

Hope Church Youth Retreat
Cran Hill ~ January 16-18, 2018

Youth: Ages 6th-12th grade

Retreat Preparation:

Pastors BC, JR and I met in November 2017 to brainstorm ideas for the retreat. It has been our observation in working with Hope Church youth over a number of years that despite being in a Hope Church setting in which substitutionary atonement theology is seldom the focus, that the youth will often use such language when asked to make statements of faith: i.e. “Jesus died on the cross to save me from my sins.” At the same time, when asked what questions they have about faith, youth at times express curiosity or even confusion over the death of Jesus on the cross (such as: “why did Jesus have to die?” and “did God really have to make Jesus die for sins?”), indicating a dissonance about how this fits into their sense of who God is and even of what being a Christian is about. As pastors, we have discussed for some time what strategies we could develop and implement to provide an alternative non-penal narrative of salvation for our youth. We believe that if we can provide a more life-giving atonement theology, then this paradigm could be “sticky” (the creative terminology found by Pastor J!) for our youth in a way that they could carry with them for a life of faith that connects with God and self and neighbor in life-giving ways. It is that background and intention that we brought to this discussion for a youth retreat focused on ways to present and explore a Girard/Alison-friendly paradigm of atonement theology. The intention is to do this in a way that is evocative and invitational, not seeking to impose a “right” way of believing (or to shame a “wrong” way) but rather to creatively explore what resonances emerge from the youth when such a paradigm is offered.

The initial aspects of our discussion clarified that this was not a setting in which to provide systematic content for youth to learn. Not only would this unlikely be ineffective, since we cannot assume that the youth have motivation or investment in learning something which they have not asked for (and will not be graded on!), but also it is important that the structure of the retreat both reflect the spirit of the Girard/Alison atonement paradigm and engage the youth with care. As to the spirit of the paradigm, the focus is not on a systematic and linear formula to learn, but rather an “undergoing” of the “irruption” (language of Alison) of God’s freedom and life into human brokenness. As to engaging the youth with care, it was very important to us that there be no sense of trying to call out or shame any youth for having an “incorrect” view that would then be corrected, but rather to design an experience in which there is opportunity for youth both to have their ideas heard and for them to creatively explore ideas that we believe are meaningful for them to engage with. And along with all of that, this retreat has a long tradition of being fun! – so our goal is for the study component of the retreat to be substantive while done with some playfulness and creativity.

As we brainstormed this admittedly challenging goal for content, we came upon the idea of using popular music as a centerpiece for content. This may seem a stretch for some 40-50-something pastors to pull off with youth, but we felt this was not an effort to pander to the youth by artificially trying to be cool, but rather a unique way to introduce

content and provoke discussion. It is an approach that fits the informal and fun vibe of the retreat, and on a deeper level it also reflects a theology which values narrative and creativity in understanding both the saving grace of God and the life of faith.

In brainstorming on this approach, I shared that I have for quite a while been enamored with the song “Meant to Live” by Switchfoot, hearing it as an excellent expression of Girard/Alison theology. And as we talked, we came up with two additional songs to focus on: “Born This Way” by Lady GaGa and “Blessings” by Chance the Rapper. Each of these songs presents a worldview which combines the brokenness of humanity with the possibilities for humanity, and each both implicitly and explicitly engages God and spirituality. Most importantly, the use of these songs is an assertion that there are the tones of Girard/Alison theology to be heard in them and that these songs can provide a unique way of bringing youth into creative engagement with this narrative for atonement theology.

Once we settled on using music as a focal point, the idea developed to have the youth listen in the lyrics and music for what was being expressed about the human condition, about God and God’s relationship to the world, and about meaning in life. Along with this, the youth will be asked to explore scripture passages which we believe will resonate well with the themes of these songs and which are passages which touch on the heart of an irruptive atonement theology.

