



February 2008

## **The Road to Reconciliation – Reflections for Lent**

The devotions and traditions of Lent present opportunities for reflection on the meaning of Christ's sacrifice for us and our response. It is a time for somber contemplation and repentance as we humbly recognize our sins and failures. We focus on the need for God's grace as we seek to respond anew to God's presence in our lives and in the world.

For advocates of Middle East peacemaking, the current events that accompany this year's Lenten season exude danger and despair, even as the scene on the world's diplomatic stage signal some positive forward movement.

The reflections in this resource, "The Road to Reconciliation" — including one for Forgiveness Vespers and Clean Monday, the beginning of Lent for Orthodox Christians — lift up the critical need for Middle East peacemaking. We are challenged to seize the openings for reconciliation and to recommit ourselves to vital activities that make for peace.

Let us take this Lenten journey together knowing that we seek and struggle in partnership and community toward peace with justice in the Holy Land.

Many thanks to the writers for their contributions and support of this project.

Anna Rhee  
Grassroots Coordinator

## **Ash Wednesday**

### **Isaiah 58:1-12**

#### **Authentic Worship: Serving the Neighbor's Need**

What kind of worship pleases God? The poetic, prophetic words of Isaiah 58:1-12 leave no doubt: That which serves neighbors in distress.

Believers today see “neighbors” not as a geographic category but a moral one. Neighbors aren’t the near ones but the needy ones, next door or far away. Our service to God, says Isaiah, is about meeting people’s material needs and liberating the oppressed.

Regarding neighbor-needs in the Holy Land, U.S. Christians have long responded to suffering there with humanitarian efforts: sharing food, sheltering the homeless, providing medical care. We’ve also sought “to loose the bonds of injustice” and “let the oppressed go free”—advocating for policies by our own government that pursue an end to Israel’s occupation of another people, an end to violence from both sides, and a political agreement that lets Palestinians and Israelis live in security and peace.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer defined Christians as people who join God’s Suffering One in the world: “watching with Christ in Gethsemane” (Letters and Papers from Prison). When we pray with our Lord in Gethsemane this Lent, let’s clearly link our prayers with political action. “Ora et labora,” the old Latin injunction, surely fits: we’re to both pray and work for a just peace in the land called Holy.

#### **Prayer**

*Shepherding God, your arms are open wide to each Palestinian, each Israeli. Turn them and us away from violence. Lead us all in your way of understanding, forgiveness, trust and reconciliation — the way of peace. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

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Charles P. Lutz, CMEP Minnesota Grassroots Advocacy Coordinator

## **Forgiveness Vespers and Clean Monday**

### **Matthew 6:14-21**

### **Principles for Living**

In Orthodox parishes, Lent begins with a service known as Forgiveness Vespers, held the Sunday evening before the day called Clean Monday on which the Lenten Fast begins. Each member of the congregation, including the clergy, goes to every other member, looks the other in the eye, bends down in humility, asks for forgiveness — using the person’s name (“forgive me, John,” “forgive me, Mary”) — and offers the kiss of peace. Still ringing in everyone’s ears during this profoundly communal but also personal act of reconciliation are the words of the Lord read out at the Divine Liturgy that morning: “If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Is there any teaching more important to live by, or more difficult? When someone does me wrong, from that moment I am saddled with a responsibility I did not have before. I am responsible for wanting forgiveness for the person who wronged me, as deeply and sincerely as I want forgiveness myself. Nobody can fulfill this responsibility for me. Only I can do it. Nothing dispenses me from it. If I am Israeli, if I am Palestinian, the burden of this responsibility will lie very heavy on me, since it is to everyone around me who injures me, threatens me, wishes me ill, or misunderstands me that my forgiveness has to extend, and yet it is beyond my power to offer this out of my own resources. I can’t do it myself. It is a gift of God and the most extraordinary sign of God’s power.

During this Lent, as we ask God to enable us to forgive our brothers and sisters as He forgives us, and to deliver us from our own prejudices and divisions. May his love embrace all the peoples of the Holy Land, giving them the strength to seek peace and pursue it. May this love inspire our political leaders to advance just policies that foster mutual recognition and reconciliation.

