

**Full of Truth and Hope**  
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Forum on Ethics and Public Policy  
Wisconsin Council of Churches  
September 25, 2007—Stevens Point, WI

The matter of bold, visible, courageous public faith—and its derivative as a confession—is as unnerving as it is urgent. I am, on the one hand, grateful for the witness of your Council and pleased to be a small part of your continuing discussion. On the other hand, I am filled with doubt and uncertainty as any of you, and an outsider to the particular process that belongs to your common life. I am glad to share my reflections with you, mindful that I am a reader of texts and have no wisdom about strategy and none of the burdens of daily parish regularity. My comments are in four unequal parts.

I.

This consultation has focused on three great confessions from many that might have been chosen... Barmen, Kairos, and Birmingham. All three, in their articulation, were risky and decidedly uphill assertions, even if to a belated observer the issues seem clear and unambiguous. Each constituted a summons beyond the status quo:

- Barmen was a summons to “German Christians” (*Deutsche Christi*) who saw no conflict between the Gospel and National Socialism, and did not want to choose.<sup>1</sup>
- Kairos was addressed to particularly well-meaning liberals in South Africa who agreed that Apartheid was evil, but who passively colluded in its continuation.
- Birmingham was Martin’s address to pastors who were “fence sitters” and who did not want to face the ominous matters of race.

Many of us think that our general situation is amid the National Security State that is propelled by market ideology. This situation reduces all of life to commodity and is an issue of parallel urgency on which matters are equally ambiguous. It occurs to me that much of the anxiety and wise fear (or reluctance) voiced by members of the panel and felt by many of us are grounded in two complicating factors:

First, the issues facing us, even if I have not used the right words—National Security State, market ideology, commodity—are complex and multi-faceted. That is, it concerns variously unrestricted militarism in the pursuit of empire, unrestrained market ideology that assaults the human infrastructure, unregulated abuse of the environment in the interest of money-making, and disregard of justice concerning gays, immigrants and any “other”.., all of which has created a political environment that bespeaks the collapse of a free press and the elimination of an independent judiciary. The issues are so complex that it is not very easy to voice a clear, uncompromising moral imperative. Perhaps it was the same in Germany, but with Kairos and Birmingham, it appears now that matters in these circumstances could be more readily focused in moral urgency. Concerning the many facets of our contemporary crisis, we have not yet been led by the spirit to great clarity.

Second, the force of “civil religion” that sustains U.S. exceptionalism permits some measure of “moral cover” for our current policies and social commitments, so that much can be done in the interest of “democracy” and “freedom” which variously excuse military aggression and free market exploitation. This historical reality too easily takes the edge off of our moral suasion; whether in good faith or not it is relatively easy for defenders of our system to credit it with moral legitimacy. Ronald Niebuhr’s stricture against the claims of “the Children of Light” continues to be a faithful exposé of our cultural context.

Our opportunity for confession, then, must take into account the enormous complexity of our lethal ideology, and the resources available for a “moral defense” of that ideology, even if a like defense was available in the earlier confessional contexts.

It is my judgment that before we get very far toward a confession, we have an enormous task of preaching, teaching, witness, and interpretation, in order to show that the urgency of confession is powerfully intrinsic to our faith, and not an “extra” about which there is an option. Thus our thinking about confession, so it seems to me, does not fit our concern about “being prophetic” in any conventional way. It concerns core matters. But such a claim would be an immense surprise to many of our church people, precisely because we have, for the most part, cast our preaching and teaching and witnessing in other categories.

## II.

Thus I thought that from my limited capacity and focus I might best line out four claims of faith that may help focus on the preaching, teaching, witnessing, and interpreting that may evoke confession:

1. There is no doubt that the concrete, history-transforming, world redefining happenings of Friday and Sunday constitute the core of our faith and of our preaching. Paul has familiarly summarized for us, “of first importance what I too had received,” namely the core proclamation of the church (1 Cor 15:3), all of this “in accordance with the scriptures.” The church, in its mumbling, unthinking fashion, regularly recites the creedal formulation and even after that it “proclaims the mystery of faith,” that “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

We are entrusted to preach Christ crucified. That Friday turn of the world was the exposure of the vulnerability of God to the violence of the empire. Jesus’ trial before Pilate—which turned out to be a trial of the empire before Jesus—and his subsequent conviction and execution is the best show of power and authority that the world can muster. In that exhibit of power and authority, the world is exposed as fraudulent in its claim of ultimacy, a *papier-mâché* practitioner of violence and good intention. That effort by the world to eliminate him did not work. However one lines out the claim that we are “saved by the cross”—without the niceties of a theory of atonement—something decisive happened there in which God’s vulnerability is exhibited as ultimate truth. It is for good reason that Jurgen Moltmann terms the cross not only the “foundation” of Christian theology, but also the “criticism” of Christian theology. The cross, in its raw, abrupt, quotidian fleshliness, testifies against our smoother theological truth that gives false assurances and that makes easy alliances in the world. Luther’s famous phrase, “the crucified God,” calls us always back to the raw claim that it is the utter self-giving of God in weakness that is the true exhibit of holiness that eludes the control of the world. That has been entrusted to us.

We are empowered to preach Christ risen. From the beginning the church has struggled and mumbled about this miracle. In any case, what has been entrusted to us is the news that the death systems of the world lack staying power and authority, and do not merit our loyalty. They do not merit our loyalty because they disappear after two days, driven from the field by the overflowing power of new life invested in the body of the risen Christ. While the church has mumbled about the particular way of Easter, it has been forthright in God’s gift of energy and freedom and joy that comes when our lives depart the death systems and move in a myriad of ways into the uncharted territory of well-being given as the gift of the spirit.

The church and its preachers are instructed to attest to the saving vulnerability of Friday, even while we are citizens of a society that wants no vulnerability at all. The church is invited to witness to the intense surprise of Easter, even though we live in a society that by technological anxiety wants to reduce and overcome all surprise, to make it a world in which no gifts are given and no compassion enacted that makes all things new. The church is invited to the *great violent festival of vulnerability* and to the *great exuberance of surprise*.

