

people of the COVENANT

DAILY DEVOTIONS FOR LENT

PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT

Geoff Duffy

I was standing in my very first congregation many years ago reciting the words of the Nicene Creed when I had a sudden urge to yell out, “So what?!” What possible connection can these ancient creeds and confessions have to believers living in the 21st century? In the years since that moment, I have made a more concerted effort to make connections between the ancient words of our faith and the lived reality of our lives.

This year’s Lenten devotional takes a look at the Sunday scriptures, and the theme of “covenant”, through the lens of some of the great confessions of the Reformed faith. If you’re like me, you’ve probably never read many of these beautiful expressions of the faith. The *Book of Confessions*...what’s the point of that?

In his book, *Confessing the Faith Today*, reformed pastor Allan Janssen asks a similar question. By taking a second look at the historic confessions, Janssen says “the church acknowledges the work of the Spirit in its past, and inquires how the old confession with its witness might open vistas for the contemporary church in its own expression...As the church reflects on the older confessions, it catches sight of the Spirit’s work through the church in the world.”

So I invite you this Lent to explore what it means to be *People of the Covenant* by making new friends with some of the reformers, re-acquainting yourselves with some forgotten Bible characters, and taking a fresh look (maybe your first look) at the confessions that bind together so many Reformed Christians.

This year’s devotional is designed around the first reading from the Hebrew Scriptures we will hear each Sunday during Lent. Instead of a reflection each day on a new scripture, all the devotions for a single week pick up different themes from the Sunday readings. The confessions referenced can all be found online by doing a simple search. You may want to spend some time during Lent reading through some of the confessions that pique your interest.

John Calvin

French theologian, pastor
and reformer in Geneva
during the Protestant
Reformation

Calvin’s monumental work,
*The Institutes of the Christian
Religion*, is a classic of
Reformed theology

BOOK OF CONFESSIONS

Statements of the shared
beliefs of Reformed
Christians

BOOK OF ORDER

Manual for how
Presbyterians work together

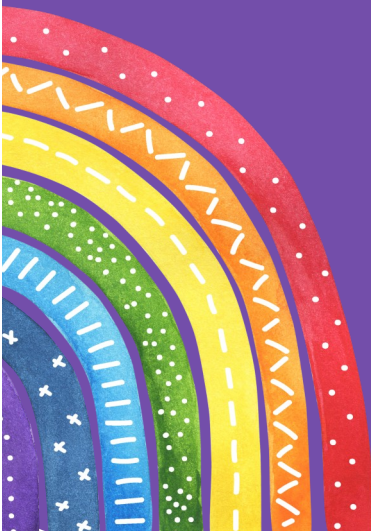
BOOK OF COMMON WORSHIP

Guidebook for how
Presbyterians worship
together



Week One

H O P E



Scripture

GENESIS 9:8-17

God said to Noah and his sons: "I am going to make a solemn promise to you and to everyone who will live after you. This includes the birds and the animals that came out of the boat. I promise every living creature that the earth and those living on it will never again be destroyed by a flood. The rainbow that I have put in the sky will be my sign to you and to every living creature on earth. It will remind you that I will keep this promise forever. When I send clouds over the earth, and a rainbow appears in the sky, I will remember my promise to you and to all other living creatures. Never again will I let floodwaters destroy all life. When I see the rainbow in the sky, I will always remember the promise that I have made to every living creature. The rainbow will be the sign of that solemn promise."

FEBRUARY 18

My mom was asked a few years ago to be the speaker at her church's annual Christmas Tea for Women. In the weeks leading up to the event, she sent me an advance copy of her talk. She had been asked to reflect upon the topic of gifts, and woven throughout her testimony, was the story of the gift of God's faithfulness to her and my dad throughout fifty years of marriage. Just a few years after they were married, at the age of thirty-six, my dad had a heart attack. My mom was just twenty-nine at the time, with three young boys to take care of and a fledgling family business to run. In her talk, she recounted that it was during those moments of despair when she really learned to trust God. And throughout her life, she has come to know in her heart that the God we believe in can be depended upon to keep every divine promise.

Christians sometimes have odd ways of speaking. So much of our worship vocabulary is made up of words we rarely, if ever, use in any other space. Covenant is one such word. The writings of John Calvin, and the Reformed tradition which followed him, are full of the word "covenant." But just what does it mean?

I once asked a group of Sunday school students what a covenant is. One girl said, "A covenant is a promise that God has made with you and, no matter what, God will always love you." Calvin wrote volumes to explain his understanding of the Covenant, and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* took six paragraphs to differentiate between all the different covenants in the Bible. Yet somehow, this little girl was able to articulate the meaning in just one sentence. Bingo!

I don't know if my mom would actually use the word "covenant" to describe how God has been faithful to her throughout her life. She tends to speak more of God's love, God's faithfulness, and God's promises. But she only knows of those attributes of God because she intimately knows the fountain of grace from which they come. John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, put it this way: "...those blessings which unceasingly distil to us from heaven, are like streams conducting us to the fountain." (1:1:1) Or like a rainbow appearing in the afternoon sky.

What experiences have you had that have revealed to you the covenant faithfulness of God?

FEBRUARY 19

At first glance, this scripture chosen for the First Sunday in Lent is an odd choice. What does it have to do with anything we associate with Lent...fasting, temptation, sin, sacrifice, suffering? Actually, not much at all. Rather, it points us in a different direction altogether. Instead of focusing on our human deficiencies, it sheds light onto God's graceful promises.

Some Christians are fond of saying that the "God of the Old Testament" is somehow different than the "God of the New Testament." For some reason, they believe that the God of Noah and Moses is full of wrath and fury, while the God of Jesus is all love and mercy. While it's certainly true that different parts of the Bible accentuate different attributes of God, it's not true that the scriptures paint two entirely different pictures of our Covenant God. From the beginning of salvation history in Genesis to its cosmic conclusion in Revelation, God is always standing ready to extend mercy and grace to those who accept the covenant invitation.

Can you recall places in the Old Testament where God is portrayed as a loving creator? Can you recall places in the New Testament where God is portrayed as a righteous judge?

FEBRUARY 20

When my nieces were young, they loved watching Veggie Tales, those silly cartoon vegetables that tell Bible stories. One evening as they were watching the episode about Noah and the Ark, my youngest brother, Mike, leaned over to me and said, "Hey Geoff...you know about the Bible, right?"

I've learned over the years to answer that question with fear and trepidation!

"I suppose so," I said.

"OK. The Bible says that God created everything, right?"

"Sure."

So far, so good.

"And then he decided to destroy all the people and everything in the world, right?"

"That's what the Bible says," I responded.

I was feeling lucky. Two easy questions in a row.

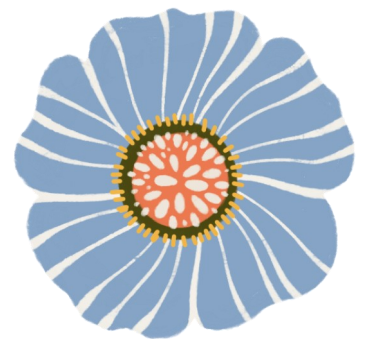
"Well," Mike said, "If God created everything, does it make any sense at all to you that he would just destroy it all?!"

"It all depends on how you look at the Bible," I responded. "Did it literally happen or is it a story placed there to point us to a deeper truth?"

After I explained what I meant, my brother went into the living room and said to my mom, "Did you know that Geoff doesn't believe the Bible is literally true?"

Not exactly what I said. But it did begin a conversation.

There are stories of a great flood told in the literature of almost every culture on earth. Stories of the flood are also told in the archeological records found in the



“...those blessings which unceasingly distil to us from heaven, are like streams conducting us to the fountain.”

-John Calvin
Institutes 1.1.1

earth we inhabit. Something happened. And the Bible attempts to make some sense of it.

Perhaps we miss the point of the story when we focus too much on the destruction caused by the great waves. Maybe, just maybe, the point of the story is the rainbow, not the flood. The rainbow is where the promise is to be found. The rainbow is a sign from God to every living creature. The rainbow is a covenant reminder that no one is outside the bounds of God's saving love.

But it also a reminder that we are called to be like this Covenant God whose love has rescued us from the dire situations in which we find ourselves. To live as covenant people means to treat others with the same faithfulness and mercy God has shown to us. Calvin put it this way, "God is known when humanity is cared for." (*Commentary on Jeremiah 22:16*)

*Who might God be asking you to include in your circle of caring this Lenten season?
Who might God be asking you to break bread with this Lenten season?*

FEBRUARY 21

When I was born, my parents decided to name me Geoffrey Lyons Duffy. Actually, my dad wanted to name me Jake, but my mom wouldn't agree to it. What they did agree on though was my middle name. I have the same middle name as my great grandma, Margaret Lyons Alverson. I've always loved that I carry a bit of her name around with me each day. It connects me with my ancestors and reminds me that I am part of something larger than myself.

The second reading we heard on Sunday from First Peter said, "Eight people went into that boat and were brought safely through the flood. Those flood waters were like baptism that now saves you." (1 Peter 3:20-21)

On the day of our baptism, we were each baptized in the name of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The God of the Covenant is not an impersonal deity. The God of the Covenant has a name! *I Am. Yahweh. God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. El Shadai. Adonai. Jesus.* We know God by many names, and each one gives us some deeper insight into who God is.

A few years ago, I travelled to Bosnia, my first visit to a predominately Muslim country. While I was there, I noticed many people with prayer beads in the mosques. I found out that each strand contained 33 beads. When multiplied by 3, the worshipper is able to focus on the 99 names of God found in Muslim spirituality. Fascinated by the concept, I spent one morning choosing a string of beads for myself at a shop by the side of the road. When I returned home, I tried to use it to come up with my own 99 names of God. It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be.

How many names of God can you come up with? How do the names you use for God help or hinder you in your own spiritual life?

“Q: What do you understand by the providence of God?

A: The almighty and ever present power of God

by which God upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth, and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty, all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

-Heidelberg Catechism

27



FEBRUARY 22

There are two hymns in the Presbyterian hymnal that seek to expand our horizons when it comes to thinking about God. (Actually, there are more than two, but these are a couple of my favorites.) Both are written by women, and both use feminine imagery to imagine the God who wishes to be in covenant with us.

Womb of life and source of being,
home of every restless heart,
in your arms the world awakened;
you have loved us from the start.
We, your children, gather round you,
at the table you prepare.
Sharing stories, tears and laughter,
we are nourished by your care.
(*Womb of Life and Source of Being* by Ruth Duck)

Mothering God, you gave me birth
in the bright morning of this world.
Creator, source of every breath,
you are my rain, my wind, my sun.
(*Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth* by Jean Janzen)

What images of God in these hymns resonate with your own experience of God's faithfulness?

