



World Fellowship Sunday • January 22, 2012



Gathering

Call to worship

There is no longer Jew or Greek,
there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
—Galatians 3:28

- Leader: The time has come.
Let us worship the most high God.
- People: With Christians all over the world,
we gather to worship!**
- Leader: The time has come.
The kingdom of God is near.
- People: We are assembled here,
expectant.**
- Leader: The time has come.
Believe the good news!
- People: May worship be good news
that inspires and convicts.**

*(Sarah Thompson USA, Marius van Hoogstraten,
Netherlands/Germany)*

Worship with Songs and Readings

Reading: Psalm 103:1-11; 19-22

Prayer (s)

Songs from the *International Songbook, Paraguay
2009*

- “Praise, I will praise you, Lord” (# 2)
“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty” (#17)
“He is with you all the time” (#31)

Hearing and Responding to the Word

Sermon, based on Genesis 18

Stories

Songs from the *International Songbook, Paraguay
2009*

- “Father, I love and praise you” (#5)
“Tengan la Mente de Cristo” (#9)
“Hakuna akaita” (#7)
“In Jesus we are brothers and sister” (# 12)

Prayer for reconciliation and unity among Christians

- I Glory to God, who is generous and kind,
source of grace and truth.
- II God fills our hearts with confidence and
hope.
God’s love opens us to our brothers and
sisters.**
- I We are delivered from sin through Jesus Christ,
God’s ambassador and our Lord.
- II The Word calls us all to live in freedom as
children of God.
Those who have gone before us believed,
and they answered this call.**
- I They found eternal grace, promised by God,
not through their own works nor by human
might.
- II Yet through disagreements and conflicts,
their unity was broken.
The powerful abused their power,
persecuting and killing brothers and sisters in
the faith.
Pride led them to scorn one another.**
- II With truth and humility we ponder
the burden and promise of our history
and together we declare each other freed
from our past sin.**
- I We abandon suspicion and abuse of power
in the name of the One who gave his life for us.
- II We hear anew God’s call
to manifest our unity in Christ.**

- I We are grateful for the diverse gifts of the Spirit, given freely to individual members and to the church.
- II **We want to serve each other with the special gifts God has given to each of us**

I & II and with joy to unite our efforts to spread the reign of God in this world. To God alone be glory. Amen.

(Prepared for the dialogue between Reformed and Mennonites in Switzerland, 2009)

Prayers of intercession for the European churches and Mennonite World Conference
(see Call to Prayer by Markus Rediger below)

Conclusion

The Lord's Prayer
 Benediction
 Song of blessing: "Herr, gib uns deinen Frieden"
(Lord, give us your peace – see below)

Am Dm G C
 1. Herr, gib uns dei-nen Frie - den,
 Am Dm G C
 2. gib uns dei - nen Frie - den,
 Am Dm G C
 3. Frie - den, gib uns dei-nen Frie-den, Herr,
 Am Dm G C
 4. gib uns dei - nen Frie - den.

T.: Wolfgang Poeplau
 M.: Ludger Edelkötter 1976

Used with permission of KiMu Kindermusikverlag, Pulheim/Köln. Text by Wolfgang Poeplau. Music by Ludger Edelkötter.

Also available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTq2tVlwDe8>

Seeds for a Sermon
Listen to God and Act
Genesis 18: 1-8

Bible scholars note that Abram's behavior seems to change after the Lord blesses him, reaffirms the divine covenant with him, and commands him and his descendants to circumcise their male children. This change is also reflected in Abram's new name: Abraham. Sarai likewise becomes Sarah. The Hebrew letter H is added to their names, signifying this new covenant with God. From now on, with their lives thus intertwined, they will uphold the name of the Lord. "Hallowed be thy name... Thy will be done." Abraham and Sarah are blessed indeed.

Even though Abraham and Sarah have accepted a new task, however, it is obvious that doubts still linger in their hearts. The Lord has said there will be a new future—but when, if ever, will it come to pass? In the beginning of this episode, then, there is a stillness, a fatigue. Abraham sits in front of his tent in the heat of the day. Spring is over, and the earth is scorched, dry and barren. The scene reminds me of “The Waste Land” by the English poet T.S. Eliot: “Here is no water but only rock_ / Rock and no water and the sandy road / winding above among the mountains. . .

Will there ever be new beginnings? There will be, but they take time. The Lord often dwells among us in disguise. In ordinary daily life God can be found, close to our heart and home, so commonplace, yet so special. As Psalm 113:4-6 declares: “The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?”

The Lord wants to be close, to be intimate with people, to rejuvenate and restore, to renew their hopes and foster new beginnings. God visits both the sick and the strong, the needy and the hopeless.

Hospitality

Abraham is only too eager to receive guests in his tent. The biblical storyteller seems to rejoice in relating all the details of his welcome, including the practice of foot washing, a very hospitable procedure. Having welcomed the presence of the Lord in his life, Abraham is now enabled to welcome other people in his life and home as well.

There is bonding and bridging here. Abraham is bound to the Lord and reaches out to others. One could say he acts like a partner of God. He takes his responsibility for the welfare of God’s creatures.

