your church, or your children's school? What does it mean to all suffer when one suffers and to all rejoice when one rejoices? It means each one of us embraces the peoples and the stories of the world; it means letting them affect us.

It means that when we read this report from Bread for the World it is a challenge and a commissioning:

The global community has the capacity to provide every man, woman, and child with adequate food, clean water, safe sanitation, primary health care, and basic schooling in the next few years at an affordable price. UNICEF estimates that the US share of such an effort would be an additional \$2 billion a year. That's less than what people in the United States spend monthly on beer.

It means we have a goal of finding out way out to the circle that encompasses all of God's children. It means that we work out way out to that circle. It means we don't tolerate excuses. It means we transform the way things are. We make the world a better place for all God's creation. We leave this world a better place for those yet to come.

Have we here in our city—have we here at our church—decided that in the name of God it is wrong for anyone to be without a place to live, food to eat, or adequate health care? Have we decided that racism and abuse of any kind is intolerable and we will not allow it? Have we shoved our way into the circles around us as much as we need to? Working for transformation in the immediate community around the church? Throughout the city?

"Leave these enclosed rooms. Get out from behind these locked doors. Go beyond your comfortable circles. Shove your way into other circles and make a difference. As God sent me so send I you."

In the beginning was the word, and the word was community—full of grace and truth.

I recently came across these disturbingly challenging words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Whether in our time Christ can still occupy a place where we make decisions on the deepest matters known to us, over our own life and over the life of our people, that is the question we will consider today. Whether or not the Spirit of Christ has anything final, definite, and decisive

to say to us, that is what we want to speak about....

One thing is clear: we understand Christ only if we commit ourselves to him in a stark "Either-Or." He did not go to the cross to ornament and embellish our life. If we wish to have him, then he demands the right to say something decisive about our entire life.

The way I live my life does matter. God has changed my life and my life needs to be about changing life for others—something we in the church all too often hear as changing *the lives* of others. Two different things. We need to be about changing *life* for others. Creation will be different—better because of how I have chosen to live my life.

A Zulu proverb says that when a thorn pierces the foot, the whole body must bend over to pull it out. The body does not consist of one member, but of many. And we are the body of Christ.

Have you ever thought about who you would identify as Jesus' community? Peter, James and John, and Judas; tax collectors, prostitutes and Pharisees; Roman soldiers with hammers and high priests with political agendas; the homeless, the mentally ill, and the folks whose pictures are in *People Magazine*; CEOs who have five homes scattered over the globe and the garbage collector in his one-room apartment; Christians and Buddhists; atheists and secular humanists.

Practice community. The circle includes us all.

Isn't it time to prove G. K. Chesterton wrong when he says, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." Isn't it time to confront the damning truth of what is attributed to Ghandi: "I might have become a Christian if I had ever met one." Or, the other version I've heard: "I might have become a Christian if it weren't for Christians."

It is my prayer that all of us here will be challenged—to grow up, to mature, to become a people with one dream, one heart, and one soul—dreaming together of changing the world, dreaming God's dream of community, and living lives dedicated to such a dream, to leave this room as those sent, in the name of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus was sent.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth.

—John Ballenger is a pastor in Baltimore, Maryland.

benediction



art by Peter Yuichi Clark

...Among people everywhere, sharing of bread
forms a bond of fellowship.

For the sake of our redemption,
we say together the ancient words
which join us with our own people
and with all who are in need,
with the wrongly imprisoned
and the beggar in the street.

For our redemption is bound up
with the deliverance from bondage
of people everywhere.

This is the bread of affliction,
the poor bread,

which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt.

Let all who are hungry come and eat.

Let all who are in want
share the hope of Passover.

As we celebrate here,
we join with our people everywhere.

This year we celebrate here.

Next year in the land of Israel.

Now we are all still bondmen.

Next year may all be free.

—from the *Yahatz*, the portion of the Passover Seder in which the middle matzah is broken and shared.
This passage is taken from the *New Union Passover Haggadah*, published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis.