



**General Council Bible Study
“Living God, we repent our idolatry;
lead us to justice and peace”
Jeremiah 10:1-10
Hyunju Bae**

I. Encountering the “Living God”

Good morning! I would like to begin our first Bible study with examining the richness and depth of the biblical designation "living God." As this invocation will repeat itself during the worships and the Bible studies of this historic General Council, it deserves our primary attention. The theological reflection of the Bible is fundamentally shaped by the knowledge of the *living* God. The appellation "living God" appears very frequently in the Old Testament and occurs in the New Testament as well (Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; 1 Samuel 17:26, 36; 2 Kings 19:4, 16; Psalms 42:2, 84:2; Isaiah 37:4, 17; Jeremiah 10:10, 23:36; Daniel 6:20, 26; Hosea 1:10; Matthew 16:16, 26:63; Acts 14:15; Romans 9:26; 2 Corinthians 3:3, 6:16; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 Timothy 3:15, 4:10; Hebrews 9:14, 10:31, 12:22; Revelation 7:2; etc.). In the Bible, "living God" is a significant invocation of God that is uttered with profound wonder at the divine mystery. By pronouncing "living God," believers stand before the God in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) and are drawn into the amazing sphere of God's presence, redemptive action in history and creative love for life.

First of all, "living God" is the holy and eternal God. The encounter with the immortal and infinite God who is supreme and majestic above all creatures brings up a "creature-feeling," or a sense of nothingness (Rudolf Otto). Abraham said, "I who am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). Habakkuk expresses pointedly the human feeling arising from the encounter with the living God: "Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my 'Holy One' who shall not die" (1:12; cf. Hebrews 10:31).¹ When a theologian seeks to contrast the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," the "God of Jesus Christ," with the "God of the philosophers," as Blaise Pascal did, he or she tends to rely on the biblical appellation "living God" among others. For it conveys a profoundly mystical experience of the transcendent God that defies a mere conceptual straightjacket. Living God with sovereign freedom is neither for domestication, nor under magical control, nor under priestly guardianship (Acts 7:48). Living God is the source of iconoclastic vocation of prophets and reformers. Jesus Christ, whose ministry unmistakably reflects prophetic engagement and reforming commitment, is "the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:13-16).

Secondly, "living God" with sovereign freedom and in unapproachable majesty is the God of fidelity as well. Characterized by a dynamic intervention in history, living God is in faithful covenantal relationship with the people of God. The livingness of God is demonstrated in

¹ This translation comes from Hans-Joachim Kraus, "The Living God: A Chapter of Biblical Theology," in *Theology of the Liberating Word* ed. Frederick Herzog (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), 91.

God's deliverance of people, God's pedagogy and judgment and the fulfillment of God's promise, that is, in God's will to saving, forming, guiding, rectifying and communicating with the people of God (Psalms 22:4; 1 Samuel 14:39; Jeremiah 16:14-15, 23:7-8; etc.). The name of Yahweh, the God of exodus (Exodus 3:13-15), means "I will be there (for you)."² The resurrected Jesus told the disciples that, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20; cf. 1:23; 18:20). While the people of Israel broke the covenant, which brought forth the divine rage and judgment, the faithful God promised a creative way to enact a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31; 1 Corinthians 11:25). In the New Testament, Paul declares that even the unfaithfulness of the people of God didn't nullify the faithfulness of God (Romans 3:3-4). He was convinced that the living God formed the "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16) in and through Jesus Christ, and that God has made the apostle and his coworkers competent to be ministers of a new covenant, a covenant of life-giving Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6). Christians have "our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe" (1 Timothy 4:10). The intimate and sure knowledge of the faithful God finds its most paradoxical expression in Job's discourse: "As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter" (Job 27:2). In the midst of dark mystery in which God appears as the adversary, Job declares that "Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven" (Job 16:19), and that "my redeemer lives" (Job 19:25). Anchored in the knowledge of the living God of covenantal fidelity, the believers in the Bible don't interpret the darkest valley of pain and suffering as God's death, but laments in the silence of God.

