



100th Anniversary of the Council on Christian Unity

Worship Resources

Prepared by Ron Allen and Linda McKiernan-Allen

1. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Sunday, January 17, 2010

These worship resources can be used on the Sunday before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day or at a special Martin Luther King, Jr. Day service. The materials develop two related themes: One is God's call to the church to become one, incorporating those of different race, ethnicity, gender, and other categories of human community. (In current Disciples' language, God wants the church to become anti-racist and pro-reconciling.) Such a church is a model of the quality of community God seeks for all peoples. The second theme is the vocation of the church to call the wider world to become anti-racist and pro-reconciling. God does not intend for church and world to manifest institutional sameness, but to become multicultural and inclusive communities marked by love, peace, justice, respect and mutual support.

Many of the materials written in a responsive format (Leader/People) could be adapted to be spoken by a single voice.

Call to Worship*

Leader: God creates people from every race, tribe, tongue and ethnic community.

God calls us to live in community marked by love, peace, justice, respect, and mutual support.

People: Yet we draw lines between peoples.

We raise barriers.

We treat one another with prejudice.

Leader: In every generation, God raises up prophets,
speaking forth God's desire

for all people to live together in love.

People: Today we come together to give thanks to God for Martin Luther King, Jr.

Today we live into the dream of all people living together in beloved community.

*[All materials marked with an * were developed by Ron Allen and Linda McKiernan-Allen]*

Opening Prayer*

Reconciling God,

we rejoice in the wonderful diversity of the human community in this congregation
and in the world.

We thank you that every person, every race, every culture is beautiful.

We rejoice because each one brings gifts to the great human circle.

During this hour of worship, help us feel safe enough with you and with one another

to confess our brokenness.
We acknowledge the ways in which we feel superior.
We are sorry for the times we behave destructively
toward people of other races, ethnic groups, and cultures.
Through sacred song and story, help us experience your renewing love for us and for all.
Stir up courage within us to join in the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.
that we might be immersed in your justice rolling down like waters and
your righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
We pray in the name Jesus, who calls us to love one another even as he loves us. AMEN

Responsive Reading

Leader: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that."

People: "Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

L: Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality. Hate destroys [a person's] sense of values and objectivity. It causes [a person] to describe the beautiful as ugly and the ugly as beautiful."

P: As humans our core can be corroded. We sometimes confuse "the true with the false and the false with the true."

L: Only love can light our way. "In every age and every generation, people have envisioned a promised land."

P: "The road ahead will not always be smooth. Our dreams will sometimes be shattered and our ethereal hopes blasted."

L: But the "ultimate measure of [a person] is not where [they] stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where [they] stand at times of challenge and controversy."

P: So we dream together: experiencing each others' hardships, weaknesses, and judgments.

L: We dream together.

P: Dreaming and striving for the world promised by God.

Affirmation

I refuse to believe that we are unable to influence the events around us. I refuse to believe we are bound by racism, war, and injustice. I believe those around me are my brother and my sister. I believe in dignity every day and that our brokenness can be healed. I believe we can overcome oppression and violence, without resorting to it. This means I seek to reject revenge and retaliation. I remember, "Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can."

[The Responsive Reading and the Affirmation draw from the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. and were drafted by Abigail Reichard, a student at Christian Theological Seminary.]

Invitation to the Table*

When Jesus ate with his disciples the last time in the upper room, he created the loaf and cup as a meal that seals a covenant among people mutually committed to one another. By eating the last supper with the disciples, Jesus committed himself to them. As the risen Jesus is present at this

table now, he commits himself to us. When we partake of these elements, we commit ourselves to be in covenant and community with Jesus and with all who gather at this Table.

In the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., we remember the many different peoples who break bread together—communities of African origin, Asian origin, European origin, Hispanic origin, Native American origin. By eating the bread and drinking the cup, we commit ourselves not only to Christ, but to all who take these elements in their hand. In so doing, we commit our heart, mind, soul, and strength to work for beloved community.

