

## OVERVIEW



Hello and welcome to the discussion guide for the Lenten video series, **What God says > we say: How We Rewrite God’s Covenant**. In plain language, the title is “What God says is greater than what we say,” and it points to the tendency for humans to rewrite God’s plans, promises, and worldview into something that serves our selfishness or promotes our own understanding of the way things should be.

### **What do the videos contain?**

There are five videos in the series. Each video is about 20 minutes long. Each addresses one of the scripture lessons assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary for the Sundays of Lent in 2021 (Year B).

Session 1: God says, “blessed.” We say, “cursed.” Based on Genesis 9:8-28

Session 2: God says, “welcome.” We make divisions. Based on Genesis 17

Session 3: God says, “worship.” We say, “profit.” Based on John 2:13-22

Session 4: God liberates. We turn back to bondage. Based on Numbers 21:4-9

Session 5: God says, “forgiven.” We ask, “Really?” Based on Jeremiah 31:31-34

Each video begins with an introduction that includes a brief explanation of Womanist Theology. That summary is followed by an introduction to the scripture and speaker for that video. Each speaker shares a reflection on one of the texts, which is followed by a brief interview. At the end of the interview, viewers are invited to have their own discussions.

### **How Can a Congregation use the Videos?**

Of course, we hope that you will use the wording and themes that speak to the unique needs of your communities. The videos are designed to be used:

1. In the place of the Scripture and sermon during your congregation’s regular midweek Lenten worship, OR,
2. As a Christian Education unit, watching the videos together and using this Study Guide.

We hope that the videos will be a tool that you can use flexibly and creatively to fit the needs and context of your setting. For example, after the first few weeks, you may choose to skip the introductions and jump into the reflection and interview sections to allow more time for worship and/or discussion.

### **Why This Study Guide?**

The Racial Justice Ministry Team recognizes that it is not easy for everyone or every congregation to address issues of race or racism. As part of this overview, we have provided some general discussion questions that can be used for all the sessions. Then, for each weekly session, we are also providing a few questions specific to that week's reading and suggested opening and closing prayers to help ground our conversations in God's presence. Finally, we have offered suggested readings or additional videos to help participants prepare for conversations or to continue to study after viewing and discussing the videos.

### **Why Womanist Theology?**

Womanist theology invites us to listen for the voices and interpretations of those who may be overlooked or downplayed in biblical texts. As you will discover over the course of this five-part series, all too often the voice that is overlooked in biblical stories is the voice of God. We and our ancestors may substitute our will, our worldview and our desires for God's will and vision for us. Join us as we imagine and reimagine how these ancient texts speak to us today.

### **General Discussion Questions To be Used with All the Videos:**

- 1. How have you heard this text used or explained before?**
- 2. Have you been harmed or seen others harmed by this text?**
- 3. Have you experienced this story as life-giving, or full of grace? (How does this story condemn you or show you human sin? How does it bring you grace and forgiveness?)**
- 4. What were you most surprised about in this video?**
- 5. What new perspective did you hear on this text and how do you react to hearing it interpreted in a different way?**

### **CREDITS**

**Interviewer:** The Rev. Dr. Melissa Lemons, Associate Pastor at Unity Church in Wilmington, Delaware ([unitywilmington.org](http://unitywilmington.org)) and Assistant Professor of Clinical and Mental Health Counseling at Wilmington University

**Videographer and Video Producer:** Katie Simbala, Creative Director, Kap2ure Creative Co.

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## **SESSION 1**

### **Video #1 God says, “blessed.” We say, “cursed.”**

Based on Genesis 9: 8-28

Watch the Entire Video Here: <https://youtu.be/98DctH6sNK4>

### **Lesson Summary**

If you are familiar with Genesis, you know that the Lord blessed the earth and human beings in many ways. Soon after those blessings, human beings found a way to confuse themselves or lose sight of God’s intentions. The 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis is one of those times. The Lord blessed all of creation. After an unfortunate incident that is never fully explained, Noah cursed one of his sons and that curse was somehow interpreted as God’s will and something that was supposed to apply to a group of people for all time. Take note. It was Noah’s curse, not God’s. But, that “Curse of Ham” has been projected onto people of African descent in different ways over the centuries.

