

# LIVING THE QUESTIONS



## LIVING THE QUESTIONS 2.0

### II. HONORING CREATION



## 8. RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS



**FOCUS:** There are three Biblical “macro-stories” that shape the whole of the Biblical narrative: Bondage and Liberation, Exile and Return, Sin and Forgiveness. Each representing a different facet of the human condition, they demonstrate what is necessary for the restoration of relationships on a variety of levels.

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### RE-LIGIO-ED

Rootless. Alienated. Estranged. Meaningless. The human condition can be a desperate mix of questions about the basics of “being.” In fact, the longing for a sense of connection is at the root of the English word, “religion.” The Latin *re-ligio* means to re-link; to reconnect. To help reconnect, re-link, and restore people to relationship with one another and to the Divine is at the heart of religion’s intended purpose. Our stories, rituals, ceremonies and traditions grow out of our collective effort to systematize our understanding of just what it takes to be “*re-ligio-ed*.”

At the heart of the Biblical tradition is the notion that truth doesn’t come to us primarily as fact, creed, or scripture. It is best conveyed through story. As our spiritual ancestors endeavored to sort out the process of reconnection, they did so by developing three major themes – what Marcus Borg calls Biblical “macro-stories.” For the ancient Hebrews enslaved in Egypt, the problem was bondage. Since what was needed was liberation, the tale of the Exodus became one of the most important stories for ancient Israel. For those removed to Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem, the problem was exile. The solution was maintaining a sense of identity in a foreign land, and if possible, a journey of return. For those grounded in the institution and rituals of the Temple, the problem was sin and guilt. The solution was forgiveness. Individually and collectively, these stories serve as the thematic wellspring from which stream the major stories of the Biblical tradition.

### BONDAGE AND LIBERATION

*“If the problem is bondage, then the solution is liberation – It means leaving Egypt and the dominion of Pharaoh. It involves passing through the sea to the other side – a passage from one kind of life to another.”*

– Marcus Borg

While liberation from bondage for the Hebrews was a practical matter of getting away from the Pharaoh, bondage today is no less real: political, economic, religious, psychological, and spiritual bondage is the stuff of everyday struggle for countless millions.

While the temptation is to let this story be something that happened long ago about which the facts are worth knowing, the true power of the story is in what it is saying right now about each of our lives, what it says to the deepest part of our being. “Everyday” kinds of bondage in our lives take on many forms: grief, anxiety, ego, guilt, regret, addictions, religion, legalism, apathy, destructive relationships, destructive jobs, issues of identity – or just being in a rut.

That’s in part why Fr. Richard Rohr says that Christianity is not so much a spirituality of *addition* (where you add this skill and that achievement) as it is a spirituality of *subtraction*. Peeling away the things that don’t matter or that keep us in bondage is the solution to much that ails the human soul.

## **TOWARD THE PROMISED LAND**

Following the American Civil War, newly freed slaves in the South had no place to go. Many returned to plantations to work for room and board – and no pay. They’d been “liberated,” but not much had changed. “Where do we go from here?” is a question the Torah asks repeatedly. The whole of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy is about the subsequent journey of the children of God – a journey of trials and tribulations, learning how to survive, and journeying toward the “promised land.”

This spiritual journey toward a land of promise has been expressed in countless ways. From personal pilgrimages to holy places to the highly personalized notion of being “born again” to focusing on doing whatever it takes to guarantee a spiritual future in heaven, the Promised Land is finally none of these. It is best thought of as a way of being where there is peace, understanding, and justice – and not just for one, but for the whole community. Jesus called it the Reign or Kingdom of God.

Moses may have never made it to the Promised Land; Martin Luther King, Jr. may have never made it to the Promised Land, but the vision of it inspired them towards doing everything they could in achieving it. As two tourists admired the spectacle of Disney World, they talked about the genius of Walt Disney. “Too bad he isn’t here to see it,” said one. The other replied, “It wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t seen it.”

