

Richard H. Lowery, editor

Foreword by Terri Hord Owens

WELLSPRINGS *of* HOPE

Prayers for a Prophetic
New Vision for Disciples



Wellsprings of Hope:
Prayers for a Prophetic
New Vision for Disciples

Edited by Richard H. Lowery
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Saint Louis, Missouri

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INTRODUCTION

Terri Hord Owens, General Minister and President

When the general ministry presidents began to discuss and work on this book of prayers, terms like “coronavirus” and “COVID-19” had not yet entered everyday conversation. Our thought in conceiving this volume was to lead the church in prayerful reflection as we come to the end of an important period in the life of our church and look to the next phase. Now, in the wake of this horrific pandemic, the prayers and reflections offered here have a particular poignancy we had not imagined when we started the project.

Let me begin with a bit of history. In 2001, under the leadership of Dick Hamm who was our General Minister and President at the time, the church adopted “the 2020 Vision,” a vision that we be “a faithful, growing church that demonstrates true community, deep Christian spirituality, and a passion for justice.” That broad vision was centered in a specific set of goals to guide our work together for the next two decades articulated as four “priorities” of the church. We pledged over the coming period to become a pro-reconciling/anti-racist church, to form a thousand new churches, to help a thousand existing churches revitalize, and to develop the leadership we need for these new and revitalized congregations. Under the guidance of my immediate predecessor, Sharon Watkins, we reaffirmed the priorities of the 2020 Vision as guiding principles of our life together—a decision I have embraced and carried forward.

During these two decades, we have made progress throughout the church in addressing the sin of racism and learning ways to practice reconciliation. Though not all of the congregations we started during this period have continued to operate, we have in fact exceeded our goal of forming a thousand new churches.

More than a thousand existing congregations have participated in programs of church transformation and revitalization. We have invested in our colleges and seminaries and explored a variety of educational programs in congregations, regions, and across the general ministries to prepare the ordained and commissioned ministers and lay leaders we need to lead these new and revitalized congregations. The 2020 Vision has become a part of our DNA as we move forward.

At the February 2020 General Board meeting, I invited the Church to build up what Walter Brueggemann calls “the prophetic imagination.” From the beginning of my term as GMP, I have made it a priority for us to focus on our spiritual growth through the disciplines of prayer and Bible study. With a strong spiritual foundation, we will have the courage to imagine a new church for a new world. Our God and our governing documents have already given us the permission to change, even revolutionize what we do and how we do ministry. We must give ourselves that same permission to change, to let go, and to construct ministry in new ways. That will mean new ways of structuring our work and ministry, new collaborations, and new methods of holding ourselves accountable to one another. We must also claim freedom from fear—the fear of what may happen when we let go of traditions and established structures and routines. Since that February 2020 Board meeting, the COVID-19 crisis has meant that such courage and imagination are no longer just “strategic,” “nice-to-have” ideas. In order to be effective in this new world, and to even survive, we must change, and we must invite the Holy Spirit to give fresh wind and new vision. Key to our emergence in this new world is our common understanding of covenantal life and relationship to one another. The gospel rapper, B Slade, speaks of “familiar bondage” versus “foreign freedom.” Too often, those ways that we find familiar and comforting can become a form of bondage. With each generation, there is a necessary exploration of new ways and understandings. Such “freedom” may seem foreign to many of us, but it is this foreign

freedom which opens us up for new life, and the inclusion of new perspectives and ideas.

Our covenant life and the courage to imagine a new church for a new world will, of course, be an important topic for reflection and discussion as we go forward. The general ministries offer this book of weekly prayers as part of our preparation for that conversation. It is our hope that each week of the year beginning with Advent 2020, individuals and congregations will be united in prayer that we reflect deeply and wisely as we enter this new era of our life as a church.

