

We believe in the God who brought Israel out of bondage in Egypt.

The foundational act of God's covenant with Israel – the act by which the identity of God is shown forth and to which Israel returns, over and over, in their naming of God – is the release of captives. The Exodus from Egypt defines the nation of Israel and the nature of God. The Exodus is the story of setting free those who are enslaved, but it applies equally to prisoners. God is the one who brings those in prison out of bondage into the Promised Land of the beloved community.

We believe that Jesus came to proclaim release to the prisoners and the captives.

In the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, he begins by reading a prophecy from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." We believe that Jesus' promise of freedom for prisoners does not apply only to "spiritual" imprisonment to sin but to every structure that holds captive the children of God – including the actual prisons and structures of supervision and confinement built into our criminal justice system. We believe that Jesus' proclamation of freedom for prisoners applies to those who have committed crimes as well as to those who are innocent but held captive.

We believe that everyone has great capacity for good and great capacity for evil.

Prisons are built on the myth of incapacitation – that if we can exile the "bad people" out of our communities we will be safe. But as Christians we believe that each of us is created in the image of God but also that each of us is subject to the power of sin. There are no "good people" and "bad people" – we are each "entirely sinner and entirely saint." That means our justice can't be based on separating out the "bad people" but instead on building stronger networks of safety to prevent violence and restorative justice procedures to make amends when harm has been done. God will always go after the "lost sheep" (Matthew 18:12-14), so we should work for justice within communities, not by allowing people to be banished from them.

We believe that Jesus died for our sins on the cross, and by doing so brought an end to punishment.

"By his blood, he reconciled us. By his wounds, we are healed." We believe that Jesus bore the punishment of every sin in our place on the cross and thus reconciled us to God. As a direct consequence of this, the need for punishment and retribution ended when Jesus died. He bore it away by his death. Because of the cross, we are liberated to imagine justice that is free of retribution. We understand justice to be about accountability, restitution, and restoration without punishment. There is no more punishment, because "Jesus paid it all."

We believe that Christ descended into Hell and rose again to defeat death and Hell.

Jesus' descent into Hell upon his death, to overcome death and Hell and destroy it, is the paradigm for prison abolition. By entering Hell, Jesus abolished it, setting free those who were imprisoned by death or sin. Many Orthodox icons of the Resurrection show Jesus taking Adam and Eve by the hand and setting them free. Jesus broke the gates of Hell to release all those who were held captive.

We believe in the forgiveness of sins.

Our justice must always be aimed at forgiveness and reconciliation. The church has the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18). It is our job to build structures of justice aimed at pursuing reconciliation and restoration of right relationship. Prisons are the opposite of this kind of justice. Their retributive aims conflict with the goal of rehabilitation, and imprisoning offenders does not meet the needs of victims. Ultimately, we believe that justice comes through restoration and making amends in community.

We believe that God is reconciling all things and making all things new.

The church is the first witness to God's re-creation of the world. The new creation begun with Jesus' victory over sin and death will not be complete until all things in heaven and on earth are reconciled to God. Prison abolition is the banishment of those who have done harm. But ultimately, we know that even those who have done great harm will be restored to God's love. Abolishing prisons is a concrete witness of our hope, as Christians, that all will eventually be restored through "the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting." It is making real on earth now what we eventually hope for in the New Jerusalem at Christ's return.