FEBRUARY 23

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. Throughout the centuries, Christians have attempted to define who God is in their creeds and confessions. Consider this description found in *The Second Helvetic Confession*, a very early expression of Reformed theology: "We believe and teach that God is one in essence or nature, subsisting in himself, all sufficient in himself, invisible, incorporeal, immense, eternal, Creator of all things both visible and invisible, the greatest good, living, quickening and preserving all things, omnipotent, and supremely wise, kind and merciful, just and true." That packs a punch, doesn't it? Most of us would probably need a dictionary alongside us to truly grasp who God is according to this definition.

But Reformed folks are always thinking and re-thinking their understanding of God. 422 years after *The Second Helvetic Confession* was put to paper in Switzerland, Presbyterians in the United States composed a somewhat more poetic vision of God. *A Brief Statement of Faith* confesses that...

We believe in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage.
Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.



We all believe
in our hearts
and confess
with our mouths that
there is a single and
simple spiritual being,
whom we call God -
eternal,
incomprehensible,
invisible,
unchangeable,
infinite,
almighty;
completely wise,
just,
and good,
and the overflowing
source of all good.

-Belgic Confession
Article 1

Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.

Try writing your own statement of faith. What words would you use to describe God? What words would you avoid?

FEBRUARY 24

One of my favorite contemporary expressions of faith comes from the Christian Reformed Church in North America. *Our World Belongs to God* was adopted in 2008 by their governing body and “is meant to give a hymn-like expression of our faith within the heritage of the Reformed confessions.” We often use the words of this expression of faith in our own worship here at WPC. Consider these images of God...

God holds this world
with fierce love. (#5)

While justly angry,
God did not turn away
from a world bent on destruction
but turned to face it in love.
With patience and tender care
the Lord set out
on the long road to redemption
to reclaim the lost as his people
and the world as his kingdom. (#18)

How has God held you with “fierce love” this past week?

“Although Adam and Eve
were expelled from the
garden and their days
burdened by the weight
of sin, the Lord held on
to them in love and
promised to crush the
evil forces they had
unleashed.”

-*Our World Belongs to God*
19



Confessions

THE SECOND HELVETIC CONFESSION

The Second Helvetic (Swiss) Confession was composed in 1561 by Heinrich Bullinger, a Reformed minister serving in Zurich, Switzerland during the emergence of Swiss-German Reformed Protestantism. Originally, the confession was to be a private document for his congregation in Zurich. It did not take long however, before Bullinger’s confession moved into the public arena where it was criticized by the Lutherans (for being too Reformed). Churches in Switzerland however, found it to be helpful and they adopted it as their new confession of faith. *The Second Helvetic Confession* is known for delving into the practical reality of the life of the church; it includes the church as a community gathered, worship, conflict, and even how to decorate the sanctuary.

Scripture

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him again and said, “I am God All-Powerful. If you obey me and always do right, I will keep my solemn promise to you and give you more descendants than can be counted.”

Abram bowed with his face to the ground, and God said: “I promise that you will be the father of many nations. So now I’m changing your name from Abram to Abraham. I will give you a lot of descendants, and they will become great nations. Some of them will even be kings. I will always keep the promise I have made to you and your descendants, because I am your God and their God.

“Abraham, from now on your wife’s name will be Sarah instead of Sarai. I will bless her, and you will have a son by her. She will become the mother of nations, and some of her descendants will even be kings.”

FEBRUARY 25

My niece and her husband recently celebrated their fifth wedding anniversary. Their wedding was an all-family affair: my mom and dad came out of retirement to arrange the flowers, my brother’s family joined their soon-to-be relatives to decorate the church hall, and I flew home from Chicago to play the piano. As wonderful as all our contributions were, however, none of our talents were what “sealed the deal!” That took place when Shelby and Jacob exchanged rings after reciting their words of commitment to each other.

Among Christians, marriage is often called a covenant. In fact, our *Book of Common Worship* includes this blessing for the exchange of rings: *By your blessing, O God, may these rings be for this couple symbols of unending love and faithfulness, and signs of the covenant they have made this day.* For us humans, words are sometimes just not enough. We need concrete reminders of the promises we’ve made to each other. On those days when we’re having trouble believing (or keeping) the covenants we’ve made, these symbols serve as reminders of our words. They keep us hopeful in times of doubt, and grateful in times of joy.

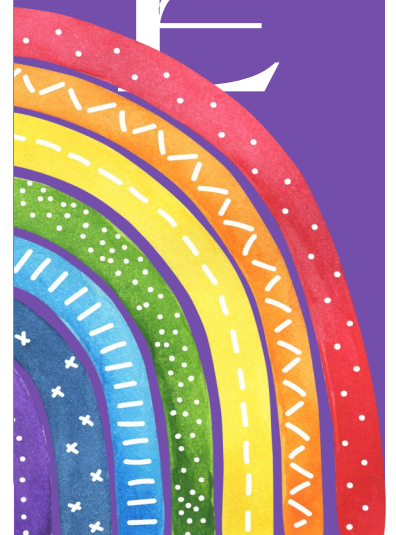
John Calvin saw the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as “signs” and “seals” of the covenant promises God has made to us. “It seems to me,” Calvin writes in the *Institutes*, “a simple and appropriate definition to say, that (a sacrament) is an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith...” (4:14:1)

Calvin didn’t have a very high regard for our human condition. He viewed humans as “ignorant” and “sluggish.” Our faith in God is “slender and weak” and needs to be “propped up on every side and supported by all kinds of means.” (4:14:3) But he did believe in the immense loving grace of God. And because God wishes us to know how much we are loved, God has given us the waters of baptism, and the bread and wine of communion, to “seal the deal.”

How would you define a sacrament? How important are the sacraments in your own spiritual life?

Week Two

P
R
O
M
I
S
E



FEBRUARY 26

Elizabeth was a twenty-six-year-old British nurse who would spend her lunch hour each day eating and visiting with one particular dementia patient. After every lunch, she would promise to return the following day for another sandwich and another talk. The elderly patient, however, was always afraid that Elizabeth would get too busy on her rounds to come back. She worried that the young nurse would forget her. So, one day Elizabeth left her a “Promise Card” with these words: “I promise I will come and have lunch with you tomorrow...because I said I would!” When Elizabeth arrived the following day, the woman was holding the card. She looked up with a smile and said, “You remembered!”

Like the elderly dementia patient, we too sometimes have trouble believing in promises that have been made to us...even promises made by God.

When God promised to make Abram the father of a great nation, he was already seventy-five years old, with no heirs. He was an unknown nomad in the desert, and yet God promised, “I will make your name great.” (Genesis 12:2). And although he had only a tiny patch of land, God promised that Abram’s descendants would inherit all the land around, as far as the eye could see. They were bold promises on God’s part!

But Abram (like Elizabeth’s patient) was having trouble believing God’s promises can be trusted. Sarai and Abram were still childless and still wandering in search of land. So, God took Abram out under the night sky and handed him a Divine Promise Card.

“Can you count all those stars?” God asked. “I didn’t think so! But that’s how many descendants you are going to have!” God knew that Abram’s faith, in the words of John Calvin, was “slender and weak” and needed a little help. So, God gave him a sign, written in the evening sky.

God gives us signs in the sacraments of baptism and communion...Divine Promise Cards! When we have trouble believing we are enough, the waters of baptism are a sign of God’s redeeming grace, signaling to us that we are God’s children. And when we have trouble believing there is enough, the bread and wine of communion are signs of God’s overflowing abundance, signaling to us that we are fed and cared for by the hand of God. Each time we feel the drops of water, or eat the morsel of bread, we can smile and say to God with confidence: “You remembered!”

What tangible signs of God’s promises have you seen in your life? What Divine Promise Card has God left for you?

FEBRUARY 27

As signs of a covenant, rings and unity candles make sense to me. As seals of an agreement, a wax stamp or beautiful notary seems logical. But a three-year old cow, female goat, and a ram? A dove and a young pigeon? If I’m honest, that borders on the creepy. But those are the tangible signs that God used to seal the covenant with Abram (Genesis 15).

“It seems to me a simple and appropriate definition to say, that (a sacrament) is an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith...”

-John Calvin
Institutes, 4.14.1



“How will I know that you will do all you’ve promised?” Abram asked God.

So, God commanded him to bring a small zoo over to the meeting place. Abram then cut in half the cow, the goat, and the ram...but not the birds.

But then it gets even stranger! Abram falls into a trance-like sleep, while a smoking cooking pot and a flaming fire make their way between the halves of all the animals. And it’s in that moment, when Abram is fast asleep, that God renews the promise of the covenant to bring Abram and his descendants into a land of milk and honey.

One of the great rediscoveries of reformers like Calvin was the truth that God’s grace is extended to us without any merit of our own. Like sleeping Abram, there is nothing we can do to earn the favor of God. God’s promises to redeem us and bring us home to a land of plenty are true, even in the moments when we may fail to see any proof.

Evidently, barnyard animals and birds were just the evidence Abram needed to know that God could be trusted. “The sacraments,” Calvin said, “are truly termed evidences of divine grace and, as it were, seals of the good-will which God entertains toward us. They, by sealing it to us, sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith.” (Institutes 4.14.7)

The signs that God gave that night were enough to sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase Abram’s faith. The very next chapter of Genesis records the birth of Ishmael, the son of Abram and Sarai’s servant, Hagar. The promise would be kept differently than Abram had imagined. But God, as Abram was reminded by the signs of the covenant, always keeps faith.

When has God kept promises to you in a way differently than you had expected?

FEBRUARY 28

“I don’t know exactly what it was, but it felt like fire shooting through my body. When I stood up, the pain was gone.”

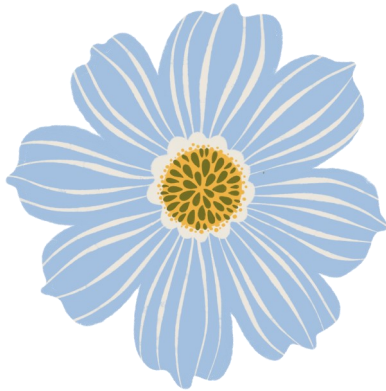
I was facilitating a retreat in the first congregation I served where, among other things, I was the Director of RCIA. For Catholics, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is the process adults go through as they prepare to receive the sacrament of baptism. In the Catholic tradition, most adults are baptized at the Easter Vigil on the night before Easter. And, in keeping with an ancient tradition, on the Sundays leading up to the Vigil, special prayers are offered in worship for those who will be baptized.

On the Saturday before Palm Sunday, I was gathering with all our candidates for baptism to help them reflect on these experiences of prayer. One of the men had incredible problems with his knees. When we were preparing for those pre-Easter prayers, I assured him that he wasn’t required to kneel if it would cause him pain. But when that Sunday came and the priest invited the candidates to come forward, I saw him kneel along with all the others. He shared with the group how he just felt led to kneel on that day. He told us that, when the priest laid hands on his head, he felt a warm sensation go through his body. Honestly, I was a little stunned. After all, even though we talk a lot about the work of the Holy Spirit, sometimes we have trouble believing that the Spirit will actually show up!



“The sacraments are truly termed evidences of divine grace and, as it were, seals of the good-will which God entertains toward us. They, by sealing it to us, sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith.”

