

# *Advent 2020*

*“Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God”*





Advent 2020 is a production of the Protestant Center  
for Pastoral Studies in Central America: CEDEPCA.

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Guatemala, October 2020.

# “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God”

(Is.40:1 NRSV)

Of adverse times that seem endless, of gloomy days without the possibility of sun, of cloudy horizons, the utopia of a new reality seems so distant. When the grayish conditions of God’s people submerge into a spiral of uncertainties, people huddle for a chance to do well. This has been, in part, the experience in this year, 2020, the year that will be remembered for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations, suffering, abandonment and death have surfaced again, under other circumstances, but with the same root: “people’s lives are not a priority”. Many tears have watered the ground, as if wanting to ask Mother Earth to bring forth that new reality that is only perceived in the shadow of utopia.

This evokes Deutero-Isaiah, when he warns of the prolonged suffering of God’s people in the context of the captivity in Babylon (Is. 1-39). At that time, he was the mediator of a call to repentance, to a renewal of the covenant with God that would once again make the lives of all people a priority. Between denunciations and harsh pronouncements, Isaiah envisions a new reality; God would do something new.

Then the prophet’s expression arises: “Comfort, console my people, says your God.” This gives way to a new scenario (Is. 40-55), full of wonderful expectations, of tender interventions that demonstrate God’s faithful support for

creation. That is why God insists on comfort, on relief, because the glory of God will come, making its way in the desert of suffering.

Our Advent celebration welcomes the comfort of our God. In the midst of adverse times, God’s glory is manifested in the face of Jesus Christ; that he came, that he comes, as comfort and hope for all nations. That longed-for utopia comes to meet us, giving us back the ability to dream and to fight, making an alliance with our God. Advent, then, invites us to be participants and protagonists of consolation, medicine for everyone.

For 28 years, CEDEPCA’s Advent publications have insisted on the hope and comfort of our God. This edition of Advent 2020 is no exception. It invites us to celebrate God’s tender intervention that always brings comfort while announcing a new time. We hope that by celebrating, personally or collectively, we will be able to discern the Divine Comforter at work in the midst of our circumstances.

In hope.

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The background features a soft, green watercolor wash that transitions from a darker shade on the left to a lighter, almost white shade on the right. A faint, circular logo is visible in the center, containing a cross and the acronym 'CEDEPCA'.

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*(Is. 40:1 NRSV)*

# The Christian Tradition of Advent

Advent (Lat. Adventus: advent, coming, arrival) is the celebration that has been defined since the first centuries of Christianity as a liturgical time in which the church has always prepared itself for Christmas Day or the birth (Nativity) of Jesus. It is a practice that invites people to share, pray and reflect during the four weeks leading up to Christmas, and to finish with a special celebration on Christmas Day.

Advent is a time of hope-action (active hope) that implies: commitment to humanity and to nature, struggle for justice, constant work to build the Reign of God here on earth, joy, festivity and celebration. Above all, it is a moment of tenderness, affection and love, because through our solidarity with other human beings and their needs, we remember the solidarity that God lives out with humanity through God's son, Jesus.

## The Advent wreath

An Advent wreath is used to mark the passage of time during the weeks of Advent and to accompany the reflections and prayers. This symbol is a wreath made up of green foliage. The circular shape symbolizes eternal life. The green represents hope and life. In the foliage four candles are inserted, to choose between: the purple that evokes repentance, the yellow that evokes faith in Jesus, the green that evokes hope, the pink that evokes joy and the red that evokes God's love.

The practice is to light a new candle each week. On Christmas, after lighting the four candles in the wreath, a white candle is lit in the center of the wreath. This evokes the purity and arrival of Jesus. The light and warmth of the candles represent the proximity of the birth of Jesus, the light of the world.

## The Advent themes

The reflections and prayers are divided into five moments: four weeks of Advent and Christmas Day. Each moment contains a specific theme taken from the readings offered by the Revised Common Lectionary, a biblical reading, a call to reflection, an approach to the current reality, biblical reflection, generative questions, an activity for the week and prayer.

In this edition, we thank the Rev. Betsey Moe, the Rev. Rafael Escobar and the Rev. Arnaldo Aguilar, for their contributions to the production of these reflections for this Advent season.

We hope that each space of Advent time will be a community experience of meditation, hope and commitment, grounded in the mystery of Jesus: God with us.

