

The Wired Word

Student Handout

Sunday, **March 14, 2021** --- from 9:00-9:45am

Zoom ONLY

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 --- Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

Last week, Pope Francis brought a message of fraternity, hope and peace to Christians in Iraq who have been battered and brutalized by al-Qaeda and then by ISIS. He urged them to forgive and turn their energies toward a hope-filled future, restoring their hearts and homes. In our next class, we will consider some learning from that visit and the application of those learnings to our lives today.

How To Participate:

We are offering *The Wired Word* class live via Zoom. *The Wired Word* Zoom discussion will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. You can also use these resources to reflect or study on your own, with your family/friends, and/or with your Abide Group.

Until further notice, there is NO in-person Sunday school due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

You can participate in *The Wired Word* virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>

or by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592

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For more information about *The Wired Word* go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes/sunday-classes-for-adults.html#WiredWord>

For other learning opportunities through St. Paul's UCC go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes.html>

To subscribe or unsubscribe for the **free** weekly mailing of *The Wired Word* student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



Pope Francis Visits Battered Christians in Iraq, the First Time Any Pope Has Gone to That Country

The Wired Word for the Week of March 14, 2021

In the News

"Today ... we reaffirm our conviction that fraternity is more durable than fratricide, that hope is more powerful than hatred, that peace more powerful than war."

Those words were from Pope Francis, spoken at a Mass in Mosul last Sunday, during a first-ever papal visit to Iraq, where he was welcomed by Iraqi President Barham Salih with an official ceremony at the presidential palace in Baghdad.

Leading the Mass amid the rubble of a city ruined by ISIS during its occupation from 2014 to 2017, when ISIS fighters killed both Christians and Muslims who opposed them and perpetrated genocide against other religious minorities, including Yazidis and Iraqi Chaldeans, the 84-year-old pontiff delivered a message of peaceful coexistence, urging peace and safety for all.

The pope's visit has been called "historic," not only because no previous pontiff has visited Iraq, but because Christians in that country have had a very hard time over the last two decades.

The Christians in Iraq are considered to be one of the oldest continuous Christian communities in the world. Before 2003, Christians in that nation numbered about 1.5 million, but during the chaos in Iraq after the U.S. invasion followed by the acts of violence by al-Qaeda, and especially after the brutality of ISIS, Christians were among those who were killed by terrorists. Many Christians fled the country. Estimates put the Christian population of Iraq today at about 300,000.

During the Mass, in an apparent reference to ISIS, Francis said hope could never be "silenced by the blood spilled by those who pervert the name of God to pursue paths of destruction."

He delivered a similar message in three other conflict-torn cities in the country.

The day before the Mass in Mosul, Francis met privately with Iraq's revered Shiite leader, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in the 90-year-old cleric's home in Najaf. Afterward, the Grand Ayatollah said Christians should live in peace in Iraq and enjoy the same rights as other Iraqis. For his part, the pope thanked al-Sistani for having "raised his voice in defense of the weakest and most persecuted" during some of the most violent times in Iraq's recent history,

Iraqis cheered the meeting of the two men, and the prime minister responded to it by declaring March 6 a National Day of Tolerance and Coexistence in Iraq.

Najaf resident Haidar Al-Ilyawi declared. "It is a historic visit and [I] hope it will be good for Iraq and the Iraqi people."

Pope Francis also visited Qaraqosh, a Christian town in Iraq's Nineveh Plains. Those plains are sometimes called "the cradle of Christianity." There, he told struggling followers of Jesus to hold on to their roots and to forgive their oppressors. He said it was better to put their energy toward restoring their hearts and homes destroyed by ISIS occupation.

"Now is the time to rebuild and to start afresh, relying on the grace of God, who guides the destinies of all individuals and peoples," the pope said.

"You are not alone! The entire church is close to you, with prayers and concrete charity. And in this region, so many people opened their doors to you in time of need," Francis said.

