



all anew

READY OR NOT

by Kelly Fryer 

SESSION ONE SAY GOODBYE TO NICE

OVERVIEW

Giving birth is a beautiful thing and essential to life, but there is nothing nice about it. Birthing new life is a violent process that produces pain, requires sacrifice and makes a really big mess. That's what we are asking for when we plead with God for renewal. Are you ready?

GETTING READY

Centering questions

For the heroes and sheroes of the biblical story, being part of the “new” thing God was doing often meant having to do and say things that were unpopular with family, friends and neighbors. What if being part of God's renewal today means not just wading into the messiness yourself, but being willing to create discomfort for those you love? What truths need to be told in the places you live, work, worship and play? Are you ready?

Take a minute to center yourself and open your heart and mind to hear God speaking to you through the words and stories in the Bible.

OPENING PRAYER

God, help us hear your word to us through the biblical story and through the words we speak to each other today. Give us wisdom to hear your call to be a part of what you are doing in this world as an overflowing gift of love and grace. Give us courage to answer that call with joy. Amen.

GETTING REAL

In this section of the study, Scripture holds up a mirror, helping us to think about things a little differently and question what we see in ourselves, in our congregations and in our world.

Our text

“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation: I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing’” (Revelation 3:14–17a).

A reflection

Lots of us grew up with pastoral images of Jesus and his followers. Dressed in long flowing robes and sandals (not exactly ready for an action scene in the next Jason Bourne film), he was pictured sitting in the shade of a tree, surrounded by smiling people enraptured by his stories. Children and sheep snuggled in his lap.

He was so—nice.

We named our churches after this “Good Shepherd,” our “Redeemer” and “Messiah,” or in honor of the “Grace,” “Faith,” “Hope” and “Peace” he brings. Names like “Church of Tax Collectors and Prostitutes” (Matthew 21:31), “Eye of the Needle Church” (Luke 18:25) and other provocative possibilities didn't make the cut. OK,

so maybe they aren't very poetic, nor do they roll off the tongue with ease, but also, they're just not very nice. And a lot of us have always expected our churches—and our church leaders—to be just as nice as we believed our Lord to be.

So what's wrong with nice?

First of all let's be clear: Nice is not the same as good.

Making nice is what you do to avoid upsetting people. Nice avoids conflict, runs from controversy. Nice tries to summon a half-hearted smile saying, "That's OK," even when everything clearly is not. Nice doesn't dare risk upsetting the status quo, worries about "what the neighbors might say" and fears losing face. Nice lets you walk all over her. But Good knows there are more important things than your reputation, your balance sheet and whatever else it is you count on to make you comfortable. Good will walk with you into the center of a storm, face scrunched up with fear, stomach in a knot, praying that you'll get out alive—for the sake of what is right and what is true.

Good does what matters.

Good is anything but nice.

Just ask a Laodicean.

In those first chapters of Revelation, speaking through a messenger known by the name of John at the end of the first century, Jesus had some hard words for all seven of the churches in Asia. He called out the church in Ephesus for being all talk and too little action. Smyrna was warned that church members would end up in prison for their faith; they were encouraged to hold fast. Church members in Pergamum had allowed themselves and their teachings to be diluted by self-centered values. But Jesus began each reproach with generous words of appreciation. To Ephesus, Jesus said, "I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name." To Philadelphia, he began, "I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word."

The message to the Christians in Laodicea was different. There were no words of praise, no thanks given.

"I know your works," Jesus said to the church in Laodicea. "You are neither cold nor hot."

The church in Laodicea couldn't afford to be good,

literally. "I am rich," they said to themselves. "I have prospered." They had wanted nothing and everything to lose. The last thing they dared to do was stand out by taking a stand.

You taste like nothing, Jesus might as well have said. You have put your own needs, position and comfort ahead of everything else. You stand for nothing. You are nothing. I spit you out.

"Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Revelation 3:22).

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING?

1. What are your earliest memories of Jesus? What images of him do you remember from your childhood? How have those images helped or hindered you in your life of faith?
2. Have you ever experienced "niceness" getting in the way of "doing good" in your own life and/or within your faith community?
3. The Book of Revelation has been controversial in the history of the church and can be confusing to readers today. It helps to remember that it was written at a very particular point in history, at least 100 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, to real congregations who were trying to figure out how to "be church" and live their faith in a world that did not appreciate, understand or even like them. Some of these Christians were facing real persecution. All of these churches faced challenges from both within and without. Some scholars believe the author of this book used images and symbols to disguise the real meaning of his words, so that it could not be used against the churches if it were intercepted by the antagonistic authorities. Read Revelation 3:7–13, 3:14–22, which contains letters written to two different churches. Discuss:
 - a. How are these two letters the same? How are they different?
 - b. What is the call to action God has for each of these two churches?
 - c. What is the good news God has for each of these two churches?
 - d. Which of these two churches is more like the faith community of which you are a member? What makes you say that?
 - e. What message do you think God has for your faith community today?