-John Calvin
Institutes, 4.14.7



The sacraments duly perform their office only when accompanied by the Spirit, the internal Master, whose energy alone penetrates the heart...the sacraments do not avail one iota without the energy of the Holy Spirit.

-John Calvin
Institutes, 4.14.9



When God signs the covenant with Abram in this interesting ritual, the story says a smoking pot and a flaming fire went between the halves of the animals. I've never heard the Holy Spirit called a smoking pot, but I do know that the Spirit shows up throughout the scriptures as fire.

In Calvin's day, there was a lot of discussion about whether or not a sacrament was effective if the person receiving it had no faith. Calvin, along with many other reformers, believed that in order for a sacrament to actually do its work within a person, the Holy Spirit had to first be at work in that individual's heart. "The sacraments duly perform their office only when accompanied by the Spirit, the internal Master, whose energy alone penetrates the heart...the sacraments do not avail one iota without the energy of the Holy Spirit." (*Institutes, 4.14.9*)

I have no doubt that the man in my first congregation felt the energy of the Holy Spirit that Sunday morning. The "internal Master" had already taken hold of his heart. The waters he was immersed into that Easter Vigil just sealed the relationship that was already forming between him and the God of the Covenant.

Have you ever seen a visible sign of God's Holy Spirit? How important do you think the presence of the Spirit is when we celebrate the sacraments?

FEBRUARY 29

It's difficult for many of us to imagine in the 21st century, but in earlier days of the Christian faith, believers relished debating minute details of every doctrine under the sun. Needless to say, we've not always been kind to one another in the process.

Towards the end of Calvin's life, Lutheran and Reformed theologians gathered in the West German town of Heidelberg to try and reconcile some of their differences. At the request of Frederick the Elector, two men were asked to compose a confession of faith that might unite both Lutherans and Reformed Christians. Relying upon their skills as a professor of theology and a city preacher, Zacharias Ursinus and Kaspar Olevianus, produced *The Heidelberg Catechism*.

Many Christians brought up in the Reformed tradition may be familiar with the very first question and answer:

Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A: That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

Probably less familiar is the question about the sacraments of the church:

Q: What are sacraments?

A: Sacraments are visible, holy signs and seals. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and seal that promise. And this is God's gospel promise: to grant us forgiveness of sins and eternal life by grace because of Christ's one sacrifice accomplished on the cross.

In your own experience, how have the sacraments helped you to "understand more clearly the promise of the gospel?"

MARCH 1

John Calvin preached his last sermon on February 6, 1564. Suffering from ill health, he called the ministers of Geneva to his side to wish them a final farewell. When he finally died on May 27 of that year, the city leaders laid his body in state. So many people came to view his body however, the leaders feared that Calvin's followers would want to venerate his relics (a practice Calvin adamantly opposed) and make his burial site a place of pilgrimage. So, in obedience to Calvin's wishes, they buried him in an unmarked grave in the Cimetière des Rois in Geneva.

This is just as Calvin would have wanted it. For Calvin, it was more important that the church be faithful to the teachings of Christ than to the ideas of John Calvin. This is the reason so many Reformed Christians take as their motto *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*: the Church reformed and always being reformed in accordance with the Word of God. The ancient confessions must always stand ready to dialogue with more contemporary expressions of faith.

Our World Belongs to God is a contemporary confession of faith adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Its statement about the sacraments is a beautiful and simple definition of a mystery that Calvin spent much of his life trying to explain.

God meets us in the sacraments,
communicating grace to us
by means of water, bread, and wine. (#37)

Which confession speaks more to your heart: the "Heidelberg Confession" or "Our World Belongs to God"?

MARCH 2

Here are symbols to remind us
of our lifelong need of grace;
here are table, font, and pulpit;
here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
here in silence, as in speech,
here, in newness and renewal,
God the Spirit comes to each.

Here our children find a welcome
in the Shepherd's flock and fold;
here are bread and wine are taken,
Christ sustains us as of old.
Here the servants of the Servant
seek in worship to explore
what it means in daily living
to believe and to adore.

- *God is Here*, hymn 409

Do you personally experience the Spirit's presence equally at the table, font, and pulpit? Or more profoundly at one of them?

Q: What are the sacraments?

A: Sacraments are visible, holy signs and seals. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and seal that promise.

And this is God's gospel promise:

to grant us forgiveness of sins and eternal life by grace because of Christ's one sacrifice accomplished on the cross.

-*Heidelberg Catechism*

66





Confessions

OUR WORLD BELONGS TO GOD

In order to restate the church's faith in today's language and address contemporary issues, the Christian Reformed Church in North America approved *Our World Belongs to God* as a contemporary testimony at their Synod 1986 (similar the PCUSA's General Assembly). The second edition of *Our World Belongs to God* was approved by Synod 2008. While not having confessional status, it is meant to give a hymn-like expression of our faith within the heritage of the Reformed confessions, especially addressing issues that confront the church today.

The Bible tells the story of God's mighty acts in the unfolding of covenant history. It reveals God's will and the sweep of God's redeeming work. Illumined and equipped by the Spirit, disciples of Jesus hear and do the Word, witnessing to the good news that our world belongs to God, who loves it deeply.

-*Our World Belongs to God*

Scripture

EXODUS 20:1-17

God said to the people of Israel:

I am the Lord your God, the one who brought you out of Egypt where you were slaves.

Do not worship any god except me.

Do not make idols that look like anything in the sky or on earth or in the ocean under the earth. Don't bow down and worship idols. I am the Lord your God.

Do not misuse my name.

Remember that the Sabbath Day belongs to me. You have six days when you can do your work, but the seventh day of each week belongs to me, your God. No one is to work on that day. In six days I made the sky, the earth, the oceans, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That's why I made the Sabbath a special day that belongs to me.

Respect your father and your mother, and you will live a long time in the land I am giving you.

Do not murder.

Be faithful in marriage.

Do not steal.

Do not tell lies about others.

Do not desire to possess anything that belongs to another person.

MARCH 3

Like many people during the pandemic, I started surfing on Sunday mornings for online church services. I was a little surprised when the service I started "attending" regularly wasn't on Sundays at all. It wasn't even broadcast from a church. It was the Saturday morning service from Central Synagogue in New York City, a large progressive synagogue located in Midtown Manhattan.

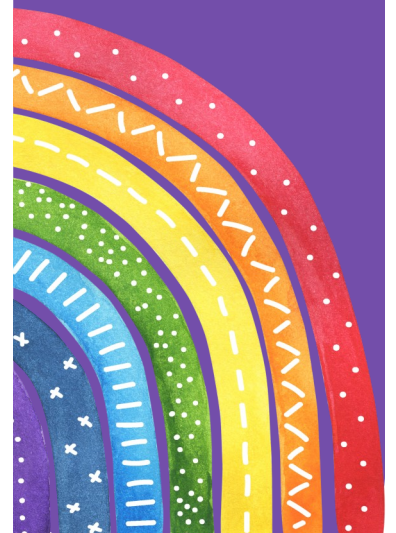
Their rabbi, Angela Buchdahl, is the first Asian-American woman to lead a synagogue in the United States! Informed by her own experience of being raised by a Korean mother and a Jewish father, Rabbi Buchdahl talks frequently about what "makes a Jew a Jew." For her, being Jewish isn't primarily about ethnicity or culture (although those things are important). Being Jewish is first and foremost about accepting the demands of Torah and striving to live it in her daily life.

The Torah and the Commandments given to Moses at Mount Sinai ... these are the things that bind the Jewish community together.

On most Saturdays, there are one or two bar or bat mitzvahs at Central, the moment when a young person becomes a full member of the Covenant Community. After the

Week Three

W
O
R
D
S



Ark is opened and the scrolls are brought out, the young person recites these words: *The light of the Torah shines forth from Zion. Adonai's teachings flow from Jerusalem.*

Centuries before last Saturday's bat mitzvah at Central, the psalmist wrote, "Blessed is the one who finds delight in God's law. She is like a tree planted by water streams." (Psalm 1: 1, 3) God's law, the Covenant that has bound Jewish people together for millennia, is as necessary as water! Without it, the community has no identity.

Christians are also formed as a community through the waters of God's Word. But the scriptures are not the only life-giving streams for followers of Christ. We also find our identity in the waters of baptism. In the words of the *Book of Common Worship*, "In baptism God claims us...by water and the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the church."

Just as the Commandments binds the Jewish community together, so the Sacraments create community for Christians. For disciples of Jesus, being a Christian isn't about ethnicity or culture. It is about accepting the call of Jesus whispered into our ear on the day of our baptism...follow me.

How would you answer this question...what makes someone a Christian?



Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to respond to that grace.

-Book of Order
W-3.0402

MARCH 4

When I lived in Seattle, one of my favorite places to worship when I had a Sunday off was St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral. On one of those Sundays, I had an eye-opening experience as I witnessed the baptism of an infant during worship.

The cathedral's baptismal font is a huge stone-like work of art. When it came time for the baptism, the assisting minister poured water into the font as one of the cathedral priests prayed the Prayer of Thanksgiving over the water. As I let the words of the prayer wash over me, I started to hear the sound of water flowing down the chancel steps. The minister had poured the font to overflowing! Water was everywhere! I later learned this was standard practice for this worshipping community. What a marvelous expression of the overflowing grace of God that we celebrate in the sacrament of baptism.

And then I witnessed another first. Since I had grown up in a tradition that didn't ordain women, I had never seen a woman baptize anyone. But the priest that morning was female. It wasn't the actual baptism that struck me so much as what happened next. After baptizing the baby, the priest gently cradled the infant in her arms and laid her up against her shoulder. What a marvelous expression of the mother-like love that God lavishes on us each day of our lives.

In his *Catechism for the Church in Geneva*, John Calvin described baptism as an "entrance into the Church of God, for it testifies that instead of our being strangers to him, God receives us as members of his family." (5.323) At the cathedral that morning, we were all given tangible signs that, not only were we no longer strangers to God, but we were also no longer strangers to each other. The waters that (literally) flowed down the chancel steps that day stood as signs and seals of the covenant that links all Christians across time and space.

Do you know where you were baptized? Was it a font, a river, a pool? Give thanks today for the gift of your baptism. If you've never been baptized, do you feel God calling you to the water?

MARCH 5

Easter is a time for baptisms for many churches throughout the world. Whether it happens around a tiny font in the darkness of the Easter Vigil, or in a cold lake at an early morning Easter sunrise service, the day of Christ's resurrection has always been a special time for Christians to baptize new believers. The year 387AD was no exception for the church in Milan, and for a young man named Augustine.

Augustine's mother, Monica, was a devout Christian who shared her faith with her son throughout his life. But Augustine, like many teenagers, was drawn to other pursuits. As a young adult, he had little interest in the things of God, and even less interest in becoming a Christian. But Monica continued to pray and give witness to her deeply held faith.