# Advent pastoral ministry

In the environment of the present reality, at the end of the year 2020, it is pertinent to strengthen an Advent ministry that responds in two ways: “Christmas” consumerism and the renewal of hope.

The season of Advent warns of the perverse utilitarianism of “Christmas” consumerism, typical of the end of the year dates. Pastorally, it is appropriate to call the people of God to recover the spirit of Advent, to pay attention to the transcendent eschatological dimension of the history of salvation. This call implies recovering the mystery of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ as a true gift of God for humanity.

Pastoral ministry during Advent, then, invites us to establish a free, critical and prophetic community. One that circulates in a way that is contrary to the hedonistic frenzy of the marketplace. An expectant community of the Savior, but grounded in the practice of justice, conversion, generosity and love.

From another perspective, Advent ministry is very pertinent to the renewal of hope, especially in the context of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. “Hope against hope”, between the aftermath and the panorama that the pandemic paints, the people of God are summoned to affirm life as a sign of hope.

Jesus Christ, who comes to human beings, dignifies life with a mysterious empathy that encourages walking by the power of the Spirit.

In this way, the Advent celebration is an experience of accompaniment that enlivens hope and empowers the church to become a visible sign of God’s grace.

In this accompaniment, churches, faith communities, cell groups, families or individuals can follow up this Advent celebration by sharing their reflections, their responses to the questions or their weekly activities. Active participation provides an extraordinary opportunity to experience a healing and encouraging community ministry.



- Introduction:

We celebrate with great joy the arrival again of this Advent season, in a special way, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Shadows and uncertainties have colored this year, but without ignoring the reality of our brothers and sisters, we celebrate God's saving actions in the midst of these times. "God has done something;" blessed be God's name.

Advent calls us to prepare for our encounter with Jesus. This preparation encourages us to "feelthink" our role in the future of the current reality. What is our responsibility? What is our response? This is what potentiates a transformative encounter with Jesus, one that allows us to continue talking about hope and good news at this time. Amen.

- Reading from Isaiah 64:1-12.

- Call to reflection:

One voice:

Beloved sisters and brothers, with hope we begin this Advent pilgrimage, full of gratitude to God for sparing our lives. We plead, O God, that you make your salvation shine on those who have suffered the ravages of the pandemic.

All voices:

Now therefore, Jehovah, you are our father and our mother; we are the clay, and you are the one who formed us; so we are the work of your hands.

One voice:

We light the first Advent candle, light of life and hope for all. That light that shines in the

darkness and does not succumb to darkness. Guiding light on the eternal path to abundant life.

All voices:

Now then, Jesus, you are the light of the world; enlighten every person, so that the vigor of life impels them to believe and to build a world of peace and justice. Amen.

- Our reality:

As we come to the end of a horrific year, many people are crying, "God, do something!" Over a million people across the globe have died from Covid-19, government leaders have forsaken public health for political gain, and we've seen age-old problems like systemic racism and police brutality, domestic violence and social isolation, climate change and the consumer habits that feed it increase in intensity, turning neighbor against neighbor. Naturally, we wish God would step in and make things right - because as a human race we don't seem to be capable of turning this world around on our own.

- Reflection:

"God, do something!" was the cry of God's exiled people as they returned to a Jerusalem in ruins, as we read in Isaiah 64. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence, to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!" Jerusalem's devastation was complete, and the people longed for God to "come down" like God did in fire and smoke when Israel was struggling to find their identity in the wilderness (Exodus 19).



We as Christians know that God does, eventually, “come down” to save. Not in smoke and in fire, but in flesh – in the person of Jesus Christ. God responds to the cries of God’s people, and the “comfort, comfort” spoken of in Isaiah 40 becomes real. But first, there needed to be for Israel an acknowledgement, a reckoning, of the devastation they were experiencing. They had to name the suffering and take responsibility for their own part so that they would not only welcome God’s intervention, they would be able to participate in it with humble hearts.

Isaiah 64 expresses the longing for God to “do something,” but it also expresses lament - beginning in verse 5 and building to the end: “There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity....Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?” (vv. 7, 12). Lament would be a necessary part of receiving the new life God had in mind for Israel.

In this year of global pandemic, when many of us are feeling frustrated, sad, and weary, it seems appropriate to begin Advent in longing—saying to God, “Come down!” “Do something!” But also, lament - saying to God, “The world is devastated by \_\_\_\_\_” and “We are not without fault.”