GETTING RENEWED

In this section, we go deep and spend time really listening for what God might be saying to us through a particular story we read in the Bible.

READ 1 SAMUEL 17:1—18:9 AND THEN DISCUSS:

1. What jumps out at you in this story?
2. What do you hear God saying to you, personally, through this story?
3. What do you hear God saying to your community (for example, your town, your congregation, your denomination, your Bible study group) through this story?

A reflection

Here's another image imprinted on our minds and hearts from our Sunday school days: The little shepherd boy, David, using five smooth stones and a wagon full of spunk to take down a giant warrior named Goliath. This is one of the most beloved stories of our faith.

“When the words that David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul; and he sent for him. David said to Saul, ‘Let no one’s heart fail because of [Goliath]; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.’ Saul said to David, ‘You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth’...David said, ‘The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.’ So Saul said to David, ‘Go, and may the Lord be with you’” (1 Samuel 17:31–33, 37).

This idea that you can't be too small to win, even against the fiercest opponents, has shaped many of our lives. For sure, it has animated children's books for generations. The three little pigs defeat the big, bad wolf. Frodo and Sam fling themselves against the gates of Mordor and, beyond all odds, make Middle Earth safe for every creature, great and small, again. Harry Potter and friends take down He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named.

But there is another lesson to be learned in David's tale, another truth to be told.

When David picked up those stones and hurled his

answer to the Philistine's challenge—“You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts!”—it wasn't just the giant he threatened. That young man, that nobody shepherd who hadn't yet learned to shave, was challenging everyone and everything that had ever been important to him.

David was never even supposed to be there. He was just a courier, charged with bringing cheese and bread from home to feed the soldiers and then scurrying back to give his elderly father news about how his older brothers on the front line were doing. Three of them had followed King Saul into battle, including the eldest son, Eliab.

When Eliab heard his youngest brother talking to some of the other men in the camp, asking questions that challenged the idea that “this uncircumcised Philistine should defy the armies of the living God,” Eliab was furious.

“What have I done now?” David asked, pouting. Apparently this wasn't the first time Eliab was annoyed by the boy's insolence. But these words really stung. “What are you all afraid of?” David seemed to be saying. “Don't you know our God is bigger than a giant?”

Eliab snarled at him: “Why are you here, anyway? And who do you think you are, presuming to know more than your brothers, our King and his whole army? Go back home and watch the sheep.”

But David did not go home. Word got to King Saul that some kid in the camp was talking trash, saying the giant should not be feared. Surely Saul had started to feel foolish, sitting in his tent wondering how he might get out of this mess, every day, all day long, hearing the taunts of the Philistines and their ridiculous, terrifying giant.

Saul was never supposed to be king of Israel, any more than David was supposed to go into battle. It's not that he was such a bad guy, although he certainly had his faults; it's just that God kept telling the people they didn't need a king. Kings are nothing but trouble. They take your stuff. They send you into battle. They make you do all the work, and, in the end, you hate them for it. “But the people refused to listen” (1 Samuel 8:19). “We want a king,” they cried, “so that we can be like other nations. We want a king to govern us and go out before us to fight our battles!”

The king they got was Saul, and now here he was, a giant on one side of him and an impertinent little boy questioning his faith on the other.

“Go ahead. Fight the giant,” Saul said.

It wouldn’t have looked good for Saul if the giant had mauled the boy, sending his broken body hurtling down the mountain to his king’s feet. But it looked even worse when David won.

“Whose son are you, anyway?” Saul asked when David returned from battle carrying the giant’s head in his hands, beginning a rivalry between the two that would last until one of them was dead.

The “David and Goliath” story we learned in Sunday school isn’t wrong, exactly, but it is incomplete. This is more than a story about how the littlest, most ordinary person can overcome any challenge. This is also a story about how words of faith and hope and truth create upset and about how that trouble often starts at home.

David didn’t just challenge a giant on that mountain-side. He challenged his family, his nation, his king. He dared them to believe their own songs and scriptures, and he was adamant that their prayers should lead to action. That little boy was a holy troublemaker.

The biblical story is full of them.

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING?

1. Can you think of someone you admire who had to deliver a difficult or unpopular message to their family, church or community? Have you ever been in a position like that? What happened?
2. How do you know when the message you feel called to deliver is actually of God? What steps do you—or can you—take to make sure you are answering God’s call to speak out or act up—and not just going rogue? How can Scripture, the faith community and your conscience all work together to help you discern what to say and do in a situation?
3. Think back through your life. Whose voice has challenged you and helped you grow in faith? How can you honor and/or thank that person?



GETTING RILED UP

This section raises a contemporary issue and challenges us to see it within the context of what God is saying to us through the biblical story.

