



## 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Council on Christian Unity

### **Worship Resources**

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### **3. Transfiguration Sunday in connection African American History Month** **Sunday February 14, 2010**

#### **Resources included in this material:**

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#### **Focus for Today**

February is African American History month. The gospel reading for today in the Revised Common Lectionary is the transfiguration of Jesus (Luke 9:28-36). At first glance, a preacher might not think that African American History month and the transfiguration have a lot to do with one another. But when we ponder the purposes of the two emphases, they come together in a powerful way directly related to the calling of the Council on Christian Unity in the wider mission of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

African American History Month has several related foci. One is to honor the African roots of the African American community. This month raises the awareness of peoples of all cultures to the contributions that African Americans have made and continue to make to the United States and to the wider world. It particularly lifts up how the African American community has struggled (and continues to struggle) for justice. African American history month encourages peoples of all cultures to live together in mutual respect, love, peace, and justice. It calls attention to racial injustices perpetrated by people and institutions of European origin in the past and offers the Eurocentric community opportunities to repent and to join the struggle for justice. It celebrates such growth as our nation has made towards becoming an anti-racist/pro-reconciling society. African American History month invites us to take a sober and unrelenting look at the ways in which racism continues to do violence to people of color and to eat away the soul of the national community.

As noted in more detail below, the transfiguration of Jesus is a realization of the Realm of God in the present. The transfiguration signals the partial presence of the Realm of God in the midst of the struggles of the broken old age. A purpose of the story of the transfiguration is to encourage Jesus' disciples to continue their witness even when confronted by misunderstanding, opposition, and violence.

At the General Assembly in Indianapolis in 2009, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) adopted as its mission becoming a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. A key part of becoming a movement for wholeness is for the denomination to become "anti-racist" and "pro-reconciling", two key themes in African American History month.

Within this wider denominational mission, the work of the Council on Christian Unity includes helping the broken parts of the church come together so that the church as healed community can itself be a sign of the wholeness that God seeks among all peoples. At its best, with respect to issues of race and ethnicity, the church as a community should both be transfigured and should call the world to transfiguration. That is, in the midst of the fragmentation that racism creates in the present, the church should itself *be* an antiracist/pro-reconciling community (manifesting the Realm of God), and it should *call the world* towards similar qualities of life together.

The anti-racism/pro-reconciliation emphasis of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) views racism as a combination of prejudice against people of color and the power to oppress people of color. By this definition, only people of European origin can be racist. In African American History month, Eurocentric people should repent of the sin of Eurocentric privilege and should seek ways to join the struggle for an anti-racist pro-reconciling social world.

The struggle towards becoming an anti-racist/pro-reconciling church and world can be difficult. The story of the transfiguration both encourages those in the struggle and embodies the goal of the struggle. In transfigured community, all peoples live together in the Realm.

[Material marked by an asterisk \* was prepared by Linda McKiernan-Allen and Ron Allen]

### **Call to Worship\***

Leader: We come to this service of worship remembering Jesus and the disciples, climbing the mountain long ago.

People: We struggle to understand God's purposes and to live together as God wants.

Leader: In this African American History month, we confess that relationships among our country's racial and ethnic communities are anything but transfigured.

People: Communities of African origin and European background are often fragmented, tense, even violent.

Leader: We seek to see the One who was transfigured.

People: We seek to be transfigured ourselves.

### **Opening Prayer\***

O God of all peoples, we give thanks for the glow of the transfigured Jesus all around us.  
In this hour, help us better understand Jesus's presence and leading.  
In this African American History month, help us allow the light of Jesus' transfiguration  
to illumine how we so often turn away from peoples of other races and ethnicities.  
We pray you will work through our ears as we listen to scripture and preaching,  
through our voices as we sing and pray, and  
through our hands as we eat the bread and drink of the cup,  
that we may come together in this service to experience transfiguration.  
Then by your mercy, sustain us through this hour and beyond,  
that in the days ahead we might fully witness,  
with our ears, our voices and our hands,  
to your will for love, peace, and justice among people of every race.