Justice advocates Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice write in their book, *Reconciling All Things*, “Lament is not despair. It is not whining. It is not a cry into a void. Lament is a cry directed to God. It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world’s deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are.”

In this first week of Advent, when we find ourselves longing for “comfort, comfort,” may we first be disturbed rather than distracted and sorrowful rather than numb. May we take the time to cry out to God and express the pain

we see and experience, knowing that God is faithful. When we begin in this way, we open ourselves to healing and restoration. With eyes and hearts wide open, we are ready for God to come and make all things new.

*Betsey Moe*

- Questions to deepen the reflection:

What are some of the feelings you normally have at the beginning of Advent? How is this year different?

How do you see God using the people’s lament in the process of healing - in scripture and in the world?

- Activity for the week:

This week, write your own prayer of lament - or write a different one each day. You may choose to use the formula often found in Biblical laments:

1. An introductory address to God, naming God’s attributes and remembering what God has been or done in the past on behalf of God’s people.
2. A heartfelt complaint that describes the suffering you are seeing or experiencing.
3. A confession of trust, even if you do not feel it right now.
4. A prayer for deliverance, appealing to God’s faithfulness.

- Prayer:

Beloved God, may the longing for your glorious interventions not dispel the reality of our paths. May the grace of Jesus Christ and your marvelous presence make us vehicles of divine comfort in the midst of the bleak panorama that many people live today. In Christ Jesus, Amen

- Introduction:

We continue our Advent journey, recognizing that it is a complex and challenging journey. Beyond the precious moments of hope and celebration, walking to meet Jesus also implies going through desert-like moments. This year has shown that the fragility of our lives, communities and societies is very serious, and that it is very difficult to anticipate timely consolation that guarantees the well-being of all.

But it is precisely at the center of this experience of survival that we find precious promises of God that animate our journey. We walk in these promises, beyond our sorrows and afflictions, waiting for that glorious encounter with Jesus. Today, in this Advent celebration, we can trace a path of hope by opening our hearts to be comforted and strengthened by the healing presence of the Savior. Amen.

- Reading from Isaiah 40:1-11.

- Call to reflection:

One voice:

Beloved brothers and sisters: It is good to be here today, walking towards our encounter with Jesus. The road is probably desert-like, but it is still a meeting place. May today be a renewing and healing experience for each and every one of us.

All voices:

We are here also to meet our own beings, our selves, in the reality of our frailties. We recognize that you have sustained us up to this moment and that you continue your tender plans of good for each person.

One voice:

We light the second Advent candle, announcing “comfort, consolation for your people.” We honor your loving intervention by opening space for you between the desert, the valley, the mountain and the hill. There is no distance, territory, race, creed or nation that your consoling light does not illuminate.

All voices:

Amen, comfort Lord! Console your people as we sing your praises and acknowledge that you come to us with so much hope for a better world. Amen.

- Our Reality:



In the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, some people expected that the virus would be a leveler, that all people were equally susceptible, and that all sectors of society would suffer. But as time went on and the virus spread, we learned that those who already had fewer resources were the most negatively affected. Those who do not have the choice to work from home are more often

in the pathway of the virus. Online school is not reaching the students who lack supervision and access to the internet. And when those lacking resources do get sick, they often cannot access or cannot pay for the healthcare required. COVID-19 has heightened the disparities that already existed within and between our countries.

These systemic disparities that run along racial, gender, and economic lines feel like too much to overcome. Those who have power do not want to relinquish it, and those without power cannot get out of the cycles that keep them down. Together, we are in a wilderness that we cannot see our way out of.

- Biblical reflection:

Through the prophet Isaiah, God declared to Israel, “Comfort, O comfort my people” when they were in the spiritual wilderness of exile. These words marked a new day for God’s people; the emphasis would no longer be on the community’s failings that, in part, led to the exile, but on God’s will and power to deliver and restore them as a people.

However, when Isaiah spoke, Jerusalem lay in ruins and the people were divided. The wilderness of exile was still felt. Israel was not comforted or comfortable; on the contrary, they were quite uncomfortable. Wouldn’t the greatest comfort be for God to rescue them out of their wilderness and bring them to a completely restored promised land?