Thirdly, "living God" is the God of life. As the Creator of heaven and earth, God gives life to all humans (Genesis 1-2; Psalms 139:13-14; Jeremiah 38:16) and all things (1 Timothy 6:13). Life in fullness of human and earth communities is God's joy. As for the Creator of life, any violence crushing life or any destruction of human dignity and community life is a challenge to God's own work. The God of life denounces the power of death. Being a sinful and arrogant rebellion against the God of life, the power of death manifests itself in oppression, domination, exploitation, discrimination, exclusion and alienation. God's preferential option for the poor and the weak is natural because their life is most vulnerable and easily under the threat of death. God is the defender and friend of life (Wisdom of Solomon 1:13, 11:26; Ezekiel 33:11); Jesus Christ is the author of life (Acts 3:15), and the Holy Spirit is the breath of life. The living God who gives life imparts graciously new and eternal life (Romans 6:4; John 3:16). Life is a gratuitous gift. The core secret of flourishing life is love. Love is to life what hatred is to death (Matthew 5:21-22). The God of life is characterized by a will to creative love (Ephesians 2:4-5; Romans 5:8; 8:35, 37, 39). John states with lucidity that, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). The experience of the living, faithful and loving God in Jesus Christ opens up a road to the actualization of seemingly impossible possibilities on earth: conquering fear (1 John 4:18), breaking down the dividing wall and the hostility (Ephesians 2:14) and loving even enemies (Matthew 5:44).

II. Faith and Idolatry in Jeremiah 10:1-10

² Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. I, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1962), 180-81.

In Jeremiah 10:1-10, the reference to the living God is situated within a context of a classic argument of the prophetic condemnation of idolatry (cf. Isaiah 44). The text describes the fascination and fear that Israel felt towards the idols of the nations. Fascination and fear are two fundamental elements of religious feeling. Religious emotions are susceptible to distortion unless the true knowledge of the living God is there. They have a danger of degenerating into false religion or pseudo-mysticism and engendering the idolatrous faith. In commenting on our text, Calvin distinguishes between the true astrology as a genuine art and science and the adulterated astrology as the hotbed for superstition. The former serves as "the alphabet of theology," as Calvin believes that the contemplation of the celestial structure inevitably leads to the admiration of God's wisdom, power and goodness. It was God that let lights in the dome of the sky "for signs and for seasons and for days and years" (Genesis 1:14). On the other hand, the corrupted astrology which Jeremiah attacks in the text is obsessed with foolish divinations. It regards the signs of celestial bodies not as natural marks used to differentiate diverse seasons but as decisive factors prognosticating future events and fate determined by necessity.³ The prophet attacks superstitious religiosity, and exhorts, "Do not fear stars, but fear the true and living God" (Jeremiah 10: 2, 5, 7, 10; cf. Proverbs 1:7; Matthew 10:28).

Israel was attracted to the customs of the surrounding empires, which exerted crucial political influences over the historical courses of Israel. In the ancient times, Egyptians and Chaldeans enjoyed the international fame for possessing the supreme knowledge and wisdom, while Yahweh and the laws of Israel were often despised. The prophet deplores that Israelite people lost the faculty of discernment due to the seductive power of the idols of the empires. Forgetting their own identity as the covenantal people of the faithful God as well as their own way as such (cf. Acts 9:2), they followed the way of noncovenanting empires, valuing worthless and empty deities. They worshipped the false, human-made and dead idols that cannot speak, nor move, nor save, nor give life. The direction of their commitment and obedience was wrong. They forsook Yahweh, "the fountain of living water," and "dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

It is noteworthy that Israel's blind idolatry is embedded in the contemporary economics (Jeremiah 10:3, 4, 9). The industry of idolatry involves a long-distance trade (9), employs committed agents (3, 4, 9) and produces the narrative of lie and deceit to brainwash people and make their minds dull (8). The idols do not simply reside in a religious sector but penetrate into the manner of organizing the whole communal life, offering the symbols and the instructions for concrete practices. By mindlessly surrendering to the economics of idolatry, Israel let lifeless commodities and impotent fetishism prevail in the society. A result is the diminished life among people.

Israel failed to remember not only the fidelity of God but also the sovereign freedom of God the ultimate judge. The idolatrous faith and superstitious fear clouded their mind to forget that the true and living God of Israel is not only their King but also the King of the nations

³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, Vol. 2, trans. and ed., John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 6-18.