Friday Evening ~ Introductory Session

Approximately ½ hour

Youth are gathered in a single group, with a posterpad and markers available

Intro:

‘This weekend we want to explore together what you could call the basics of the Christian faith.

We’ll have a chance to think about what you believe, and hear what others believe, and to think about some things about our faith in God in new ways.

So to start things off we want to give a scenario for you: imagine that someone has never heard of Christianity before and wants to know what it is about - in one sentence! And to do that, you could think about things like this:

- What are some of the ways you have heard people give a one sentence summary of the basics of Christianity (whether or not you agree)?
- Are there ways you sometimes hear Christianity described that you have a problem with?
- Have you ever heard a summary of Christianity that you thought was really good?
- How would you describe Christianity in a sentence?!

We’re going to have you brainstorm some ideas on your own and then with a small group, and then we’ll share some of our thoughts together.’

Youth divide into small groups and each receive a worksheet (below) to jot down some thoughts;

youth have some time to write down individual ideas and then share with the small group;

small group leaders collect ideas and appoint a youth to report those ideas back to the group;

leader records all of the ideas on posterpad sheets and discusses with the group if there are any themes to notice with the responses.

That’s it!

FRIDAY EVENING BRAINSTORMING

Imagine that someone has never heard of Christianity before and wants to know what it is about:

what are some of the various ways you have heard people describe Christianity (whether or not you agree)?

Are there ways you sometimes hear Christianity described that you have a problem with?

Have you ever heard a summary of Christianity that you thought was really good?

What kind of answer would you give? – 1 sentence:

Saturday Morning ~ 1st Session

Youth are gathered in a single group, with a posterpad and markers available

Intro:

‘Last night we got ourselves thinking about how people summarize Christianity, and you had a chance to give a summary of Christianity for yourself *(some of the collected responses could be reviewed)*.

While that’s all bubbling around in our heads a bit, today we’d like to put those ideas in the background and take some time to develop our own way of describing Christianity.

And one of the main ways we’d like to do that is not to talk about faith as a list of beliefs but much more as a story – about what we feel as much as we think – maybe as a poem - or even as a song! So here’s something to listen to’: *distribute the lyrics sheet (below) and listen to “Meant to Live”;*

That’s a song, and then we’d like to put a bible story alongside that song, so follow along with this story from Luke 15 – it’s a parable that Jesus tells.

Read Luke 15 together (below)

That’s our material for you to reflect on this morning, so we’re going to divide into small groups to see what this song and story says about people and life and God, and then we’ll come back together to share some ideas.’

SWITCHFOOT "Meant To Live"

Fumbling his confidence
 And wondering why the world has passed
 him by
 Hoping that he's bent for more than
 arguments
 And failed attempts to fly, fly

We were meant to live for so much more
 Have we lost ourselves?
 Somewhere we live inside
 Somewhere we live inside
 We were meant to live for so much more
 Have we lost ourselves?
 Somewhere we live inside

Dreaming about Providence
 And whether mice or men have second tries
 Maybe we've been livin' with our eyes half
 open
 Maybe we're bent and broken, broken

We want more than this world's got to offer
 We want more than this world's got to offer
 We want more than the wars of our fathers
 And everything inside screams for second
 life, yeah

We were meant to live for so much more
 Have we lost ourselves?
 We were meant to live for so much more
 Have we lost ourselves?
 We were meant to live for so much more
 Have we lost ourselves?
 We were meant to live
 We were meant to live

Luke 15 ~The Story of the Lost Son *from The Message*

Jesus said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’

“So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

“That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ He got right up and went home to his father.

“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’

“But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

WONDERING ABOUT “MEANT TO LIVE”

What does this song say about what’s wrong with life and wrong with the world?

How does this song describe people?

What’s the mood of this song? How does it make you feel?

What is there in this song that is hopeful about life and about the world?

Where can you see God present in this song?

WONDERING ABOUT LUKE 15

In this story, does the father forgive the lost son? (trick question! 😊)

What *does* the father do?

