

Stop Torture, Protect Human Rights

An Order of Worship for Human Rights Day

Preparation for Worship

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."

— I John 4:7

"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

— Matthew 5:44

"No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

— Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 5

Call to Worship

One: This is a time to prepare for the One who is and is to be.

Many: Eternal God, help us get ready.

One: This is a time to shine a light into the dark corners.

Many: Help us know your truth.

One: This is a time to open our eyes and our hearts.

Many: Help us care about your people.

One: This is a time to make crooked ways straight and rough places smooth.

Many: Help us help enact your justice.

Hymn

"On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry" #10, *The Presbyterian Hymnal* or "Prepare the Way" #13, *The Presbyterian Hymnal*

Introduction to the Prayer of Confession

Today is Human Rights Day. The day marks the United Nations General Assembly's adoption, on December 10, 1948, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first global enunciation of human rights. The commemoration was established in 1950 when the United Nations General Assembly invited all states and interested organizations to celebrate the day as they saw fit.

Torture is a human rights violation. On this Human Rights Day, we pray for justice and healing for people throughout the world who have been tortured. We pray for people who inflict torture, for they too are tormented. We pray for ourselves, confessing all we have done or left undone that may have contributed to the suffering of our sisters and brothers. We pray in the name of the One who was tortured, died, and rose to save us all. I invite you to pray together.

Prayer of Confession (Unison)

God for all peoples, we pray for our brothers and sisters throughout your world who endure torture physically, spiritually, and emotionally. In their pain may they experience your presence and care, binding their wounds and providing support.

We pray for our brothers and sisters throughout your world who inflict torture physically, spiritually, and emotionally. May they experience your presence and care, binding the wounds that they receive as they wound others. Open them to see the dignity of each person. Strengthen them to seek ways to break free from violence.

We pray for our brothers and sisters throughout your world who authorize torture physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Break the hold of fear and anger upon them. Inspire them to seek other ways to advance their causes.

We pray for ourselves, confessing our responsibility for acts of torture that violate our sisters and brothers and degrade us and our values. Guide us to know about torture, care about torture, and act to end torture. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection reveal that your love is indeed stronger than torture and fear.

(Time of silence for personal prayer and confession)

Amen.

Words of Assurance (based on Malachi 3:1-4)

Those who confess their sins will receive God's mercy, and their transgressions will be no more.

For God's love in Jesus Christ cleanses and purifies, melting away all that is imperfect so that we may live as God intends.

Passing of the Peace

One: In Christ we have been forgiven, freed, and made whole. Let us witness to God's gift of peace by sharing it with friends, neighbors, even enemies. The peace of God be with you.

Many: And also with you.

First Lesson: Malachi 3:1-4

Second Lesson: Luke 1.68-79

(Instead of reading this passage, the congregation may sing it to either of two easy-to-sing tunes in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* — #601 and #602. If not sung here, one of these hymns may be sung after the sermon.)

Sermon: Know. Care. Act.

(Sermon notes follow the liturgical material.)

Hymn

"Arise Your Light Is Come!" #411, *The Presbyterian Hymnal* or "Song of Zechariah" #601, *The Presbyterian Hymnal* or "Song of Zechariah" #602, *The Presbyterian Hymnal*

Prayers of the People

Litany for Human Rights

One: Someone is shouting in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make a straight path for God to travel! Every valley must be filled up, every hill and mountain leveled off. The winding roads must be made straight, and the rough paths made smooth (Luke 3:4-5)."

Many: God of justice, your messenger calls us to prepare your way, to make your paths straight.

One: But the world is not ready to receive you. The roadway is choked with the material possessions of people who have become rich from the labor of those who are denied access to resources because of their race, ethnicity, gender, class, or nationality.

Many: God of peace, your messenger calls us to prepare your way.

One: But fearful threats exist. The highway is barricaded with armaments. The valleys are filled with land mines that kill innocent children, women, and men.

Many: God of compassion, your messenger calls us to prepare your way.

One: But not everybody will be free to greet you. Some languish in prison or under house arrest. Some endure torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

Many: Many women are imprisoned in their homes, abused by their husbands and without means of escape because they are denied legal and economic recourse. Many children are chained in sweatshops or sold into prostitution.

One: How then shall we prepare the way?