(Psalms 96:5, 10). Despite Israel's singular status before God, God's dynamic intervention in history was neither monopolized nor domesticated by Israel. With sovereign freedom and in unsearchable wisdom, God chooses the nations as partners, judges them when they absolutize power and despise Yahweh's will to justice and truth. God "will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth" (Psalms 96:13). There is no escaping the true and living God who is the ultimate judge of both Israel and the nations.

In Jeremiah 10:1-10, a sharp contrast is presented between God and the idols, and between faith and idolatrous faith. Another antithesis that looms large throughout the book of Jeremiah concerns a confrontation between false prophets and true ones (Jeremiah 14, 42). To God's rage, "from the prophets ungodliness has spread throughout the land" (Jeremiah 23:15). Jeremiah accuses the false prophets of speaking visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord (cf. Ezekiel 22:28). As the mouthpieces for spurious peace and security (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:3), they "keep saying to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you;' and to all who stubbornly follow their own stubborn hearts, they say, 'No calamity shall come upon you'" (Jeremiah 23:16-17). In reality, dooms were approaching. Perverting the words of the living God (Jeremiah 23:9ff), the false prophets produced the narrative of lie and deceit. To that extent, two competing narratives were inevitably in clash.

Jeremiah was a true prophet sent by the living God. He was compelled to speak the word of the Lord, "something like a burning fire" within his soul (Jeremiah 20:9). The prophets were not so much foretellers whose specialty rested in the prediction of things in the future as leaders who considered themselves the ambassadors of Yahweh. As a messenger of the living God, Jeremiah spoke God's perspective of national and international reality in the crisis of Judah and denounced her complacent and self-serving nationalism and pervasive idolatry. He proclaimed that Israel should leave behind the idolatry to turn to the true and living God. While the destination of going after other gods is Israel's hurt (Jeremiah 7:6), the plan of the Lord is not for harm, but for welfare of Israel, to give them a future with hope (Jeremiah 29:11; 30-33).

Regarding the way for "a future with hope," there were different opinions. Jeremiah emphasized the importance of the covenantal obedience rather than blind religious rituals (Jeremiah 7: 1-7, 22-26, etc.). What matters is the practice of commandments not to oppress the alien, the orphan, the widow, not to shed innocent blood and to act justly one with another. Neither idolatry nor the temple-centrism is an option, as these routines are void of the true knowledge of God and the ethical obedience coming from covenantal responsibilities (Jeremiah 7:5-7).

Jeremiah lived a solitary life (Jeremiah 16:1-2), full of turmoil during the tragic period of Judah. The prophet witnessed a deportation of his people into Babylon and the fall of Jerusalem. He himself became an exile in Egypt. Feeling the impending disaster in his bones, Jeremiah spoke fiercely truth to the kings, priests, prophets, officials and the people. He even saw and conveyed a vision of a world on the brink of regressing to pre-creation chaos,

"as if struck by a mighty nuclear bomb"⁴ (Jeremiah 4:23-31). As Israel didn't want to listen to his warning, Jeremiah became "a man of strife and contention to the whole land" (Jeremiah 15:10). Jeremiah experienced the curse from all of them, the imprisonment (Jeremiah 36:5; 37:11-21; 38:28), the threats of murder (Jeremiah 26: 8, 11), and the burning of the entire scroll of his prophecies by King Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 36:23). The suffering servant went through persecutions "like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (Jeremiah 11:19; Isaiah 53:7; Acts 8:32).

Jeremiah was a man embracing polarity tension. His twofold role as spokesperson for Yahweh and spokesperson for the people rendered him an active mediator who produced many oracles and prayers. Jeremiah traversed two different dimensions. On the one hand, he sympathized with God's heart, the divine pathos, and listened to God's voice, the divine logos. On the other hand, he felt truly human anger, self-pity, despair, fear, doubt and joy as well (Jeremiah 20:13). One can also find in Jeremiah a coexistence of strong masculinity and compassionate maternity/perceptive femininity. While being as stalwart as "a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls" (Jeremiah 1:18), he was as susceptible as a mother weeping for her children (Jeremiah 31:15). On the one hand, Jeremiah uttered severe divine judgment fiercely, expressed God's rage firmly, and denounced the false optimism of the false prophets tenaciously. On the other hand, he wept over the tragic destiny of his own people. Such weeping signals "the end of all machismo."⁵