We have chosen as the biblical focus of our reflections and prayers one of the most beautiful poems of the Bible, now embedded in the book of Isaiah. Many biblical scholars think that Isaiah 35 is the product of an anonymous admirer of the late Eighth Century Jerusalem prophet Isaiah ben Amoz. We do not know the name of this anonymous disciple of Isaiah, but the style and content of the poem is consistent with later chapters in the book, which many biblical scholars have called “Second Isaiah.” These chapters, these scholars think, were written by an anonymous poet who wrote from the heart of Babylonia about 150 years after Isaiah and was one of the descendants of Judah’s royal court, forcibly exiled there when Jerusalem was looted and destroyed by the Babylonian imperial army in 586 BCE. Between his or her community of exiles and the ancestral homeland of Jerusalem lay a large desert wilderness that normally would prove deadly to cross. But the poet of Isaiah 35 envisioned a world where the God of Judah and Israel would rescue the exiles and bring them back to their ancestral home with such speed and miraculous power that they would march straight across the deadly desert, which would suddenly bloom and come to life, where pools and streams of life-giving water would bubble up and flow, where those weakened by their long captivity would leap for joy and those blinded by the darkness of imprisonment would suddenly see the light of day. It’s a beautiful vision of hope for an in-between time and place in the life of the people of God.

We too as a church are in an in-between time, what cultural anthropologists have termed a “liminal” space, partly in what has come before but heading toward something still unfolding ahead. Liminal spaces are places of uncertainty and exciting new possibility, places of enormous creativity and new beginnings.

As we conclude one important period of our life together as a church and prepare to journey to the next, we move forward in hope, not entirely certain what the future holds but with firm conviction that God calls us to walk boldly in prayer and gratitude. We offer these prayers for our weekly reflection together in the coming months as we enter this important new part of our journey. We invite you to join in prayer with Disciples throughout the United States and Canada for the faithfulness and boldness of our witness to the living, healing power of the Risen Christ.

Isaiah 35 (NRSV)

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.*

*The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.*

*They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.*

³ *Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.*

⁴ *Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!*

Here is your God.

*He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.*

He will come and save you.”

⁵ *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;*

⁶ *then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

*For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;*

⁷ *the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

⁸ *A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God’s people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.*

⁹ *No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.*

¹⁰ *And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

ISAIAH 35 IN CONTEXT

Rick Lowery, President, Disciples of Christ Historical Society

A surprising vision of hope, a call to faith and bold action in the face of fear and despair.

For years now, these war refugees and their descendants had lived in a land far from home. Separated from their ancestral homeland by a vast desert and hundreds of miles, they were there, not of their own accord, but because of decisions made decades ago at the highest levels in the capital city of the world's sole superpower Babylon, modern-day Iraq. These were political decisions backed by irresistible military force, the best trained, best equipped soldiers the world had ever seen, in numbers unprecedented, with violent efficiency never seen before.

“A lion has risen up from its thicket,” a Judean pundit and prognosticator named Jeremiah had said of that army. “A destroyer of nations has pulled up stakes and is marching out to set your land to waste. Your cities will fall in ruin, with no one inhabiting them” (Jeremiah 4:7). Most folks in the capital city thought he was crazy, but Jeremiah's warnings soon proved true.

In 586 BCE, “the Great King,” the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar, sent his army into Jerusalem and destroyed it, smashing the Temple of Judah's national God, Yahweh, killing the royal family and sending local leaders into exile hundreds of miles away.

That, however, was a half-century ago. Military shock-and-awe only goes so far and lasts so long. Times change. Superpowers fade. Empires collapse.

Now, Babylon was coming apart at the seams, torn by its own contradictions, undermined by the arrogant incompetence, the greed, the gridlock, the political miscalculation, the global overreach of its own elites.

As its power faded, the power of its new international rival grew. The challenge from the heart of Persia—today’s Iran—struck like a bolt out of the blue. Political reality at home in Babylon made things worse. The once-great country was weak. Public confidence had collapsed. The situation was bleak.

When the end finally came, it came with a whimper. Persian soldiers swept virtually unopposed into the capital city and were welcomed as liberators. Babylon the Great had fallen! A new Persian world order was taking its place.

The new “Great King,” the Persian Emperor Cyrus, had considerable support inside Babylonia itself. He was especially popular among the small community of ethnic Judeans whose parents and grandparents had been exiled there by Nebuchadnezzar a half-century earlier. Shortly after Cyrus conquered Babylon, he issued a decree that members of the Judean exile community could go to the land of their ancestors and rebuild Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). It would be an outpost on the western-most edge of Persia’s imperial reach, just a stone’s throw from Egypt.

Frankly, many Judean exiles were reluctant to take him up on the offer. The journey back would be long and hard. The city lay in ruin. The task of rebuilding would be monumental. And besides, a vast, hostile desert stood between them and Jerusalem.

Isaiah 35, however, argues that the exiles should give it a try.

