

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
Prayer Service

Monday, January 16 • 6:30 p.m.



***“Do Good;
Seek Justice”***

-Isaiah 1:17

A Place To Be
Spirituality Center

www.aplacetobesc.org

Introduction to the Theme of the Year 2023

Do good; seek justice.

(Isaiah 1:17)

Introduction

Isaiah lived and prophesied in Judah during the eighth century BCE and was a contemporary of Amos, Micah and Hosea. This was towards the end of a period of great economic success and political stability for both Israel and Judah, due to the weakness of the 'superpowers' of the time, Egypt and Assyria. However, it was also a period when injustice, inequity and inequalities were rampant in both kingdoms.

This period also saw religion thriving as a ritual and formal expression of belief in God, concentrated on Temple offerings and sacrifices. This formal and ritual religion was presided over by the priests, who were also the beneficiaries of the largesse of the rich and powerful. Due to the physical proximity and interconnectedness of the royal palace and the Temple, power and influence were centered almost entirely on the king and the priests, neither of whom, for much of this history, stood up for those who were enduring oppression and inequity. In the worldview of this time (one which recurs throughout history), the rich and those who made many offerings were understood to be good and blessed by God, while those who were poor and could not offer sacrifices were understood to be wicked and cursed by God. The poor were often denigrated for their economic inability to fully participate in Temple worship.

Isaiah spoke into this context, attempting to awaken the consciousness of the people of Judah to the reality of their situation. Instead of honoring the contemporary religiosity as a blessing, Isaiah saw it as a festering wound and a sacrilege before the Almighty. Injustice and inequality led to fragmentation and disunity. His prophecies denounce the political, social and religious structures and the hypocrisy of offering sacrifices while oppressing the poor. He speaks out vigorously against corrupt leaders and in favour of the disadvantaged, rooting righteousness and justice in God alone.

The working group appointed by the Minnesota Council of Churches chose this verse from the first chapter of the prophet Isaiah as the central text for the Week of Prayer: *"learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1:17).*

Isaiah taught that God requires righteousness and justice from all of us, all the time and in all spheres of life. Our world today in many ways mirrors the challenges of division that Isaiah confronted in his preaching. Justice, righteousness and unity originate from God's profound love for each of us, and are at the heart of who God is and how God expects us to be with one another. God's commitment to create a new humanity *"from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev 7:9)* calls us to the peace and unity God has always wanted for creation.

The prophet's language with regard to the religiosity of the time is ferocious - *"Bringing offerings is futile, incense is an abomination to me... When you stretch out your hands I will hide my eyes from you" (vv. 13, 15).* Once he has spoken these blistering condemnations, diagnosing what is wrong, Isaiah offers the remedy for these iniquities. He instructs God's people to, *"Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil" (v. 16).*

Today, separation and oppression continue to be manifest when any single group or class is given privileges above others. The sin of racism is evident in any beliefs or practices that distinguish or elevate one "race" over another¹. When accompanied or sustained by imbalances in power, racial prejudice

1. There is only one race, the human race. However, we must acknowledge that the myth of race has caused the reality of racism. Race is not biological; it is a social construct which separates humanity according to physical traits. It is important to acknowledge that while the term may not be used in various parts of the world, it has been used as a tool to effectively divide and oppress groups of humans.

moves beyond individual relationships to the very structures of society - the systemic perpetuation of racism. Its existence has unfairly benefitted some, including churches, and burdened and excluded others, simply due to the color of their skin and the cultural associations based upon perceptions of "race".

Like the religious people so fiercely denounced by the biblical prophets, some Christian believers have been or continue to be complicit in supporting or perpetuating prejudice and oppression and fostering division. History shows that, rather than recognizing the dignity of every human being made in the image and likeness of God, Christians have too often involved themselves in structures of sin such as slavery, colonization, segregation and apartheid which have stripped others of their dignity on the spurious grounds of race. So too within the churches, Christians have failed to recognize the dignity of all the baptized and have belittled the dignity of their brothers and sisters in Christ on the grounds of supposed racial difference.

Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr memorably said, *"It is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hour in Christian America"*. This statement demonstrates the intersections between the disunity of Christians and the disunity of humanity. All division has its root in sin, that is, in attitudes and actions that run counter to the unity that God desires for the whole of his creation. Tragically racism is part of the sin that has divided Christians from one another, has caused Christians to worship at separate times; and in separate buildings, and in certain cases has led Christian communities to divide.