In time, Augustine started attending Sunday services at the church where the famous bishop, Ambrose, preached. At first, he was only impressed with the eloquent preacher's style. But then one day something strange happened. While wondering the streets of Milan, Augustine heard a child singing, "Pick it up, and read it!" Since he could not recall any children's song with those words, he took this to be a sign from God telling him to grab a Bible and start reading. As he poured over the words of scripture, and the testimony of people like the Apostle Paul, Augustine found himself slowly coming to faith.

On the evening of April 24 (387AD) the newly converted Augustine of Hippo was immersed in the waters of new life by Bishop Ambrose of Milan. Augustine was ordained in 391, and elected Bishop of the North African city of Hippo in 395. Revered by Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants alike, Augustine is regarded as one of the greatest Christian thinkers of all time.

Later in life, Augustine wrote an account of his conversion in his famous *Confessions*. In it, he penned these beautiful words: *Late have I loved Thee, O Lord; and behold, Thou wast within and I without, and there I sought Thee. Thou wast with me when I was not with Thee.*

"If you are thirsty, come and drink water!" God invites us through the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 55:1). Like Augustine, so many others down through the centuries have also found themselves parched after a lifetime running from God. The waters of baptism are a sign of the gift of God's grace that pursues us at all times. Like the water of Isaiah's prophecy, baptism is a free gift to all who are thirsting for a deeper relationship with God.

Almost 1,200 years after Augustine's baptism, another great Christian thinker wrote down his Confession. In 1561, Heinrich Bullinger, a minister of the Reformed church in Zurich, set out to put into writing his own understanding of the Christian faith. In *The Second Helvetic Confession*, he says, "to be baptized in the name of Christ is to be enrolled, entered, and received into the covenant and

Late have I loved Thee,
O Lord;
and behold,
Thou wast within
and I without,
and there I sought Thee.
Thou was with me
when I was not with
Thee.

-Saint Augustine



family, and so into the inheritance of the (children) of God...and to be granted the manifold grace of God.” (5.187)

When have you felt far away from God? Was there a sign or a gift that you were given to remind you of God’s grace?

MARCH 6

71% of the earth’s surface is covered by water. The human brain and heart are composed of 73% water, and the lungs are about 83% water. Our skin contains 64% water, muscles and kidneys are 79%, and even our bones are watery: 31%! Simply put, we could not survive without water.

But water is also destructive. Many of us can remember the terrifying scenes from Hurricane Katrina as people climbed onto the tops of their homes waiting to be rescued from the water that was threatening to drown them.

Whenever we see an adorable baby in a beautiful gown having water poured over her head, it’s easy to imagine the waters of baptism as life-giving. The child’s adventure is just beginning, and we know that the waters are a sign of the gracious presence of God that will follow her throughout the course of her life.

But God also sets the water of baptism in front of us as a sign of death. “Don’t you know that all who share in Christ Jesus by being baptized also share in his death? When we were baptized, we died and were buried with Christ.” (Romans 6:3-4)

In the Christian tradition I was raised in, baptism was celebrated later in life and then, only by full immersion. I remember well the Sunday evening of my own baptism. I was thirteen and deathly afraid of having my head underwater. When it came time for me to be baptized, I tensed up and slipped coming up out of the water as the pastor held me with a firm grip. It was an appropriate metaphor for the Christian life. We all spend a lifetime trying to die to those things which try to deter us from being a follower of Christ. Although we may slip and fall, baptism is a sign and pledge that God’s strong hand is always there to lead and guide us.

Life and destruction. Washing and cleaning. Refreshment and nourishment. “The water (of baptism) washes dirt away, and cools and refreshes hot and tired bodies. And the grace of God performs these things for souls, and does so invisibly or spiritually.” (*Second Helvetic Confession*, 5.188) God seems to know that we need a visible reminder of the work that is being done invisibly in our hearts. And so, God gives us the water of baptism.

Think about the different ways Christian baptize – sprinkling, pouring, immersion. Which do you prefer? Why?

“The water (of baptism) washes dirt away, and cools and refreshes hot and tired bodies. And the grace of God performs these things for souls, and does so invisibly or spiritually.”

-*Second Helvetic Confession*
5.187



MARCH 7

One of the hot topics in this year's election will undoubtedly be immigration. In the past few months, governors from some of the border states have sent over 17,000 migrants to Chicago. To put that in perspective, that is like my entire hometown being dropped off in the middle of Chicago! Many of these people, families with children from Venezuela, have been bussed here in the middle of winter.

The answer to this crisis for some people is more construction on a wall on our southern border. "The Wall" has become a very tangible sign of the polarization and division that exists among Americans at this moment. Whatever we may think about the wisdom of putting up such a barrier, we can agree that one purpose of a wall is to separate people from each other. Whether a person is a refugee fleeing violence or a rancher cultivating the land, a wall puts up a physical barrier to community life.

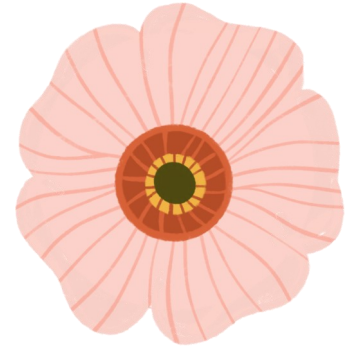
But walls don't always have to be concrete or steel; they can also be constructed of prejudice, greed, and power. And this is precisely why the gospel of Jesus, the way of life into which every Christian is baptized, is so revolutionary. Christ came to break down everything that divides us. The apostle Paul put it this way, "Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman." (Galatians 3:28) All the walls we put up between ourselves are shattered by the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

There are many things that have divided Christians over the centuries, but the one sacrament that has united believers across denominations is the sacrament of baptism. This sacrament is, in the words of *The Book of Order*, "the bond of unity in Jesus Christ." In the waters of baptism "we are made one with Christ, with one another, and with the Church of every time and place. In Christ, barriers of race, status, and gender are overcome; we are called to seek reconciliation in the Church and world, in Jesus' name." (W-3.0402)

Baptism is not only God's gift of grace; it is God's call to respond to that grace. Each time we witness a baptism, we hear these words: "By water and the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the church, the body of Christ, and joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice." (*Book of Common Worship*)

Whether it's the Jewish community standing at the foot of Mount Sinai or the Christian community standing around the font of baptism, our call to be Covenant People is never just for us. Time and time again in the scriptures, God calls those chosen to extend the circle. "There is a time coming," the prophet Isaiah reminds us, "when the mountain of the Lord's temple will be the highest of all. It will reach above the hills; every nation will rush to it." (Isaiah 2:2)

Have you ever thought of baptism as a call to live a life of justice? What does being "joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice" look like to you?



(In Baptism) we are made one with Christ, with one another, and with the Church of every time and place. In Christ, barriers of race, status, and gender are overcome; we are called to seek reconciliation in the Church and world, in Jesus' name.

-Book of Order
W-3.0402

MARCH 8

I love children's books. I love the illustrations and the colors. But mostly, I love the simplicity of the messages they contain. In fact, I have a collection of them on my shelves at home that occasionally make their way to the sanctuary for a children's sermon. One of my favorite books is called *You Belong Here*. Page after page shows drawing of animals, birds, sea creatures, plants, and flowers...each in the exact place where they belong. Interspersed throughout the book are words like this:

And you belong right here, where you're home,
and where I hold you close.
Of all the wonders I've ever known,
you're the one I love the most.

Around the time of the Reformation, there were debates on whether or not infants and children should be baptized. John Calvin, believing that even infants were included in the covenant promises made by God to their parents, taught that children should indeed be baptized. He believed so strongly in his position that he dedicated an entire chapter to its defense in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Guido de Brés was a student of John Calvin in Geneva, who later became a preacher in the Netherlands. When asked to give an account of the Reformed faith to his persecutors, de Brés composed the *Belgic Confession*, which later became a standard for Reformed Christians throughout the Netherlands and Belgium. "We believe," de Brés wrote, "our children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant...truly, Christ has shed his blood no less for washing the little children of believers than he did for adults. Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them." (Article 34)

Each time water is poured over the head of a little child at the font, we signify to a world that often has little use for them, that they do indeed belong right here, in the community of the church, where they are at home. Years after giving them the Torah, God spoke words of assurance to frightened people living in captivity: "I will promise you the eternal love and loyalty that I promised (your father) David." (Isaiah 55:3) In my home, God says, I will hold you close because "you're the one I love the most." Even, especially, the children.

What responsibilities do adults in the church have to help parents as they attempt to raise their children in the covenant community?

“We believe our children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant...truly, Christ has shed his blood no less for washing the little children of believers than he did for adults. Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them.”

-*Belgic Confession*
Article 34



MARCH 9

Jane Parker Huber was the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries, the wife of a Presbyterian pastor, a deacon, a choir member, and the editor of her church's newsletter. She served on various committees and councils of the Presbyterian Church (USA), and was named a "Valiant Woman" by the Church Women United. But it is her hymn texts that many people are familiar with.

Realizing that there were few hymns for the celebration of baptism written from a Reformed perspective, Jane Huber composed *Wonder of Wonders*, which is included in the Presbyterian hymnal. It can be sung to the tune of the *Doxology* or *The River is Wide*. Try it!

Wonder of wonders, here revealed:
God's covenant with us sealed,
and, long before we know or pray,
God's love enfolds us every day.

Here in this sacrament we see
God's grace unbound, for all, for me!
May we respond with joyful praise
in loving service all our days.

This child of God, though young or old,
we welcome now into Christ's fold,
to know with us God's loving care,
and all our joys and sorrows share.

Now we our vow of faith renew,
stretch wide our sights to global view,
and claim with Christians far and near
a larger family held dear.

(*Wonders of Wonders* by Jane Parker Huber © 1980 Jane Parker Huber)

What new insights did you have about baptism this week?

Confessions

THE BELGIC CONFESSION

The Belgic Confession, written in 1561, owes its origin to the need for a clear and comprehensive statement of Reformed faith during the time of the Spanish inquisition in the Lowlands. Guido de Brès, its primary author, availed himself to some extent of a confession written chiefly by John Calvin. The work of de Brès, however, is not a mere revision of Calvin's work, but an independent composition. It was adopted as one of the doctrinal standards to which all office bearers in the Reformed churches were required to subscribe. The confession is recognized by many as one of the best official summaries of Reformed doctrine. The name, *Belgic Confession*, comes from the Latin *Confessio Belgica*. *Belgica* referred to the whole of the Netherlands, both north and south, which today is divided into the Netherlands and Belgium.



Through the sacrament of
Baptism we enter the
covenant God established
in Jesus Christ.

Within this covenant God
gives us new life,
strengthens us to resist
evil, and nurtures us in
love.

Through the covenant, we
choose who we will serve,
by turning from evil and
turning to Jesus Christ.

Trusting in the gracious
mercy of God, do you turn
away from sin and
renounce evil and its
power in the world?

I do.

Who is your Lord and
Savior?