Being "the most human of the prophets,"⁶ Jeremiah the griever was a pilgrim on *via dolorosa*. Later Jesus was identified with Jeremiah (Matthew 16:14), and the story of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44) reveals a point of similarity between the two, among others. Paul the apostle also joins this group of grievers, when he reveals "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" for his own people in his heart (Romans 9:2). One can have a glimpse of what an "*orthopathema*,"⁷ a right way of suffering, is like, in the life of these great figures in the Bible. It is an indispensable element beyond words (orthodoxy) and deeds (orthopraxis) in the process of accomplishing God's mission and ministry in the world where the sin and rebellion against God abound. It is astonishing and inspiring to find how faithfully these grievers trusted in the ultimate triumph of the living God amidst their own sorrow and suffering.

III. Discerning Idolatry Today

An abandonment of idolatry was a prerequisite for faith not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament (Acts 15:20; 17:16; 19:35; Romans 1:23; 1 Corinthians 8:4; 10:19; 12:2; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Galatians 5:20; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5; 1 Peter 4:3; 1 John 5:21; Revelation 13:14-15; etc.). The proclamation to turn from the worthless, futile and foolish things of the idols to the living God, and from dead works to the living God, was a

⁴ *The Oxford Annotated Bible* (1973) on Jer 4:23ff.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 61.

⁶ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1957), 339.

⁷ Robert Schreier, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bookes, 1992), 37.

core of the *kerygma* of the early churches (Acts 14:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; Hebrews 9:14). Paul the apostle admonishes to the Corinthians: "Do not become idolaters" (1 Corinthians 10:7), and "flee from the worship of idols" (1 Corinthians 10:14). It is noteworthy that the worship of idols is closely intertwined with the economics in the Corinthian situation as well (1 Corinthians 8, 10). The New Testament offers a crystal clear definition of idolatry: greed is idolatry (Colossians 3:5) and one who is greedy is an idolater (Ephesians 5:5). Jesus said, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed: for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). Greed diminishes life, not increases it.

An antithesis between faith and idolatry might sound antiquated in our post-modern, sophisticated world that is more familiar with a contrast between faith and atheism. If we define the concept of idolatry as putting trust in what is not ultimately God and blindly following fake gods and lesser lords (1 Corinthians 8:5), however, a contrast between faith and idolatry becomes all the more relevant for our time when a number of penultimate priorities fascinate people, possess their hearts and claim their loyalty. There is nowadays an increasing number of enlightened atheists who are alienated from religion in disillusionment when they experience its violence, misuse of reason and deep-seated patriarchy. Yet idolaters could be found in both religious and atheist sectors if limitless profits, power, technology, consumerism, militarism, nationalism, individualism, fundamentalism, racism, patriarchy or any other finite objects or penultimate values are venerated as infinite and ultimate on their priority altar. Now just as then, both faith and idolatry are not confined in the realm of religion but penetrate into the manner of organizing the whole life of individuals and societies. A confrontation between faith and idolatry inevitably involves a battle between two competing narratives that provide two different perceptions and understandings of reality, just as in the case of Jeremiah and the false prophets.

Two recent ecumenical texts employ the term "idolatry" explicitly. Both documents attempt to identify and debunk the myth of contemporary idolatry in the areas of economics, militarism and nuclear industry and present an alternative narrative in prophetic tradition. As the perceptions of reality vary, producing a whole spectrum of perspectives, the dichotomous presentation of reality could seem to lack sufficient sophistication and prudence, not paying attention to the complex reality. Yet when the churches listen to the voices of victims, the complex matters frequently become simple, and a dichotomous confrontation between two competing narratives are often inevitable. Jesus Christ was himself a victim of hegemonic oppressive structure of the Roman Empire. Being the body of Christ, the church takes seriously the experiences and the perspectives of the vulnerable and weakest members of human and earth communities and considers the right to life and happiness of the next generations.