Though this chapter is now included in the scroll we call the book of Isaiah, the author of it is anonymous. There is no superscription that tells us that this is a prophecy of Isaiah or anybody else in particular for that matter. The chapter just jumps right into the beautiful prophetic poem. This is not the only chapter in Isaiah that does this.

In fact, after chapter 39, Isaiah ben Amoz, for whom the book is named, drops out of the picture altogether. Furthermore, the implied setting of the oracles seems to shift from the place and time of the prophet—Jerusalem in the late 700s BCE—to a time

about 150 years later around 540 BCE in the heart of Babylonia. The implied audience is no longer the late Eighth Century royal court of sovereign Judah, but their distant descendants living in Babylonian exile about 50 years after Jerusalem had been destroyed. These chapters view Cyrus as a ruler chosen by Israel's God, calling him Yahweh's "anointed one" (messiah; Isaiah 45:1), a term that elsewhere describes the king of Israel and/or Judah (e.g., see 1 Samuel 10:1). The themes in these chapters, 40-55, focus on "comfort" and restoration for a Jerusalem which now lay in ruin. The oracles speak of surprising new life in the desert, springs and rivers of water, and lush oases in barren terrain. These chapters promise a miraculous exodus-like journey about to happen on a superhighway across the desert that will take willing members of the exile community back to Jerusalem, the home of their ancestors. Then suddenly in chapter 56, the perspective seems to change again. The implied location of the audience shifts from Babylonia to Jerusalem now rebuilt and restored. The implied time is the end of the 500s or perhaps the early 400s, after the second Jerusalem temple had been completed with Persian permission and assistance. This focus on rebuilt Jerusalem continues to the end of the book in chapter 66.

This striking shift in themes and perspectives through the course of the book has led scholars to believe that the book reflects at least three distinct historical periods: the time of the actual ministry of the priest and prophet Isaiah ben Amoz of Jerusalem in the late 700s BCE, during the heyday of the Judean monarchy; an "update" by an admirer of Isaiah writing at the end of Babylonian exile around 540 BCE, the time the Persians conquered Babylon; and a final epilogue added by someone who actually went back to Jerusalem and experienced life in the rebuilt city with its rebuilt Temple toward the end of the 500s and beginning of the 400s.

We call these three distinctive sections of the book "First Isaiah," "Second Isaiah," and "Third Isaiah." (Also note that these terms

are often used to describe the different authors/editors who gave us the material in these sections.)

The work of the anonymous writer/editor of exile who gave us the Second Isaiah material is primarily focused in chapters 40-55, but it is also spread here and there throughout chapters 1-39. Many scholars think of this exilic writer/editor as the one who gave the book its definitive (though not final) shape, arranging and editing the earlier Isaiah traditions in such a way as to lead the readers/hearers of the scroll toward the experience of Babylonian exile and the surprising joy of promised return to Jerusalem and restoration of the city. So, in an important sense, the chapters of First Isaiah are preparing us for the message of Second Isaiah, with Third Isaiah providing a final stamp on the whole book.

Although Isaiah 35 falls in the broad section of the book that is normally described as First Isaiah, this chapter is in fact from the same author/editor who gave us the Second Isaiah chapters 40-55. Isaiah 35 anticipates the themes and message of chapters 40-55 and makes this anonymous prophet's first, best case for why the refugees in Babylonia should take the risk of going back to Jerusalem to rebuild.

Forced exile had been politically and economically devastating, but it also had posed an enormous theological challenge for the exile community.

Most people in the ancient Middle East were polytheists. They believed in and worshipped multiple deities.

Israelites were also polytheists, but some were what scholars have called "henotheists." Henotheists agreed that there were many gods, but they thought they should be loyal to one of the gods exclusively—in Israel's case, Yahweh, usually translated in English translations as "the LORD." Using marriage practices as an analogy, many—maybe most—Israelites were theological polygamists. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, for example, were theological polygamists—polytheists. They loved Yahweh, the national deity of Israel, but they also promoted