Unfortunately, not much has changed since the time of Martin Luther King's statement. The 11:00 am time slot - the most common time for Sunday worship often does not manifest Christian unity, but rather, division, along racial and social as well as denominational lines. As Isaiah proclaimed, this hypocrisy among people of faith is an offence before God: *"even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood"* (v. 15).

Learn to do good

In the Scripture passage chosen for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023, the prophet Isaiah teaches us how we are to cure these ills.

Learning to do right requires the decision to engage in self-reflection. The Week of Prayer is the perfect time for Christians to recognize that the divisions between our churches and confessions cannot be separated from the divisions within the wider human family. Praying together for Christian unity allows us to reflect on what unites us and to commit ourselves to confront oppression and division amongst humanity.

The prophet Micah points out that God has told us what is good and what God requires of us: *"to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God"* (Mic 6:8). To act justly means that we have respect for all persons. Justice requires truly equitable treatment in order to address historic disadvantage based on "race", gender, religion and socio-economic status. To walk humbly with God requires repentance, reparations, and finally reconciliation. God expects us to unite in a shared responsibility for equity for all God's children. The unity of Christians should be a sign and foretaste of the reconciled unity of the entire creation. However, Christian division weakens the force of that sign, serving to reinforce division rather than bring healing to the world's brokenness which is the Church's mission.

Seek justice

Isaiah counsels Judah to seek justice (v. 17), which is an acknowledgment of the existence of injustice and oppression in their society. He implores the people of Judah to overturn this *status quo*. Seeking justice requires us to face up to those who inflict evil on others. This is not an easy task and will sometimes lead to conflict, but Jesus assures us that standing up for justice in the face of oppression leads to the kingdom

of heaven. *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"* (Mt 5:10). Churches in many parts of the world must acknowledge how they have conformed to societal norms and been silent or actively complicit regarding racial injustice. Racial prejudice has been one of the causes of Christian division that has torn the Body of Christ. Toxic ideologies, such as White Supremacy and the doctrine of discovery², have caused much harm, particularly in North America and in lands throughout the world colonized by White European powers over the centuries. As Christians we must be willing to disrupt systems of oppression and to advocate for justice.

The year during which the Minnesota writing group was preparing the texts for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was filled with the evil and devastation of oppression in its many forms all over the world. This suffering was greatly amplified in many regions, especially in the Global South, by the Covid-19 pandemic, where even basic subsistence was almost impossible for many, and practical assistance was largely absent. The author of Ecclesiastes seemed to be speaking to the current experience: *"I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed- with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power with no one to comfort them"* (Eccles 4:1).

Oppression is harmful to the entire human race. There can be no unity without justice. As we pray for Christian unity, we must acknowledge current and generational oppression and be resolute in our commitment to repent of these sins. We can make our own Isaiah's injunction to *"wash yourselves; make yourselves clean"* because *"your hands are full of blood"* (vv. 15, 16).

Rescue the oppressed

The Bible tells us that we cannot separate our relationship with Christ from our attitude towards all God's people, particularly those considered *"the least of these"* (Mt 25:40). Our commitment to each other requires us to engage in *mishpat*, the Hebrew word for restorative justice, advocating for those whose voices have not been heard, dismantling structures that create and sustain injustice, and building others that promote and ensure everyone receives fair treatment and the rights that are due to them. This work must extend beyond our friends, family and congregations to the whole of humanity. Christians are called to go out and listen to the cries of all who are suffering, in order to better understand and respond to their stories of suffering and their trauma. Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr. often stated that *"a riot is the language of the unheard."* When protest and civil unrest arise, it is often because the protesters' voices are not being heard. If churches join their voices to those of the oppressed, their cry for justice and liberation will be amplified. We serve and love God and our neighbor by serving and loving one another in unity.

Defend the orphan, plead for the widow

Widows and orphans occupy a special place in the Hebrew Bible, alongside strangers, as representatives of the most vulnerable members of society. In the context of the economic success in Judah at the time of Isaiah, the situation of orphans and widows was a desperate one as they were deprived of protection and of the right to own land, and therefore the capacity to provide for themselves. The prophet called on the community, as it rejoiced in its prosperity, not to neglect to defend and nurture the poorest and most vulnerable among them. This prophetic call echoes in our time, as we consider: who are the most vulnerable people in our society?

Whose voices are not being heard in our communities? Who is not represented at the table? Why? Which churches and communities are missing from our dialogues, our common action and our prayer for Christian unity? As we pray together during this Week of Prayer, what are we willing to do about these absent voices?