That the dramatic movement from Friday vulnerability through Saturday dread to Sunday surprise is only made by narrative particularly, not by scientific proof, not by universal truth, not by logical discourse. It is done, rather, by narrative acknowledgment that subverts a world of power by vulnerability that exposes a world of dread through brooding absence that rejects a world of control through surprise. All of that is entrusted to the preacher, to be lined out each time we meet, a little imagination, a little cleverness, a few gimmicks, but mostly a stark alternative to a world that has failed in its extravagant claims that lack any life-giving power.

2. The particularity of Friday-Sunday, crucifixion-resurrection, vulnerability- surprise is rooted deeply in Israel's lived experience that constitutes the shaping memory and abiding reality for Jews and Christians. That shaping experience has been stylized by liturgy and tradition that mediates and makes available the raw bodily reality, the scars of which continue to be carried in the community of faith. It is the truth of our narrative that Jewish life led to an abyss that foreshadows the Friday crucifixion. The crisis is singularly the dislocation of the holy city of Jerusalem, the loss of a temple, monarchy, and political identity, and the deportation of leading citizens at the behest of the empire. Whatever may be the historical detail of destruction and deportation, that abyss is seared into the imagination of God's people, an abyss before which faith is powerless and silent. The raw reality is the crude imposition of force that culminates in the capture of "the last king" in Jerusalem. It is reported that Zedekiah watched his sons, the princes, being executed, and then his eyes were put out (2 Kgs 25:6). Many others suffered, but Zedekiah's suffering is Jerusalem's epitome of helplessness, vulnerability, and humiliation; he is representative of his people that had lost its way in the process of geopolitics. His blinding and execution signify the roughshod termination of the lead figure in the Davidic line, a humiliation for the God who had made promises. The Old Testament does not flinch from the geopolitical reality of imperial power, the sort of imperial power enacted by Rome on a later Friday. Empires produce abysses, and faith cannot resist or counter that reality.

It is the truth of our narrative, moreover, that life in displacement eventuated in a restoration, albeit a modest, even feeble restoration. The leading Jews of Babylon did indeed return to Jerusalem and recover some semblance of Jewish identity and social reality.

- There apparently was a modest return of Jews to Jerusalem just after 537 B.C.E., just after Cyrus the Persian had come to imperial authority.

- After that feeble effort, there was a more visible effort in the years 520-516 B.C.E., noted by Haggai and Zechariah, at the modest accomplishment of the "Second Temple."

- These returnees, however, were not very significant, for we learn, with reference to Nehemiah, the continuing sorry state of the city:

They replied, "The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire." (Neh 1:3)

Out of that report, with deep and troublesome sadness and with cunning negotiations with the Persians, Nehemiah leads a more effective effort at restoration in Jerusalem. In the wake of Nehemiah came the Torah-enterprise of Ezra that is commonly regarded as the reconstitution of Judaism.

This experience of being led into abyss and led out in restoration proved to be the defining marks of Jewishness and surely the large truth of the Old Testament. The reality is a geopolitical one; Israel found itself as exposed and vulnerable to the vagaries of the empire, as did the body of Jesus in the Christian narrative.

The reason I take this much time with historical detail (that will not preach well in most of our congregations) is that there surely is an interpretive connection between the core tradition of the church and the core memory of Israel.

- Behind Friday vulnerability lies the stamp of the Jewish abyss.
- Behind the Sunday surprise the church remembers the wonder of restoration of Jerusalem, even on a small scale.
- Behind the dread silence of Saturday lies the long years of displacement wherein we were coerced into “Songs of Zion” in a strange land, in order that we should be mocked for our faith and scorned for its failure (see Ps 137:1-3).

It belongs to the church to make the trek from Friday vulnerability through Saturday dread absence to Sunday surprise. Before that trek made by the community around Jesus, it belongs to Jews—and continues to belong to Jews—to make the journey into the abyss of displacement through the mocking of humiliation in historical absence to the miracle of restoration. It belongs to the truth of history and to the truth of faith. At the center of faith, for Christians as for Jews, is the gap of discontinuity where we are led into the dismantling power of the world; this gap of discontinuity arises in a way and in a depth that is beyond our construction or imagination. The truth of lived faith is engagement with that lived experience that is given liturgical articulation. It is, however, a lived experience that defies stylized articulation, about which every pastor knows. Every pastor walks the walk with folk into that journey of vulnerability, dread, and surprise. And every pastor is compelled to talk the talk of vulnerability, dread, and surprise, a task that we rightly call “prophetic.”

3. Characteristically, we do not want to go. Jews did not want to go, in that ancient world. And Christians with whom we minister do not want to go; nor do we ourselves much want to go. We do not want to walk the walk.

There is huge resistance to being led into the abyss. It is called denial. I believe that denial is now a major pathology in our society, as it was in that ancient Jewish society. It is, rather, a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in which if one does not know and is not told, one need not have to go.

In that ancient world of Jerusalem as they walked closer and closer to the abyss that had the fingerprints of empire all over it, the Jews pretended that it was not happening and that they could manage their future without walking that dread journey. I will cite three texts that exhibit the vigorous denial of the coining abyss:

- In Jeremiah 6:13-15, Jeremiah issues one of his many poems of sad truthfulness. He begins with a standard indictment:

For from the least to the greatest of them,  
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;  
and from prophet to priest,  
everyone deals falsely. (Jer 6:13)

He describes an acquisitive society in which everyone is on the make with the kind of deception that makes neighborliness impossible. That acquisitiveness, moreover, is rooted in a sense that acquisitiveness is possible and legitimate because “everything is coming up roses”:

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,  
saying, “Peace, peace,”  
when there is no peace. (Jer 6:14)

There was a wound in Jerusalem society. That was the wound of external threat and internal alienation. It was, so Jeremiah concludes, a lethal wound; but his contemporaries had managed by easy words to “heal” the wound, to cover it over, to make it invisible, and to remove it from the screen by smooth talk. The word is “*shalom*,” “all is well and all manner of thing will be well.” It was the cant of the temple liturgy sustained by political ideology:

God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble. (Ps 46:1)

Jeremiah follows his assault on deceptive words with the most acute indictment, “They do not know how to blush.” They have no more shame. They are incapable of being embarrassed at their true situation. Abraham Heschel remarks that the loss of embarrassment is the quintessential loss of human capability. And so Jeremiah issues a massive “therefore,” a consequence of such denial:

Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;  
at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,  
says the Lord. (Jer 6:15b)

And just in case the oracle was not noticed, the tradition of Jeremiah permits the prophet to say it yet again in chapter 8:

Therefore I will give their wives to others  
and their fields to conquerors,  
because from the least to the greatest  
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;  
from prophet to priest  
everyone deals falsely.  
They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,  
saying, “Peace, peace.” when there is no peace.  
They acted shamefully, they committed abomination;  
yet they were not at all ashamed,  
they did not know how to blush.

Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;  
at the time when I punish them, they shall be overthrown,  
says the Lord. (Jer 8:10-12)

Here the poem reverses matters and begins with anticipation that wives and fields will be taken over by conquerors (Babylon). The juxtaposition of “wives and fields” surely echoes the tenth commandment, “Thou shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or your neighbor’s field.” The empire covets and will have its way, so says the prophet, because of Jerusalem’s denial.

- The second exemplar of denial is the narrative transaction between Hananiah and Jeremiah in chapter 28. The latter prophet’s name means “YHWH is gracious,” and Hananiah expected YHWH to be gracious enough to save the city in its current crisis. Indeed Hananiah had meditated on the rescue of Jerusalem a century earlier from the hand of the Assyrians at the time of Hezekiah and Isaiah, and he reckoned that the same rescue would happen again. Jeremiah has just announced the coming onslaught of Babylon against Jerusalem and Hananiah refutes his words:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord’s house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. (Jer 28:2-4)

Hananiah anticipates, according to YHWH’s promises, that the little deportation of 597 B.C.E. will be ended; everyone will come home, including the boy king Jehoiachin. The yoke of the empire will be broken and there will be return to normalcy ... within two years. The two prophets argue the point and Jeremiah is put on trial for his life. In the end, the narrative dismisses Hananiah tersely as a false prophet whom YHWH has not sent:

In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died. (Jer 28:17)

Though Hananiah died, his message is an important one because denial of the coming abyss is a major establishment enterprise. We may imagine that Hananiah, unlike Jeremiah, enjoyed good

access to the establishment and his patter of cheap grace was welcomed as free grace: God is good all the time, and all will be well. Just pretend.

- A third pertinent text is Ezekiel 13 in which the prophets (who oppose Ezekiel are accused of falsehood):

Because, in truth, because they have misled my people, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear whitewash on it. (Ezek 13:10)

The political leaders may have been at fault; but the religious leaders are the ones who put a good face on their fault and enacted a cover-up. The outcome, of course, is that members of the community do not need to face reality. It is as though it were not happening! And therefore one need only pretend.<sup>2</sup>

Just pretend:

- that the economy has bottomed out
- that the war has turned arid we are making great progress;
- that the addiction can be controlled with discipline;
- that the index of teenage suicides is societally insignificant;
- that date rape is just boys who will be boys;
- that generous gun laws will make us safer;
- that if people work harder they will prosper like us.

There is also a huge resistance about life eventuating in restoration it is called despair. It is the mood of those who have looked clearly into the abyss, who have gone reluctantly but necessarily into it, and who have come to regard the abyss as bottomless and perpetual, a world without end. Despair is the conclusion that we reach in the pit of our stomachs that we are trapped here forever, and we had best make the most of it. In the end, there will be no well-being, so get what you can now. Eat and drink and own all that you can, because there are no new gifts to be given. There are no dreams, no visions, no possibilities, only this...the worst kind of eschatology, sadly "realized." Here are some texts on despair in ancient Israel in the midst of the abyss:

- The Book of Lamentations, sad poems of grief, concludes with a stunning realization:  
Why have you forgotten us completely?

Why have you forsaken us these many days? (Lam 5:20)

The verse assumes that God has forgotten and God has forsaken. The poem does not debate that claim, but accepts and asks "Why?" To be sure the verse is followed in the penultimate verse of the book by a petition, indicating that hope is not completely voided. But the final verse 22 leaves us with a notion of rejection and divine anger:

...unless you have utterly rejected us,  
and are angry with us beyond measure. (Lam 5:22)

The poem cannot make a move toward restoration because the abyss is all defining. The use of the word "forsake" of course anticipates the Friday lament of Jesus in his forsakenness in which he replicates the pain of Jerusalem in his own body (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). In the abyss there is only rejection!

- In Isaiah 40:27, the lyrical poet of hope begins by quoting Israel's utterance of despair, perhaps a liturgical formulation of despair:

Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and speak, O Israel,  
"My way is hidden from the Lord,  
and my right is disregarded by my God"? (Isa 40:27)

In its abyss Israel could only conclude that YHWH did not know and did not care.

- Isaiah 49:14, in what appears to be a quote from the liturgical formulation of Lamentations 5:20 that I have already cited, again uses the double terminology of forsake:

But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me,  
my Lord has forgotten me." (Isa 49:14)

That is what Zion said. That is what they said in shabby, shattered Jerusalem. That is what they said in Babylon where they had been taken against their will. The big defining terms again are "forsake" and "forget."

- In Isaiah 50:2, YHWH asks in indignation:

Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem?  
Or have I no power to deliver?  
By my rebuke I dry up the sea,  
I make the rivers a desert;  
their fish stink for lack of water,  
and die of thirst. (Isa 50:2)

YHWH is indignant because when YHWH comes to rescue, God finds no takers. When God called, there were no respondents. And why did Israel not respond? Because they had drawn the conclusion that YHWH's hand was short. They remembered when YHWH had delivered them from Egypt with "a strong hand and an outstretched arm." But now, by contrast, there was no evidence of a strong divine hand, no show of a divine outstretched arm. All the evidence suggested that YHWH's arm, a vehicle of divine power, had shriveled to uselessness. It is as though YHWH had become disabled. All around the Israelites could see the geopolitical outcomes of an empire no longer kept in check by divine restraint. They had drawn the only conclusion that the evidence permitted. There was no reason to answer YHWH, no motivation to receive or welcome the coming of YHWH, no ground for any hope at all. They were, they judged, alone in the world, without an advocate or a strong intervener.