A telling detail in the story reflects what has changed. In the beginning of the story it is recorded that the visiting angels were ‘above’ Abraham (v. 2). But a little later Abraham is ‘above’ them (v. 8). A Jewish story relates that the angels at first did not have much respect for Abraham. To them he was sick and weak, a vulnerable human being. When the angels Michael and Gabriel discovered how hospitable and welcoming he was, they had to recognize his superiority. Here was a human being with an eye to the needs of others. Here was someone in control of his needs and passions. Here was someone not only concerned with his own self-interests. Abraham rose to the occasion and gained their respect.

People can in fact grow in stature, outgrowing their natural needs and wishes and limitations. People can learn not simply to do as they wish. “Not my will, but Thy will be done,” said Jesus in the garden. For people of faith, there are higher orders.

Hebrews 13: instructs us to “keep being concerned about each other as the Lord's followers should. Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it.” In the original Greek New Testament this basic attitude of love is described in several words, including *filadelfia* (brotherly love) and *filoxenia* (love of stranger).

Biblically speaking, to love is not so much a feeling as something you do. It is a verb, both grammatically and spiritually. Hospitality is given by offering the stranger a place in your home and feeding him this very day. In a world without hospitality no one will ever be truly at home.

Three perspectives

1. In our Western societies we struggle with our hospitality. Our societies are changing, and there are new tensions, threats and challenges. Hospitality, or the lack of it, has become a real concern. There is not only a lack of love for the stranger, but also xenophobia, a blend of fear and hate (Gr. *xenophobia*). What does welcoming the stranger mean in this context?

2. Our communities struggle to become more hospitable to those people who have lost contact with the church and who live in a secular society. How do we help people to find a new and relevant connection to the gospel and the Christian community? What does hospitality mean in a missionary context? What do we consider to be vital to our message and what would we actually offer to those outside the church?

3. On a more personal level, let us ponder how to retain or regain an open heart. We have become isolated as free and separate individuals. How do we value tradition and community? How can we grow in faith and life as disciples of Christ, who found new ways to touch the hearts of all? How do we stay one with him in our hearts (1 John 3:17)?

May God’s Spirit inspire our hearts and hands.

Gerke van Hiele, the Netherlands

Story:
A wall of peacemakers: “A glimpse of God’s kingdom”

A crowd storms towards us, trying to push through our lines, and I wonder what on earth I am doing here. Behind us are nervous Kurdish soldiers, who only days before fired live ammunition into the crowd. In front of us are angry young men looking for revenge, too impatient to accept the slow road of non-violent change.

And we are in between. To my left and right are Kurdish lawyers, writers and teachers. They speak to the young protesters, imploring them to stay calm. As our human chain separating the two sides starts to break, some protesters join hands with us to strengthen our “peace wall.” The crowd calms down. The soldiers relax. Nobody is killed.

It is late February. Inspired by the Egyptian Revolution, the inhabitants of Iraqi Kurdistan demand freedom and an end to corruption. After several days of violent riots, Christian Peacemaker Teams Iraq has been invited to become part of a human “peace wall” separating the protesters from the soldiers. Within days, instead of rocks and bullets, soldiers and protesters exchange flowers and take pictures together.

One week later, a bomb goes off in the demonstration, setting off a riot. Although our peace wall crumbles, many soldiers refuse to shoot at the people they have gotten to know over the days. Soon after, soldiers and protesters dance together in the street.

A massive wave of violence ended the protests later, and it is uncertain how Kurdistan will develop politically. But I think, standing there together with Kurdish peacemakers, watching enemies become allies, we all got a rare glimpse of God's kingdom.

Marius van Hoogstraten of the Netherlands works as a volunteer with the German Mennonite Peace Committee.

Call to Prayer
2012—a year of change

This coming year will see many changes in the Mennonite World Conference (MWC). For World Fellowship Sunday we invite special prayers that God’s presence and guidance may be known. Please pray for:

- **César García** of Colombia who on January 1 succeeds **Larry Miller** as General Secretary. Miller begins the same day as Secretary of the Global Christian Forum.
- The **transition of the MWC head office** from Strasbourg, France to Bogotá, Colombia.
- Preparations for the triennial **MWC General Council**, May 20-26 in Basel, Switzerland. The focus is MWC work for 2012–2015, including the appointment of the next MWC president-elect who will assume responsibilities as MWC president at the time of the 2015 MWC assembly in Pennsylvania, USA.
- **Liesa Unger**, staff coordinator for the logistics of the General Council event, as well as meetings of the MWC executive committee, the four GC Commissions, the Young Anabaptists (YABs), the Global Mission Fellowship, the Global Anabaptist Service Consultation and a meeting of global educators.
- The gathering of the **European Mennonite Regional Conference (MERK)** in Sumiswald, Switzerland, just prior to the General Council meetings. This gathering takes place every six years, between the full MWC Assembly years. The theme of MERK coincides with that of World Fellowship Sunday –“Hands Reaching Across Borders”– and reflects our desire to follow Jesus and take a stance against segregation and exclusion.

While there will be many changes in our worldwide community, we are anchored in Jesus Christ, who is and remains the foundation of our celebration of World Fellowship Sunday. (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Markus Rediger, Switzerland, MWC Executive Committee member