One is the Accra Confession, titled "Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth" (2004). It takes issue with the fundamental tenets of neoliberal economic globalization and summarizes them as follows:

- unrestrained competition, consumerism and the unlimited economic growth and accumulation of wealth are the best for the whole world;

- the ownership of private property has no social obligation;
- capital speculation, liberalization and deregulation of the market, privatization of public utilities and national resources, unrestricted access for foreign investments and imports, lower taxes and the unrestricted movement of capital will achieve wealth for all;
- social obligations, protection of the poor and the weak, trade unions, and relationships between people, are subordinate to the processes of economic growth and capital accumulation (9).

According to the Accra Confession, this position "makes the false promise that it can save the world through the creation of wealth and prosperity, claiming sovereignty over life and demanding total allegiance which amounts to **idolatry**" (10). The Accra Confession offers an alternative narrative in prophetic tradition as follows:

We believe that any economy of the household of life given to us by God's covenant to sustain life is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and wellbeing of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation. We believe that human beings are called to choose God over Mammon and that confessing our faith is an act of obedience. Therefore we reject the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God's creation (22, 23).

The other document, "For a World of Peace, a World Free of Nuclear Weapons" (2010), explicitly declares as follows:

The ideology of security through nuclear armament is heretical. In light of the biblical faith that true/authentic security comes from Yahweh God, to depend on nuclear weapons for the security of nations and peoples is an expression of unfaith that does not trust God's protection and care, and is the sin of **idolatry** that relies on what is not God as if it is God. "If God does not protect the house, the guardians guard in vain."

This position might sound naive to the people living under the nuclear threat before their nose and indoctrinated in "the myth of deterrence" and the doctrine of "the balance of terror." Yet time is ripe for Christians in such a situation to consider Paul's exhortation: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). The document quoted above came to serve as one of background statements for the WCC's "Statement towards a Nuclear-free World," which was approved by its Central Committee in 2014. The Statement warns that the fascination and obsession with the nuclear power continues despite all the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and Fukushima in 2011 and calls for "nuclear exodus as pilgrimage of justice and peace." The nuclear competition among nuclear weapon states and the desire to go nuclear among other states continue to be reproduced on the basis of the "myth of deterrence." The WCC's Vancouver Assembly (1983) already declared: "The concept of deterrence, the credibility of which depends on the possible use of nuclear weapons, is to be rejected as morally

unacceptable and incapable of safeguarding peace and security." It is well known that one of the nuclear military strategies is named MAD (mutually assured destruction), as if admitting self-scornfully the contradiction and suicidal vision behind the national security policy making nuclear enterprise as its beloved idol.

The myth of deterrence that feeds on fear is to be replaced by the prophetic imagination to envision the world of peace, free of war and mass killings. Instead of a doctrine of mutually assured destruction, we need to cultivate a culture of mutually assured conviviality and abundant life for all. Joint human security for all, committed to the freedom from fear and the freedom from want, should become a more viable priority than militarized security that worships the weapons of mass destruction as its idols. The WCC's "Statement towards a Nuclear-free World" presents an alternative vision in prophetic stance: "We are called to live in ways that protect life instead of putting it at risk—neither living fearfully, defended by nuclear weapons, nor living wastefully, dependent on nuclear energy. We are invited to build communities and economies in harmony with God's manifold gifts and promises of life." As people equipped with the knowledge that "perfect love casts out fear" and that "whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (1 John 4:18), Christians need to examine the nuclear issue from the standpoint of the victims of radiation poisoning such as the *hibakusha* (Japanese atomic bomb sufferers), *pi-pok-ja* (Korean atomic bomb sufferers), test site victims in the Pacific whose bodies are deformed by genetic mutation and laborers working in mines and power plants under the threat of radiation. The concern for the next generations with the right for full life in a healthy environment and for the earth poisoned by nuclear tests need to be prioritized.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s prophetic speech, "Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence," delivered on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City. In this illuminating address, King pinpoints "a very obvious and almost facile connection" between the war in Vietnam and the struggle for poor—both black and white:

A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor - both black and white - through the poverty program. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated, as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So, I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