2. The Doctrine of Discovery resulted from a Papal Bull issued by Pope Alexander VI (May 4th, 1493), and was pervasive throughout the world benefitting the churches in every way in regards to the descendants of Indigenous and Enslaved people. It justified seizing the lands of Indigenous peoples on the grounds that the colonizing powers 'discovered' these lands.

Conclusion

Isaiah challenged God's people in his day to learn to do good *together*, to seek justice *together*, to rescue the oppressed *together*, to defend the orphan and plead for the widow *together*. The prophet's challenge applies equally to us today. How can we live our unity as Christians so as to confront the evils and injustices of our time? How can we engage in dialogue, increase awareness, understanding and insight about one another's lived experiences?

These prayers and encounters of the heart have the power to transform us individually and collectively. Let us be open to God's presence in all our encounters with each other as we seek to be transformed, to dismantle the systems of oppression, and to heal the sins of racism. Together, let us engage in the struggle for justice in our society. We all belong to Christ.

Thank you for joining us for this prayer service. Please join us daily from January 18-25 where we will be posting daily reflections on this theme, presented by members of the A Place to Be community. They will be found online here:

www.aplacetobesc.org

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[Youtube.com/@kellylemens304](https://www.youtube.com/@kellylemens304)

Hymn: Many and Great, Oh God (Dakota Hymn)³

1. Wakantanka taku nitawa tankaya qa ota;
mahpiya kin eyahnake ça,
maka kin he duowanca;
mniowanca šbcya wanke cin, hena oyakihi,

1. Many and great, O God, your works, maker of earth and sky.
Your hands have sent the heavens with the stars;
Your fingers spread the mountains and plains.
Lo, at your word the waters were formed; deep seas obey your voice.

2. Woehdaku nitawa kin he minagi kin qu wo;
mahpiya kin iwankam yaŧi,
wicowaste yuha nanka,
wiconi kin he mayaqu nun, owihanke wanin.

2. Grant unto us communion with you, O star-abiding one.
Come unto us and dwell with us;
With you are found the gifts of life.
Bless us with life that has no end, eternal life with you.

Paraphraser: Philip Frazier; Author: Joseph Renville (1842)

Native American

Joseph R. Renville

$\bullet = 124$



Man - y and great, O God, are your things, Mak - er of earth and sky.
Zahl-reich und groß ist, Gott, was du schufst, Er - de und Him - mels - welt!
Mu - chas y gran - des tus o - bras son. Crea-dor de cie - lo y tierra.



Your hands have set the heav - ens with stars, your fin - gers spread the moun - tains and plains.
Dei - ne Hand weist den Ster - nen die Bahn, du gabst Ge - stalt den Ber - gen, dem Tal.
Tu ma - no pu - so es - tre - llas al cie - lo mon - tes y lla - nos has es - par - ci - do,



Lo, at your word the wa - ters were formed; deep seas o - bey your voice.
Ja, auf dein Wort das Was - ser sich teilt, Mee - re ge - hor - chen dir.
por tu pa - la - bra el a - gua bro - tó, tu voz es - cu - cha el mar.

hand drum or tom-tom 

2. Grant unto us communion with you,
you star abiding one;
come unto us and dwell with us;
with you are found the gifts of life.
Bless us with life that has no end,
eternal life with you.

2. Wir bitten, gib' Gemeinschaft mit dir,
du bist das Licht, das bleibt.
Komme zu uns und wohne bei uns,
du hältst des Lebens Gaben bereit.
Segne mit Leben, das nie vergeht,
das ewig lebt bei dir.

2. Que entre nosotros tu siempre estés
Sé tú el principal
En medio nuestro ven a morar
contigo esté el don de la vida
Bendícenos con vida sin fin
Vida eterna en ti.

English, paraphrased by Philip Frazier. German, Dieter Trautwein, © Strube-Verlag GmbH, Pettenkofenstr. 24, D-80336 München, Germany. Spanish, Juan A. Gattinoni, CLAI, 1406 Buenos Aires, Argentina.

* These hymns were suggested by the writing group from the Minnesota Council of Churches, which prepared the first project of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023, and are published under its responsibility.

3. This hymn was sung by thirty-eight Dakota prisoners of war as they were led to execution at Mankato, Minnesota, on December 26, 1862. This song was first published in the Dakota Indian Hymnal (1916) and is perhaps the only Native American hymn to be sung broadly in North America beyond its original Dakota culture. The author, Joseph Renville, was indigenous Dakota and the translator of this hymn is Francis Philip Frazier.