We can see, from Isaiah 59:1, that this way of voicing despair must have been prevalent in displaced Israel. An affirmative voice answers the doubt of 50:2:

See, the Lord's hand is not too short to save,  
nor his ear too dull to hear. (Isa 59:1)

The Israelites concluded that YHV/H did not save because YHWH could not save. The world is beyond YHWH's recovery and the news is not good.

Jeremiah had dealt with denial among those who could not see the disaster coming. The tradition of Isaiah, somewhat later, deals with despair among those who are caught in the abyss. The denial is among those who refuse to see and so imagine that Israel will not be destroyed...that the Messiah will not die. The despair is among those who know, but cannot imagine a future, cannot discern a way out of no way; they could not believe that Messiah will be raised from the dead to new life. Denial resists abyss...and so crucifixion. Denial fends off vulnerability. Despair resists homecoming...and so resurrection. Despair fends off surprise. Faith is to walk that walk, but denial and despair refuse the walk.

4. Our ministry is among those who refuse the walk. The wonder of faith is that the talk sometimes authorizes, empowers, and emboldens the walk. Ministry is talk the talk that the community may walk the walk of faith into the abyss and walk the walk of faith out of the abyss into restoration. Urgent ministry now is to talk in ways that move past denial into the walk of vulnerability and that move past despair into the walk of surprise, there to find the gift of God and the possibility of genuine humanness. Because the deniers and the despairers do not want to go, evangelical talk is characteristically upstream against great resistance. I shall insist in what follows that in the reality of abyss and restoration, in the practice of vulnerability and surprise, in the face

of denial and despair, the task has a two-fold accent about the shape of reality in a world where the living God is on exhibit.

A. The walk into the abyss is fended off by denial. The evangelical antidote to denial is truth-telling. It is the task of truth-telling that belongs to prophetic ministry, an act that is sure to provoke resistance and hostility among those in denial, because it requires seeing and knowing and engaging with that which we have refused to see, know, or engage. The truth that is to be told is that the world is out of sync, that we live against the grain of God's holiness, and that such living has immense negative consequences because the sync and the grain are God-given and cannot be outflanked. Such talk of "out of sync" and "against the grain," put theologically, is the truth that the world is under divine judgment. That is the primal burden of truth-telling among these ancient prophets in the face of the abyss enacted—at the behest of YH'ATH—by Babylon. The rhetorical tradition of the prophets suggest that there are two modes of such truth-telling as divine judgment, a "hot mode" that imagines the intrusive agency of YHWH as punisher, and the "cool mode" that makes connections between "cause and effect" and so traces the consequences of actions, consequences that belong intrinsically with the choices and the policies.

The truth-telling is an insistence that we live, by the goodness of the creator God, in a morally coherent creation. For that reason matters are connected in terms of present choices and future outcomes. It is to be noticed that prophetic truth-telling—whether hot or cold—is characteristically poetic. It is not excessively confrontive, unless, of course, there is objection to subversive poetry that is not especially issue-oriented. Such poetry aims, characteristically, below social specificities to the brooding anguish and dismay of the God who will not be mocked. It is always the propensity of the powerful to imagine that with enough technology or shrewdness, the holy intransigence of creation can be outflanked. The poets arise to bear witness to the deep conviction that God is not mocked, and that the moral coherence of the creation will hold.

I have selected a series of occasions of truth-telling in the prophetic tradition, though you might have chosen others. As I pondered them, it struck me that these ancient utterances require almost no interpretive imagination, so contemporary are they. And therefore as belated prophetic voices, we ourselves can appeal to the ones who uttered before us and trade on their imagination and courage:

- Isaiah 5:20. The verse is among a series of "woes." "Woe" means big trouble coming that cannot now be averted:

Ah, you who call evil good  
and good evil,  
who put darkness for light  
and light for darkness,  
who put bitter for sweet  
and sweet for bitter! (Isa 5:20)

In the NRSV the "woe" is translated as "alt" The verse asserts that big trouble that cannot be averted will come to those who engage in euphemism, who call things by their wrong names, and so disguise the truth of social reality. Prophetic ministry consists in calling things by their right names and so summoning folk to face the social reality of being out of sync. Consider for example, "friendly fire," "collateral damage," "welfare reform," "outsourcing," "downsizing," to name a few; and perhaps the most shameless usage, to term a lethal missile "peacekeeper." Ancient Jerusalem, in its liturgies of complacency, disguised reality, as do we. The church is the place for naming things faithfully, because euphemism is a tool for denial.

- Amos 6:4-7. Amos offers another "woe," though the term is not in the Hebrew and must be borrowed from verse 1. Amos describes the indulgent entitlement of his contemporaries in Samaria with their exotic ivories, their at-ease lounging, and their killing of young animals for veal,

which only the affluent can do, their idle entertainment, and their self-indulgent society out of control:

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,  
and lounge on their couches,  
and eat lambs from the flock,  
and calves from the stall;  
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,  
and like David improvise on instruments of music;  
who drink wine from bowls,  
and anoint themselves with the finest oils. (Amos 6:4-6a)

The poem moves inescapably to the “but” of verse 6b:

but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! (Amos 6:6b)

Not grieved! Not upset! Not in touch with reality! This is consumerism gone amok... without notice. And there comes the big prophetic “therefore” of verse 7:

Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,  
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away. (Amos 6:7)

They had not noticed at all and were not worried; they surely could not have extrapolated the deportation into exile, for “exile” was nowhere on the screen of the folks at the club as it was not on the screen with the Shah or with the Tsar or with any who are narcotized in power. When they heard the poem of Amos they must have wondered.

Perhaps “exile” does not follow from self-indulgent entitlement; that is a connection only in the rash thrust of the poem and, besides, it is only a poem.