### **Prayer**

*O Lord and master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power and idle talk. Give rather a spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to thy servant. Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my brother. For you alone art holy, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.*

- Prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian (306-373), recited at all Orthodox services throughout Lent

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## **First Week in Lent**

### **Matthew 4:1-11**

#### **Tempted to Take Shortcuts**

When I get discouraged with the progress of peacemaking in the Middle East, or angry with leaders who seem unwilling or unable to really strive for the welfare of their people, it is somehow comforting to know that even Jesus struggled with the desire to take shortcuts.

Even Jesus wished that things were easier. In Matthew 4, Satan suggests that Jesus capitalize on people's greed and fear in order to seize political power: Just opt out of what is sure to be a frustrating ministry, trying to teach people the meaning of grace and reconciliation. Just skip that whole messy and discouraging road to the cross.

Knowing that even Jesus faced these temptations puts me in awe of the many peacemakers in Israel and Palestine, who patiently — day after day, week after week, in times of hope, and in times of disappointment — continue to plant seeds of justice and hold high the vision of freedom from strife. In a land where there is no one on either side who has not experienced a wrong that could be avenged, to seek peace is courageous and extraordinary.

Let us, in this season of Lent, remember peacemakers everywhere. Lift them in prayer. Write a note of encouragement. For to walk the road of reconciliation and at-one-ment with persistence and grace is to walk as children of God. The road may be messy and often discouraging, but it is in company with the Prince of Peace.

#### **Prayer**

*Our Lord, you blessed peacemakers and called them children of God. We ask that you to give courage and perseverance to all who work for peace today — in the Middle East, in the halls of Congress and in so many places around the world. May your pleasure and company encourage them to continue forward. Amen.*

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Ann Staal, Middle East Peace Makers Coordinator, Reformed Church in America, and CMEP Board member

## Second Week in Lent Genesis 12:1-3

### Blessing All of Abraham's Children

Some of the most pressing questions for people of faith today are interfaith questions: How can we reach out beyond the confines of our own faith and our own ideas about God to encounter other people of faith? Can we develop bonds of real relationships — even friendships — with others in our increasingly interdependent and all too quarrelsome human family? The story of God's call and promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 can help address these questions.

Abraham ventures forth from the safe harbor of his known world toward a promised land amidst uncertainty and danger, clinging to God's promise that "through you all the families of the earth will be blessed." As the biblical story unfolds, Abraham has two sons — Ishmael and Isaac. Muslims trace their connection to Abraham through Ishmael while Jews and Christians see themselves as descendents of Isaac. As Bruce Feiler points out in his thoughtful book, *Abraham*, the stories in Genesis include promises that great nations will come from *both* Isaac and Ishmael. When Abraham dies, both his sons come together to bury him. This model of cooperation and shared love for Abraham suggests that the divisions and enmity that have too often characterized relationships between and among the descendents of Abraham are not the only option.

The late Pope John Paul II understood the promise of Genesis 12:3 and sought to live out a new model of interfaith understanding and cooperation. He was the first pope to visit a mosque (in Cairo and Damascus) and a synagogue (in Rome, then Jerusalem). Speaking to some 80,000 Muslims in 1985 in Casablanca, John Paul II said: "We believe in the same God....I believe that God today invites us to change old practices. We must respect each other and we must stimulate each other in good works on the path to righteousness." Like Abraham, John Paul II ventured forth with the assurance that God's blessing extends to all the families of the earth. We, too, can claim that promise.

### Prayer

*We pray, O God, that all the children of Abraham will remember your promise to bless all the nations of the earth. Help us, your anguished, confused and all too quarrelsome children, to move beyond animosity and hatred. Help us, we pray, to come together in a spirit of healing and hope as we commit to work together for reconciliation and peace. Amen.*

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Dr. Charles Kimball, Professor of Comparative Religion, Wake Forest University, and CMEP Leadership Council member

## **Third Week in Lent**

### **John 4:5-42**

### **God's Grace Does Not Depend on Our (or Their) Virtue**

John 4:5-42 recounts for us such a human encounter, yet such a manifestation of God's power of reconciliation. Jesus, a Jew, and a Samaritan woman, doubly divided from the Jews by religion and gender, are suddenly in conversation. She is amazed that Jesus will even acknowledge her presence, so deep is the division. Yet Jesus transcends the differences, overcoming at one and the same time the prejudices of his own people and the animosity of Samaritans toward Jews. By simply asking for water, he disarms centuries of suspicion and hatred and begins a dialogue, clearly aimed at reconciliation and open communication. And from such beginnings arise mutuality and solidarity.