## **WITH CANAANITE EYES**

As appealing as “promised land theology” may at first seem, it can also be a quagmire of competing claims. The same Biblical texts some interpret as messages of saving hope and promise are seen by others as condoning conquest and genocide. The Native American theologian, Robert Allen Warrior, reads the Exodus and Promised Land stories “with Canaanite eyes.” He says, according to the Biblical text, the Canaanites:

*“...are not to be trusted, nor are they to be allowed to enter into social relationships with the people of Israel. They are wicked, and their religion*

*is to be avoided at all costs. The laws put forth regarding strangers and sojourners may have stopped the people of Yahweh from wanton oppression, but presumably only after the land was safely in the hands of Israel. The covenant of Yahweh depends on this."*

(From "A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991)

Likewise, the early success of the American economy was made possible by the forced labor of millions of African slaves. Civil rights leader Malcolm X was said to have claimed that his people didn't land on Plymouth Rock, but that "Plymouth Rock landed on them." Similar claims can be made against the Afrikaners in South Africa, Spaniards and Portuguese in South America, Belgians in the Congo, and the Dutch in the East Indies.

In adopting the story of the Exodus as their own, African-Americans are but one group to have acknowledged the continuing power of the Biblical story to inspire people in bondage with the hope of liberation.

*"We need not always weep and mourn, let my people go;  
and wear those slavery chains forlorn, let my people go.  
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt Land,  
Tell old Pharaoh, 'Let my people go . . .'"*

– African American Spiritual

Be it Peasant vs. Oligarchy in Central America, Palestine vs. Israel, indigenous aborigines vs. the "white fella" in Australia and New Zealand, or countless other conflicts, stories of bondage and liberation continue to play out on a national scale.

## **EXILE AND RETURN**

*"By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the LORD'S song in a foreign land?"*

– Psalm 137 (NRSV)

Perhaps one of the most important and least acknowledged events contributing to the shaping of Western Culture was the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 587/6 B.C.E. The brightest and best of Jewish leadership was taken into exile in Babylon where they served the courts and needs of the Babylonians for generations. This was not only a political defeat, but also a crisis of faith: Babylon's victory was perceived as a victory for Babylon's patron god Marduk over Yahweh of Israel.

Deprived of all the trappings of Temple and Promised Land, the exiles took to writing down their stories of faith in order to prevent assimilation into the Babylonian culture. This “resistance literature” promoted hope in the assurance that Marduk’s apparent victory was not the last word and that captivity would come to an end. The traditions that were cared for and the writings of this time period contribute significantly to what we now know as the Torah. After several generations in captivity, a remnant was allowed to return to rebuild their culture and eventually, the Temple.

This, however, is not the only Biblical story with the theme of exile and return. The authors of Genesis explored exile and return in the story of Eve and Adam’s banishment from the Garden. The newly self-conscious humans were not only evicted from Eden, but were cast into a world of anxiety and alienation from one another and the Divine. The journey of return is then played out over the length and breadth of the Bible as human beings seek to reconnect with the idyllic vision of life in Paradise.

## **SIN AND FORGIVENESS**

One of the sound bites used to promote Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* was, “Dying was his reason for living.” But for Gibson, God’s reconciliation with the world is based not on Jesus’ death alone. As is evidenced by the movie’s excruciatingly long and drawn out scenes of torture, abuse, and humiliation, the suffering of Jesus seems to hold a peculiar fascination. And he’s not alone. Much of Christianity has understood that in order to redeem the sins of the world – past, present and future – Jesus had to suffer an awful lot.

The theological concept that describes the healing of the once-estranged relationship between God and humanity is called “atonement.” Said to be achieved for Christians through the “work” of Jesus (not his life and ministry, but his self-sacrificing death) the idea of atonement has a long and convoluted history.

In the ancient world, it was not unusual for religions to restore relationship to their god or gods with animal sacrifice. Judaism practiced animal sacrifice for countless years. Since the first New Testament writer, Paul, didn’t have any Gospels to go on to describe Jesus’ life, he went with what he knew, which was “Christ crucified.”