Now I know that such poetry, if made contemporary, cannot be uttered in most of our venues of ministry. But here it is, a text inviting other texts, a poem inviting other poems, an act of imagination authorizing other acts of imagination that seek to do truth-telling.

- Hosea 4:1-3. YHWH has an “indictment” against Israel. The poem announces YIWHJH to be a litigator who is suing God’s people. The bill of particulars is the Decalogue that has been violated:

There is no faithfulness or loyalty,  
and no knowledge of God in the land.  
Swearing, lying, and murder,  
and stealing and adultery break out;  
bloodshed follows bloodshed. (Hos 4:1b-2)

This is a clever poetic utilization of the ten commandments for who would have thought to turn the Sinai charter into subversive poetry? There is an edginess to the rhetoric when command becomes poetry.

And then the big “therefore” of verse 3:

Therefore the land mourns,  
and all who live in it languish;  
together with the wild animals  
and the birds of the air,  
even the fish of the sea are perishing. (Hos 4:3)

“Land mourns” means there is a drought. Violation of commandment, in poetic construal, causes drought. Violation of Sinai impinges upon the ordered fruitfulness of creation. Talk about environmental crisis! Such talk makes no sense unless it is creation behind which sits the creator who is not to be mocked. Hosea can use the triad, “beasts, birds, fish,” because he has studied Genesis 1. He takes old liturgy and makes poetry. Prophetic talk is not explanation and rational argument. It is, rather, poetic declaration that is outrageous in its performance. And when once

performed in utterance, the poetry lingers with its own force and cannot be recalled. Technical achievements in our contemporary world require us to imagine our autonomy; but Hosea, long before Al Gore, knew that such autonomy is a joke. The divine commands are ways in which we answer for creation to the creator. (See also Mic 2:1-4; Jer 5:23-29; Jer 9:17-19; Jer 18:14-17.)

B. The walk out of the abyss into newness is fended off by despair. The prophetic antidote to despair is hope-telling. It is the task of hope-telling that belongs to prophetic ministry, an act that is sure to evoke doubt and resistance among those in despair, because hope-telling requires risk and venture that we characteristically do not want to undertake. When an alternative is possible, it requires us to leave present circumstance, even if that present circumstance is debilitating, and to move out to new gifts that we thought would not be given. The hope to be told is that the abyss will not defeat God or deter God from bringing creation to full *shalom*. The news of prophetic utterance is that the world is under promise. That is the primal burden of hope-telling among these ancient prophets who spoke right in the midst of the abyss. That hope takes a modest political form about the recovery of Jewish society in Jerusalem. But it also takes a larger, lyrical form in grand doxological exuberance that does not doubt that the world is on its way to well-being. That doxological exuberance invites us to be the vanguard of newness that will arise among the bold, exactly in the abyss. One of the great wonders is that the exile is precisely the venue for hope, a venue out of which comes the promises of God upon which we continue to count.

I have selected a series of occasions of hope-telling in the prophets, though you might have chosen others. As I pondered these promissory texts, it struck me that they are now very difficult to enunciate in a world that knows too much and that is largely emptied of the mystery of God. But then it struck me as well, that they must have been very difficult in ancient time, for they are in defiance of facts on the ground. But then, in this tradition of faith, the future will be given by God to those who act in defiance of the apparent facts on the ground.

I imagine all of these texts (and many others) are summarized by God who has on God's lips, "I have a dream." It is a dream that rushes beyond present circumstance in which God, like Martin Luther King, has no strategy for getting from here to there. But the dream, and the utterance of the dream, keep the abyss from being absolutized. The news is that there is more and there is other. It is an offer to those who refuse to abide in despair, the despair of defeat or the despair of entitled affluence. It is an offer to those who move out according to the God who has one more trek to make across the wilderness.

- Amos 5:14-15. Amos is not much of a hoper, fixed as he is on the coming abyss in Samaria. Nonetheless in chapter 5, there is a series of imperatives that culminate in this way:

Seek good and not evil,  
that you may live;  
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,  
just as you have said.  
Hate evil and love good,  
and establish justice in the gate;  
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,  
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:14-15)

Such imperatives are acts of hope. They assert that things may still be turned, but that such a renewing turn will require radically altered conduct. The new conduct is "good" (not evil), hate of evil and love of good, good finally equated with social justice, that is, economic reform. It is an act of hope to perform in this way, because "it may be"—the prophetic "perhaps"—it may be that YHWH will be gracious. Hope is active, transformative conduct.

- Hosea 2:18-23. The crisis is deeper in Hosea. In Hosea 2:2-13, the prophet has announced divorce and termination of the covenantal relationship. At the end of verse 13 comes the abyss. The

remarkable fact is that the poem does not end in verse 13. There is a very long pause after verse 13, long enough to inhale the reality of abyss, of being God abandoned. But then God says more. In verses 14-23, YHWH speaks Israel out of abyss and into renewed covenant. It is a covenant that renews creation and that rescues the environment from a meltdown:

I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. (Hos 2:18)

It is a covenant that reaches to God's forsaken people. The people divorced will be reembraced, re-loved, and remarried:

And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord. (Hos 2:19- 20)

All the great words of Israel's covenantal faith are mobilized to bespeak YHWH's renewal of faithfulness. Beyond abyss lies passionate, divine fidelity. Along with the restitution of covenant, comes full, glad restoration of fruitful creation, the very creation that had been plunged into the abyss:

On that day I will answer, says the Lord,  
I will answer the heavens  
and they shall answer the earth;  
and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and they shall answer Jezreel;  
and I will sow him for myself in the land.

And I will have pity on Loruhamah,  
and I will say to Loammi, "You are my people";  
and he shall say, "You are my God." (Hos 2:21-23)

The earth will answer in fruitfulness: Israel will luxuriate in its new status: "You are my people." It is never so in the abyss. The poet, however, refuses despair and asks his poem-listeners to move beyond abyss into glad expectation.