I am struck by the precise truth in King's observation of "the war as an enemy of the poor." We are living in a scandalous world where an astronomical amount of finance is invested into military industry while the unprecedented food crisis and hunger are taking place, and the gap between the rich and poor is widening. The Accra Confession states, "the annual income of the richest 1% is equal to that of the poorest 57% and 24,000 people die each day from poverty and malnutrition." Humankind is a wolf to humankind (Plautus: *homo homini lupus*). Greedy idolatry worships a murderous god, who doesn't care about how much blood

of innocent people is shed in the blind pursuit of limitless profits and monetary interests. Jeremiah conveys the divine indictment of King Jehoiakim: "But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence" (Jeremiah 22:17; cf. Ezekial 22:27, 29; Ecclesiasticus 34:18-22; Matthew 21:33-43). The evildoers make a kind of countercovenant with the power of death and consider strength the norm of justice (Wisdom of Solomon 2:11-12).

The mindset that regards armament and militarism as the sole means to conflict resolution is a major stumbling block to the people aspiring for more collaboration beyond national borders for healthy common life in peace. Northeast Asia suffers from thick fogs of fine dust, or fine particulate matter, which is called a silent killer due to its grave health threat. The transnational nature of this phenomenon deserves an urgent and more active cooperation among governments, scientists, business sectors and civil societies. At such a critical juncture, a rise of military tension with a prospect of a possible nuclear "Hot War" is simply insane. The global climate change requires our collaboration and wisdom-sharing at a global scale. The unprecedented crisis demands the partnership at an unprecedented scale. The church needs to lead by example in unity. The church is to make a crucial contribution in transforming the necrophilic desire for "a balance of terror" into the life-loving insight of "a balance of mutual trust" to terminate a never-ending vicious cycle of destruction and death for the sake of the abundant life for all (John 10:10). The church should keep open a channel of alternative communication by offering the safe space where the victims could voice out, and as "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), should speak truth to the powers.

IV. Exodus Out of the Shadow of Death

Our civilization suffers from the disease unto death. We now live in a disgraceful "global jungle" where the cruel culture of the "survival of the fittest" triumphs. There is "the obvious disparity between the value assigned to life in developed nations versus developing nations—most particularly as reflected in World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) decisions" ("Value of life" from Wikipedia). The fundamental threat of the exploitative economic system lies in the commodification of human life, the devastation of human relationships and the dehumanization of both the oppressor and the oppressed. The advent of artificial intelligence might accelerate a danger of making a narcissistic idolatry of human omnipotence more attractive and pervasive in the area of economy and military industry in a smart way (cf. Acts 7:41). Even space is being militarized. In the world characterized by the loss of transcendence and the obsession with human autonomy, space exploration with an expectation to find another home for humanity is embarrassing to many, as the earth, our true and sacred home, suffers from insufficient remedy for its pollution. The average citizens often feel like living in a culture of obscurantism and obfuscation regarding crucial decisions influencing their own daily life and security. Antidemocratic elements prevail in the hard-won democracy of the world. The culture devoid of transparency and democratic participation in many important areas of life signifies a retrogression into an aristocratic oligarchy of the empire that builds up its own tower of Babel with its top in the heavens (Genesis 11:4). People are increasing who don't

and can't discover a sensible meaning in grand enterprises of the national and world leaders and are silently suffocated by the feeling of emptiness and despair. Hamlet's words, "To be or not to be," fit in. Two opposite responses often come to the scene: violence and escapism. Yet it is evident that neither aggression nor indifference may well open a way to life for all.

An exodus out of the shadow of death begins with *metanoia*. The 20th century was the most violent era with two World Wars and with the devastation of the Earth, and yet we didn't learn from the dark abyss of death crucial key lessons for flourishing life in the 21st century. The prophets deplore at people who keep listening but do not understand, who keep looking, but do not perceiving (Isaiah 6:9, 10; Matthew 13:14; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10). Like Israelites who said to Aaron, "make gods for us who will lead the way for us (Acts 7:40)," we tend to rely on the idols, not on the true and living God, for guidance, in persistent blindness and naive optimism. "Our present stark global reality is so fraught with death and destruction that we will not have a future to speak of unless the prevailing development paradigm is radically transformed and justice and sustainability become the driving force for the economy, society, and the Earth. Time is running out."⁸ In order for God to build up and plant anew (Jeremiah 24:6, 42:10, 45:4), we need to tear down and pluck up our own conscious and unconscious collusion with idolatry. *Metanoia*, our repentance, our reversal of priorities, and our reformation of relationships and practices, should be the first step for our pilgrimage of justice and peace.