Many: In the name of God and for the sake of God's people, we proclaim in word and deed that all human beings are born with fundamental human rights.

One: How shall we prepare the way?

Many: We will strive to guarantee the dignity and worth of the human person and the equal rights of all.

One: How shall we prepare the way?

Many: We will work for a world in which human beings enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want.

One: How shall we prepare the way?

Many: We will work for a world where no one is ever subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

All: Then we will go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before us shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. And every valley shall be filled, and the crooked shall be made straight, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

One: Let us take a moment of silence to remember those whose human rights are being denied or whose worth as children of God has been denied for any reason.

(Moment of silence)

All: Amen.

The Offering

Hymn

"On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry" #10, verse 4, *The Presbyterian Hymnal*

Prayer of Dedication

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn

"Live Into Hope" #332, *The Presbyterian Hymnal* or "O Sing a Song of Bethlehem" #308, *The Presbyterian Hymnal*

Charge and Benediction

One: Know. Care. Act. Be assured that "the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ."

Many: We know. We care. We will work to enact God's love and justice.

One: May God continue to guide our feet in the way of peace as we wait for, work for, and witness to salvation.

Sermon Notes

The need to prepare for the gift of salvation is the theme and the goal of this day's lectionary passages. Written in diverse circumstances for diverse audiences, they all point to the need to be ready for the power of God that brings truth to light, instills compassion, and overcomes injustice and sin. In other words, these passages point to God's promise given to all people in Jesus Christ.

December 10 is both the second Sunday in Advent and Human Rights Day. If we follow Karl Barth's dictum to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, we can not help but take note of what Scripture has to say to the daily reports of human rights abuses throughout the world.

This year the headlines and our consciences lead us to focus on one class of abuses in particular: torture. This is not because torture is the most pressing abuse of human rights — the most pressing abuse is the one being perpetrated right now and right here, wherever you are. However, torture is a fundamental issue because it systematically denigrates the image of God that is stamped on each individual. It also violates God's command not to take advantage of those who are at our mercy, and certainly prisoners are completely at our mercy. It is irrelevant whether or not they are our enemies; God still commands us to treat them as human beings, even to love them. Torture undoes this command.

Thus, we focus on torture because it is an urgent issue of our day, because it is fundamental to our faith, and because it is a case study in how to approach sin, including social sins. This approach is summarized as Know, Care, Act.

Know: The first step in being able to act to end the horror of torture, or any sin, is to know what is going on and not turn away. The song of Zechariah (Luke 1:67-79) speaks to God's intention "...to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." Of course, Zechariah is foretelling John the Baptist's mission, which perhaps is the mission of all of us who prepare the way for the One who is and is still to come.

One reaction the preacher might be wise to anticipate is how difficult it is for people to hear the message that torture has not only been inflicted by our enemies, but also by those employed by or allied with the United States. This revelation causes dissonance for believers. How could this happen on our watch? How widespread is the abuse? Is it a matter of isolated incidents, or is there systemic abuse that points to a policy of torture? Before we can end torture we need to acknowledge what is happening. This is uncomfortable in part because in a free society we all bear some complicity. It should be helpful, however, for members to know that our denomination has issued many statements expressing our opposition to torture anywhere by anyone, including most recently at the 217th General Assembly (2006) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The General Assembly passed an overture to approach the U.S. government to ask for an independent investigation into allegations of abuse. In this way we are following God's call to shine a light into dark corners and expose the truth. If no systemic abuse is found, then suspicion will be lifted. If torture has been inflicted, then all those who are responsible can be brought to justice.

Stopping torture is not a "feel good" issue. It runs counter to much of the secular, sentimental lead-up to Christmas. Again, it is important for the preacher to acknowledge how hard it is to hear about torture. It is equally important to look at the painful realities because knowing helps create empathy that can lead to action.

To know is the first step in preparing the way for God's gift of salvation.

Care: Of course, it is not enough to know about atrocities. We must also care about those who suffer. One way for a preacher to help people care is to allow the voices of the survivors and those who have worked to end torture to speak for themselves. Examples of short quotes are found in the resources listed below. Additional quotes are available in many news sources almost daily. With some introduction and music, these quotations can serve as the core of a sermon that is an interpretation of Luke 1:79, and they resonate with Paul's word in the Epistle commending those who "share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel (Philippians 1:7)."