**Jesus Christ is my Lord
and Savior.**

-Book of Common Worship
Service of Baptism

Week Four

GRACE



Scripture

NUMBERS 21:4-9

The Israelites had to go around the territory of Edom, so when they left Mount Hor, they headed south toward the Red Sea. But along the way, the people became so impatient that they complained against God and said to Moses, “Did you bring us out of Egypt, just to let us die in the desert? There’s no water out here, and we can’t stand this awful food!”

Then the Lord sent poisonous snakes that bit and killed many of them.

Some of the people went to Moses and admitted, “It was wrong of us to insult you and the Lord. Now please ask him to make these snakes go away.”

Moses prayed, and the Lord answered, “Make a snake out of bronze and place it on top of a pole. Anyone who gets bitten can look at the snake and be saved from death.”

Moses obeyed the Lord. And all of those who looked at the bronze snake lived, even though they had been bitten by the poisonous snakes.

MARCH 10

This week’s covenant story is bizarre! With the exception of the symbol of a snake on a pole that we see in hospital settings, the imagery in this story seems far removed from 21st century life. Snakes sent to punish? A bronze snake placed on a pole to heal?

Even after the spectacular escape from Egypt and daily food sent by God from heaven in the form of manna, the people grumble and complain. As a result of their behavior, they encounter snakes in the desert. Deadly snakes. We’ve all been there. We’ve all had moments when we forgot our blessings and instead focused on everything that went wrong. The sting of a failed marriage. The bite of an addiction that we can’t seem to overcome. The poison of a friendship turned sour.

After their plea for salvation, God instructs Moses to craft a bronze snake and place it on top of a pole. Anyone who gets bit can look up at the image and will be saved. In other words, take a good look at the very thing that is causing your pain. The word of grace in this story is that God offers healing in exactly those places in our lives where the sting is the worst. Many of us can look back at awful moments in our lives and, with hindsight, see that it was in those desert times that God offered healing to us.

In the Gospel we read on Sunday, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:14-15) In our moments of despair and grumbling, God lifts up means of grace for us. But we must be willing to look up from our pain and face our demons head-on.

The sacraments are sometimes referred to as “means of grace.” In the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, we experience the healing presence of Jesus as we tell his story and join others for a meal. Around the Lord’s Table, we remember how Jesus,

hurting from the sting of a friend's betrayal, gathered the disciples together for a final supper.

Jesus could have lashed out at Judas, the betrayer. He could have become bitter with Peter, the denier. He could have berated the others who would desert him by the end of the evening.

But instead, he looked straight at the ones who were causing his pain, and he gave thanks. Then he "took a loaf of bread, broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'" (Luke 6:19-20)

Each time we take the bread and drink from the cup we are reminded that the most painful thing imaginable - the death of Christ - becomes the very source of life for those who are willing to look up at the cross.

Remember a particularly painful moment in your life. Where did you see God's healing presence?

MARCH 11

"*Mah nishtanah?*" the young boy asked his father as the family sat down for the evening meal.

"Why," he wanted to know, "is this night different from all the other nights?"

"Because," his father answered, "We were once slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and on this night God brought us out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm."

It was the beginning of Passover, and the meal was the traditional Seder meal that Jews all around the world eat on the first night of the festival. God had commanded the people to observe the Passover meal during the time of Moses to remind them of the moment when God saved them from their enemies.

Jesus was a faithful Jew who would have celebrated many Passovers with his family and friends throughout his life. Each time they gathered, they recalled the story of the Exodus. They remembered how the Angel of Death passed over their ancestors' homes because they had been marked with the blood of the lamb. They reminisced about how God was still working in their own history, saving and protecting them time and time again...even this year. Even this very night.

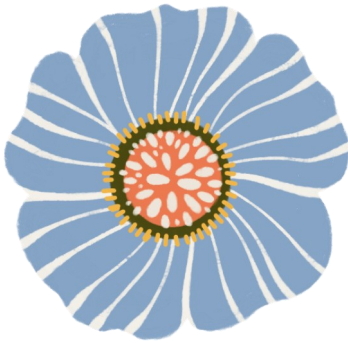
It was at a Jewish Passover meal that Jesus gave his followers the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Eucharist is a Greek word meaning "thanksgiving," and is one of the oldest names Christians have for this sacrament. "The Lord's Supper," the *Book of Order* says, "is a sacrifice of praise and a sign of our gratitude for God's steadfast love." (W-3.0409)

Is the word "Eucharist" new to you? How does it enrich your understanding of The Lord's Supper to think about it as "a sacrifice of praise?"



“The Lord’s Supper is a sacrifice of praise and a sign of gratitude for God’s steadfast love.”

-Book of Order
W-3.0409



MARCH 12

Whenever I need a good laugh, I turn on old reruns of The Golden Girls. I love the character of Rose Nyland, the simple storyteller from Saint Olaf. In one episode Rose's new boyfriend, Miles, a literature professor, invites her to a party at his home with some of his colleagues. As he introduces her to a couple fellow professors, they are in the middle of answering the question, "If you could invite any three famous people to dinner, either living or dead, who would you invite?"

Not wanting to leave Rose out of the conversation, they turned to her and asked her the same question.

"Could I pick Jesus?" she asked as they all shot a blank stare at her before walking away.

Throughout the centuries, Christians have always believed that Jesus is present with them whenever they gather around the Lord's Table. The earliest Christians were satisfied with just believing Jesus' words to be true. *This is my body. This is my blood. Whenever two or three of you are gathered in my name, I am there in your midst.* They didn't spend much time speculating on how this was possible.

By the time of the Reformation however, Christians were condemning one another for their belief or lack of belief in the *real* or *true presence* of Christ. Followers of Jesus fought wars and fired off letters denouncing the opposing side. Martin Luther taught that the bread and wine of communion became the body and blood of Jesus. On the other side, Huldrych Zwingli taught that the bread and wine of communion were symbols of the body and blood of Jesus.

In the middle of this debate was John Calvin.

Calvin believed strongly in the true presence of Christ in the sacrament of communion. For him, the bread and the cup were not merely symbols of Christ's body and blood; they were a real communion with the body and blood of Jesus. Calvin believed, and the confessions of the Reformed faith teach, that Christ is indeed present whenever we come to the table. Those who eat the bread and drink the wine with faith truly commune with the body and blood of the risen Lord in a spiritual communion.

"Now, should any ask me (how Christ is present in the sacrament)," Calvin wrote in his *Institutes*, "I will not be ashamed to confess that it is too high a mystery either for my mind to comprehend or my words to express; and to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it. The truth of God, therefore, in which I can safely rest, I here embrace without controversy. Christ declares that his flesh is the meat, his blood the drink, of my soul; I give my soul to him to be fed with such food...I have no doubt that he will truly give, and I will truly receive." (4.17.32)

How would you describe the "true" or "real" presence of Christ you experience when you receive communion?

“The truth of God,
therefore, in which I
can safely rest, I here
embrace without
controversy. Christ
declares that his flesh
is the meat, his blood
the drink, of my soul; I
give my soul to him to
be fed with such food...
I have no doubt that he
will truly give, and I
will truly receive.”

-John Calvin
Institutes, 4.17.32

MARCH 13

When I was in high school, we were required to read Tolstoy's *War and Peace*...all 1,200 pages! Not exactly what a high schooler wanted to do with his time. So, I have a confession to make...I cheated. I never read *War and Peace*. Instead, I picked up a copy of the *Cliff Notes* and then headed to class each day to discuss Tolstoy's masterpiece.

Then came college. As a Pastoral Studies major, I was required to do a lot of reading in the area of theology. Thankfully, even though I studied a little Calvin, we were not required to read the entire *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Had our professor asked us to do so, I may have just reverted to my old Calvin Cliff Notes!

When John Calvin's monumental work was published, however, the printing presses couldn't keep up with the demand. Between the time of the first printing in 1536 and the last one in 1554, *The Institutes* went through five re-printings and expansions. And the last edition was 80% longer than the first one! Calvin wrote the *Institutes* to explain the beliefs of Reformed Christians in the city of Geneva. Much of his writing is defensive, highlighting the differences between Christians of various traditions.

450 years after Calvin, another document was again published in Geneva: *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. The publisher, the World Council of Churches, is a federation of denominations that seeks to build bridges between Christians. A half-century after the Reformation, Christians are once again beginning to look for the things that unite us in faith.

Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry was written after a fifty-year process of consultation with many Christian groups (including the PCUSA) as a way of coming to a common understanding around the things that have traditionally divided us: the sacraments. "In leaving behind the hostilities of the past, the churches have begun to discover many promising convergences in their shared convictions and perspectives...We have found reason to rejoice in the rediscovery of the richness of our common inheritance in the Gospel." (Preface, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*)

Why do you think Christians have been so divided over the centuries in their attitudes towards the Lord's Supper? Have you had an experience of communion with Christians from another tradition? How was it similar to your own? How did it differ?

MARCH 14

I had a strange experience a few years ago on Thanksgiving. Everyone contributed dishes to the meal, the conversation was lively, and the company was good. But no one gave thanks! We didn't pray. We didn't have a moment of silence. We didn't even go around the table, like many families do, to say what we were thankful for. We just sat down and ate.

About twenty years ago, Sarah Ban Breathnach wrote *Simple Abundance*, in which she encouraged the practice of writing down ten things you were thankful



“This sacrifice (of praise) is indispensable in the Lord’s Supper...all Christians are called ‘a royal priesthood,’ because by Christ we offer that sacrifice of praise of which the apostle speaks, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name.”

-John Calvin
Institutes, 4.18.17



for at the end of each day. It’s not such a new idea. In fact, many Orthodox Jews have a practice of reciting 100 *B'rakhot* each day. A *B'rakhot* is a simple prayer thanking God for things like “creating people with intelligent minds who invented alarm clocks so we could wake up on time this morning!”

Fortunately, scientific research is catching up with what people of faith have known all along. Numerous studies show the link between gratitude and better mental health. Being grateful unshackles us from toxic emotions. Thankfulness has lasting effects on the brain. The benefits of living a life of thanksgiving take place over the course of an entire lifetime. In other words, being people of thanksgiving is good for our health.

John Calvin referred to the Lord’s Supper as a sacrifice of praise. “This sacrifice,” he wrote, “is indispensable in the Lord’s Supper...all Christians are called ‘a royal priesthood,’ because by Christ we offer that sacrifice of praise of which the apostle speaks, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name.” (*Institutes* 4.18.17)

Each time we gather for the Eucharist, the first thing we do is offer thanks to God, for “it is right to give God thanks and praise.” This *Great Prayer of Thanksgiving* is the central prayer of the Christian faith, in which we give thanks “for God’s creative power, providential care, and covenant faithfulness, along with particular blessings of the day.” (*Book of Common Worship*)

There are over thirty different Great Prayers of Thanksgiving in the new *Book of Common Worship*. Ponder these words from one of the newly composed prayers:

Holy, holy, holy Lord –
We praise you for your love:
bringing order out of chaos,
breathing life into dust,
leading captives into freedom,
calling wandering children home,
giving bread to the hungry,
giving drink to the thirsty,
raising the dead to life.
Therefore we join our voices with the choirs of heaven...