Use this story to express an understanding of what God is like...what is God like?!

What connections can you make between this story and the Switchfoot song?

If you used this story to summarize what is at the heart of Christian faith, then how would you express what that faith is?

Saturday Early Afternoon ~ 2nd Session

Youth are gathered in a single group, with a posterpad and markers available

Intro:

Time for song #2! – any guesses what it is?! We're taking some time to listen to ideas about faith in a more story-like, and this is another song that has some things to offer us about what life and faith is about, so listen for what seems important to you. It's from Lady Gaga!: *distribute the lyrics sheet (below) and listen to "Born This Way"*

We're going to put this song together with a story about Jesus and a woman who he talks to at a well. Some of you may know this story and others not, but what's important to know is that in the time of Jesus it was frowned upon for men to talk with women AND there was hatred between people who were Jews and people who were Samaritans.

Read story from John 4 - below

Let's discuss in small groups what this song says and what this story about Jesus & the woman says about people and life and God.

BORN THIS WAY ! Lady Gaga

It doesn't matter if you love him,
 or capital H-I-M
 Just put your paws up 'cause you were born this
 way, baby
 My mama told me when I was young
 We are all born superstars
 She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on
 In the glass of her boudoir
 "There's nothing wrong with loving who you
 are"
 She said, "'Cause he made you perfect, babe"
 "So hold your head up girl and you'll go far,
 Listen to me when I say"
 I'm beautiful in my way
 'Cause God makes no mistakes
 I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way
 Don't hide yourself in regret
 Just love yourself and you're set
 I'm on the right track, baby
 I was born this way (Born this way)

Oh there ain't no other way
 Baby I was born this way
 Baby I was born this way
 Oh there ain't no other way
 Baby I was born this way
 Right track baby I was born this way
 Don't be a drag, just be a queen
 Don't be a drag, just be a queen
 Don't be a drag, just be a queen
 Don't be don't be don't be
 Give yourself prudence
 And love your friends
 So we can rejoice your truth
 In the religion of the insecure
 I must be myself, respect my youth
 A different lover is not a sin
 Believe capital H-I-M (hey hey hey)
 I love my life I love this record and
 Mi amore vole fe, yah
 I'm beautiful in my way
 'Cause God makes no mistakes
 I'm on the right track, baby
 I was born this way
 Don't hide yourself in regret
 Just love yourself and you're set

I'm on the right track, baby
 I was born this way

Oh there ain't no other way
 Baby I was born this way
 Baby I was born this way
 Oh there ain't no other way
 Baby I was born this way
 Right track, baby I was born this way
 Don't be a drag, just be a queen
 Whether you're broke or evergreen
 You're black, white, beige, chola descent
 You're Lebanese, you're Orient
 Whether life's disabilities
 Left you outcast, bullied, or teased
 Rejoice and love yourself today
 'Cause baby you were born this way
 No matter gay, straight, or bi
 Lesbian, transgendered life
 I'm on the right track baby
 I was born to survive
 No matter black, white or beige
 Chola or orient made
 I'm on the right track baby
 I was born to be brave
 I'm beautiful in my way
 'Cause God makes no mistakes
 I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way
 Don't hide yourself in regret
 Just love yourself and you're set
 I'm on the right track, baby
 I was born this way yeah
 Oh there ain't no other way
 Baby I was born this way
 Baby I was born this way (Born this way)
 Oh there ain't no other way
 Baby I was born this way
 Right track, baby I was born this way
 I was born this way hey
 I was born this way hey
 I'm on the right track baby
 I was born this way hey
 I was born this way hey
 I was born this way hey
 I'm on the right track baby
 I was born this way hey

Same D.N.A. but born this way
Same D.N.A. but born this way

John 4 ~ The Woman at the Well *from The Message*

Jesus was journeying back home and had to pass through Samaria. Worn out by the trip, sat down at the well. It was noon.

A woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water. Jesus said, “Would you give me a drink of water?” (His disciples had gone to the village to buy food for lunch.)

The Samaritan woman, taken aback, asked, “How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” (Jews in those days wouldn’t be caught dead talking to Samaritans.)

Jesus answered, “If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water.”

The woman said, “Sir, you don’t even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So how are you going to get this ‘living water’? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?”

Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.”

The woman said, “Sir, give me this water so I won’t ever get thirsty, won’t ever have to come back to this well again!”

“It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before God. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

WONDERING ABOUT “BORN THIS WAY”

What’s the mood of this song? – how do you feel when you listen to it?

How does this song look at life? What challenges does it describe?

What is there in this song that is hopeful about life and about the world?

How does this song talk about God? about faith?

WONDERING ABOUT JOHN 4

Jesus was a Jew and a man; the woman was a Samaritan and a woman. What would be the expectation for how Jesus would treat the Samaritan woman?

How does Jesus treat her?

What does Jesus say about her? (trick question 😊)

What does Jesus offer to her?

Make some comparisons to “Born This Way”:

- how does Lady Gaga sound like Jesus (or vice versa!)?
- according to both Lady Gaga and Jesus, what is God most interested in?

Jesus talks about the “generosity of God”...discuss amongst yourselves!

Saturday Late Afternoon ~ 3rd Session

Youth are gathered in a single group, with a posterpad and markers available

Intro:

Time for song #3! - We've heard a couple of songs that help us to look at faith in some interesting ways, and we've heard some things from the Bible that make some connections with those themes about faith - and this time we're going to use a rap song! I cannot claim to have known this song – it was Pastor B that was cool enough to think of this one – but I do like this song. Perhaps you've heard of Chance the Rapper, and he is getting a lot of attention now as someone putting some interesting themes into very good music. So here's something to listen to from him: *distribute the lyrics sheet (below) and listen to "Blessings"~*

Along with this song, our final Bible passage is some pretty well-known words from Jesus that are often called the Beatitudes – which means blessings:

Read Matthew 5 (below)

BLESSINGS ~ Chance the Rapper

I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him 'til I'm gone
 I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him 'til I'm gone
 When the praises go up, the blessings come
 down

It seems like blessings keep falling in my lap
 It seems like blessings keep falling in my lap

I don't make songs for free, I make 'em for
 freedom
 Don't believe in kings, believe in the Kingdom
 Chisel me into stone, prayer whistle me into
 song air
 Dying laughing with Krillin saying something
 'bout blonde hair
 Jesus' black life ain't matter, I know I talked to
 his daddy
 Said you the man of the house now, look out for
 your family
 He has ordered my steps, gave me a sword with
 a crest
 And gave Donnie a trumpet in case I get
 shortness of breath

I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him 'til I'm gone
 Don't be mad
 I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him 'til I'm gone
 When the praises go up (Good God)
 The blessings come down Good God
 When the praises go up (Good God) the
 blessings come down
 (the blessings come down)
 When the praises go up, the blessings come
 down
 (It seems like blessings keep falling in my lap)
 The blessings come down
 When the praises go up, the blessings come
 down (Good God)

They booked the nicest hotels on the 59th floor
 With the big wide windows, with the suicide
 doors

Ain't no blood on my money, ain't no Twitter in
 Heaven

I know them drugs isn't close, ain't no visitin'
 Heaven

I know the difference in blessings and worldly
 possessions

Like my ex girl getting pregnant
 And her becoming my everything

I'm at war with my wrongs, I'm writing four
 different songs

I never forged it or forfeited, I'm a force to be
 reconciled

They want four minute songs

You need a four hour praise dance performed
 every morn

I'm feeling shortness of breath, so Nico grab you
 a horn

Hit Jericho with a buzzer beater to end a quarter
 Watch brick and mortar fall like dripping water,
 ugh!