- Micah 4:1-5. There will be days to come! The abyss is not the last day. The description of exile (and Friday) does not disrupt YHWH's rule. The poet imagines, as does every prophet, a world out beyond despair. In this case, it is the scenario of all nations and peoples on the road together:

In the days to come  
the mountain of the Lord's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised up above the hills.

Peoples shall stream to it,  
and many nations shall come and say:  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob." Mic 4: 1-2a)

The nations will refuse to sink in mutual deterrence and destruction. They will gather together peaceably to make a trip into YHWH's future. The reason they will go to the house of the God of Jacob—going joyously and peaceably—is in order to learn what they do not yet know:

that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between many peoples,

and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away. (Mic 4:2-3 a)

From Zion comes “instruction,” that is, Torah. From the temple come commandments for all, commandments of discernment and disarmament and peace. There are days coming when wars will end. The weapons will be overcome; they will be transposed by Torah. Nations will eventually decide that obedience beats oppression:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more;  
but they shall all sit under their own vines

and under their own fig trees,  
and no one shall make them afraid;

for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. (Mic 4:3b-4)

It is only a poem, a vision, a hunch, a hope. But that is all you get in the abyss. Such a hunch, however, on the lips of a bold poet is enough. It asserts, without explanation or apology, that it will be otherwise. Listeners are to be ready for otherwise, because God’s world will not remain in the abyss, not more than three days worth. (See also Jer 31:34; Jer 33:10-11; Isa 65:17-25.)

6. Isaiah 43:1-5. The ultimate defeat of despair is delivered by this remarkable poem that contains the quintessential overthrow of despair. It begins and ends the same way:

- At the beginning in verse 1:

But now thus says the Lord,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isa 43:1)

- It ends in verse 5:

Do not fear, for I am with you;

I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you. (Isa 43:5)

The beginning and the end are the same: Do not fear! It is an assurance in the form of a command. It is an imperative requiring moving out of the abyss, out of a world defined by imperial cynicism, out of world of abuse that discounts the displaced.

The ground for such assurance-as-imperative is two-fold. First, “I am with you.” You thought I had abandoned you; the reason you thought that is that you accepted imperial definitions of reality that are not true (see Isa 54:7-8). Second, “You are mine.” You had forgotten that because you accepted the definitions of the empire that identified you as subject of the empire. Thus the assurance is a vigorous contestation of the reality accepted too easily in the abyss. I am with you ... not absent, not negligent, not indifferent. You are mine...not theirs! This *assurance-as-imperative* is the rock bottom assurance of hope, that the world—and our particular context—are inhabited by the Holy One who will prevail in the same way that the same Holy One has prevailed over the powers of death when he descended into Saturday hell.

Do not fear:

- It is the word of the angels to the shepherds in Bethlehem (Luke 2:10);
- It is the word to the visitors of the tomb on Easter morning, because “Do not fear,” is the substance of Easter power (Matt 28:5, 10);
- It is the word every parent speaks to every child in the midst of a nighttime nightmare, “Do not fear...I am right here.” That utterance ends the child’s nightmare and in the abyss of

Israel that divine utterance ended the long nightmare of displacement and transformed exile into home;

- It was the primal utterance of John Paul II when he first came back to Poland as Pope, a word uttered to solidarity leaders who had much to fear.

The empire in all of its manifestations—and its various shapes of red/orange/yellow alert is, “Be very afraid.”

- Be very afraid of not conforming to social authority and social expectation;
- Be very afraid of peer pressure;
- Be very afraid for your life, your food, your home, your future.

And then, “Do not fear.” The world waits for hope-filled truth. But the word must not be spoken too soon, or the word of hope will only reinforce denial. It is a word among those who despair, not among those who deny.

### III.

The claims of faith that I have lined out here are central for us and familiar to us and are shared—*mutatis mutandis*—by Jews and Christians:

crucifixion — resurrection;  
exile — homecoming;  
denial — despair;  
truth-telling — hope-telling.

This cluster of terms, in broad stretch, indicates both the crisis in which we find ourselves, and the work to which we are called.

The twin pathologies of denial and despair, I submit, indicate the context of our work. Despair arises when we discover how it is with us. But behind despair lies denial which in some large part is produced by the forces of empire that find narcotized people easier to manage and manipulate.

The outcome of denial and despair is to produce passivity and acquiescence, whether it is the passivity of our illusion of moral superiority and assured triumph, or acquiescence of fatalism that cowers before an inescapable despair. Either way, the consequence of such acquiescence is abdication, a refusal to engage issues, an inability to think or act outside the box of dominant power arrangements and consensus plausibility systems. The empire does not require agreement or need approval. It requires only passive conformity among those who believe that there is no alternative.

It has been the work of preaching, teaching, witnessing, and interpreting in the biblical tradition, since the beginning, to create time, space, energy, will, and imagination for a break with the narcotic of acquiescence and the exercise of an alternative. All the way from Moses’ initial “Let my people go,” to Billy Graham’s most recent altar call. The work has been to evidence that life is choosable beyond the closed system of empire—while Egypt or Babylon or Rome or “Satan, sin, and death,” or the American system of totalism.

I submit that it is now the work of the church in the United States, in a society narcotized by denial and despair, to tell truth and hope in a way that makes new, evangelical decisions possible. Such a responsibility on the part of the church is risky—as members of the panel have recognized—because no one easily foregoes the safety of denial and no one readily relinquishes despair for the demanding possibility of hope.

The act of creating space for alternative decisions, of course, include advocacy for a particular alternative decision. But behind particular advocacy is the more elemental insistence that there are indeed choices, options, and alternatives. It is the totalizing intent of the dominant system (empire) to assert that there are no alternatives, but the choices have already been made and matters are foreclosed. Every person in despair has concluded that. And every person in denial takes that option ... whether about addiction, a bad marriage, an unworkable job, or whatever. It was not

different in ancient Israel as it found the Egyptian-Canaanite religion-economic-political system completely defining and containing all thinkable possibilities. The tradition of Moses, however, would not quit. So I cite five texts that invite decision:

1. The preaching tradition of Deuteronomy insists that enactment of Torah can create a social system that is alternative to the Canaanite social system that we used to call “Fertility Religion.” After all of the particularities of Moses’ instruction, the appeal for covenant concludes in Deuteronomy 30:15-20:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut 30:15-20)

This is a life-or-death decision. It is a choice that will determine the future for generations to come.