Consequently, in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, Paul wrote, “Christ died for our sins.” But there’s a problem: in both Greek and English, there are two ways to interpret that phrase. The first, most popular understanding is, “Christ died to save us *from* our sins.” However, an equally acceptable reading of the passage has very different implications: “Christ died *because of* or *on account of* our sins.” Early Christians picked up on the first idea of Jesus’ death as sacrifice. The first evangelist, Mark, devoted the first half of his gospel to Jesus’ life, and the whole second half to his suffering and death. By the time the writer of the Gospel of John was writing, the

idea of Jesus as sacrifice had gained so much influence that the storyline was changed: John even changed the day of Jesus' death so it could be said Jesus was slain at the exact moment the Passover lambs would have been slain.

To top it off, *The Letter to the Hebrews* takes it to the next level, setting Jesus' death against the backdrop of *another* Jewish holiday, Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement. In a sad irony, the Jesus of the Gospels, who overturned the tables of the money-changers in the Temple, protesting not only economic corruption, but the cult of animal sacrifice itself, is simultaneously portrayed in *Hebrews* as the High Priest that offers the sacrifice and as the perfect animal whose blood is spilled in order to satiate God's need for blood.

Clearly, even the early church struggled with the "meaning" of Jesus death in relation to Sin and Forgiveness. Over the centuries, many attempts have been made to make sense of the Biblical assertions regarding God's bloodthirsty expectations before forgiveness can be meted out. Not the least of these are theories of the atonement fashioned by the late twelfth-century theologian, Anselm. Leaving out the notion of grace altogether, Anselm constructs the system that resonates in our churches and psyches to this day: in order to satisfy God's having been insulted by human sin, it is necessary for the perfect God-man, Jesus, to die. This almost purely legal argument eclipsed earlier ideas of Jesus' death symbolizing God's victory over Satan, and has itself experienced nearly a millennia of revision. Two thousand years of fevered speculation on exactly how sinners can receive forgiveness from God is proof of the hunger human beings have for reconciliation with the Divine. The notions of "Substitution," "Satisfaction," and "Ransom" are among the theories of atonement that will be explored further in *Living the Questions* Session 11: *The Myth of Redemptive Violence*.

All this, of course, is a distraction from the very real need of seeking forgiveness from our own fellow human beings. A fixation on sin and the need for divine forgiveness creates an obsession about a vertical relationship at the expense of relationships with those around us. Over-spiritualizing sin and forgiveness makes it a higher priority to seek God's forgiveness than the forgiveness of one's neighbor. After all, it is often easier to kneel at the altar over and over again than to knock on a neighbor's door and seek practical resolution to a misunderstanding.

## **JUST DO IT**

We are people in need of forgiveness. But we also need liberation and a sense of belonging. The Biblical witness offers us diverse solutions to our diverse problems. Remembering that truth comes as story and that different stories may speak more powerfully to people at different times, we are presented with multiple ways of understanding the quest for reconciliation. To be fixated on one

story at the expense of the others diminishes the richness of what the Bible has to offer.

What is important, then, is to begin to live in the stories of reconciliation and make them our own, being present to the immediate and legitimate needs of real people. Together we can continue to move in the direction of reconciliation, restoring relationships with one another and with the Divine.

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

### **DVD Chapter 2:**

Describe some of the characteristics of the Exodus story and how it speaks to the human need for liberation from bondage.

What are some of the “isms” and concrete expressions of bondage from which Carcaño has been liberated?

How does the Passover Seder affirm that the Exodus story is “true” about us?

List some of the cultural messages that, as a matter of course, subject us to bondage.

### **DVD Chapter 3:**

Describe some of the characteristics of the story of the Babylonian exile and how it speaks to the human need for a return from exile.

How do the “Priestly” story and Temple sacrifice speak to the human need for forgiveness from sin?

In what ways might the dominance of the Priestly story and the doctrine of the atonement diminish the broader Biblical message?

Bill Nelson claims that Jesus was against the sacrificial system of the Temple Cult of Israel. Explain.

As described by Borg, list the function and benefits of the three different stories in speaking to the diversity of the human predicament.

## **SPIRITPRACTICE:**

Reconciliation and Forgiveness (with Sr. Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States.*)

### **Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting so far from the material?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

### **Consider the following questions as a group:**

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?



## PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

### For your Personal Journey: Forgiveness Day

The modern practice of Yom Kippur (the Jewish Day of Atonement) has many advantages over the rote prayers of forgiveness recited in many Protestant congregations. One element is the period of time set aside the week before the holiday to seek out those with whom you've had a disagreement in the previous year and seek to make amends.

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:23ff may very well be an amplification of a similar practice already taught by the Pharisees:

*"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."* (NRSV)

Short of instituting a celebration of Yom Kippur in your congregation, integrating an annual day of forgiveness may be a helpful tradition in assisting people to restore relationships. The Worldwide Forgiveness Alliance (<http://www.forgivenessday.org>) is dedicated to demonstrating the power of forgiveness across cultural and national boundaries. Part of their mission includes establishing the first global holiday, International Forgiveness Day, to be celebrated on the first Sunday of every August. The Alliance website has ideas and contact information for those interested in organizing local observances of International Forgiveness Day, both in religious and non-sectarian settings.

### In our Institutional Journey: An example of making reconciliation real

In an effort to recognize and begin to deal with the rift between Aboriginal and European Australians, a draft "Declaration for Reconciliation" has been circulated since the late 1990s for discussion and possible adoption on a national level. In part, it reads:

- *"Speaking with one voice, we the people of Australia, of many origins as we are, make a commitment to go on together recognising the gift of one another's presence.*
- *Our nation must have the courage to own the truth, to heal the wounds of its past so that we can move on together at peace with ourselves.*
- *And so we take this step: as one part of the nation expresses its sorrow and profoundly regrets the injustices of the past, so the other part accepts the apology and forgives.*
- *Our new journey then begins. We must learn our shared history, walk together and grow together to enrich our understanding."*

You can find out more by visiting the websites of groups like Reconciliation Australia: [www.reconciliation.org.au](http://www.reconciliation.org.au). The National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia issued a detailed apology to the Indigenous people in 1994 and continues to work toward reconciliation through its "Covenanting" process (see <http://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/statements/covenant.htm>). Such efforts develop strategies to advance reconciliation that can be adopted in many other situations – even your own.

# LIVING IT OUT

## SESSION 8 PLACES IN THE HEART

We often think that spiritual practices or spiritual disciplines are limited to Bible study and prayer. Did you ever consider a movie and popcorn for your spiritual practice? That is exactly what is on the menu for this session's "Living it Out."

Rent (or perhaps you know someone with a copy) the movie "Places in the Heart" and invite friends to watch it with you.

After the movie:

Share with your movie partners what it was like to witness communion in the movie.

Why do you think Jesus often used mealtime for teaching and for relationship building?

*About Communion:*

Depending upon your church's practices, a prayer known as the Great Thanksgiving may be used in preparation for communion. This prayer tells/retells bits of the biblical Story and helps worshippers remember God's action and love made visible in journey, liberation, salvation, forgiveness and community. In conjunction with remembering the faith story is the opportunity for confession and reconciliation. Prior to receiving communion, everyone is encouraged to offer people with whom they are worshipping signs of peace and reconciliation. In other words, just like our ancestors, before we receive this meal, we reflect upon our lives and actions and seek to get right with others.

Reflection, Prayer and Action

Spend time in prayer, reflecting on your words and actions that unintentionally or intentionally hurt another person.

Is there someone with whom you have a strained or broken relationship?

Find a picture of that person or write their name on a piece of paper. Place it in space where you will see it frequently. Pray for that person and yourself.

Consider steps toward reconciliation. If possible, you might invite that person out for coffee or to share a meal.

### **Prayer of Confession**

*God who is made visible to us in the breaking of the bread, we sit in the Upper Room and wonder “is it I, Lord, who have and will betray you”? Is it I Lord who would sell you for thirty pieces of silver? For the money in my bank account? For any pleasure in this world? For gadgets and policies that promise security? At the expense of others? Please forgive me for any way I have acted as Judas when he betrayed you. Forgive me for any way I have acted as Peter when he denied you. Forgive us all, O God, for we are not so different than these two men – capable of love and capable of betrayal. We claim your table promise that the cup of forgiveness is poured out for each of us. Let us drink deeply and live fully to honor the One in whose name we pray. Amen.*

– Cynthia Langston Kirk