What are you thanking God for this day? Try writing your own Great Prayer of Thanksgiving.

MARCH 15

Forty Autumns is the memoir of a German family separated by the Berlin Wall after World War II. Nina Willner writes about the experiences of her mother, Hannah, who, at the age of 20, escaped from East Berlin, leaving behind her parents and several siblings. Because of the severe travel restrictions, her mother was allowed to travel to West Germany only twice to see her daughter; her father, only once, shortly after Hannah married. It would be the last time Hannah ever saw her parents. Thirty years later, now living in the United States, she reminisced that she could hardly even remember what her family looked like. Telling stories about growing in a divided Germany helped keep Hannah’s family alive in her heart.

Oscar Wilde once said that “memory is the diary we all carry about with us.” Without our memories, the people we’ve loved would slip into oblivion. Remembering their lives however, makes them real once again. Telling their stories pulls them into our own experience at the moment. It’s as if they were right here, eating and drinking with us.

Christians have a fancy word for the type of remembering we do. It’s called *anamnesis*. Simply put, it means that each time we tell the story of Jesus at the Lord’s Table, he is present with us in a unique way. In the same way the people of Israel told and re-told the story of the Exodus, we tell and re-tell the story of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension. It’s our constant reminder of the presence of God in our lives. Each time we call to mind the story of Jesus, we also become aware that the story continues to our day. Through Word and Sacrament, Christ continues to extend to us healing, wholeness, and salvation.

One of the Easter Prayers of Great Thanksgiving in the *Book of Common Worship* tells the story of Jesus this way:

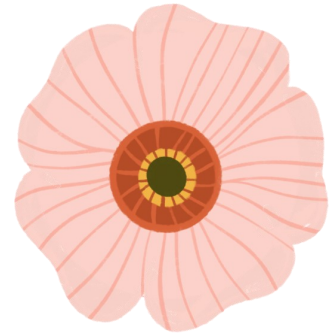
Blessed is Jesus Christ, O God,
whom you sent to save us.
He came with healing in his touch,
and was wounded for our sins.
He came with mercy in his voice,
and was mocked as one despised.
He came with peace in his heart,
and met with violence and death.
By your power he broke free from the prison of the tomb,
and at his command, the gates of hell were opened.

How is Jesus bringing healing, mercy, and peace into your life right now? How does remembering the story of Jesus at the Lord’s Supper help to remind you of his presence right now?

MARCH 16

Sara Miles was a left-leaning lesbian atheist journalist. Definitely not the church going type. But one morning, for some reason (grace?), she felt herself drawn to attend a service at her local Episcopal church. When it came time for communion, Sara felt compelled to go forward to receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation. This simple act of communing for the very first time in her life started her on a spiritual journey that led to the opening of a food pantry for people struggling to make ends meet.

“*Taste and see*, the Bible said, and I did,” Miles wrote in her memoir, *Taste and See (The Spiritual Memoir of a Twenty-First Christian)*. “I was tasting a connection between communion and food – between my burgeoning religion and my real life. My first, questioning year at church ended with a question whose urgency would propel me into work I’d never imagined: Now that you’ve taken the bread, what are you going to *do*?”



“Gracious God,
pour out your Holy
Spirit upon us and upon
these your gifts of
bread and wine that
they may be for us the
body and blood of
Christ and that we may
be his body for the
world.”

-Great Prayer of
Thanksgiving
Service for the Lord’s Day



“ Holy God,
 we thank you for this
 feast of grace and life.
 As we have been
 served, help us to serve
 our neighbors.
 As we have been fed,
 help us to feed all who
 are hungry.
 As we have been loved,
 help us to love the
 world - because in
 Christ Jesus you have
 loved us.”

-Prayer After Communion
Service for the Lord's Day

God gave the Festival of Passover to the people of Israel so they would never forget the saving power and grace of God they had witnessed as they escaped Egypt and fled through the Red Sea. But now that they had taken the unleavened bread, what were they supposed to do?

A few chapters later, God says to them: “Don’t mistreat any foreigners who live in your land. Instead, treat them as well as you treat citizens and love them as much as you love yourself. Remember, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:33-34, *CEV*) Our communion with the body and blood of Christ should always propel us to action. Once we have tasted the saving goodness of the Lord in the bread and the cup, we cannot keep it to ourselves.

One of the Lenten Great Prayers of Thanksgiving in the *Book of Common Worship* puts it this way:

Gracious God,
 as this bread is Christ’s body for us,
 send us out to be the body of Christ in the world.
 Help us to be obedient to your call
 to love all your children,
 to do justice and show mercy,
 and to live in peace with your whole creation.

Have you ever thought of Holy Communion as a call to action? How might this understanding change the way you approach the Lord’s Supper?

Confessions

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Many reformations collectively make up the Reformation famously attributed to Martin Luther. Independent, yet related, movements of Lutheran and Reformed thought traveled throughout Europe, and they collided in Heidelberg. The controversy stemmed from disagreeing understandings of the Lord’s Supper—Lutheran theology claimed real bodily presence of Christ in the elements, and the Reformed Christians believed that Christ was not bodily present in the elements, but that Christ’s real presence was in the communal act of the partaking in the sacrament. An effort was made to create a catechism that would be acceptable to both sides. The catechism, completed in 1562, addresses each of its questions personally to “you” and draws heavily on biblical language. The catechism includes language that both sides could agree upon regarding Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper.

Scripture

JEREMIAH 31:31-34

The Lord said:

“The time will surely come when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. It will be different from the covenant I made with their ancestors when I led them out of Egypt. Although I was their God, they broke that covenant.

“Here is the new covenant that I, the Lord, will make with the people of Israel:

I will write my laws on their hearts and minds.

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

“No longer will they have to teach one another to obey me. I, the Lord, promise that all of them will obey me, ordinary people and rulers alike. I will forgive their sins and forget the evil things they have done.”

MARCH 17

The young man had recently completed his Master’s degree and was just beginning his studies to become a lawyer when a summer thunderstorm hit. He had come home for the weekend to visit his parents and was heading back to school when lightning struck. Thrown to the ground and fearing for his life, he called out to God to save him. A devout Catholic, he asked St. Anne to intercede for him. “If God saves me,” he pleaded, “I will become a monk!” Shaken, but saved, the budding lawyer gave up his legal pursuits and entered the monastery fourteen days later. The year was 1505, and the young man’s name was Martin...Martin Luther.

Martin Luther was among the first wave of reformers to shake Europe, laying the foundation for people like John Calvin, who later built upon Luther’s own discoveries.

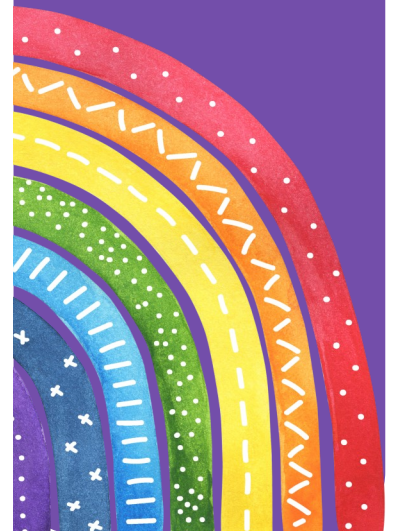
That near-disaster, and God’s saving power, became one of the defining stories of Luther’s life. His decision to become a monk led to his study of scripture, which led to his 95 Theses, which led to the Protestant Reformation. Martin would hold on to that memory of God’s saving power throughout the rest of his life.

Most of us will never come face to face with a lightning bolt. But if we’re honest, we can look back to some point in our life where we did come face to face with the saving power of God. Perhaps it was a close call on the highway. Or the safe delivery of a beautiful baby after an excruciating pregnancy. Or a successful bout of chemotherapy. Or the chicken casserole that appeared on the doorstep when we thought all was lost. Whatever the situation was, we were able to look back on it and confess, in the words of *The Belgic Confession*, that “this good God, after creating all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will...” (Article 13)

In this week’s reading, Jeremiah the prophet speaks words of comfort to God’s people in exile, carted off into captivity in Babylon. Like Martin Luther reeling on the ground after being struck by lightning, the people began to ask, where is God?

Week Five

H
E
A
R
T





Where is the One who gave us the Law? Where is the One who led us safely through the Red Sea? Where is the One who made us people of the Covenant?

Earlier in chapter 31 of Jeremiah, God reminds the people that “those who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness...(because) I have loved you with an everlasting love.” (Jeremiah 31:2-3) Whether at home or in exile, walking or struck down on the ground, God has never left us. It is this Covenant God of ours who always provides a way forward...not around, but straight through the waters and circumstances that threaten to drown us. This story of God’s faithful love is repeated over and over and over again, right down to our day.

When have you seen God’s saving power in your own life? What story of God’s deliverance do you tell over and over again in your family?

MARCH 18

Shortly after the horrific events of 9/11, a slogan entered the American lexicon: Never Forget! Artists created paintings of the World Trade Center towers with the words “Never Forget” flying in front of them. The President and other civic leaders appeared at podiums with “Never Forget” banners hanging behind them. And images of firefighters and first responders were on the nightly news with the ever-present reminder to “Never Forget.”

We are also reminded over and over again in the scriptures to “never forget.” Never forget that I led you out of Egypt with an outstretched hand, God says. Never forget that I fed you with manna in the desert. Never forget that I have been with you every single step of the way.

But then, in this week’s scripture, God seems to reverse course. “The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with you ... it will not be like the covenant I made with your ancestors.” Forget about the past covenants because I want to do something new. Here. Now.

The philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, once wrote that “without forgetting it is quite impossible to live at all.” We’ve all known people – perhaps we are that person – who cannot seem to free themselves from the events of the past, good or evil. Our own foundational stories (even those stories of God’s saving power) can trap us into believing that that distant moment was the one and only time that God will ever act on our behalf. So, we must never forget. By holding too tightly to those stories however, we can fail to see how God is moving in our lives right here, right now.

While the daily call to “never forget” after 9/11 galvanized us as a nation to come together in powerful ways to remember the victims and forge a shared future where these heinous crimes would never happen again, it also held many people back from moving forward. Most notably, it fueled anti-Muslim rhetoric in our country. What shining future may lie before us if we were able to lay the past to rest?

What do you need to let go of in order to allow God to act in your life right now?

“This good God, after creating all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will.”

-Belgic Confession
Article 13

MARCH 19

We've always done it this way.

Although they might profess the words of the Apostles' Creed each Sunday and adhere to the tenants of the Reformed confessions, many Christians' de facto profession of faith is: "We've always done it this way!"

Over the past few years, we've seen endless conversations in churches about whether to allow LGBTQ members to be fully integrated into the life of local congregations. But while many denominations continue to repeat the same arguments against full inclusion of one group or another into the life of the community, many have simply given up on church altogether.

We've always done it this way.