2. The matter is reiterated in the extraordinary encounter of Joshua 24, the covenant renewal at Shechem. Joshua urges a new decision:

Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. (Josh 24:14-15a)

And he himself models the decision:

But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. (Josh 24:1 Sb)

The exchange that follows indicates how freighted the decision for covenant is, for his listeners are ready to embrace YHWH; but Joshua does not make it easy for them:

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.” But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!” Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” (Josh 24:16-24)

The narrator concludes with the laconic observation that they made a new, chosen decision:

So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. (Josh 24:25)

3. In the polemical narrative at Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18), Elijah joins issue with the Canaanite socioeconomic-religious system, and summons Israel to a decision:

Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "Bow long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." (1 Kgs 18:21a)

The summons is echoed in every confessional statement, perhaps most dramatically among the "German Christians" who did not want to choose:

The people did not answer him a word. (1 Kgs 18:21b)

As you bow, that dramatic contest did evoke a decision from Israel:

When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God." (1 Kgs 18:39)

4. In the later, deeper crisis of Jerusalem in the seventh century, the prophetic tradition of Jeremiah articulates the choices before his contemporaries in Judah:

Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jer 9:23-24)

This most succinct and remarkable text lays out the options for the city clearly:

Either... wisdom, wealth, and might... the hallmarks of Solomon;

Or... steadfast love, justice, and righteousness..., the identifying marks for Moses.

But Jeremiah's society was completely inured, as is ours, to Solomonic pursuits. Jeremiah, in his courageous imagination, asserts that deciding otherwise is possible. Not surprisingly, he advocates the big triad in which YHWH delights. But along with such advocacy, the poet asserts that choosing, choosing alternatively, choosing outside the box, choosing beyond the consensus, choosing against the establishment is possible. The ground for such choosing is the reality of YHWH whom Solomon had long sought to eliminate from the equation of the Jerusalem establishment. Patrick Miller says of such a prophetic summons:

The problem of talking about confession and repentance, therefore, is in direct proportion to the conviction that human life is really grounded in God. Without that operative assumption, all talk of sin and repentance is perceived as anachronistic, a "preacherish" way of talking about our problems. Preaching that evokes repentance is prepared for by preaching that confronts the congregation in inescapable ways with the reality of God and the reality of God as the most important thing to say about the human, about ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

5. The most important text for our topic, I judge, is the remarkable assertion of Jeremiah in the midst of a visit to the potter's house. After he asserts that the potter can "rework" spoiled clay, the prophetic assertion seems to depart spectacularly from the metaphor of clay to make this assertion:

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. (Jer 18:7-10)

The assertion is that Israel's fresh decision can cause YHWH to revamp Jerusalem's future. The initiative and possibility is Israel's hands. Israel, not YHWH, can choose Israel's future. The odd thing is that in context, the implication is that the clay can take the initiative and cause the potter to do differently. Human history, Israelite history with YHWH, is in Israel's hands. *Mutatis mutandis*,

the church in U.S. society can assert that our national community can have a different future, even given the intractable moral passion of YHWH. It is on the basis of that premise that Jeremiah is sent by YHWH to make a bid for Jerusalem's new decision:

Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of

Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. (Jer 18:11)

It takes no imagination to think that the church in this place is dispatched by God to invite our society to "make amends."

If we are honest, we may read verse 12, the verse after the lectionary committee ended the reading, to notice that Jerusalem refused:

But they say, "It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will." (Jer 18:12)

But verse 12, in our contemporary reading, need not follow. Otherwise is possible, and the creator of heaven and earth, the responsive potter, is prepared to follow new human decisions.

The news entrusted to the church is that new decisions are possible, the kind asserted by Jesus, good news!

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14-15)

Not to be able to choose new is very bad news. It is the bad news embraced by those in despair. It is the bad news practiced by those in denial. But it need not be so, depending on voices to the contrary.

#### IV.

I want now to report on six convictions at which I have arrived that I think are germane to the matrix of confession.

1. The possibility of a confession depends upon a disengagement from the coercive practices of the National Security State. This is exceedingly difficult for any of us and all of us, for the entitled life we live without "inconvenience" is a rich and reassuring one. I imagine this is not a call for "heroic" action, but it is a call for a deliberate, sustained mindset that receives concrete enactment I am mindful of the case of Poland under the solidarity movement of Lech Walesa and Adam Michnik. They did not fight the Communist Regime, but intentionally ignored it and operated as though it did not exist. They were propelled in this by their moral ground and their deep moral passion that was rooted in old Catholic faith.

When I think about disengagement from common practice, I think first of all about the demands of production and consumption that are defining for the lives of many of us, and the reality of sabbath as a deep act of resistance and alternative, the refusal to have our lives defined by the lens of the market.

2. The practice of calling things by their right name and practicing the exposé of toxic euphemisms is the peculiar work of the church. This does not need to be excessively confrontational, but it is certain that the National Security State with its commoditization of everything and everyone depends upon false identifications. For the most part we inured in such practice so that we do not notice, an enterprise that can be extended to public life.

3. The church is—or can be—a hospitable place for hosting the profound ambiguity many people feel about these matters. On all of the great questions before our society—war, immigration, abortion, gays and lesbians—it is clear that most people are enormously ambivalent. Our society, in its dominant mode, allows no such ambivalence to be voiced and readily evoke an uncertainty that needs to be honored.

It is only this that gives me pause about confession, for any serious confession may preclude the practice of ambiguity. But I should argue that the church, in our society, must be a safe venue for ambiguity, an arena in which people will not be scolded, judged, coerced, or manipulated, because it belongs to us to be undecided. Indeed Mark Slouka has argued that such openness on hard decisions is the hallmark of democracy. Where such openness is precluded, he asserts, we are on the way to fascism.

