
On Words and Witness

Joanna Harader

When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
¹³ bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.
¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood. (Isa 1:12–15, NRSV)

As an English major, I care a lot about words. I want desperately to choose the right words, the beautiful words, the powerful words that provoke a smile or a gasp or a few tears. Until, that is, I read Isaiah’s admonishment and remember that worship is not about getting the aesthetics right. It’s about getting our lives in line with God’s Life.

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Isaiah is not the only biblical writer who condemns false piety and showy prayers. It's enough to give a preacher and liturgy writer pause. And yet, when Jesus's disciples ask him how to pray, he doesn't say, "The words don't matter." He doesn't say, "Just speak from the heart." He says, "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matt 6:9).

Our words for worship do matter—but not for their own sake. The words themselves are not the witness. The witness is the lives people live in the world because of the relationships they have with God. And worship can—and should—be a key place, a key time when those relationships are formed and strengthened. The words we preach and pray and sing in worship can draw us closer to God and point us toward greater faithfulness in the world.

World Communion Sunday Lament¹

Reader 1: We gather for World Communion Sunday in a world where women face restrictions to their freedom and threats to their bodies. Sexual intimidation and assault—against all genders—is used as a weapon of war and a means of establishing power. Survivors of sexual assault who dare to report are too often disbelieved, blamed for the “incident,” and otherwise demeaned.

Reader 2: This table is our prayer for all who suffer in silence and for all who dare to speak out.

Congregation: God, lead us to a place of mutual respect and equality.

Reader 1: We gather for World Communion Sunday in a world where over sixty-five million people are displaced. The policies of the United States government keep those in desperate need out of our country, and many families have been separated at the border.

Reader 2: This table is our prayer that all will find welcome.

Congregation: God, lead refugees to a place to call home.

Reader 1: We gather for World Communion Sunday in a world where millions have been affected by recent hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis—trying to manage life with no electricity, to connect with distant loved ones, to repair destroyed buildings, and to mourn the dead.

Reader 2: This table is our prayer that lives will be made whole.

Congregation: God, send to those facing destruction peaceful skies, solid ground, and aid to rebuild.

¹ This piece was written in October 2018. While some words for worship are relevant across different times and contexts, there can also be power in words that attend to a particular time and place.

Reader 1: We gather for World Communion Sunday in a world where over 20 million people are enslaved, and more than 10 million people are incarcerated—with the United States having the world's largest percentage of imprisoned people.

Reader 2: This table is our prayer that all people will be free.

Congregation: God, grant justice for those in prison and in slavery.

Reader 1: We gather for World Communion Sunday in a world where white supremacists are increasingly public in their hatred; in the United States, people of color face systemic racism in education, housing, employment, and police treatment; in many European countries, race-based anti-immigrant sentiments are loudly proclaimed; in Burma, the Rohingya are being terrorized, driven from their homes, and killed.

Reader 2: This table is our prayer that racism and ethnic oppression will give way to justice.

Congregation: God, change our systems; root out prejudice, let justice roll down like waters.

Reader 1: We gather for World Communion Sunday in a world where same-sex intimacy is outlawed in seventy-two countries—eight of which are United Nations member countries where same-sex relations are punishable by death; where violence is directed against LGBTQ people all over the world—some of it perpetrated by hateful individuals and much of it sanctioned by institutions and governments.

Reader 2: This table is our prayer that all love will be honored.

Congregation: God, move communities and churches to embrace the bodies and love of our LGBTQ siblings.

Reader 1: So friends, let us gather around this table of respect, this table of welcome, this table of wholeness, this table of freedom, this table of justice, this table of love.

Reader 2: Let us gather around this table of God's abundant provision, where the last are first, the lowly are lifted up, and the hungry are filled with good things.

Reader 1: Let us gather in lament for the brokenness around us and within us.

Reader 2: Let us gather in hope for the fulfillment of God's promises.

*Congregation: God, we pray for the holy transformation of our world.
Amen.*

Blessing: Hope

I know how much hope you hold in your heart:
for yourself and for those you love;
for your neighbors and for our world—
hope for health,
for peace,
for justice,
for a return to the glorious normal of our lives.
These hopes are good and holy
and also not the reality in which we live.
Not yet.
And maybe not ever—in this life.
So under all of the good you hope *for*,
I pray you are grounded in the Good you hope *in*.

May you feel the solid ground of God beneath your feet
And root your true hope,
 your healing hope,
 your life-giving hope,
not in what you think humans might be able to accomplish
but in who you know your God to be:
All-powerful Creator,
All-loving incarnate One,
Ever-present Guide and Shelter.
This is our Advent hope.
May you know it.
Claim it.
Cling to it.