Notes for Preaching (based on the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary for January 17)*

John 2:1-11. For the Gospel of John, existence takes place in two spheres: the “world” and heaven. The “world” is life apart from the knowledge of God, an existence marked by separation among peoples, hate, falsehood, dimness, scarcity, violence, and death. In the Johannine sense, racism is part of the “world.”

By contrast, heaven is a sphere characterized by the presence of God, community, love, truth, brightness, abundance, peace, and life. God sent Jesus into the world to reveal the sphere of heaven. Those who believe in Jesus experience have a limited experience of heaven in the present even as they wait for the moment when they will be gathered into the full presence of God. In the Johannine sense, a community of love is a sphere empowered by heaven.

John 2:1-11 is the first of seven signs in the Fourth Gospel. These signs have two purposes. (1) They demonstrate that Jesus does indeed make it possible for people to experience a sphere of heaven while continuing to live in the “world. (2) The signs embody the quality of the life of heaven.

John 2:1-11 is set at a wedding feast. Jewish literature in antiquity often used wedding imagery to speak figuratively of God’s eschatological purposes. As readers, then, we hear this story as representative of God’s ultimate purposes.

John uses the wine running out as symbolic of the condition of the world: empty. With respect to issues of race, the preacher might explore how the wine has run out (so to speak) in relationships

However, Jesus takes ordinary water and turns it into something extraordinary, thus re-creating the community gathered at the wedding feast in Galilee. In a similar way, the presence of the risen Jesus in the church can transform racists into beloved community. We must offer Jesus the water of our life in the “world” (our racism) so that Jesus can turn it into the wine of beloved community.

The preacher can point to ways that God is at work to turn the empty stone jars of racism into the good wine of beloved community. The ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. was a sign similar to the signs of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel by both demonstrating that people can indeed live together in love and by embodying the way to develop communities of love.

Some scholars think that the wine in this story evokes the Sacred Meal. If so, then partaking of the loaf and the cup are an experience of the sphere of heaven in the midst of the world. Apropos of the invitation to communion (above) when we eat the bread and drink the cup, we commit ourselves to live out the values of the heavenly sphere even while we are still in the “world.”

1 Corinthians 12:1-11. The congregation in Corinth was bitterly divided. Some members possessed dramatic gifts of the Holy Spirit (such as speaking in tongues) and believed that these gifts made them superior to members who manifest less dramatic gifts (such as the utterance of wisdom). These dynamics are similar to the ways in which people from different races sometimes look at one another. People of European origin have looked upon (and often continue to look upon) people of other racial/ethnic communities and cultures with disdain. Going beyond the situation Corinth, Eurocentric communities combine this prejudice with social and economic power to oppress people of color.

In this passage, Paul reminds the Corinthians that, from the perspective of the Holy Spirit, the gifts all have the same value. All are necessary for the congregation to be the eschatological community that God wants the church to be. Hence, the Corinthians should renounce their feelings and behaviors of superiority, rejoice in the different gifts, and support one another in exercising the variety of gifts. In a similar way, the preacher can encourage the congregation to repent of its prejudice (and racism, in the case of congregations of European origin). The sermon can further help the congregation recognize and rejoice in the gifts in peoples of other races, ethnicities, and cultures.

Isaiah 62:1-5. Isaiah 56-66 was written after the leaders of Israel had returned from exile in Babylon. Their return had been a disappointment in that the land and cities were in poor condition and the population was discouraged. The land of Israel felt “Forsaken” and “Desolate.”

Isaiah 62:1-5 is part of an oracle of salvation in which the prophet assures the community that God will restore the fortunes of the community. This restoration will not only benefit the Israelites but will serve as a signal to the other peoples of the world of the regenerating power of the God of Israel (Is. 62:2). In 62:10, the prophet makes it clear that the people have role to play in the restoration: They must “go through the gates” and “prepare the way for the people.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is a good occasion for the preacher to help the congregation remember that community in the United States is analogous to that in Israel at the time Isaiah wrote: disappointing, broken, even fractious, especially along the lines of race, ethnicity, and culture. Indeed, many people of African, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American origin feel forsaken and desolate. The text reminds us that God is at work to restore the community.