### **Our Speaker**

The speaker for this session is the Rev. Dr. Andrea Walker, pastor of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Washington, DC. ([stpaulslutherandc.com](http://stpaulslutherandc.com))

### **Suggested opening prayer**

*Good and gracious God, you invite us to recognize and reverence your divine image and likeness in our neighbor. Enable us to see the reality of racism and free us to challenge and uproot it from our society, our world and ourselves.*

(from the Sisters of Mercy [Social Justice Resource Center » Racism Prayers](#))

### **Questions suggested by our speaker, the Rev. Dr. Andrea Walker**

- 1a. Weren’t all the sons related?
- 1b. Whose curse was this?
- 1c. Does God sanction this curse?
- 1d. What about God’s promises?
- 1e. How can the damage be undone?

**Suggested closing prayer**

*Creator of all people, in our amazing diversity of size, shape, color, and giftedness: guide us, by your grace, to recognize the beauty and fitness of all whom you have made in your own image.*

*Give us gifts of humility and generosity of spirit to recognize in all people, the face of our Savior, Jesus, and to practice his commandment to “love one another,” toward the end of bringing harmony and peace among persons of all colors, origins, and abilities, for the sake of your Kingdom\*. (\*or Kin-dom)*

(from the Episcopal Diocese of West Virginia [Social Justice Resource Center » Racism Prayers](#))

**Suggested Websites and Readings:**

National Public Radio (2003). ‘The Curse of Ham’: Slavery and the Old Testament <https://www.npr.org/2003/12/15/1548811/the-curse-of-ham-slavery-and-the-old-testament>

Rae, N. (2018). How Christian Slaveholders Used the Bible to Justify Slavery. <https://time.com/5171819/christianity-slavery-book-excerpt/>

*The Great Stain: Witnessing American Slavery* by Noel Rae

Smith, M. J. (2018). “What, then, is the Church?” A Womanist Biblical Scholar’s Response. <https://www.ctsnet.edu/at-this-point/what-then-is-church-womanist-response/>

Thomas, E. (2018). The Curse of Ham: How Bad Scripture Interpretation Inspired Genocide. <https://www.imb.org/2018/06/12/the-curse-of-ham-genocide/>

## **SESSION 2**

### **Video #2 God says, “Welcome.” We make divisions.**

Based on Genesis 17:1-14, 23-27

Watch the Entire Video Here: <https://youtu.be/eG8uHXnarnk>

### **Lesson Summary**

This story reiterates God’s promise to make a covenant for all the people. As God did with Noah, so God also does with Abraham. Here, Abraham and Sarah finally receive the blessing promised to them to have a child and become the forbearers of many nations of people. The story focuses on a symbol of that blessing in the act of circumcising the males in the household. This passage has been used to create divisions among God’s people: male vs. female, family vs. slave, circumcised vs. uncircumcised. Such divisions are especially detrimental to God’s people when they reinforce a power structure that dehumanizes certain groups (women and slaves) by speaking only to the dominant/dominating group (men).

### **Our Speaker**

The speaker for this second video is at Mrs. Jahannah K. Shemaiah, a member at Journey of Faith in Windsor Mill, Maryland. ([journey7902.org/](http://journey7902.org/))

### **Suggested opening prayer**

*Ever present God, you called us to be in relationship with one another and promised to dwell wherever two or three are gathered. In our community, we are many different people; we come from many different places, have many different cultures. Open our hearts that we may be bold in finding the riches of inclusion and the treasures of diversity among us. We pray in faith.*

(from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. [Social Justice Resource Center » Racism Prayers](#) )

### **Questions suggested by our team**

- 2a. Have you ever heard the idea that women did not need to be “purified” in order to fulfill God’s covenant?
- 2b. Can you imagine what it is like to be a slave who has both curses and blessings placed on them without being asked? How does this influence their individual identity?
- 2c. What other symbols for the Bible have been used in ways that cause harm to others? How have they been used to cause harm? What types of harm have they been used to create?
  - The Commandments?
  - The Cross?