### **Significant Quote**

The basis of the anti-racism/pro-reconciliation emphasis of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is outlined in Joseph Barndt, *Understanding and Dismantling Racism: The Twenty-First Century Challenge to White America* (Fortress Press, 2007). African American History month is an excellent time to call this book to the attention of congregations made up largely of people of European origin.

Barndt notes that while racism has personal dimensions (e.g. bias, stereotyping, prejudice, bigotry, and hate), racism is not simply the prejudice of one individual about another race, but it involves collective or group behavior on the part of people of European origin towards the African American community and other people of color. It involves systemic power, institutional discrimination, oppression, segregation, economic inequality, political control, and, ultimately, Eurocentric superiority (p. 57). Racism, as defined by this movement, is Eurocentric racial prejudice against people of color combined by "the misuse of power by systems and institutions" to exploit and oppress people of color (p. 59). While racism once had an "iron fist" (represented by laws doing violence to people of color), racism now wears a "velvet glove" which is less obviously but even more violent (pp. 33-40).

This book is virtually one significant quote after another. Here is one that caught us by particular surprise. "Not only are we [the United States] a race-based nation, but from the very beginning, we intentionally defined ourselves as a white supremacist nation. The purpose of creating and maintaining racial categories [in the U.S.] was to make certain that the United States was intentionally designed with a racial hierarchy dominated by the [Eurocentric] race. Racism became part of our national fabric, first of all through the ideology and practice of white supremacy. The benefits of nationhood, the land, and all its resources, were clearly identified as existing solely for [Eurocentric] people. The constitution of the United States was written exclusively for [people of European origin] in the context of an explicit ideology of Eurocentric supremacy. Moreover, all of the systems and institutional structures that were put in place under the shadow of the constitution's wings were openly and explicitly designed for [Eurocentric] people" (p. 18).

African American History month helps the congregation focus on how it can join the movement to repent of this social vision and to begin to move towards become an anti-racist/pro-reconciling community.

### **Responsive Reading: Giving Thanks for African American Leaders\***

Voice 1: We celebrate African Americans whose leadership transfigures elements of our world.

Voice 2: Richard Allen, who would not tolerate segregation in the church. He founded the African American Episcopal Church so African Americans could worship in freedom and dignity.

Voice 3: Crispus Attucks, who shouted “Don’t be afraid” as he led patriots against the British in the war seeking to liberate the thirteen colonies, becoming the first African American to die in that cause.

People: Phyllis Wheatley, the first African American woman poet to gain international recognition.

Voice 1: Frederick Douglas, who escaped from slavery to become a powerful orator protesting slavery and calling for equality

People: Harriett Tubman, conductor on the underground railroad who risked her life leading hundreds of slaves to freedom

Voice 2: George Washington Carver, who taught soil improvement and diversification of crops, and who opened our eyes to the peanut, sweet potato, and soy bean.

People: A. Philip Randolph, who organized African American railroad porters to stand for dignity, fair wages and fair labor conditions.

Voice 3: Jackie Robinson, who integrated baseball. By opening the world of professional sports to people of all racial/ethnic communities, he began to open other worlds as well.

People: Duke Ellington, who filled the world with music

Voice 1: Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to the House of Representatives, who spoke tirelessly in behalf of the poor

Voice 2: James Earl Jones, whose resonant voice thunders, “deep calling to deep”.

Voice 3: Barbara Jordan, one of the first African American women from the south to be elected to Congress, whose resonant voice called us to justice.

People: Martin Luther King, Jr. who called people to live in beloved community, and whose “I Have a Dream” speech transfigured our way of thinking about race.

Voice 1: Oprah Winfrey, influential media figure who seeks to educate and inspire.

People: Barak Obama, whose election as President of the United States was a transfiguring moment in our national politics.

Voice 2: While we rejoice in such figures, we remember the struggle for a truly just, inclusive, multicultural community goes on.

Voice 3: We’re grateful for the ways our lives are being transfigured by these leaders.

We rejoice that, as God transfigured Jesus, “the Chosen”, on the mountain top, we might also be caught up in that glory, to listen and to live .

### **Responsive Concern and Confession**

Leader: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that”

People: “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love that can do that”

Singing: “We Shall Overcome” (Chalice Hymnal, 630), stanza 1.