(Good God)

I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him till I'm gone
 (Good God)

I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him till I'm gone
 When the praises go up, (Good God) the
 blessings come down

(The blessings come down)

When the praises go up, the blessings come
 down

(the blessings come down)

When the praises go up, the blessings come
 down

(Are you ready for your blessings?)

When the praises go up, the blessings come
 down

(Are you ready for your miracle?)

When the praises go up, the blessings come
 down

(Are you ready, are you ready?)

Matthew 5 - You're Blessed

When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Arriving at a quiet place, this is what he said:

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.

“Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

“Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

WONDERING ABOUT “BLESSINGS”

What is the mood of this song? – how do you feel when you listen to it?

How does this song look at life? What challenges does it describe?

What is there in this song that is hopeful about life and about the world?

How does this song talk about God? about faith?

WONDERING ABOUT MATTHEW 5

What kind of life does Jesus describe with what he says? – what is there that is difficult? good?

If you were listening to Jesus, what sort of idea would you have about what God is like?

What connections can you make between what Jesus says and the “Blessings” song?

If what Jesus says here was the core of what Christian faith is about, then how would you describe that faith?

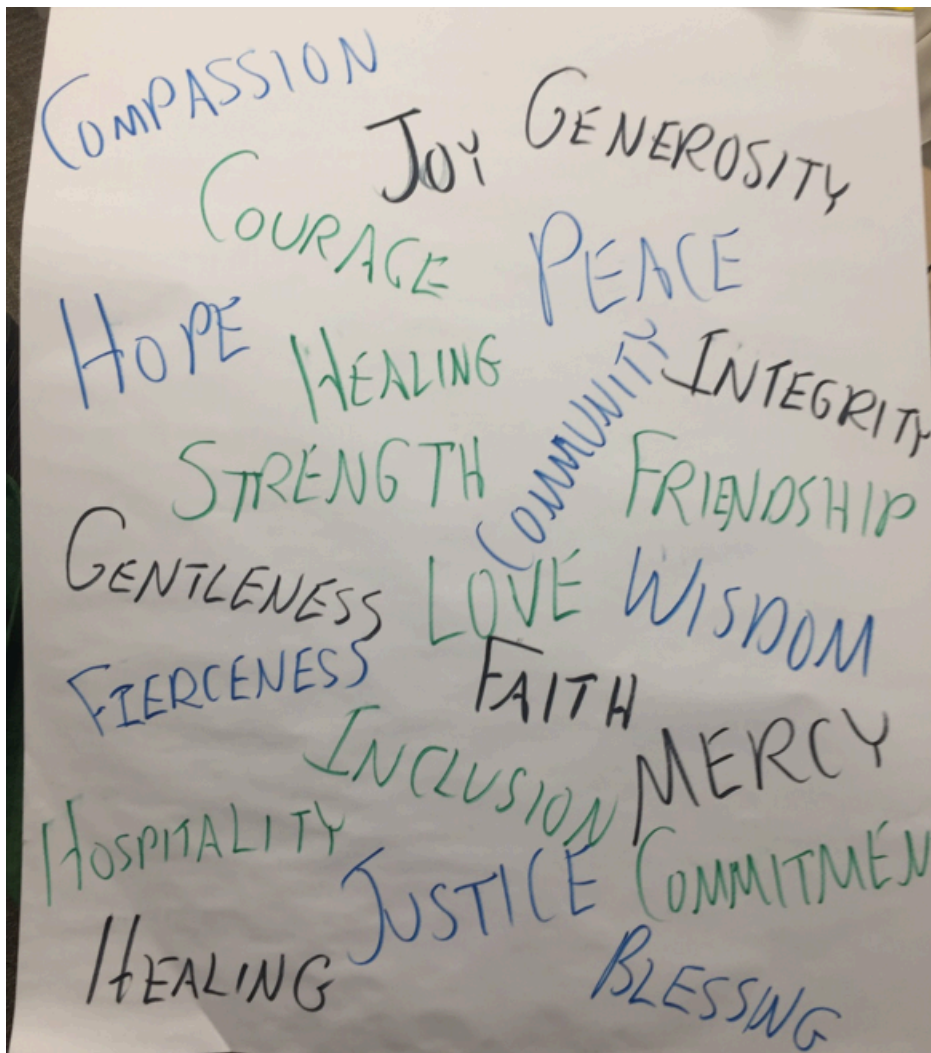
CONCLUSION ~ *led by Gordon Wiersma*

‘As we started things on Friday evening, we shared some ideas on how to summarize the basics of Christian faith – ideas we’ve heard from others and ideas that we each have. Something I’ve been thinking about a lot over the past years, and that Pastor B and Pastor J and I have talked about, is that it seems like we really need a different way to talk about the Christian faith than the kind of summary that we often hear. Because what too often seems to be the case is that the way Christianity is described is that the main thing for us to know about God is that God wants to punish us for our sins, and that the main thing to know about Jesus is that he died on the cross to take our punishment.

But that way of describing God and life seems to leave a lot of things out of what I see in real life. In my life, I certainly do have some sin, some bad things, but I also have a lot of good that is a part of me that I try to do; and in my life I also have some painful things and difficult things in my life; and there are also a lot of people who deal with hard things through no fault of their own; and besides that there’s a creation out there which is about more than just people. Isn’t that true about life? - it’s not just sin out there, it’s suffering too; and it’s also people with lots of good and compassion; and it’s a whole big creation out there too.

So does God have anything to do with all of those things?