**Suggested closing prayer**

*How do we begin, Lord of all things new?*

*How do we begin to build a new world,  
new relationships,  
new understandings?*

*How do we start over and build a community of acceptance,  
a world of diversity,  
a family of trust?*

*Shall we begin with confession, with lament and sorrow?*

*Of course, we have, and we will continue to confess our deepest sin of hatred and division. Until all among us realize how divided we are, how unjust we are, how broken we all are.*

*But surely there are beginnings to be made,  
words to be spoken,  
work to be done.*

*Surely there are ways to see with new eyes,  
brothers and sisters,  
who are different and yet the same.*

*How do we begin, God of second chances?*

*Let it begin with me. Amen.*

(from Derek C. Weber, January 2021 <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/praying-for-change-daily-prayers-for-anti-racism> )

**Suggested Websites and Readings:**

Abraham's Blended Family <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/abrahams-blended-family/>

Circumcision—Why Women Don't Need Circumcision  
[https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article\\_cdo/aid/2287938/jewish/Why-Women-Dont-Need-Circumcision.htm](https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/2287938/jewish/Why-Women-Dont-Need-Circumcision.htm)

Lesson on Genesis 17 & 18 (circumcision, blessings, religion and people)  
<https://www.torahclass.com/old-testament-studies-tc/34-old-testament-studies-genesis/92-lesson-17-genesis-17-18>

“Slaves in the Ancient World” <https://www.womeninthebible.net/bible-extras/slaves/>

### **SESSION 3**

#### **Video #3 God says, “worship.” We say, “profit.”**

Based on John 2:13-22

Watch the Entire Video Here: <https://youtu.be/DdpkVwa584g>

#### **Lesson Summary**

In this text, likely a familiar one, we hear about one of the times that Jesus becomes incredibly angry. Though we are often inclined to portray him as meek and mild, scripture tells a very different story. Here, we learn that, when Jesus arrives at the temple and sees the animals wandering through the temple courts and the money changers occupying what was supposed to have been holy space, he becomes enraged. There has been a great deal of debate over the centuries about whether Jesus actually used the whip he made to physically strike the money-changers, but the fact is we simply don't know. We know that he drove them out, and that, in John's telling of the story, he had a whip in hand. After he has done so, he quotes psalm 69, invoking both the pain and the faithfulness of his ancestor, King David. Finally, after having been challenged to prove his authority with a “sign,” he predicts both the coming destruction of the temple and his own death and resurrection.

#### **Our Speaker**

The speaker for this session is Ms. Jessica Davis, pastoral counselor and Christian educator specializing in reparations work, diversity, equity, and inclusion. This session was filmed at Unity Church in Wilmington, Delaware. ([unitywilmington.org](http://unitywilmington.org)).

#### **Suggested opening prayer**

*Good and gracious God, you formed us all with your boundless love and made us each unique and beautiful in your image. Help us to see your face in one another, and make us keenly aware of those who are being marginalized in our community so that we treat everyone with true welcome and equity, give everyone a voice, and respond to all with love and grace. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen. (by Janet DeVinney)*

#### **Questions, including those suggested by our speaker, Ms. Jessica Davis**

- 3a. Why did Jesus become enraged, and drive the merchants, money changers, cattle and sheep out of the temple?
- 3b. What was Jesus' objection?
- 3c. Why could Jesus not remain silent?
- 3d. How can we be serious, courageous, and grown-up, drawing on this womanist approach to this text, whether or not we are women and whether or not we are Black?

- 3e. Instead of asking only, “Am I being treated well?” what does Jesus instruct us to ask about people who are most often marginalized? About animals and plants? About the world itself?
- 3f. How can we practice saying “Enough” as a Lenten discipline, resisting the forces of patriarchy, racism, ableism, and queerphobia?
- 3g. Where might we step out into our communities, our churches, our nation, even our own bank accounts and say: “That isn’t yours to hoard. Give it to the poor. Now.”?
- 3h. Where might we say likewise: “You are defiling this holy land by using it to do harm to those who inhabit it. It’s resources belong to them and they alone decide how they will be used.”?