God’s comfort of Israel in exile did not take the form of a quick rescue. Isaiah said, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.” Israel’s wilderness would be the setting where the work of transformation and way-straightening would take place, and, consequently, where God’s profound comfort would take hold. In the wilderness, they would remember their frailty (“all people are grass”) and God’s power and constancy (“but the word of our God stands forever.”) In the wilderness, they would lift up their voices and declare the hope found in the presence of God. In the wilderness, they would see clearly the hills and valleys - the crippling disparities in their communities - and hear God’s intention and call to level the ground.

Throughout the Old Testament, the wilderness was the backdrop of struggle and identity formation, where people like Hagar and Moses and the community of Israel experienced their

own frailty and God’s provision and call. The wilderness was the place where God’s people encountered the living God, received their identity as God’s beloved, and heard clearly the call to live lives of righteousness, justice, and peace. Wilderness was a place of re-birth.

When John the Baptist appeared on the scene - in the wilderness - it was for this very reason: to call people to a re-birth. John announced “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins;” it was time for the whole community to leave behind the forces that oppressed and be reborn to the new reality that God in Christ was bringing to the world.

This Advent, when we find ourselves in the middle of the COVID-19 wilderness - an uncomfortable place where the gap between hills and valleys is widening and the landscape in general is bleak - may we remember that God is here. God in Christ entered our wilderness, challenged the forces of evil, and overcame all forms of death. Our greatest comfort is that God meets us here and invites us into the redemptive work of preparing the way until the “glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together.”

*Betsey Moe*

- Questions to deepen the reflection:

In what ways is a COVID-19 world similar to a wilderness?

What great disparities do you see in your community? What have you seen God doing this year to dismantle the systems that cause the disparities?

How do you sense God is calling you to “prepare the way of the Lord” in this wilderness time?



- Activity for the week:

Go for a walk, if possible, in an uninhabited space and pay attention how God may speak to you through nature. Your nature space may be in your home garden, your neighborhood, a park or trail.

Begin by taking a few deep breaths and inviting the Spirit to be with you. If there is a breeze, imagine it as the wind/breath/Spirit of God.

Walk slowly and notice your surroundings. What do you see? What do you smell? What do you hear? Notice the temperature and feel of the air. You may want to reach out and touch something that you are curious about.

Let your gaze fall on one particular object: a leaf, a rock, a flower, a stick, an insect. If you are able, hold it in your hand and study its details. What might God be teaching you through the qualities of this object? What spiritual connections come to your mind?

Consider drawing this object as a way to further meditate on the spiritual lessons God may have for you. Journal your thoughts next to your drawing.

- Prayer:

We are grateful, O God, for your inexhaustible actions of salvation for all your creation. Thank you for entering our deserts, overcoming evils, rescuing life and thus manifesting “the glory of God” over all flesh. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

- Introduction:

Beloved brothers and sisters, today we are blessed to continue our Advent pilgrimage in this third week. The readings prompt us to recognize that this time of celebration should bring joy, peace, and blessing to all people. For this, we gratefully say:

Eternal God of life, we thank you for the blessing of allowing us to get closer to you, through this beautiful celebration of Advent. Thank you because this celebration reignites the expectation of our hope before your coming and the joy of knowing that you are here. Today we approach you, invoking your glorious name through this gathering, in communion, hope and complete joy. Hallelujah.

- Reading from Psalm 126:1-6.

- Call to reflection:

One voice:

Beloved brothers and sisters, today we come with joy and hope to continue our Advent pilgrimage. We open ourselves, God, to the joy of life that comes from your word and your love. We come together to proclaim that the year of the Lord's favor is already among us. Hallelujah.

All voices:

Today we gather in your name to proclaim your presence and the joy of the Holy Spirit who encourages us in the midst of our adversities. Welcome Spirit of life, love and joy.

One voice:

We light the third candle of Advent, proclaiming the joy of our salvation. By lighting this candle, we also light our hearts; to remember that beyond our crises, there is the light of your love that reminds us that we must never lose

the joy of life, because our good God is here. Hallelujah!

All voices:

May the wonderful light of your love never go out in our lives. And in the midst of circumstances, may we remember that your grace, love and blessing accompany us. Amen.

- Our reality:

How much we need to smile again today! This journey of isolation, pain, sorrow, anguish and much uncertainty has been a long one. Given the many losses, who wants to smile today? The note that is imposed seems to now be sadness, distrust and general fear, a fear that has led

us to close our social circles. We cannot embrace those we love, we cannot properly bury those we have lost, we cannot gather with our neighbors, and we cannot go to our churches because of the risks that this entails.