Leader: “The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother’s keeper because we are our brother’s brother.”

People: Whether rich or poor, we are surrounded by our brothers and our sisters. “Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

Singing: “We Shall Overcome,” stanza 2.

Leader: “The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that all wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal.”

People: “We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.”

Singing: “We Shall Overcome,” stanza 3.

Leader: “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked, and dejected with a lost opportunity. The ‘tide in [human affairs]’ does not remain at the flood; it ebbs.”

People: So we dream together: experiencing each other’s hardships, weaknesses, and judgments, here and now.

Singing: “We Shall Overcome,” stanza 4.

Leader: Let us realize that as we struggle for justice and freedom, we have cosmic companionship. This is the long faith of the Hebraic-Christian tradition: that God is . . . another-loving God, forever working through history of the establishment of [God’s Realm].”

People: “Dreaming and striving for the world promised by God, we join together in heartfelt commitment, singing,”

Singing: “We Shall Overcome,” stanza 5.

[The Responsive Concern and Confession was compiled and created by Rufus Burrow Jr., Abigail Reichard and Shannon Walker, respectively professor and students at Christian Theological Seminary.]

### **Invitation to the Table\***

African American History Month reminds us of the struggle for justice for the African American community. This struggle began during slavery, came to particular national attention in the 1950s and 1960s, and continues today. For African Americans and for those in solidarity with that community, this struggle can be frustrating, wearying, and discouraging.

Yet, this sacred Table continues to sit in the center of the struggle. The elements of bread and cup remind us of Jesus, who had moments when he was frustrated, weary, and discouraged. The shadow of the cross loomed over him. The disciples could expect to suffer.

Yet on the mountain, God came and transfigured him. That shining moment gave him an experience of the future that lay beyond the cross. It gave him the courage to press ahead. And Luke told the story of the transfiguration to give the church a similar confidence.

This table is for us an extension of the Mount of Transfiguration. When we take the bread and the cup, God uses them to reveal the presence of Jesus and the presence of the Realm, with us, here and now. No matter how difficult the struggle for racial and ethnic justice in the present, the power of the Realm is already present and we experience it from moment to moment.

**Notes for Preaching (based on the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary for February 14, 2010)**

Luke 9:28-36

We discussed the background of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts in connection with Worship Materials No. 2 for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The heart of Luke's theology is that the history of the world is divided into two ages—the broken present age that will soon end and the coming Realm of God. Jesus is God's agent in bringing the Realm which is partially manifest now and will be fully manifest only after the Second Coming.

The immediate literary context is important to understanding the transfiguration. Prior to Luke 9:18, Jesus has announced that the Realm is coming, Jesus has been in conflict with some leaders who resist the coming of the Realm, but has not revealed that he will be crucified or that the disciples will suffer. In Luke 9:18-22, Jesus explains that some of the rulers of the present age will put him to death. For Luke, the death of Jesus is an act of desperation on the part of the leaders of the old age. By putting Jesus to death, they hope to end the possibility of the Realm coming, and, thereby, to maintain their death-grip within the old age.

In Luke 9:23-27, Luke explains that the disciples and the church will also suffer. This comes true in Acts when the church repeatedly encounters opposition. Its members are imprisoned and some are even killed.

Luke then immediately tells the story of the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). The fact that it takes place on a mountain is significant, as mountains in Jewish literature are often places of revelation. Peter, James and John are the core leaders of the apostles. For Luke, prayer is the opening of self and community to the presence of the Realm.

Jesus is transfigured. That is, God changes his body from the materials of the old age into the materials of the Realm. God gives Jesus the body that all people will have in the Realm. Paul describes this body fully in 1 Corinthians 15:35-57.

As Jesus is transfigured, God interprets the meaning of the scene and expands on its point. "This is my Son, my Chosen [or my Beloved]. Listen to him." God spoke the same first sentence at the immersion of Jesus, identifying Jesus as God's representative to bring in the Realm (Luke 3:21-22).

God adds the phrase "Listen to him" to underscore the importance of what Jesus has just said: Jesus will be killed and the disciples will suffer (Luke 9:22). The church in Luke's time was tempted to regard resistance to the Realm (and their suffering) as reason to give up their witness.