Hymn: Wade Into the Water⁴

African American Spiritual
arr. Jimmie Abbington

Traditional

Wade in the wa - ter, wade in the wa - ter chil - dren, wade in the wa - ter,

The first system of musical notation for the hymn. It consists of a treble and bass staff. The treble staff contains the vocal melody with lyrics underneath. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

God's gon na trou - ble the wa - ter. See that host all dressed in white,
See that band all dressed in red,
If you don't be - lieve I've been re - deemed,

The second system of musical notation. It continues the melody and accompaniment from the first system. The lyrics are split across two lines of text.

God's gon - na trou - ble the wa - ter. The lead - er must be the
Looks like the band that
Just fol - low me down to

The third system of musical notation. The lyrics continue across two lines of text.

Is - rael - ite, God's gon - na trou - ble the wa - ter.
Mo - ses led,
Jor - dan's stream,

The fourth and final system of musical notation on this page. The lyrics are split across two lines of text.

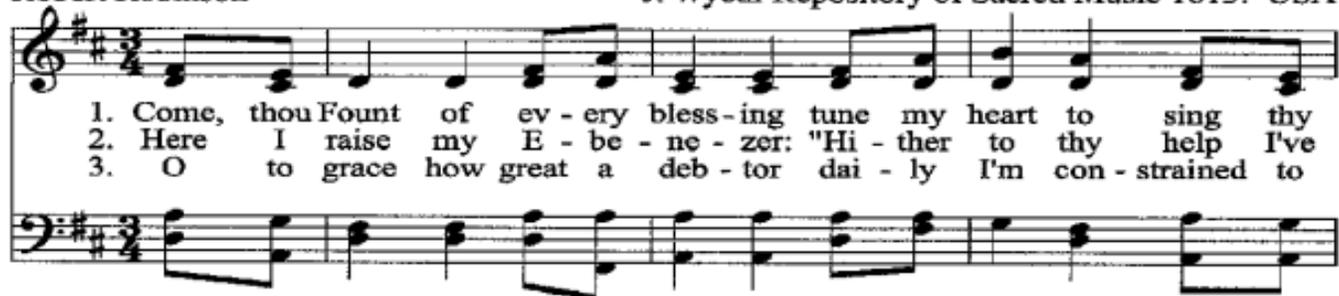
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4. This is an African American Jubilee Spiritual by Frederick J. Work and John Wesley Work Jr. (1901), based upon the narrative of John 5:2-9. For the enslaved, this song represented the struggles of life and the empowerment of freedom. Within the context of the 'troubled' waters of life there are healing waters, because God is in the midst of the turmoil.

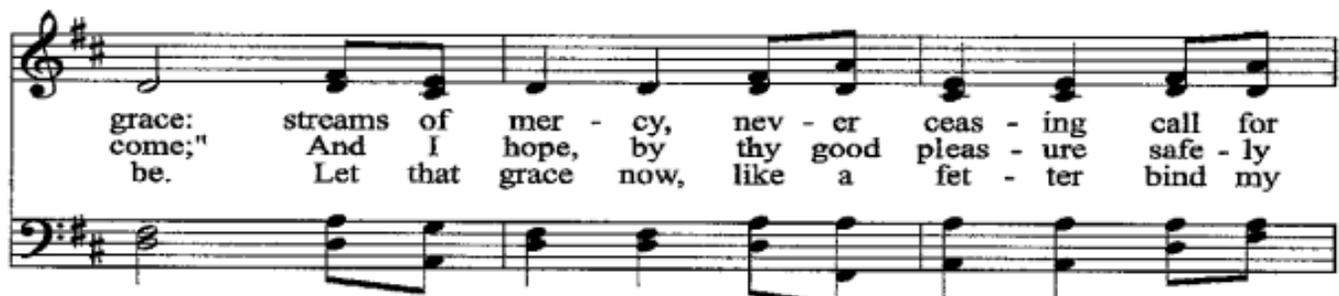
Hymn: Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Robert Robinson

J. Wyeth Repository of Sacred Music 1813: USA



1. Come, thou Fount of ev - ery bless - ing tune my heart to sing thy
2. Here I raise my E - be - ne - zer: "Hi - ther to thy help I've
3. O to grace how great a deb - tor dai - ly I'm con - strained to