We are living in an unprecedented time. Nobody expected what we are experiencing today, and as if that were not enough, the

answers to the great existential anguish do not flow, nor do they reach those who need them most. In reality, these are extremely difficult times. However, faced with this reality, today more than ever we must turn our eyes to the light of the Word of God, so as not to lose sight of the horizon and to know that what is happening to us does not have the last word. Advent is a sign of hope because God is with us!

- Biblical reflection:

The reading of Psalm 126 evokes one of the harshest and most dramatic situations that the people of Israel experienced. For 70 years they had to live in Babylon as exiles. They arrived at



this situation because they allowed themselves to be carried away by greed and social injustice, condemning many people to poverty and marginalization.

But one day, the exile ended and they were able to return to their beloved land. The psalm reflects the fact that the return was like a dream! Something incredible! The time of ignominy and pain had ended. The answer was immediate. The people, with joyous songs and with abundant smiles, express their joy and gratitude that God has freed them to live with dignity again.

It was an event like no other that restored their freedom, their dignity and their joy in life. This powerful act of God is marked by the people in their historical memory; they illuminate it with beautiful metaphors that suggests the freshness of the water that returns to fertilize the dry fields, producing life. It is equal to the joy of a peasant farmer who has patiently sown and now reaps with immense joy.

That is the same spirit that the prophet Isaiah picks up in chapter 61. Isaiah is prophesying the imminent arrival of the “acceptable year of the Lord” or “year of the Lord’s favor”: a divine project full of peace, of redemption, of liberation that gives dignity and self-respect to persons who are poor, marginalized, sick and broken-hearted. It is liberation from various captivities. It is the presence of the Spirit of God in the midst of life. This is good news.

For all this, Mary the mother of the Lord, despite her youth, does not refuse to be the bearer in her womb of the fulfillment of the arrival of the “acceptable year of the Lord.” And with a resounding voice she expresses: “My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, because God has been mindful of the humble state of God’s servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is God’s

name! “ (Luke 1: 46-49). Mary perceives that full redemption for all humanity will be born from her womb.

With the birth of Jesus, the arrival of that desired acceptable year is crystallized. That is why John the Baptist proclaims: “Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The prophets and Mary, the mother of Jesus, are part of the history of our salvation. They and she received the good news firsthand and did not keep it; they lived it and shared it.

The same happened with the community in Thessalonica, to whom the Apostle asks that, as evidence of the presence of the year of the Lord’s favor, to always be joyful, to pray without ceasing, to give thanks to God in every situation, not to quench the Spirit. And he adds, “Because this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” The will of Christ remains the same, that we all achieve the blessing of that acceptable year of our God.

For this reason, in this season of Advent, we celebrate with hope and joy that the wonderful light of the birth of Jesus has reached us. This is not only good news; it also produces deep joy in life because God, in the glorious incarnation in Christ, has given us life, wonderful light and hope forever. Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah! God is with every one of us. Amen.

*Rafael Escobar*

- Questions to deepen the reflection:

What are the things that still rob us of our joy in life?

What signs of the “acceptable year of the Lord” do we see in our church and in our society?

How can we maintain joy despite the crises we are experiencing?

- Activity for the week:

During this week, you should be vigilant for the signs of the “year of the Lord’s favor.”

Please write down during the week the visible signs of joy at the presence of the “year of the Lord’s favor” (Testimonies, news, actions that produce joy and life).

Share these signs as you meet with the Advent group.

- Prayer:

Eternal God, [we express] our deep gratitude for your son Jesus Christ, the protagonist of that “acceptable year” that brings liberation and dignity for poor, marginalized, sick and broken-hearted people. May your presence and your power, through all those who love your coming, bring actions of love and solidarity for persons who suffer. In Christ we pray, Amen



- Introduction:

Beloved brothers and sisters, welcome to the celebration of this fourth week of Advent. The wait is shortening and our great celebration is already very close at hand. Let us continue in our preparation to celebrate with joy and freedom that today we are living temples of the Spirit of God.

Thank you, God of life, for the blessing of living under your grace and eternal love. Join us on this pilgrimage of faith and encounter, and continue animating our lives so that we can continue to proclaim your mercy and great goodness. Amen.