That’s why we thought it would be interesting to listen to the songs and look at the scripture passages that we have this weekend. Because if we put this all together, I think it gives us some interesting -could I even say exciting?! – ideas about our lives and about God and about faith. I think what it says about us is that we’re caught in a lot of things that break our lives down, but that what we are created for and really want inside ourselves is something much more. And what I hear about God, is that what God cares about is...us! and this world! God’s concern isn’t getting paid for sins, God cares about this world that God has created and everything in it. What God cares about is people, and creatures too, having a life that is good and fruitful, connected to God and to each other in good ways. And because God loves this world, God does something about the brokenness of the world – God comes as Jesus. And the way we’ve heard that described today is with ideas like ‘generosity’ and ‘blessing’ and ‘welcome’ and ‘life’. So, that’s the words I think we should use to describe Jesus and to describe faith. In fact we could put together a whole ‘word portrait’ of the life of Jesus – words that touch on the realities of our lives and world:



It turns out the story of Jesus is about way more than his death, and it seems not about God being concerned with punishment at all. So what if we talked about the story of Jesus this way?:

- Jesus lived in this world to show the gifts of compassion and courage, generosity and acceptance, healing and justice. The life of Jesus is a story about how God created us all to live.
- When you live that way in this world, it is a threat to people who are in control, because the ways of death are in control – in politics, in economics, even in religion. Jesus was a threat to the people in charge, and so Jesus was crucified. But rather than running from death, Jesus trusted God even then too; and so for anyone who faces death and threats and suffering, Jesus showed that God is with us there too.

- And then there was life again: Jesus was alive again. Even when Jesus was crucified by the powers of death, life had the final word. This isn't a world where we are on our own, the God of life is present, and in the resurrection of Jesus there is the amazing truth that life is stronger even than death.

And when that's the story of Jesus, then all of these songs and scriptures we've listened to make sense. Because the story is that everything in life – all that is broken and all that is good, all that is suffering and all that is beautiful – God is present in all of it. And when the God of life is present, then we can have the faith to have blessing and generosity and life and welcome be at the center of who we are. So I'm not sure exactly how to summarize the story – and it's really meant to be a lot more than just one line anyway – but how about something like this:

Jesus is the blessing of God for the whole world.

Let's start using that as the story we tell to ourselves and others, and see how it goes. It says God is about blessing – it says you are blessed – it says your life is to be a blessing. That's a pretty good story – and it's a story we're all a part of.