In the spirit of Isaiah 62:10, the preacher can help the congregation see that they must “go through the gates.” In the case racism, this means that Eurocentric people must cooperate with the restoring work of God through anti-racism and pro-reconciling attitudes and behaviors.

The creation of a beloved community in the United States would be a powerful witness to other nations.

Benediction

As the Savior so taught...

Go now and overcome.

Overcome racial hatred with love and understanding.

Overcome sexism with mutual honor and respect.

Overcome social inequities with fair and equal educational and employment opportunities.

Overcome mean-heartedness with a kind word or good deed.

Overcome war, poverty, hunger, and suffering throughout our urban streets and lands abroad,
by sharing the love of Christ Jesus with your neighbor.

Go now and overcome!

(adapted from [The African American Lectionary.org](http://TheAfricanAmericanLectionary.org))

Possible Hymns and Songs

(numbers in parentheses are from [Chalice Hymnal](#))

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” (631)

“Hail to the Lord’s Anointed” (140)

“Here I Am” (452) *(See introduction to this hymn below)*

“Precious Lord” (628) *(See the introduction to this hymn below)*

“We Shall Overcome” (630) *(following benediction)*

Introduction to “Here I am”

A child once dreamed the Voice was calling his name. . . ‘Samuel’;
Fishermen once heard the Voice when a young man bid them follow;
And still the Voice beckons today. . . can you hear?

Here I am. Send me.

Moses protested vehemently as the Voice spoke at the burning bush;
Mary stood amazed as the Voice proclaimed impending birth;
And still the Voice beckons today. . . can you hear?

Here I am. Send me.

Rosa Parks followed the Voice to the front of the bus;
Martin Luther King, Jr. heard the Voice as the bullet shattered;
And still the Voice beckons today. . . can you hear?

Here I am. Send me.

The Voice beckons from humble places. . .
in the tears of hungry children,
in the cries of the frail and frightened elderly,
in the pleas of those whose dreams have been too long deferred;
and still the Voice beckons today. . . can you hear?

Here I am. Send me.

A timid believer pauses to listen to the Voice;
A struggling church hears the Voice and turns;
and still the Voice beckons today. . .can you hear?

Here I am. Send me.

(The preceding material is from Katherine Hawker, www.liturgyoutside.net)

Introduction to “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.”

On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., flew to Memphis, Tennessee, in support of a strike for higher wages and better working conditions by black sanitary public works employees. That day he delivered his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech, in which he talked about threats to his life. He said:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

The next day, April 4, 1968, at 6:01 p.m., King was shot in the head while standing on the second floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, surrounded by friends and associates. As he lay dying, he spoke his last words to his friend and musician Ben Branch, who was to perform at the event King was scheduled to attend that night. King said, "Ben, make sure you play 'Take My Hand, Precious Lord' in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty" [Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) p.766].

"Precious Lord, Take My Hand" was written by Thomas A. Dorsey in 1932 following the death of his wife in childbirth and their baby shortly thereafter.

(For permission to reprint, see:

http://www.gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item_id=45892)

Writers: These materials were prepared by **Ron Allen** and **Linda McKiernan-Allen**.

Linda is Interim Minister of West Street Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Tipton, Indiana. She writes regularly for the *Journal of Worship Resources* and has edited several volumes of worship resources, including *Celebrating Covenant* (Chalice Press).

Ron teaches preaching and Gospels and Letters at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. One of his books—just published—is designed to help Sunday School classes, Bible study groups, and individuals explore the range of what Christians believe about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, and God's purposes in the world: *A Faith of Your Own*:

Naming What You Really Believe. In addition to being short and inexpensive, this volum includes questions for discussion at the end of each chapter.