- Reading from 2 Samuel 7: 1-11.

- Call to reflection:

One voice:

Brothers and Sisters, let's make our own this part of the beautiful song of Mary, the mother of Jesus: "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior". May we glorify this day to the eternal God of life and rejoice in God's love.

In this fourth Advent meeting, let us ask the Giving Spirit to continue encouraging our lives and affirming our faith.

All voices:

Today we meet in your name, to proclaim your living and real presence in the midst of your people. Thank you for giving us your Spirit of Love that fills us with peace, joy and holy vigor.

One voice:

We light the fourth Advent candle, proclaiming the presence of the Spirit of God, who makes us God's people and fills us with God's love. May this wonderful light always remind us of

our commitment to live as God's people in the service of love.

All voices:

May the wonderful light of the presence of your sweet Holy Spirit never go out. Today we proclaim with joy that we are your family with courage. Give us strength so that, in the midst of this critical situation, we will remember that your light inspires us towards Love.

- Our reality:

We are already very close to the celebration of Christmas. Perhaps we are missing the contrived little songs and the commercial music that flood the atmosphere, telling us that the commercial Christmas is here. All that glitter and noise ends up decimating a more fitting vision of Christmas.

The church that is conscious of the presence of God in the world, through the incarnation of Jesus, does not celebrate a pagan festival; it proclaims a theological event: The incarnation of God in Christ in our life and in our history.

Therefore, we cannot stop proclaiming and celebrating, and for all this, we open ourselves to Advent that prepares us towards the path of our greatest celebration.

We know that the pandemic has greatly affected many people in the world. There has been much suffering, a lot of losses, many separations and especially a great deal of discouragement due to the prevailing uncertainty. But now it is right that we must build an encouraging vision by calling people to open their hearts, their homes, their churches to the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

Jesus brings us peace, joy, blessing, redemption and eternal life. He prepares us to begin living, here and now, his reign of peace and



justice. That is why we invite you not to get carried away by the commercial environment created by the system that takes advantage of something that makes so much sense and so much value. The birth of Jesus continues to be a joyous celebration because its [purpose] is to re-plant joy, purpose, and meaning now, when we need it. Therefore, let's keep walking and come closer to the word of life in order to transform this reality that the crisis has caused. Come on. Life will triumph!

- Biblical reflection:

The biblical passages of this fourth Advent gathering place us in various events that give meaning and content to our pilgrimage of faith. The 2 Samuel passage is situated in a contradiction established by the famous King David. He had insisted that he should build a house (temple) for Jehovah. At that time there was no temple in all of Israel, because they did not have the slightest idea about that type of construction.

As a result of the political connections that David established as king, he wanted to imitate other kingdoms that already had temples built for their gods. Little by little he became the most famous king of the monarchy, created in parallel fashion to the original intention of God, who always saw Israel as God's people. The monarchy did not quite understand that, and encouraged by international relationships, they established a state that was never in God's original plans.

One more note, David achieved three great political contributions that made him not only famous but also catapulted him into a political-religious icon for Israel.

1. He achieved the longed-for national unity. The twelve tribes accepted his leadership and recognized him as their king.

2. He established the political capital in Jerusalem. To achieve this, he expelled the original Jebusite owners of the city called Jebus, founded 3,000 years before Christ. The geographical position of this city was strategically important and David knew it. Later it would be called: The City of David.

3. He managed to organize, establish and strengthen the national army. Until then the people had not known this social rank, which now they would have to accept.

With these achievements, he established international and commercial relations with the neighbors of the territory now demarcated by newly-established borders.

But God, hearing David's plans, rejected them, saying: "I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. 7 Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'" (2 Samuel 7: 6-7 NRSV).

The confusion was that the house that God promised was not a monarchical dynasty, but rather to make of his people a "people-family" that understood that they would be light to all the nations of the earth to proclaim the mercy, justice and goodness of God for all people. "I will be your God and you will be my people," God told them. That is why Mary, the mother of Jesus, exclaims in her wonderful song full of God's grace and Spirit: "God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (Luke 1: 54-55 NRSV).

What God promised was to make a house (family offspring) of grace, love, mercy and great

goodness forever. This was a vision that would reach all the peoples of the earth, starting with people who were impoverished and marginalized from life. That was the mission given by God to Israel. How far the mission was from the monarchy!