Weekly Prayers for the Church and World



“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.” – Isaiah 35:1-2a

God of promise and hope, hear our prayers.
You call us into a future
that we can hardly see from here in the present.
When we are stuck in the wilderness,
it is hard to see the promised land.
When we are in the desert,
it is hard to imagine anything coming to life.
When we are dried out and dried up,
it is hard to remember the cool taste of water.
When we are deep in despair,
it is hard to think of joy.
Your promises sound impossible to our weary souls:
The eyes of the blind will be opened?
The ears of the deaf unstopped?
Blossoms in the dry land?
Waters in the wilderness and streams in the desert?
It cannot be.
And yet, You make the impossible possible.
We have seen You do it before.
We have seen You breathe new life into dry bones.
We have seen You make a way where there is no way.
We are people of the resurrection,
even here in the wilderness,
and Your words give us hope.
Your impossible promises give us hope.
We are here in the present,
but You call us into the future—
a future bursting forth with life, with glory, with joy, with singing.
What a vision You have given us, God of life!
Help us face the future unafraid. Amen.

Lee Hull Moses
Chief of Staff, Office of the General Minister and President

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” – Isaiah 35:5-6a

The poet metaphorically describes the personal impact of the ancient royal release decree where a king, usually upon accession to the throne or at the conquest of another territory, curries favor with the people by canceling debts, freeing debt slaves, and releasing prisoners from confinement. The imagery of blindness, deafness, speechlessness, and impaired mobility alludes to the dark dankness of imprisonment which the poet adopts as a metaphor for the experience of Babylonian exile. The people, newly liberated by the release decree of the Persian emperor Cyrus at the time of his conquest of Babylon, would again see the light of day, hear the sounds and smell the sweet aromas of freedom as they ran free, singing praises to their God.

God of freedom,
free us from our own inability to see
the wounds we bear
in our spirits and our bodies,
and the wounds inflicted on others
by ancestors intent
on preserving their privilege and power.
Shine the bright light of truth
on the muddled history of our church.
Grant us the courage to tell the truth,
to celebrate what's good and noble,
and also to confess the sin
and take bold action to repair.
Unstop our ears
that we may hear the songs of freedom
and justice
that have been sung
throughout our history.
Give us strength

to run toward You,
to march ever forward
toward Your sovereign reign
of justice, peace, and wholeness
for all creation.
Give us the courage
to heal what's wounded
and celebrate what's healthy and whole.
In Your holy name. Amen.

Rick Lowery
President, Disciples of Christ Historical Society

This Way ...

“A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.” – Isaiah 35:8

Maya Angelou’s book *Wouldn’t Take Nothing For My Journey Now* refers to a lyric from the Spiritual “On My Journey Now.” It is the passage that comes to my mind after studying this passage. The road that God prepares for us invites us to unforgettable journeys.

God who guides,
The journey has been different this season,
yet the journey remains the same for this reason...
You are with us on this way.
Remind us to savor the experience of the journey,
not just focus on the destination.
Remind us that each moment of the journey
provides opportunity for transformation.
When we are weary, remind us that
You are with us on this way.
Whether our journey leads us to our neighbor across the street
or across the world,
You are with us on this way.
When we worry about the journey
or encounter despair,
remind us that a highway will be there.
Remind us of the strength that comes
when we journey together...
and don’t stray.
In the Name of Jesus Christ,
we pray and remember on each journey,
You are always with us on this roadway.

Rev. Sheila P. Spencer
Interim President, Disciples Home Missions

*“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.” – Isaiah 35:1-2*

Gracious and loving creator God of the desert and the desolate,
may Your desert bounties fill our dry souls to the overflow.
In the space of dry land and negative perception,
may we find life in the reservoirs of the living waters found in You.
Nourish with the prickly pear fruit,
the sour and thorny areas of our aching and troubled hearts.
Guide us through the Holy Path only You can create in the desert,
For You are God of all creation,
perfect in timing and salvation.
In the seemingly desolate desert,
there is abundant life.
Produce in us abundant life
in our seemingly lifeless despair.
May the power of Your Holy Spirit flow in and out of
the cacti and mesquite
of our desert-landscaped lives
and bring afresh the flowers that
spring forth to life from the tips of the saguaro.
As the birds settle on the cacti and sing,
let us erupt in songs of praises
to Your Holy and Unbreakable name.
Help us trust in You in the driest of times,
in the stillness of the dark
and in the lost moments of navigating through the desert moments
in our lives.
We pray in the matchless name of Your son Jesus. Amen.