Our text

“When David’s time to die drew near, he charged his son, Solomon, saying: I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn” (1 Kings 2:1–3).

A reflection

Something appears to be seriously wrong in our congregations. It’s not the fact that we’re getting smaller and older. That’s the least of our worries. If anything, it is just a symptom of the problem.

David wasn't perfect by any stretch of the imagination, and he made a lot of mistakes between that day he let those five stones fly and the day he gave his son, Solomon, a final blessing. But he was clear on one thing: The only way to walk with joy, strength and prosperity in this world is on the path set by the Lord.

This is a truth lots of church folks seem to have forgotten or maybe never heard.

Take, for example, what our Scriptures say about those in poverty and our responsibility to care for them. It doesn't matter what part of the Bible you open and read. From the front to the back of the book, God's word is clear:

"Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land'" (Deuteronomy 15:11).

"Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full" (Proverbs 19:17).

"Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you" (Matthew 5:42).

"...truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40b).

"Sell your possessions, and give [to the poor]" (Luke 12:33b).

"As for those who in the present age are rich, command them...to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share..." (1 Timothy 6:17-18).

Yet according to the most recent Pew "Religious Landscape Study,"¹ 69 percent of Americans who describe themselves as "certain" in their belief about God (including 44 percent of mainline Protestants, which includes the ELCA) say they think government aid to the poor does "more harm than good." That's nearly 20 percent more than the U.S. population overall.

In other words, the more religious you are in America, the less likely you are to support programs that give assistance to needy families.

As another example, let's look at support for the death penalty in the United States, a barbaric practice that

has been outlawed by two-thirds of the world's nations but which we continue to share with countries such as China, Iran and North Korea. A majority of Americans (56 percent), according to Pew², still favor the death penalty, although support is declining.

But this practice took the life of our Lord. The racial bias that infuses the use of the practice in the United States has been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. And there is zero evidence that it is effective in reducing violent crime.

In 1991 the ELCA adopted a statement opposing the death penalty.

Yet two-thirds (66 percent) of white mainline Protestants (including the ELCA) support its use, compared to 48 percent of religiously unaffiliated people. Again, the folks in our pews are more likely to be for the death penalty than anybody else.

It is enough to make one wonder: Do we not believe our own Scriptures and songs?

Whose will be the voice that dares to challenge us?

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING?

1. **Where else do you see gaps like this between what Scripture seems to say and what our church teaches, on the one hand, and what our congregational members seem to believe, say and do? How do you explain this?**
2. **David believes that the outcome of walking in the way of the Lord and keeping God's ordinances and statutes is that we will prosper. When have you (or your faith community) taken action or spoken up in a way that you believed was faithful to God and "prospered"? Is there a time when you (or your faith community) did not faithfully answer God's call to speak up or take action? What happened as a result?**
3. **David tells Solomon to be "strong and courageous." Is there something you are feeling called to say or do? What scares you about that? What motivates you?**

1 www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/views-about-government-aid-to-the-poor/

2 www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/13/some-major-u-s-religious-groups-differ-from-their-members-on-the-death-penalty/

What help do you need in order to do what you're hearing God call you to do?

GETTING RELEASED

This year, as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we remember that we have been part of God's work to make all things new for a very, very long time.

Our text

"...we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

A reflection

Lutherans celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation this year. By most accounts, Martin Luther wanted to fix the church; he never intended for the church to split. The church was his family, his home. Later, after it was all over, he explained: "I opposed indulgences...but never with force. I simply taught, preached and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. I did nothing; the Word did everything."

As we know, in part because of Luther's words and actions, the church did split, and then, like a clay pot, splintered into hundreds of different shards. Speaking out and acting up is risky business.

But the pot was never the point, now, was it?

WHAT NOW?

1. The reformer Martin Luther took a big risk when he decided to speak up 500 years ago. What are some of the things Christians risk today? In other words what do we "have to lose" if we dare to speak out and act up about things that are important?
2. In what ways do you see the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Women of the ELCA and your faith community carrying forward the legacy of the Reformation today?
3. Imagine Lutherans 500 years from now looking back at our time. For what do you hope we will be remembered?

4. What is one thing you are going to do as a result of hearing God speak to you through this time we have spent together in Scripture?

Kelly Fryer has more than 20 years of experience leading organizations and ministries, including as a pastor, teacher, entrepreneur and communicator. Previously, Kelly taught leadership at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and co-founded A Renewal Enterprise, a national firm that helps values-based organizations work more effectively. Many key concerns for Women of the ELCA (women's health, ending human trafficking, working toward gender equity, racial justice, poverty, education) are part of Kelly's current work as the executive director of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in southern Arizona. She is the author of *Reclaiming the "L" Word: Renewing the Church from its Lutheran Core*.

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