Luke assures them that their suffering is to be expected as the powers of the present age dig in to resist the Realm.

The point of this narrative? In the midst of the present struggles, God gives Jesus, the disciples, and the church a vision of the future --the full Realm. Luke intends for this vision to sustain the church when it faces difficulty as it witnesses to the coming of the Realm.

Racism is a bitter and violent element of the old age. In African American History month, we recall the savagery of racism in the past and the present. Racism is in league with the powers that sent Jesus to the cross and the powers that caused the disciples and the church to suffer.

Seeking to respond to the presence and possibilities of the Realm of God, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) aims to become an anti-racist/pro-reconciling movement. Indeed, we speak of ourselves as a “movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.” However, this effort evokes resistance not only from racism in the world at large but from racism within the church. This text is a pastoral word that we need to be prepared to suffer for witnessing to the Realm.

The preacher might use this transfiguration text in two ways. First, this story assures those in solidarity with the struggle against racism that the promise of the Realm is true. In the midst of the struggle, the Realm is present. The story serves as an encouragement to continue the struggle. Second, the preacher might use the story as a lens through which to identify moments of transfiguration in which the Realm comes to expression in the particular relationships of people of African and European origin (as well as within relationships of other racial and ethnic communities). At its core, we understand: racism disfigures. . .the Realm transfigures.

Exodus 34:29-35

We presume this story is assigned to Transfiguration Sunday because it describes an event that is similar to the transfiguration of Jesus. After the exodus, with the people still in the wilderness, Moses goes up Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. When he comes down the mountain his face glows with such brilliance that the eyes of the people cannot look upon it and his face has to be veiled. The glow, of course, is from being exposed to the immediate glory of God. Even if Moses did not see God's face, being close to God is enough to change Moses.

Strictly speaking, Moses was not transfigured in the same way as Jesus. Moses did not receive the body of the Realm. However, the glow on Moses's face did testify to the fact that Moses had been in God's presence.

At one level this story underscores the authority of Moses. The people can trust what he said. At another level, the story underscores the authority of Torah, the two tablets that Moses brought down from the mountain, God's instructions in how the community was to live so that all could be blessed. Torah came immediately from God.

An underlying conviction of covenant is that when some in the community are not blessed, the blessing of all is diminished. When the covenantal community denies blessing to some, then the community itself is on a path towards curse and destruction.

Racism violates the spirit of covenant. It denies blessing to African Americans and other people of color. Although it maintains the power of people of European origin, the presence of racism has already set in motion dynamics that will lead to the curse of Eurocentric culture.

When Moses came down the mountain, Aaron and others were afraid of him. Using homiletical license, the preacher might ponder how we today fear those who, like Moses, are charged with the purposes of God. Indeed, we sometimes fear the deepest implications of living together in covenant because covenant calls upon us to enter into solidarity and support with some people whom we may fear.

A message of this part of the text is, “Do not be afraid of those who, like Moses, have the message that leads to blessing.” This notion is especially applicable during African American History month. People of European origin sometimes fear African Americans and other people of color. Eurocentric people fear giving up racism because they fear what they would lose in the way of power and control in a non-racist society. This text reminds us that when Aaron and his companions welcomed Moses down from the mountain, life in covenant could begin in fullness.

### **Closing Prayer**

God who transfigured Jesus and transfigures us: As we leave this place, help us join in the struggle to transfigure the world. Work in us to rejoice in relationships of different communities and cultures, so that that the world will more fully manifest your Realm. Help us bring transfiguring moments to our everyday worlds by saying “No” to racism with its intolerance, exploitation, injustice and violence. And help us say “Yes” to your vision of a world of welcome, mutual respect, justice, peace, and love.

### **Possible Hymns and Songs**

(Numbers in parenthesis are from the Chalice Hymnal)

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” (631)

“Oh Freedom!” (“Before I’d be slave, I’d be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord, and be free” (African American Spiritual)

“Beams of Heaven” (Charles Albert Tindley)

“I Shall Not Be Moved” (often sung during the Civil Rights Movement) (615)

“Diverse in Culture, Nation, Race” (655)

“God of Freedom, God of Justice” (656)

### **The Writers**

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