**Suggested closing prayer**

*Saving God, we pray your spirit would breathe courage and compassion into us so that when we see injustice, when we feel the suffering of those who are marginalized and declare, “ENOUGH,” we would speak out against all that harms your people and all creation. We ask that you would help us respond in kindness and with justice toward those who are being harmed, so all may be well, and all your creation may be whole, because we all belong to you. In Jesus name we pray, Amen. ( by Janet DeVinney)*

**Suggested Websites and Readings:**

Interesting, non-scholarly exchange about what Jesus says about money: Is Jesus Really Anti-Capitalist?

<https://medium.com/@jcrawf/is-jesus-really-anti-capitalist-c6221a6ec01d>

A series of articles on the theme *Has Capitalism Become Incompatible with Christianity?*

<https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/06/25/has-capitalism-become-incompatible-with-christianity>

Jesus and Emotions: How to Feel Your Feelings with Jesus

<https://www.soulshpherd.org/how-to-feel-your-emotions-with-jesus/>

John: The Gospel of the Eternal Son who Reveals the Father

<https://bibleproject.com/blog/john-gospel-eternal-son-reveals-father/>

Johannine Themes and Social Justice

<https://catholic-resources.org/John/Justice-Final.html>



## **SESSION 4**

### **Video #4 God liberates. We turn back to bondage.**

Based on Numbers 21:4-9

Watch the Entire Video Here: <https://youtu.be/xDmVzkNuduU>

### **Lesson Summary**

The Book of Numbers continues the history of the people of Israel after leaving Egypt. During this time, the people are tired and hungry and still wandering in the desert. But they also have just escaped from centuries of being enslaved people. They are learning that the act of liberation is a long, arduous journey. It is also a journey that will end in God's time and way, not necessarily the way of the people. In fact, God sends venomous snakes! God also gives them a path to healing. It is through their faith they can stay true to the promise of freedom rather than turn back to the familiar and destructive ways that kept the people in bondage and slavery. This is as it should be in our church and our country as we go through the wilderness of dismantling racism.

### **Our Speaker**

The speaker for this fourth video is the Rev. Patrick Gahagan, Pastor at Journey of Faith in Windsor Mill, Maryland. ([journey7902.org/](http://journey7902.org/))

### **Suggested opening prayer**

#### ***A Litany for Those not Ready for Healing***

*Let us not rush to the language of healing, before understanding the fullness of the injury and the depth of the wound.*

*Let us not rush to offer a Band-Aid when the gaping wound requires surgery and complete reconstruction.*

*Let us not offer false equivalencies, thereby diminishing the particular pain being felt in a particular circumstance in a particular historical moment.*

*Let us not speak of reconciliation without speaking of reparations and restoration, or how we can repair the breach and how we can restore the loss.*

*Let us not rush past the loss of this mother's child, this father's child...someone's beloved son.*

*Let us not value property over people; let us not protect material objects while human lives hang in the balance.*

*Let us not value a false peace over a righteous justice.*

*Let us not be afraid to sit with the ugliness, the messiness, and the pain that is life in community together.*

*Let us not offer clichés to the grieving, those whose hearts are being torn asunder.*

**Questions suggested by our team**

- 4a. During what times in our national history did people “turn back” to old ways in reaction to a call to freedom? Post civil war? Post civil rights? Post segregation?
- 4b. How have churches been a voice for freedom?
- 4c. How have churches been complicit in enabling prejudice and oppression?

**Suggested closing prayer: A Litany for Those not Ready for Healing (continued)**  
*Instead...*

*Let us mourn black and brown men and women, those killed extrajudicially every 28 hours.*

*Let us lament the loss of a teenager, dead at the hands of a police officer who described him as a demon.*

*Let us weep at a criminal justice system, which is neither blind nor just.*

*Let us call for the mourning men and the wailing women, those willing to rend their garments of privilege and ease and sit in the ashes of this nation’s original sin.*

*Let us be silent when we don’t know what to say.*

*Let us be humble and listen to the pain, rage, and grief pouring from the lips of our neighbors and friends.*

*Let us decrease, so that our brothers and sisters who live on the underside of history may increase.*