It is important to lift up our concern not only for the survivors of torture, but also for those who condone or inflict torture. They too are harmed by the act. Torture degrades those practice it; thus, if we wish to show compassion for our troops, we must ensure that they have explicit orders to refrain from cruel, unusual, and degrading treatment in

all circumstances. Lack of clarity must never be construed as implicit permission to torture. In addition, torture enrages the families and friends of those who are tortured, creating an impetus for retaliation that puts our troops and our security at greater risk. Support for our troops and our nation requires that we never act in ways that are contrary to the basic tenets of our faith.

To know is to care; to care is to act on behalf of those who are harmed.

Act: Fortunately, the Word of God never leaves us with condemnation or despair, but leads us to face even the grim reality of torture so that we might experience healing. The lectionary passage in Malachi poetically articulates this tough but grace-filled process, describing the renunciation of sin as a purifying fire where layers of our old self are melted away by God's love. This is painful. It hurts to lose our outer, protective shell that prevents us from knowing or caring. God melts away our layers of denial so that we may better absorb God's saving love.

This process may break our hearts as the pain of those who suffer touches us. But God does not leave us broken; out of brokenness come healing and wholeness. In the end, to know and to care, motivates us to act and there is much we can do. The preacher can leave the congregation on a note of hope.

Resources for prayer, dialogue, education and advocacy are readily available through the [Presbyterian Peacemaking Program](#). It is also helpful to lift up the stories of groups such as the [Center for Victims of Torture](#) who provide resources to assist survivors of torture with physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. Preachers may want to coordinate a letter-writing opportunity or to invite a speaker to give a minute for mission to coincide with this morning's message.

Of course, our ultimate hope is in the saving power and love of God, who gives "light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and guide[s] our feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:79)."

Resources

For preachers who want to study this issue further, the following pieces may be especially helpful. They are available through the group [No2Torture](#).

"Who Is Jesus Christ for Us Today?" a sermon by the Rev. Dr. George Hunsinger, McCord Professor of Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, Presbyterian Outlook, July 10, 2006.

"Five Reasons Torture is Always Wrong," by the Rev. Dr. David P. Gushee, professor of moral philosophy at Union University, Christianity Today, February 1, 2006.

"A Chaplain's View of Torture," by the Rev. Kermit Johnson, chaplain and major general in the U.S. Army (retired), The Christian Century, April 18, 2006.

"Call to Say No! to Torture" by Rick Ufford-Chase, Moderator of the 216th General Assembly (2004) and executive director of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, and the Rev. Ed Brogan, director of the Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel, October, 2006.

"Quotes from Torture Survivors and Those Who Work for the Way of Peace," compiled by the Rev. Kirsten Klepfer.

Ideas for a Children's Interpretation

To encompass both the theme of the Advent Scripture and Human Rights Day, one could give some background on the stories of the births of John and Jesus, pointing out that the writers of the Bible thought it was important for people to know that Herod was the king at this time. Many of the facts of Herod's reign are not appropriate to share with children. However, children are used to stories of good and evil and can readily appreciate that Herod ruled in ways that were unfair and violent and caused the people in Palestine to suffer. They wanted the world to be different for themselves and their children. They wanted the peace on earth that God promised in Jesus.

At a young age, children realize that peace on earth is still something much of the world wants and does not have. Thus the interpreter can point out that followers of Jesus are working all over the world to bring the good news of Jesus' peace to people. One of those ways is by working for the basic things that all people need — not just food and water, but the right to worship and to go to school and other basic human rights. They are what all people deserve just because they are people, because God's promise of peace is for everyone. But peace does not just happen. It is a gift from God that we have to protect by speaking up, like John the Baptist and Jesus did, against anyone who tries to hurt others.

If there is time, the children can be asked to reflect on how to say no to bullies. Bullying is also something that all children know about. They might be asked if they have ever seen a bully in action. Then they can be asked about some good ways to deal with bullies. The link can be made between saying no to bullies and saying yes to the ways God wants us to treat each other. What the children are doing when they resist bullying is what the church is striving to do and what John the Baptist and Jesus showed us how to do.

Again, these themes may seem mature for children, but children perceive the injustice around them and in the world. It is important for them to know that their church is addressing these realities and that they can help, too.