Rev. Lori Tapia
Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries

“For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert” – Isaiah 35:6b

Creator God,
You bring us to life through the breaking of waters.
You bring us to new life through the breaking of
our baptismal waters
and, through Jesus Christ,
You bring us to living water.
Holy God,
as we celebrate all that You have already called us to do,
we pray for Your guidance.
We, like the Israelites, are a people in the wilderness
wondering where we will be called next.
We ask that You lead us to the streams You have set before us.
Help us discern where we are being called.
Lead us beside the waters so that we might be
replenished and nourished.
Let each of us drink deeply from Your streams
so we can share Your Good News,
Your Living Water with all people.
Water is our source of life
just as You are our source of eternal life.
We give You thanks for new life,
for life eternal,
for Your Living Water. Amen.

Rev. Maggie May Archibald
Director of Communications, Christian Church Foundation

“A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it; but it shall be for God’s people.” – Isaiah 35:8

As a denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) can be grateful to have survived the first twenty years of the twenty-first century. We not only survived, but we thrived to form more than 1000 new congregations. Although not all of these congregations have lasted and flourished, by God’s grace, most of them have. Therefore, we thank God for answered prayer, fully aware that prayer must continue if the church is to advance.

Most Holy and All-wise God,
You are faithful and merciful to those who trust You.
Thank You for the blessing of one thousand new congregations
in this community of the Body of Christ
known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
Thank You for those who sacrificed
and labored to provide resources for construction
and for those who have answered the call
to lead these new churches
as pastors and church planters.
But Lord, in the face of declining membership,
diminished finances, an absent generation,
systemic racism, xenophobia,
and a coronavirus which closes church doors for periods of time,
Please, hear our prayer.
Be with us through these weary and barren times.
We stand on Your promise
to never leave us alone;
that You will provide a highway,
called the Holy Way,
that leads us from victory to victory.
Use us to make more and more Disciples
who will serve You and follow You,
spreading Love’s message in word and deed.
Thank You for Your Son Jesus,

who turns death into life, darkness into light,
and who does all things well.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Timothy M. James
Associate General Minister
Administrative Secretary, National Convocation of the Christian
Church (Disciples of Christ)

*“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom...
Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
‘Be strong, do not fear!’
... your God... will come and save you.” – Isaiah 35:1, 3-4*

Pension Fund of the Christian Church cares for those who have spent their lives caring for others. Through our retirement benefits and Ministerial Relief and Assistance programs, we exist for the support of ministry.

Dear God of Grace and Glory,
You are with us in times of suffering
and in times of celebration.
When the desert threatens to overwhelm,
You show up in the blossoms of divine intervention.
We pray today for those in our midst
who understand what it means
to feel downtrodden, desperate, and depressed
due to death, disaster, or debt.
When we see one weep,
help us be there to help wipe away the tears.
We are grateful for the ability to be Your hands and feet,
to help strengthen those who feel feeble
in the face of surmounting burdens.
Thank You for providing for us such a bounty to share.
May we always keep You at the center of our lives,
knowing You are the One who keeps us strong, smart, and secure.
We pray this in the name of our strength and redeemer,
Jesus the Christ, Amen.

Sarah Renfro, Area Director, Pension Fund of the Christian Church
Matt Shears, Area Director, Pension Fund of the Christian Church
Aaron Smith, Area Director, Pension Fund of the Christian Church

“For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.” – Isaiah 35:6b-7

The water and the stream which Isaiah sees in the vision are not a drip-drop of water which only touches the surface of the parched land and disappears. It is a powerful stream and gushing tsunami which can change the whole landscape. These will bring new life to the land, and the thirsty ground will enjoy the lifegiving power once again. The church (Greek: *ekklesia*, “called out from”) is the people who are called by God “from” the world; from the world for the Kingdom of God, where all creation is blessed by the Creator and fellow creatures.

O God, our creator,
renew our churches
with Your life-giving power of healing and transformation
so that we can really serve
the purpose of Your callings.
Let us open our eyes
so that we can see our neighbors with love,
as You see them.
Let us go where they are
and share our blessings
by finding Your image in each other
so that we all might find
the real joy of Your kingdom among us.
Please change our mind
so that we might ask ourselves
“Am I a good neighbor?”
instead of asking “Who is my neighbor?”
O God,
fill our hearts with Your Spirit
so that we can be a passage of Your blessings

who bring Your life-giving love
to all our neighbors. Amen.

Rev. Chung Seong Kim
Executive Pastor
North American Pacific/Asian Disciples of the Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)