"Our gathering here today shows that terrorism and death never have the last word. The last word belongs to God and to his Son, the conqueror of sin and death," the pope said, while surrounded by signs of devastation. "Even amid the ravages of terrorism and war, we can see, with the eyes of faith, the triumph of life over death."

The pope heard the testimonies of several Christians who were victims of ISIS violence. Doha Sabah Abdallah, a woman from Qaraqosh, described the moment she realized that her son was killed by a bomb during the incursion.

"We, the survivors, try to forgive the aggressor, because our teacher Jesus forgave his executioners," the woman said. "By imitating him in our suffering we testify that love is more powerful than anything."

Francis told those assembled that forgiveness "is a keyword" for the broken Christian community in Iraq. "What is needed is the ability to forgive, but also the courage not to give up," he said.

At an interfaith prayer service in Ur, Francis told Iraq's Muslim and Christian leaders, "Peace does not demand winners or losers, but rather brothers and sisters who, for all the misunderstandings and hurts of the past, are journeying from conflict to unity."

None of this changes the fact that Islam is the state religion of Iraq. There are laws against conversion from Islam to Christianity, and converts to Christianity lose inheritance rights as well as custody of their children, according to the anti-persecution organization Open Doors.

It is to be hoped that Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's statement that Christians should live in peace in Iraq and enjoy the same rights as other Iraqis, will, in fact, become a reality.

In the meantime, however, Christianity survives in Iraq. Before leaving the country, Pope Francis said. "Today, I can see at first hand that the church in Iraq is alive, that Christ is alive and at work in this, his holy and faithful people."

More on this story can be found at these links:

Pope Ends Historic Iraq Visit With Messages of Coexistence. *Aljazeera*

Pope, Top Iraq Shiite Cleric Deliver Message of Coexistence. *AP*

'You Are Not Alone!' Pope Makes Final Appeal to Iraqi Christian Community. *Religion News Service*

In Pictures: Pope Francis Visits Iraq. *CNN*

Christianity in Iraq. *Wikipedia*

Iraq: Country Dossier. *Open Doors International*

Applying the News Story

Without question, the Christians in Iraq have suffered enormously in recent years, with the loss not only of worship places but of human lives. While the pope said he found the church yet alive in that country, there is a sense that in many ways, the church has to rebuild, not only physical structures, but also faith and witness. It is to be hoped that Francis' visit gave a boost to all of that.

But make no mistake, for despite the pope's call for peaceful coexistence, the situation in Iraq remains marked by simmering conflicts, sectarian enmities, legal injunctions against conversion to Christianity and broad discontent with the government. So even as the church in that country tries to pick up the pieces, there are many hurdles on the way.

In a larger sense, however, the church around the world is always in the process of rebuilding while facing hurdles. If our lives are not brutalized, our faith often is. Terrible losses in our lives occur and some of us find our trust in God overwhelmed by painful circumstances. We may discover our commitment to follow Jesus weakened by the dashing of our hopes or by the ongoing drumbeat of secularity and competing values.

And in this time of the pandemic when many churches around the world have had to suspend their usual services, some people who were regulars at church have become comfortable with the idea of not attending worship services. We don't yet know what the fallout of the pandemic restrictions will be on our churches, but there's likely going to be some "rebuilding" necessary.

Beyond all of that, however, the pope's words about forgiveness, seeing with the eyes of faith and the triumph of life over death are part of the bedrock of the Christian faith. In speaking about these things where buildings are in ruin and hope is in shambles, Francis reminded not only Iraqi believers, but followers of Jesus everywhere that we have solid ground in Christ on which to start over.

The Big Questions

1. Is peaceful coexistence a primary message Christians should be promoting these days? Why or why not? What is your answer when "coexistence" denies the opportunity for a Muslim to convert to Christianity? In your opinion, how should "coexistence" be defined?
2. What is meant by "seeing through the eyes of faith"? How is that different from seeing through the eyes of cynicism? What can the eyes of faith see that cannot be seen by our physical eyes?
3. When has your faith needed a "rebuild"? What circumstances made the rebuild necessary? What help did you find to do so?
4. In what sense, if at all, is your faith always "under construction"? Whose responsibility is it for the rebuilding of our faith?
5. Have you ever lived in or visited a country where Christians were in the minority or in a disadvantaged position? How did it make you feel? Have you ever gone out of your way to make non-Christians feel welcome in your community?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Hebrews 11:1

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (For context, read 11:1-16.)