In the world fascinated with life-destroying values such as competition, individualism, limitless growth, greed and hostile confrontation, the church needs to try to articulate, speak loudly and live up to the fundamental tenets of Christian values. The list would be endless: prayer, faithfulness, unity, solidarity, shalom, justice, compassion, hospitality, jubilee, the kingdom of God, eucharist, *oikos*, *koinonia*, the power of love instead of the love of power and so on. These Christian values are "antidotes for fear" (Martin Luther King Jr.) and building blocks for human villages. However, it is our ecclesial reality that in many contexts these great biblical motifs and inspirations remain "solid food," hard to digest (1 Corinthians 3:2). It would be an irony for the church to claim the canonical status of the Bible without attempting to live up to its noble horizon, urgently required for the healing and wellbeing of humanity and the natural world. Let us not "accept the grace of God in vain" (2 Corinthians 6:1). Let us humbly open up to the grace of God that invites and inspires us to come out of our comfort zone and empowers us to create the safe space for genuine human communication and for bold prophetic imagination for a new civilization. Theological education both at seminaries and at local churches should develop the curriculum to teach in a relevant way such concepts as eco-justice, sustainability, greedline, ecological debt, the spirituality of enough, human security, and restorative justice, to mention a few topics, so that a new lifestyle embodying such concepts could become a Christian norm in the 21st century. The Bible supports these notions that are critical for the life in fullness of human and earth communities. Ecofeminist theological insights that try to usher in the new civilization need to be consulted in this context for the new practice of ministry and mission.

⁸ "Economy of Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A Call to Action" (WCC document), para. 9.

God's love formed us as children of the living God (Romans 9:26). On Pentecost the Holy Spirit enabled people to understand each other despite differences. We are invited to live in love as friends, brothers, and sisters. The first letter of John, that emphasizes love so emphatically, finishes with the exhortation to God's children to keep themselves from idols (5:21). It sounds as if idolatry is the major element to make love grow cold (Matthew 24:12) or to entice lovers of God to become lovers of themselves, lovers of money, lovers of pleasure (2 Timothy 3:2, 4). Baptized with the water of iconoclastic love, we do need each other in our Christian witness and in our uphill struggle (2 Corinthians 7:3). The pilgrims on the journey of faith are nourished by the friendship with Jesus Christ (John 15:13-15) and each other. One year before his death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a well-known German theologian who resisted the regime of Hitler at the risk of his own life, composed a poem, titled *The Friend*. It highlights the "comradely" part of friendship:

Distant or near
in joy or in sorrow,
each knows in the other
his loyal helper
to freedom
and humanity.

Friendship in love renders our *via dolorosa*, our *orthopathema*, bearable and even beautiful, and blesses our pilgrimage of justice and peace to become a hopeful and joyful journey.

The Reformers were iconoclasts to deconstruct petrified faith and to shake and wake up the people of God to turn to the living God. I hope that we, as Reformed families who inherit the iconoclastic spirits of the Reformers, could summon our courage in God's grace to take initiative in discerning our contemporary idolatry within and without, reignite our living faith in the living God and spearhead and shape the ecclesial and social changes in the 21st century for the glory of God. "If we dream alone, it is just a dream. If we dream together, it is the beginning of new reality. If we work together, following our dreams, it is the creation of heaven" (a Brazilian saying). May the living, faithful and loving God be with us today and throughout all the programs of the General Council, refresh us with inspirations and friendships, and bless us with all the joy coming from the Holy Spirit!

Questions for Discussion

1. When do you feel God as alive, as living God, in your personal life, in the church, and in the society?
2. What can be identified as the idols and idolatry in your context?
3. In the Letter from Birmingham City Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed his deep disappointment over the laxity of the church. He distinguished between a thermometer-like church and a thermostat-like church. The former records the ideas and principles of popular opinion, while the latter transforms the mores of society. What is needed for the transformation of a thermometer-like church into a thermostat-like one especially for the sake of economic and ecological reformation

and peace-making movement?