Desmond Tutu prays: "O God, all holy one, you are our Mother and our Father, and we are your children. Open our eyes and our hearts so that we may be able to discern your work in the universe. And be able to see Your features in every one of Your children. May we learn that there are many paths, but all lead to you. Help us to know that you have created us for family, for togetherness, for peace, for gentleness, for compassion, for caring, for sharing."

Human solidarity is God's will. God says, "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; The things of the past shall not be remembered or come to mind." [Is. 65:17] In such a new world there will be peace, reconciliation and mutuality, and all people will enjoy the dignity of the children of God.

### **Prayer**

*Loving God, let the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman be for us a model and guide for reconciliation among all peoples, Israeli and Palestinian, Christian, Jew, Muslim. Let all that seek your will be united by your grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

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T. Michael McNulty, SJ, Justice and Peace Director, Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), and CMEP Board member

## **Fourth Week in Lent**

### **John 9:1-41**

### **The Worlds of Sin and Light**

The 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel recounts the story of the restoration of sight by Jesus to a man who was born blind. When challenged by authorities about who restored his sight, the man insists it was Jesus who healed him. In defending this simple truth against those who cannot accept the reality of Christ's grace and power, the man goes through progressive enlightenment from understanding Jesus as an ordinary man, then a prophet, a person sent by God, and finally, the transcendent "Son of Man."

Two worlds swirl around this one man. One is a vindictive, judgmental world of alienation where authorities see suffering as a punishment for sin, implying a spiteful, tyrannical God. The other accepts the reality of suffering, but without the need to find a reason to blame the victim. It is prepared to receive the healing and saving power of God revealed in Jesus.

The world is full of assertions of victimhood and assignment of blame, often compounded by refusals to be open to peace, or even to oppose it. In the Holy Land, the cycle of violence and mutual recrimination have long been the enemy of reconciliation. On the cross of Good Friday, Jesus reveals the need to break that cycle and to accept God's grace through loving relationship.

### **Prayer**

*O God, who wishes suffering on no one and wholeness for all, open our eyes to the saving power of your Grace so that we may effectively work for the reconciliation of the world with you.  
Amen.*

## **Fifth Week in Lent Ezekiel 37 and Psalm 130**

### **Rattle Them Bones, Hope in the Lord**

Here we are in the last week of Lent. Where have our Lenten reflections and our faithful actions taken us during this forty-day period? Despite Abbas and Olmert and Bush and others being in peace-searching dialogue, many homes and schools and communities of Israel and Palestine, and yes, in the U.S., still seem far distant from a peace reality. Around us we see the very real existence of torn communities and governments in turmoil as they search for an answer. Nations, peoples, in the midst of pain and agony, desperately searching for hope.

Our writer from Psalms could relate. Big time. “Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord, hear my voice,” she screams. And the prophet Ezekiel, he found himself in one of the most depressing and hopeless situations one might encounter. God plopped him down in the middle of a graveyard. A valley full of dead and useless bones. The prophet and the psalmist knew the torment of personal agony. They stood in desperate need of hope for another day.

As faithful children of God it is our mandate from such Hebrew story tellers to now carry their story the next step. Our Lenten journey, our reflections of a God who never ends, one who brings new life, expects this of us. The psalmist sang her lament and then searched and waited and moved forward in God’s steadfast love. Ezekiel stumbled among the dry bones sharing the hope of God for all, and slowly and surely newness sprang forth. The spirit of God was restored in them, and they found life.

We cannot lessen our clamor for peace or diminish our song of hope for God’s people. We are called to stand in the strength of God’s breath into our bones, into our being, and demand that nations find new life in an understanding of peace and justice in all valleys of our land. Abbas and Bush and Olmert and others; you and I, let us continue this work of Lent, this journey of hope, and let us proclaim and bring peace into the continuing story of God’s children. A narrative of love and forgiveness and life.

### **Prayer**

*Creator God, surround us in this journey. Give us prophetic words to speak, bold proclamations for peace and life and love. Restore your spirit within us. For in you there is steadfast love. Amen.*

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Rev. Phil Jones, Director, Church of the Brethren Witness/Washington Office, and CMEP Board member