"Faith is ... the conviction of things not seen." In other words, religious faith is a different but valid way of "seeing" the world and life. Hebrews 11 is commonly referred to as the "faith chapter," but it's really about "seeing" something that not everyone sees.

After this verse, the author of Hebrews points out Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah and others as examples of people of faith. Of them the Hebrews writer says, "All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they *saw* and greeted them" (v. 13, italics added.)

Faith believes that God is real even though God cannot be seen with the eyes, and that God rewards those who seek him, even when that reward is not forthcoming in the present age. Faith is the means, the *eyes*, by which the as-yet-unseen "heavenly country," the future inheritance of the faithful, can be seen from a distance. Faith for the author of Hebrews does not make real something that has no intrinsic reality of its own. It merely recognizes that what God promises is more certain, better, greater and more lasting than any boon the fleeting pleasures of sin can offer.

In other words, faith is not some mustered-up belief or desperately held position. It is a way of *seeing*. When we apply the Christian faith to the world we live in, we could say that faith does not change the facts about the world, but it does change the conclusions we draw about those facts.

That is to say that two people can look at the same facts and arrive at opposite conclusions. If two people visit a hospital that treats those with serious crippling injuries, they will both see patients with missing limbs, patients in great pain, patients suffering other ways. One might look at all of this and conclude that the world is a mess and life is a nasty joke. The person might even decide not to allow him- or herself to care too much for anyone because of the possibility of pain when a loved one suffers.

The other person might see in all of this the incredible courage and resilience of the sufferers and decide that the illnesses are an outrage precisely because God's gift of life is so good.

Questions: Is your faith in God directed toward the future or the present or both? Explain your answer. What role does the past play in your faith?

Genesis 21:17-19

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. (For context, read 21:8-21.)

Genesis 21 tells of Hagar, Abraham's concubine, who had borne him a child while his wife Sarah was childless, incurring the anger and jealousy of Sarah. Hagar and her son were then banished into the desert. Before long, they were lost and out of water. The child was at the point of dying of thirst. Hagar put him down under a bush, turned away and began to weep. God heard her crying, and "God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water, and she went and filled her bottle, and gave the boy to drink."

God did not make a miracle, as we usually understand that term, happen for Hagar. God did not create any life-giving resources that were not there before. He opened her eyes so that she saw the well that she had not previously noticed, and all of a sudden the same world that had looked so hopelessly cruel to her a moment before was now seen as a

livable and life-sustaining place. The well had been there all along. The world was never really as bleak and barren a place as it had seemed to her. But until God opened her eyes and led her to see the water, she looked at life and saw only futility and suffering.

This scene with Hagar tells us something about both faith and the nature of God's help. Hagar appears not to have any self-generated trust in God, but God's act of "opening her eyes" enabled her to see and use the help of the Lord, which was an act of faith on Hagar's part. God's help in this case was direct and was initiated by God. But God is not always the initiator of his help (see the Luke 15:17 commentary below).

Questions: When have you noticed something helpful that you had not noticed before? Do you ever feel that God had "opened your eyes"? What did faith have to do with that?

Luke 15:17

But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!" (For context, read 15:11-32.)

This is the "turning point" verse in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. There in the pigsty, the prodigal was so hungry that he actually thought about eating the slop he'd been hired to feed to the pigs. But then, in the words of the verse, he "came to himself."

That's a great phrase, which was already an idiom in several languages before Jesus used it in the parable. We use a form of it in English when we say that a person is "not herself" today or that a person "came to his senses." When the prodigal came to himself, he was in effect, acknowledging "What a fool I've been!" He also recognized that no one was going to be riding to his rescue, so if things were to be changed, he had to take the initiative.

