

Sacred Texts for Beloved Community 5 *World Communion*

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Ezekiel 34:15-16, 25-31

¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. ²⁵ I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. ²⁶ I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. ²⁷ The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil, and they shall know that I am

the LORD when I break the bars of their yoke and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. ²⁸ They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. ²⁹ I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. ³⁰ They shall know that I, the LORD their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord GOD. ³¹ You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord GOD.

John 3:11-17

¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

There have been many seasons in our lifetimes, and surely this is one of them, when these two words seem completely in-compatible: World Communion. Historically, in the church's vocabulary, World Communion is a fairly new construct, because its conception as an ecumenical observation didn't come about until the mid-1930's. Given the national and global uncertainty of our time, it's worth remembering that World Communion came into being during the Great Depression, after World War I, and as tensions were mounting toward World War II. To use the words of a leading poet of that day, T.S. Eliot, wrote that it was a time "for a further union, a deeper communion through the dark cold and empty desolation."¹

Poetic words that sadly resonate with the volatility, violence and tense alliances of our day. Then as now, during a time of economic uncertainty, of escalating violence and warfare, a time in which those earthly realities were taking a toll on the spiritual health of believers, World Communion Sunday was established. Its purpose to reaffirm the power of the Lord's Supper to unite the church of Jesus Christ, and to challenge the church to "further union, a deeper communion" with brothers and sisters around the globe. So, in keeping with those initial hopes for this day, the church affirming God's grace and mercy extend to all people our scripture

¹ T.S. Eliot, "The Four Quartets," quoted by Art Ross in The Presbyterian Outlook.

readings proclaim God's love for the world, and God's intention for humankind to coexist in peace, unafraid and secure.

Our reading from Ezekiel was addressed to a people in exile, living under the violent oppression of corrupt and abusive rulers who were exploiting the land and people in order to maintain their own power to the detriment of others. The prophet describes an alternative reality wrought by the hand of God. Ezekiel forecasts the coming of God's servant Son as the Shepherd who cares personally for each member of his flock, searching for the lost, rescuing those who have strayed away, judging the nations for wrongdoing, and bringing all of creation into an endless season of peace.

This, of course, is the prophetic source of the gospel image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, reigning with justice and compassion, gathering all of humankind into God's fold. It is the vision of hope for the world communion we so desperately need. It is a vision of hope for the world God so loves.

Pulitzer prize-winning author, Elizabeth Kolbert, has focused her journalism and scholarship on the environment by inviting readers to be well-informed citizens of Planet Earth. Her most recent book, *Life on a Little-Known Planet*, takes readers from an island in Denmark that is

going carbon-neutral, to a melting ice sheet in Greenland; from a biologist who believes we can talk to whales to an entomologist racing to find rare caterpillars before they disappear.

Beyond her passion for the environmental protection of God's creation, Kolbert also has fresh insight into the 15th century explorer Christopher Columbus. Writing for *The New Yorker* she showed how his view of global exploration was constricted by his closed mind. She notes his most distinguishing legacy may well be his "reluctance to acknowledge the magnitude of what he had found." Over the course of four trans-Atlantic trips, Columbus remained insistent that Cuba was part of China. Says Kolbert, "He didn't want to have discovered someplace new; he wanted to have reached someplace old, and as a result he was blind to the real nature of the world he had stumbled onto."

What he had stumbled onto, of course, was another land of indigenous peoples with their own beautiful array of colors and customs. But unable to see and value his kinship with them, he viewed them as objects of exploitation. He oversaw a system of violence and forced labor that was beyond cruel. Purporting to be on a religious conquest to Christianize new lands he, and his kind, could not see global human diversity as God's gift.

When Columbus died in 1506, Kolbert writes, he died a bitter man, absent of friends and bereft of respect. Fixated by the comfortable boundaries of what his mind allowed room for – and no more – he concluded his earthly days in absolute despair. Much of the world, she argues, still lives under the vestiges of Columbus’ era of colonialization, dehumanization and exploitation.²

Every day we see how that legacy of close-mindedness and racism play out across the landscape of our globe and in our city streets. It’s that kind of small-mindedness and lack of vision that keep people from seeing the world in its variation is God’s gift, the object of God’s love. Today while we watch our nation defund global food aid and medical aid, and gather military leadership and declare war on the city streets of Chicago and Memphis and Portland, and recruit ICE agents to a work that is little more than Systemic Racism, we, like the man Columbus, who was once hailed as discovering America, might just fall into a life of absolute despair and bereft of respect.

Or... or we can be empowered by a vision of the World God loves and sent Christ to save. A vision of God as Shepherd tending a human fold, where those who abuse and exploit are fed on a diet of justice. A vision of

² Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Lost Mariner,” *The New Yorker*, Oct. 14, 2002, p. 211.

peace where everyone can sleep in safety and live out their days without fear and have enough to eat. A world God created in a beautiful array of human colors and genders and all manner of diversity. This is the world God intends, and our lives, and lives of faith, depend on our living toward that vision.

You know John 3:16, for God so loved the world is so familiar to us, that we often forget how it is conjoined to the verses just before it: *And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* We don't see those two verses emblazoned upon America's highway billboards, but John 3:16 makes no sense without them. John's reference to Moses, in describing the cross, recalls a bizarre incident from the Book of Numbers. The people were complaining to God for rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, only to lead them into the wilderness where it was hard to find food. God got irritated at their complaining and sent fiery serpents to bite and teach them a lesson. When Moses pleads with God to take the serpents away, he's instructed to set one upon a pole, so that when they gazed upon it they would be healed. With similar stories from Greek mythology, this text is the source for the medical symbol of the caduceus, the winged staff with intertwining snakes. A little bit of poison may just be what the doctor ordered for healing.

The gospel writer John this story; he knew the Torah. He likens this story of Moses, God, and the fiery serpents to the cross of Jesus Christ. By his wounds we are healed; through his death God loves the world and raises us to new life. Whenever we gather at the Communion Table, we are reminded that our eternal life has already begun, we eat of Christ's body to be nurtured for the good work of resurrection. That work, of course, is to extend the love, justice, compassion and peace of Christ for the unity and reconciliation of the world.

My good friend, Cindy Jarvis, once said it like this: "What does how we live in the world, respecting the human dignity of others, have to do with the Lord's Supper? It has to do with becoming a community whose manners proclaim our active love, for - in the faces of one another we will see the Christ of God... It has to do with Christ's real presence in the world - betrayed and broken, shared and raised up. It has to do with God's grace given in the fray, with Christ's forgiveness which alone makes us worthy partakers of this meal... a meal we - in no way - deserve and yet, most desperately need... The true presence of Christ is not on the table," Cindy said, "but around the table in a circle whose circumference goes around the globe." ³

³ Cynthia Jarvis, "The Table Turned of Hurt and Hope," Chestnut Hill Presbyterian Church, 10/4/2000.

Friends, if you are looking for the tangible love of God in your life, all you get here is a tiny taste and a little sip. But it is sufficient to lead you out into the world in genuine peace, and in the grace of forgiveness. It is enough to give you the strength to work for the unity and reconciliation of God's human family. It is ample for World Communion.

AMEN.