But God's perspective is always more expansive than we can imagine. "Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new" God says to the people through the prophet Isaiah. "It's bursting out! Don't you see it?" (Isaiah 43:16-21)

Shirley Erena grew up in New Zealand in the Methodist Church. Later in life she married John Murray, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand. The language of many of Murray's hymns is new and fresh to our ears. She began writing hymns because, in her own words, "it seemed to me that the hymns we sang had no resonance with the world I lived in...there was no imagery that evoked a particular environment, no landscape of thought to accommodate the southern hemisphere...no connection with the Maori culture of our society, which is officially bicultural, nothing to articulate our own hopes and visions." And so she began creating new songs for the church to sing. One of my favorite texts is *From the Apple in the Garden*:

From the apple in the garden
to the manger and the star,
from the rainbow and the promise
to the moment where we are,
you are our hope, loving God.

God is always up to something new. When the garden became a mess, there was a promise. When the promise was forgotten, there was a rainbow. When the rainbow was a memory, there was a star. And when the star faded, there was a Savior.

From the curse of Eve and Adam
to the blessing of the Christ,
from the spirits of division
to your Spirit in our midst,
still be our hope, loving God!

If we are "made in God's image" and "God uses our skills for the unfolding and well-being of his world," (*Our World Belongs to God*, 10) then how can we be so resistant to the new and the creative ways in which God wishes to work in our own place and time?

When have you resisted what God might want accomplish now because "we've always done it this way?"

“Made in God's image

to live in loving
communion

with our Maker,
we are appointed
earthkeepers and

caretakers

to tend the earth,

enjoy it,

and love our neighbors.

God uses our skills

for the unfolding
and well being

of his world

so that creation

and all who live in it

may flourish.”

-*Our World Belongs to God*

10





MARCH 20

John Knox Witherspoon was a Scottish Presbyterian minister who helped unify the Presbyterian Church in America, moderating its first General Assembly (1789) in Philadelphia. What Witherspoon is best known for however, is his involvement in the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. It was Witherspoon who introduced James Madison to the idea of a government with checks and balances...a new (and revolutionary) idea for the time.

There's no doubt many of the founders of our country were strongly influenced by the ideas of John Calvin. After all, twelve signers of the Declaration were Presbyterian. Another thirteen were Congregationalists, a later addition to the Reformed family. Building upon the ideas of Calvin, which were revolutionary in his day, our founders sought to create something new.

In a society not known for its respect of the human person, Calvin, acting on his deeply held conviction that all people are created in God's image, wrote that "we ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian or Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves." (*Institutes*, 2.8.55)

Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new, Isaiah preaches. *I am making a new covenant*, Jeremiah encourages.

We must always be open to the Holy Spirit who leads us to new insights into God's Word. In this century, many Reformed Christians are attempting to look at their relationship with God's creation in new and creative ways. While the ancient confessions all affirm God as the creator of this world, they did little to foster an ethic of care. The Christian Reformed Church in North America adopted this new expression of faith in 2008:

We lament that our abuse of creation has brought lasting damage to the world we have been given:

polluting streams and soil,
poisoning the air,
altering the climate,
and damaging the earth.

We commit ourselves
to honor all God's creatures
and to protect them from abuse and extinction,
for our world belongs to God.

(*Our World Belongs to God*, 51)

Can you think of ways that your congregation or denomination has addressed a contemporary issue by doing something new?

“We ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian or Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves.”

-John Calvin
Institutes, 2.8.55

MARCH 21

For the past few years, I've spent my Februarys accompanying middle school students in vocal competition. After two weeks of rehearsal, and one Saturday of critiques, competition day arrives. Knowing they will be judged and scored by a professional, the students usually enter the classroom with some sense of trepidation. But much of that melts away when they see the faces of their parents in the audience. The smiles of dads, and the reassurances of moms, help each singer step up to the stage and deliver their best performance. As I watch parents beam from ear to ear listening to their children sing, I wonder how our faith might be strengthened if we thought of God, our Divine Parent, with such a huge smile, watching us as we go through the journey of life!

Earlier in the chapter from Jeremiah we've been pondering this week, God says, "Israel, you are my dearest child, the one I love best. Whenever I mention your name, I think of you with love. My heart goes out to you; I will be merciful." (Jeremiah 31:20, GNT) These are not the musings of a god who wishes to remain distant from the creation. This is the voice of a loving mother, a gentle father, who wishes only the best for their children.

The gods of the ancient world were not known to be particularly caring. Mostly, they were strong-handed tyrants. A few were benevolent dictators. But only Yahweh - the God of Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, and Jeremiah - was a loving parent.

Like the father of the prodigal son, God will do anything, even something new, to get our attention. *I will forgive their sins. I will forget the evil they've done. I will write my law of love on their hearts.*

While justly angry,
God did not turn away
from a world bent on destruction
but turned to face it in love.
With patience and tender care
the Lord set out
on the long road of redemption
to reclaim the lost as his people
and the world as his kingdom.
(*Our World Belong to God*, 18)

Can you imagine God smiling at you, turning towards you, and facing you with love?

“With patience
and tender care
the Lord set out
on the long road
of redemption
to reclaim the lost
as his people
and the world
as his kingdom.”

-*Our World Belongs to God*

18



MARCH 22



I labored, waited, and
prayed to feel the one
“who loved me, and
gave himself for me.”

-Charles Wesley

Charles Wesley, along with his brother, John Wesley, was from a much later generation of reformers than Luther and Calvin. Born in 1707, Charles was given the best early education by his mother, Susannah, who knew Greek, Latin, French, and English! After graduating from Oxford, the Wesley brothers were ordained priests in the Anglican Church, and set sail for America as missionaries to the colonists. Charles soon realized however, that his faith was lacking something...an intimate covenant relationship with God. “I went to America to convert the Indians,” he wrote, “but, oh, who will convert me?”

Upon his return to England, Charles became acquainted with the Moravians, a group of Christians who trace their beginnings to Jan Hus, a reformer from Bohemia who lived 140 years before John Calvin. As he prayed for God to do something new in his heart, Charles wrote in his diary, “I labored, waited, and prayed to feel the one ‘who loved me, and gave himself for me.’” Shortly after that entry, Charles had a conversion...a new experience of God’s covenant in his life. The two brothers would go on to organize the early Methodist Church. And from their beginnings, the Methodists have always sung the hymns of Charles Wesley.

Wesley composed 8,989 hymns over the course of his life! One of his best known, *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*, was written shortly after his conversion experience.

Thou, O Christ, art all I want; more than all in thee I find.
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint, heal the sick, and lead the blind.
Just and holy is thy name; I am all unrighteousness.
False and full of sin I am; thou art full of truth and grace.

Plenteous grace with thee is found; grace to cover all my sin.
Let the healing streams abound; make and keep me pure within.
Thou of life the fountain art; freely let me take of thee.
Spring thou up within my heart. Rise to all eternity.

Just as the people of Israel saw God’s redeeming hand in the waters that were spread before them in the desert, so Christians see God’s redeeming grace in Jesus Christ. *I will make a new covenant*. God would once again do something new through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

How would you describe your own “conversion” experience? Has it been a gradual process, or can you point to one moment when you knew that God really loved you?

MARCH 23

The first Protestant seminary in North America was opened 235 years ago...by believers of the Dutch Reformed faith. After more than two centuries, New Brunswick Theological Seminary continues to educate ministers in the Reformed Church of America (RCA). Allan Janssen, a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the RCA, was also an Associate Professor of Theological Studies at the seminary, specializing in studies of the Reformed Confessions.

In his book *Confessing the Faith Today: A Fresh Look at the Belgic Confession*, Janssen says that “the creeds and confessions of the church are repositories of

astonishment, of ‘radical amazement.’” While always playing a secondary role to the wonder of scripture, “The confession only endeavors to describe the wonder that has happened, and more, the God who is disclosed – or more properly, the God who discloses God’s self – in the events that are witnessed.”

Tomorrow, we begin the week called Holy. On Palm Sunday, Jesus rides into a jubilant city ready to welcome him as king. By Friday however, the crowds will have turned their backs on God’s Beloved, and cry out for his death. But on Sunday the tables will be turned once again as God raises Jesus from the dead, proving that even death itself is not strong enough to contain the love and grace of God!

The devotions for next week will include a scripture reading traditionally associated with that day, as well as a statement from one of the confessions that have guided our Lenten journey. The confessions were written in very specific places by very specific people for very specific purposes. But we believe that the Holy Spirit guided our ancestors in the faith in the same way that we are guided today. As you read each scripture in dialogue with a confessional statement, ask yourself, what resonates? How might you “describe the wonder” differently?

Remember, as Janssen says, “Confession is the language of love..We grope for words and liturgically repeat those words that the church has forged, in all their inadequacy, to say back to God what God is about. The very care with which we form the words and phrases is itself an act of love and honor.”

What do you know about the Reformed Confessions now that you didn’t know at the beginning of Lent? How does the writing of a Confession make more clear the covenant God has made with us?

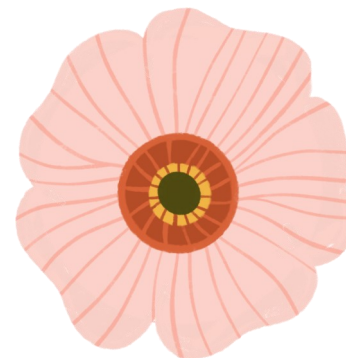
“The creeds and confessions of the church are repositories of astonishment, of “radical amazement.” The (confessions) only endeavor to describe the wonder that has happened, and more, the God who is disclosed – or more properly, the God who discloses God’s self – in the events that are witnessed.”

-Allan Janssen
Confessing the Faith Today

Confessions

A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH

When the United Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Presbyterian Church (US) merged in 1983 to become the Presbyterian Church (USA), they thought it important to form a brief statement of faith to be added to the *Book of Confessions* and used in worship. Several aspects distinguish it from the other creeds including its emphasis on Jesus ministry in Judea and Galilee, gender inclusive language, affirmation of the ordination of both women and men, and both masculine and feminine imagery of God.



Week Six

H O L Y

Holy Week

PALM SUNDAY

Scripture: Luke 19:28-38

When Jesus had finished saying all this, he went on toward Jerusalem. As he was getting near Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples on ahead. He told them, "Go into the next village, where you will find a young donkey that has never been ridden. Untie the donkey and bring it here. If anyone asks why you are doing that, just say, 'The Lord needs it.'"

They went off and found everything just as Jesus had said. While they were untying the donkey, its owners asked, "Why are you doing that?"

They answered, "The Lord needs it."

Then they led the donkey to Jesus. They put some of their clothes on its back and helped Jesus get on. And as he rode along, the people spread clothes on the road in front of him. When Jesus was starting down the Mount of Olives, his large crowd of disciples were happy and praised God because of all the miracles they had seen. They shouted,

"Blessed is the king who comes
in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven
and glory to God."

Confession: Heidelberg Catechism, #34

Q. Why do you call Jesus "our Lord"?

A. Because—not with gold or silver, but with his precious blood— he has set us free from sin and from the tyranny of the devil, and has bought us, body and soul, to be his very own.