Thus, he formulated a plan: "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

Then he started for home, where his father gladly welcomed him back, not as a hired hand, but as his well-loved son -- the "himself" the father intended for him to be all along.

The parable tells us something about God, who seems to be represented by the prodigal's father. In the parable, this father is eager and ready to welcome the prodigal home unconditionally, but he isn't his son's direct rescuer.

There are plenty of examples in scripture of God making the first move to help people in trouble. For example, see the story of Hagar in the Genesis 21 discussion above. But this parable shows a different way God sometimes works: He waits for you to "come to yourself," which is also a way of seeing-- though, of course, even that coming to oneself may have been sparked by God.

We have the Bible's witness that God is with us. But the Prodigal Son parable shows us the merit of coming to oneself and taking responsibility for the direction of one's life and, insofar as one is able, working on solutions to the messes one has gotten into.

The prodigal, for all his self-inflicted problems, "came to himself," the parable says.

Questions: In what ways is "coming to yourself" a form of seeing? How is that related to faith in God? In what ways is the prodigal's "coming to himself" a step in rebuilding his life? his family relationships? In what ways is it instructive about rebuilding your faith and aiding your church?

Zechariah 2:1-5

I looked up and saw a man with a measuring line in his hand. Then I asked, "Where are you going?" He answered me, "To measure Jerusalem, to see what is its width and what is its length." Then the angel who talked

with me came forward, and another angel came forward to meet him, and said to him, "Run, say to that young man: Jerusalem shall be inhabited like villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and animals in it. For I will be a wall of fire all around it, says the LORD, and I will be the glory within it." (No context needed.)

This reading from Zechariah comes from the time when the people of Judah who'd been in exile in Babylon were allowed by the new Persian ruler to return to the Promised Land and resettle there. Zechariah was one of the prophets who brought the word of the Lord to them during that time.

This portion of the book of Zechariah tells about a vision the prophet had. Zechariah, accompanied by an angel, sees a surveyor going out with a measuring device in his hand. Zechariah asks the man where he is going, and the man says he is going to measure the boundaries of Jerusalem -- apparently in preparation for rebuilding the city walls.

At that point, a second angel appears and speaks to the angel with Zechariah, telling him to run to the man and tell him not to bother measuring the old dimension of Jerusalem because the new Jerusalem will be inhabited by so many people that they will not fit into the old city. And furthermore, says this second angel, new walls are unnecessary because God himself will be the protecting wall around the city.

One of the lessons from this vision is that rebuilding doesn't usually mean just putting things back as they were. Rebuilding the walls on the old foundations would mean restricting their future.

Questions: Thinking about your own church, what new dimension might be possible as you reopen after the pandemic? What learnings from how ministry continued during that time might suggest a going-forward addition or direction for your church?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this, heard in a sermon: "Christian faith is a way of seeing the world through more than just our eyes. Or to say it differently, it is having eyes in the back of our mind, in the front of our heart, in the depths of our spirits, in the palms of our hands and the soles of our feet. It is a way of seeing God in the world. Like the grandfather who took his grandson fishing, and while they were sitting together on the bank, the boy asked, 'Grandpa, can anyone see God?' The old man answered, 'Sometimes I think I never see anything else.' Or in the last words of the priest in the novel *The Diary of a Country Priest* put it, 'Grace is everywhere.'

"As the author of Hebrews says, 'By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible' (Hebrews 11:3)."

2. Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, where Paul talks about seeing in the literal sense, and the value of what "cannot be seen." To what things that cannot be seen do you think Paul is referring? In what ways, if at all, do these verses help you deal with present difficulties and anxieties. These verses are often read at funerals, but to what part of life do they most apply?

Responding to the News

As your congregation makes a new beginning after the pandemic, this is a good time to think about how members can begin to see what the future might look like through the eyes of faith. What can you imagine about the new shape of things that you couldn't see before Covid?

Include the Christians of Iraq in your prayers.

Prayer

Grant us, O Lord, the ability to see through the eyes of faith and gumption to do what we can to act on what faith sees. In Jesus' name. Amen.