*Let us pray with our eyes open and our feet firmly planted on the ground*

*Let us listen to the shattering glass and let us smell the purifying fires, for it is the language of the unheard.*

*God, in your mercy...*

*Show me my own complicity in injustice.*

*Convict me for my indifference.*

*Forgive me when I have remained silent.*

*Equip me with a zeal for righteousness.*

*Never let me grow accustomed or acclimated to unrighteousness.*

(from Dr Yolanda Pierce [Prayers for Racial Justice and Reconciliation \(xavier.edu\)](https://www.xavier.edu/~yolanda/prayers-for-racial-justice-and-reconciliation/))

**Suggested Websites and Readings:**

The 1619 Project details the legacy of slavery in America  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q14BTdS6BRc>

American Historical Association on 1776 Commission, [https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-condemning-report-of-advisory-1776-commission-\(january-2021\)](https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-condemning-report-of-advisory-1776-commission-(january-2021))

Eames, Christopher, February 15, 2019, “Does the Serpentine Symbol of Healing Have a Biblical Origin?” <https://watchjerusalem.co.il/540-does-the-serpentine-symbol-of-healing-have-a-biblical-origin>

## **SESSION 5**

### **Video #5 God says, “forgiven.” We ask, “Really?”**

Based on Jeremiah 31:31-34

Watch the Entire Video Here: <https://youtu.be/LHVqQZcxvfA>

### **Lesson Summary**

Jeremiah was a priest called to be a prophet for Israel. He has some harsh words to say to the people of Israel, likening their sins and idol worship to committing adultery in their relationship to G-d. Jeremiah sent many warnings about why they needed to repent, calling out their unjust treatment of women, children and immigrants. The people do not listen to Jeremiah and are ultimately overthrown by the Babylonians. This particular section of Jeremiah has been known as the “Little Book of Consolation”, or, “Jeremiah’s Book of Comfort.” It is a hopeful prayer in the middle of censure and destruction. The speaker will help us understand where we can see strands of hope and truth and a new covenant with G-d in our country today, similar to what Jeremiah envisioned for the people of Israel.

### **Our Speaker**

The speaker for this fifth video is the Rev. Tamika Jancewicz, Associate Pastor at First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ellicott City, Maryland. ([firstlutheranec.org](http://firstlutheranec.org))

### **Suggested opening prayer**

*Dear God, In our efforts to dismantle racism, we understand that we struggle not merely against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities – those institutions and systems that keep racism alive by perpetuating the lie that some members of the family are inferior and others superior.*

*Create in us a new mind and heart that will enable us to see brothers and sisters in the faces of those divided by racial categories.*

*Give us the grace and strength to rid ourselves of racial stereotypes that oppress some of us while providing entitlements to others.*

*Help us to create a church and a nation that embraces the hopes and fears of oppressed people of color where we live, as well as those around the world.*

*Heal your family God, and make us one with you, in union with our brother Jesus, and empowered by your Holy Spirit.*

(from Pax Christi [Social Justice Resource Center » Racism Prayers](#) )

**Questions suggested by our speaker, the Rev. Jancewicz**

- 5a. What then does this mean for you?
- 5b. How have you found yourself in bondage to shame or guilt, or even what others have placed on you that wasn't even yours?
- 5c. What has been engraved on your heart? When you hear of G-d's forgiveness and love, do you believe it to be true, or is there a part of you that hears judgement instead?

**Suggested closing prayer**

*God, You are the source of human dignity, and it is in your image that we are created. Pour out on us the spirit of love and compassion.*

*Enable us to reverence each person, to reach out to anyone in need,  
to value and appreciate those who differ from us,  
to share the resources of our nation,  
to receive the gifts offered to us  
by people from other cultures.*

*Grant that we may always promote  
the justice and acceptance  
that ensures lasting peace and racial harmony.  
Help us to remember that we are one world and one family.  
Amen.*

(from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council [Social Justice Resource Center » Racism Prayers](#) )

**Suggested Websites and Readings:**

Overview of Jeremiah Bible Project <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSK36cHbrk0>

The Rev. Dr. Wil(dna) Gafney <https://www.wilgafney.com/>