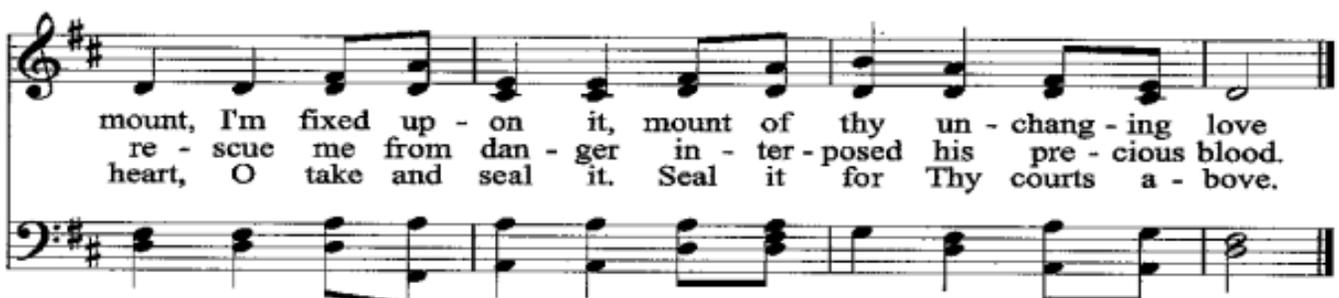
grace: streams of mer - cy, nev - er ceas - ing call for
come;" And I hope, by thy good pleas - ure safe - ly
be. Let that grace now, like a fet - ter bind my



songs of loud - est praise. Teach me some me - lo - dious
to ar - rive at home Je - sus sought me when a
wan - dering heart to thee. Prone to wan - der, Lord, I



son - net sung by flam - ing tongues a - bove. Praise the
stran - ger wan - dering from the fold of God. He, to
feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Here's my



mount, I'm fixed up - on it, mount of thy un - chang - ing love
re - scue me from dan - ger in - ter - posed his pre - cious blood.
heart, O take and seal it. Seal it for Thy courts a - bove.

Hymn: What a Fellowship, What a Joy Divine⁵

Elisha Hoffman

Anthony J. Showalter: USA



1. What a fel - low - ship, what a joy di - vine,
2. Oh, how sweet to walk in this pil - grim way,
3. What have I to dread, what have I to fear,



lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms; what a bless - ed - ness,
lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms; oh, how bright the path
lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms I have bless - ed peace



what a peace is mine, lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms.
grows from day to day, lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms.
with my Lord so near, lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms.



Lean - ing lean - ing, safe and se - cure from all a - larms;



lean - ing lean - ing, lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms.

5. This hymn, authored in 1887 by E. A. Hoffman, was inspired by Deuteronomy 33:27. It is meant to help contemplate what it means to find refuge in our heavenly Father's arms in times of fear and trial, and to allow God's joy and peace to replace our loneliness and anxiety.

Hymn: Lift Every Voice and Sing

James Weldon Johnson

C F A⁷ Dm

1. Lift ev - 'ry voice and sing, till earth and
 2. Ston - y the road we trod, bit - ter the
 3. God of our wea - ry years, God of our

3 F C^{#o7} Dm Gm A

heav - en ring, ring with the har - mo -
 chas - t'ing rod, felt in the days when
 si - lent tears, thou who hast brought us

6 Bb Gm F C⁷

nies of lib - er - ty; Let our re -
 hope un - born had died; yet with a
 thus far on the way; thou who hast

9 F A⁷ D Gm A

joic - ing rise High as the lis - t'ning
 stead - y beat, have not our wea - ry
 by Thy might, led us in - to the

12 Bb F C⁷

skies, Let it re - sound loud as the roll - ing
 feet come to the place for wich our peo - ple
 light, keep us for ev - er in the path, we

sea. sighed? pray. Sing We Lest a have our song come feet full of the o - ver a stray from the

18 Dm C

faith that the dark past has taught us,
way that with tears as been wa - tered;
plac - es, our God, where we met Thee,

20 F C D \flat D \flat

Sing we lest a have our song come, hearts, full of the tread - ing our drunk with the hope that the pres - ent has path through the blood of the wine of the world, we for -

23 F C 7

brought slaugh - get us; tered; thee; Fac - ing from the out shad - owed the be -

25 F A 7 Dm Gm A

ris - ing sun Of our new day be -
gloom - y past, till now we stand at
neath thy hand, may we for ev - er

28 B \flat G \sharp dim F C F

gun, let us march on till vic - to - ry is won.
last where the bright gleam of our bright star is cast.
stand, true to our God, true to our na - tive land.