HOLY MONDAY

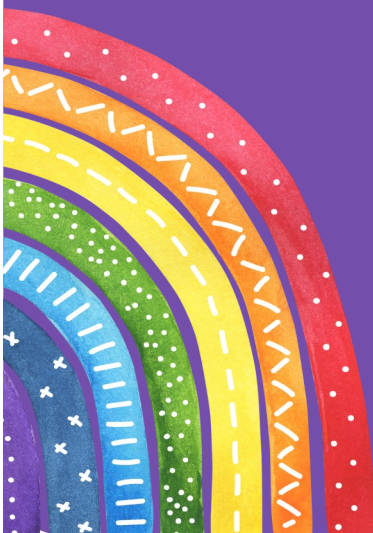
Scripture: John 12-1-8

Six days before Passover Jesus went back to Bethany, where he had raised Lazarus from death. A meal had been prepared for Jesus. Martha was doing the serving, and Lazarus himself was there.

Mary took a very expensive bottle of perfume and poured it on Jesus' feet. She wiped them with her hair, and the sweet smell of the perfume filled the house.

A disciple named Judas Iscariot was there. He was the one who was going to betray Jesus, and he asked, "Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor?" Judas did not really care about the poor. He asked this because he carried the moneybag and sometimes would steal from it.

Jesus replied, "Leave her alone! She has kept this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me."



Confession: Our World Belongs to God, 26

Being both divine and human,
Jesus is the only mediator.
He alone paid the debt for our sin;
there is no other Savior.
We are chosen in Christ
to become like him in every way.
God's electing love sustains our hope:
God's grace is free
to save sinners who offer nothing
but their need for mercy.

HOLY TUESDAY

Scripture: Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV)

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
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,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Confession: A Brief Statement of Faith (PCUSA)

We trust in Jesus Christ,
Fully human, fully God.
Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,



“God’s grace is free
to save sinners who
offer nothing
but their need for
mercy.”

-Our World Belongs to God

26



eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.
Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
Jesus was crucified,
suffering the depths of human pain
and giving his life for the sins of the world.
God raised this Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life,
breaking the power of sin and evil,
delivering us from death to life eternal.

“ Looking for life
without God,
we find death;
grasping for freedom
outside the law,
we trap ourselves in
Satan’s snares;
pursuing pleasure,
we lose the gift of joy.”

-Our World Belongs to God

14

SPY WEDNESDAY

Scripture: Luke 22:1-6

The Festival of Unleavened Bread, also called Passover, was near. The chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses were looking for a way to get rid of Jesus, because they were afraid of what the people might do. Then Satan entered the heart of Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve apostles.

Judas went to talk with the chief priests and the officers of the temple police about how he could help them arrest Jesus. They were very pleased and offered to pay Judas some money. He agreed and started looking for a good chance to betray Jesus when the crowds were not around.

Confession: Our World Belongs to God, 14

Fallen in that first sin,
we prove each day
that apart from grace
we are guilty sinners:
we fail to thank God,
we break God’s laws,
we ignore our tasks.
Looking for life without God,
we find death;
grasping for freedom outside the law,
we trap ourselves in Satan’s snares;
pursuing pleasure,
we lose the gift of joy.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Scripture: Luke 22:14-23

When the time came for Jesus and the apostles to eat, he said to them, "I have very much wanted to eat this Passover meal with you before I suffer. I tell you that I will not eat another Passover meal until it is finally eaten in God's kingdom."

Jesus took a cup of wine in his hands and gave thanks to God. Then he told the apostles, "Take this wine and share it with each other. I tell you that I will not drink any more wine until God's kingdom comes."

Jesus took some bread in his hands and gave thanks for it. He broke the bread and handed it to his apostles. Then he said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Eat this as a way of remembering me!"

After the meal he took another cup of wine in his hands. Then he said, "This is my blood. It is poured out for you, and with it God makes his new agreement. The one who will betray me is here at the table with me! The Son of Man will die in the way that has been decided for him, but it will be terrible for the one who betrays him!"

Then the apostles started arguing about who would ever do such a thing.

Confession: Heidelberg Catechism, #75

Q. How does the holy supper remind and assure you that you share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross and in all his benefits?

A. In this way: Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat this broken bread and to drink this cup in remembrance of him. With this command come these promises:

First, as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup shared with me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross.

Second, as surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood.

GOOD FRIDAY

Scripture: Luke 23:44-49

Around noon the sky turned dark and stayed that way until the middle of the afternoon. The sun stopped shining, and the curtain in the temple split down the middle. Jesus shouted, "Father, I put myself in your hands!" Then he died.

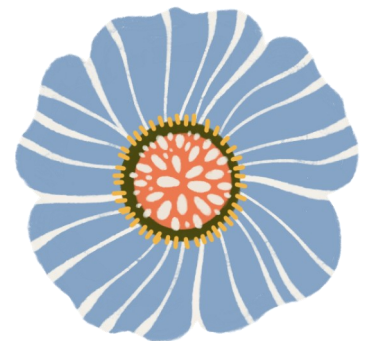
When the Roman officer saw what had happened, he praised God and said, "Certainly, this man was innocent."

A crowd had gathered to see the terrible sight. Then after they had seen it, they felt brokenhearted and went home. All of Jesus' close friends and the women who had come with him from Galilee stood at a distance and watched.

“As surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood.”

-Heidelberg Catechism

75



Confession: Belgic Confession, Article 21

And he endured all this
for the forgiveness of our sins.
Therefore we rightly say with Paul that
we know nothing "except Jesus Christ and him crucified";
we "regard everything as loss
because of the surpassing value
of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord."
We find all comforts in his wounds
and have no need to seek or invent any other means
to reconcile ourselves with God
than this one and only sacrifice,
once made,
which renders believers perfect
forever.
This is also why
the angel of God called him Jesus—
that is, "Savior"—
because he would save his people
from their sins.

“And he endured all
this for the forgiveness
of our sins.”

-Belgic Confession
Article 21



HOLY SATURDAY

Scripture: Luke 23:50-56

There was a man named Joseph, who was from Arimathea in Judea. Joseph was a good and honest man, and he was eager for God's kingdom to come. He was also a member of the council, but he did not agree with what they had decided.

Joseph went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. He took the body down from the cross and wrapped it in fine cloth. Then he put it in a tomb that had been cut out of solid rock and had never been used. It was Friday, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and watched how Jesus' body was placed in the tomb. Then they went to prepare some sweet-smelling spices for his burial. But on the Sabbath they rested, as the Law of Moses commands.

Confession: Heidelberg Catechism, #44

Q. Why does the creed add, "He descended to hell"?

A. To assure me during attacks of deepest dread and temptation that Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from hellish anguish and torment.

EASTER SUNDAY

Scripture: Luke 24:1-8

Very early on Sunday morning the women went to the tomb, carrying the spices that they had prepared. When they found the stone rolled away from the entrance, they went in. But they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus, and they did not know what to think.

Suddenly two men in shining white clothes stood beside them. The women were afraid and bowed to the ground. But the men said, "Why are you looking in the place of the dead for someone who is alive? Jesus isn't here! He has been raised from death. Remember that while he was still in Galilee, he told you, 'The Son of Man will be handed over to sinners who will nail him to a cross. But three days later he will rise to life.'" Then they remembered what Jesus had said.

Confession: Living Faith (Presbyterian Church in Canada), 3.5

Jesus suffered, died, and was buried,
but God raised him from the dead.
Risen and ascended,
he is alive now, the living Lord.
His resurrection means that our faith is not empty,
that final victory is assured over all evil power
which destroy and deform life,
and that death, the last enemy, is conquered.



“ Jesus suffered,
died, and was buried,
but God raised him
from the dead.
Risen and ascended,
he is alive now,
the living Lord.
His resurrection means
that our faith
is not empty,
that final victory is
assured over all
evil power
which destroy
and deform life,
and that death,
the last enemy,
is conquered.”

People of the Covenant by Geoff Duffy

© 2019, 2024 Geoff Duffy

Unless noted otherwise, all scripture is from *Contemporary English Version (CEV)* Copyright © 1995 by American Bible Society

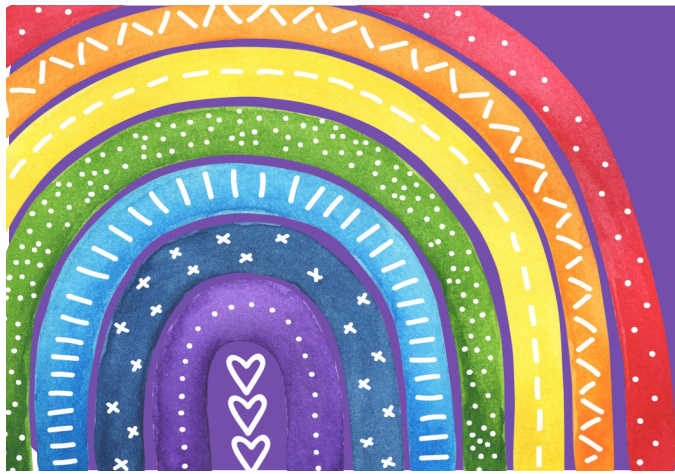
The Message by Eugene Peterson Copyright © 1993-1996, 2000-2002 by Eugene H. Peterson

Summary of *The Second Helvetic Confession*, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, and *A Brief Statement of Faith* adapted from the website of First Presbyterian Church of Estherville, Iowa

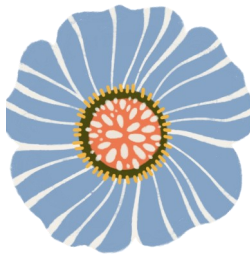
Summary of *Our World Belongs to God* and *The Belgic Confession* adapted from the website of the Christian Reformed Church

-*Living Faith*

3.5



people of the
COVENANT
LENTEN SCHEDULE 2024



ASH WEDNESDAY

FEBRUARY 14 @ 8-9AM / 12-1PM

Lent begins early this year. Ashes will be distributed in the roundabout outside the church office between 8-9am and 12-1pm. Drive through anytime to begin your Lenten journey.



WEDNESDAY SOUP SUPPERS

BEGINNING FEB 21 @ 5:45PM-7PM

You're invited for soup and conversation on the Wednesdays in Lent (Feb 21, 28, March 6, 13 and 20). Soup will be provided by a different WPC group each week.



CHRISTIAN FORMATION CLASSES

BEGINNING FEB 25 @ 11:15AM-12:15AM

Join us following worship on the Sundays in Lent (Feb 25, March 3, 10 and 17) for an engaging video series on "The Historical Jesus." The conversation will take place in Conference Room B.



HOLY WEEK

PALM SUNDAY / MARCH 24 @ 10AM

MAUNDY THURSDAY / MARCH 28 @ 7PM

GOOD FRIDAY / MARCH 29 @ 7PM

Come and remember the last days of Jesus through scripture, music, and sacrament during this most holy week.



EASTER SUNDAY

MARCH 31 @ 10AM

He is risen!