4. More than that, a safe venue of honest ambiguity is the seedbed for newness it is the place where God's spirit can do the work of newness. I would not, of course, suggest that there is any circumstance in which God's spirit cannot work newness. But it is surely evident that newness, as the gift of the spirit, does not come easily in arenas of completely settled certitude. Thus I suggest that the church, as a venue for honest ambiguity, is an environment in which newness may be given. It does happen by the work of the spirit that we are led to places where we have not thought to go. Thus the Book of Acts is powerful testimony that apostolic preaching and witness created an environment, led by the spirit, where folk re-decided about Caesar and Christ. The empire is dead set against ambiguity and suspicious of our hints of uncertainty. It is for that reason that the church, led by the spirit, always creates dis-ease for the empire.

5. The church that would be in a state of confession will need to be a church responsive to the spirit who breaks down walls, opens prisons, and makes all things new. To the extent that we are in thrall to the National Security State, we will not and cannot be led by the spirit. Perhaps it is worth observing that the National Security State has "no spirit":

The Egyptians are human, and not God;  
their horses are flesh, and not spirit.  
When the Lord stretches out his hand,  
the helper will stumble, and  
the one who helped will fall,  
and they will all perish together. (Isa 31:3)  
\* \* \*

Do not put your trust in princes,  
in mortals, in whom there is no help.  
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;  
on that very day their plans perish. (Ps 146:3-4)

That is, the empire cannot generate life, cannot provide security, can not evoke well-being or joy. The empire cannot keep its promises that touch human reality. It is the wonder of the church that it knows the name of the spirit who creates and sustains life, who makes safe, and who breeds joy.

6. Pastors and church members who cease to meet the expectations of conventional religion and who cease to count on the payouts and gifts of conventional religion are more likely to be unafraid and filled with energy. Two varied attestations to this truth:

- Soon after World War II, there was a group of aging German pastors and their wives who had suffered much at the hands of the German regime. They were getting on their tour bus and there was a young man scurrying to get all their luggage on, working with great zest. Someone asked who he was; answer: "That is Martin Niemoeller, he is eighty." Niemoeller long before had decided not to be afraid. I read that when he was a much younger man, he was in a delegation to see Hitler just after Hitler had come to power in 1933. When Niemoeller came home, his wife asked him about the meeting and what he had learned. He answered, "I learned that Herr Hitler is a very frightened man." It was given to Niemoeller, unlike most of us, to be unafraid. And when we are unafraid, energy is given.

- On a less dramatic note, I participated in a Lilly consultation with pastors at Memphis Theological Seminary. In their reflection on three years in their study groups, the pastors reported

that they had learned (a) they did not need to remain hidden in their persona) lives of struggle, and (b) they did not need to be loners. The outcome for most of them was new energy for the task of ministry. We have much to unlearn about faith and ministry and fear and what it means to be summoned to “fear not.” There are no doubt different strategic questions related to the issue of confession, but this consultation comes to us differently when fear is submitted to the great spirit of newness.

7. This leads me, finally, to reflect on the third article of the Creed, as I imagine a movement of confession to be spirit led. It occurs to me that in the spirit and through the spirit and by the spirit, we may do what the spiritless National Security State can never do:

- The spirit creates and sustains the Holy Catholic Church as a Communion of Saints, as a community of those who have given their lives over to God’s newness. The spiritless National Security State can never form community. William Cavanaugh, in his exposé of the Pinochet regime in Chile, reports that the intent of state-sponsored torture in Chile was to make community impossible.<sup>4</sup> I submit that it is the work of the National Security State— whether intentional or not—to preclude communities of commitment, trust, and generosity.
- The spirit makes possible the forgiveness of sins. The spirit has the power to break the grip of guilt for the sake of new beginnings. The National Security State and its market ideology offers no forgiveness, no free lunch, no beginning again; it is all three strikes and you are out with nothing ever forgiven or ever forgotten.
- The spirit makes possible the resurrection of our bodies and eternal life in God’s promise. The National Security State has no hope, but imagines at best the endless perpetuation of the present state of greed and acquisitiveness.

The third article is the matrix of freedom and courage in the church, and everything depends on yielding to the spirit. It has always been so. Every confession calls for a decision that is only credible if the world is under the aegis of God’s life-giving spirit:

- Barmen called “German Christians” to an either/or decision of gospel or National Socialism. It is correct, I believe, that “spirit” is only mentioned once in the Declaration, in Article 4, after quoting Ephesians 4:15-16:

The Christian Church is the community of brethren in which, in Word and sacrament, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ acts in the present as Lord. With both its faith and its obedience, with both its message and its order, it has to testify in the midst of the sinful world, as the Church of pardoned sinners, that it belongs to him alone and lives and may live by his comfort and under his direction alone, in expectation of his appearing.<sup>5</sup>

- The Kairos Document called Christians to an either/or decision concerning Apartheid. The document is not at all based on references to the spirit. It is asserted that prophetic theology is “deeply spiritual,” and the document quotes Luke 4:18-19 concerning “The Spirit of the Lord.”<sup>6</sup>
- The letter from the Birmingham jail called “white moderates” to an either/or decision concerning segregation and integration. It mentions a “sacrificial spirit,” but that is all.
- And now it is our time and our circumstance. What matters is (a) how deeply we ourselves are free from or yet contained by claims of empire, and (b) how we judge wisely about a radical bid for the mind and heart of the church. We are back to Friday and Sunday, to the truth of crucifixion and the hope of resurrection. Our society waits in denial and despair to hear a truth-filled, hope-filled word of healing and newness. September 25, 2007

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<sup>1</sup> The German church crisis was the original context for the term "cheap grace." While the phrase has an obvious generic meaning, its particular point in the German church crisis was the sense that no decision needed to be made concerning the contradiction of the Gospel and German National Socialism.

<sup>2</sup> The programmatic denial of the dominant system in U.S. society recalls for me the ballad of Nat King Cole, 'Pretend you're happy when you're blue, it isn't very hard to do.'

<sup>3</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 241.

<sup>4</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> *Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church*, ed. by Robert McAfee Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 157

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, 58.