Psalms 89 was written by Ethan the Ezrahite, and reflects precisely God's dream for humanity. "I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens." (Psalm 89: 1-2). And this is what he promised David. The megalomaniacal dreams of King David not only distorted the original vision; they also gave way to the ideological line of Zionism that is revered today. Why do we stray so far from God's original dream? In this season of Advent, let us return to the essence of our beautiful celebration; may we proclaim that one day the mercy, love, goodness and justice of God will fill the whole earth. Hallelujah.

*Rafael Escobar*

- Questions to deepen the reflection:

What were the root causes that provoked distortions of the original vision?

What must we do, during this time, to recover God's original dream?

- Activity for the week:

During this week, make a plan to visit or call someone who is suffering the ravages of disease, marginalization or poverty. Take a simple gift that makes God's mercy visible.

Let's share our experiences next week.

- Prayer:

Beloved Jesus, thank you for sharing your life and your love with your people. Today, in this celebration of Advent, we want to make the commitment to live the rest of our lives, being living witnesses of your love, your mercy, your justice and great goodness. In your name we pray. Amen.



- Introduction:

We come to the end of this Advent journey, remembering the birth of Jesus and the implications it had. This event invites us, once again, to renew our faith and to marvel at the grace of the baby in the manger. He is the longing of the peoples, the dream of those who wait for darkness to give way to a dawn of joy and happiness.

From the vision of the prophet Isaiah, to the reaction of Luke the evangelist, the coming of the Savior marks a new time of good news of great joy for all the people. Today, on this last day of Advent, we return to the joy that the presence and inspiration of the Savior brings among those who wait for him. Glory to God for this indescribable gift!

- Reading Isaiah 9:2-7

- Call to reflection:

One voice:

We thank you, God our Creator, for never abandoning your people, by giving us a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, whom we celebrate today as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. He is the consolation that inspires us to continue the journey of and through life.

All voices:

Today we trust that Jesus will reign over the whole world and there will always be peace. His reign will be invincible, and justice and right will reign forever. Almighty God will do this because of the great love he has for us.

One voice:

We light the Christmas candle, stating that “there will not be darkness forever;” that, although this year has brought much gloom to

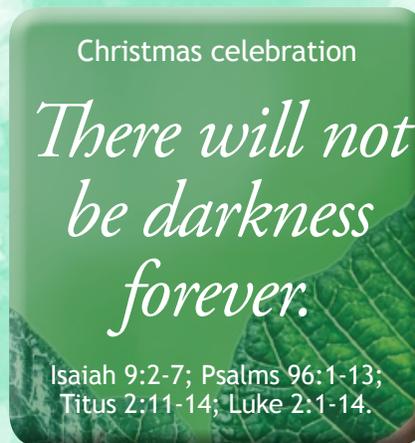
our lives and that of our sisters and brothers, the light of Jesus is reborn: Light that is life, communion, justice and peace.

All voices:

Creator God, who called forth the light from darkness, we are here to allow ourselves to be enlightened by your presence and to expose ourselves to the power of your Holy Spirit. As we celebrate Jesus in our midst, guide our steps to bring comfort and hope wherever we go. Amen.

- Our reality:

At the end of this current year, facing the celebration of Christmas, a diversity of feelings emerge in tension with one another. Month by month we have been revolving around the threat of the pandemic and its aftermath. We have lived through learning about and fighting an evil that suddenly broke into all aspects of our lives. With that tension, and still under many risks and losses, we have reached the end of the year.



How to celebrate in such a hostile environment? How to resume the joy of Christmas when the horizon looks so uncertain?

Although the market spares no effort in promoting a consumerist Christmas, the current time, with its risks and losses, provides us with an opportune environment for a renewed Christmas celebration grounded in its essence. Because Christmas is new, it is the birth of a new time, of the birth of Jesus from the deepest darkness. The hope that is not subject to the pandemic is what still remains for God’s people; hope is what is neither bought nor sold.

- Biblical reflection:

Life eventually presents different shades and colors. The least desired, perhaps, are those dark, gloomy nuances, such as those referred to by the prophet Isaiah regarding the people of God at a given historical moment (Is 9:1-7). “Darkness, deep darkness, shadows of death,” are some terms of the prophecy that reflect the terrible condition of a people who yearn for joy, rejoicing, and liberation.

This people is told that “there will not be darkness forever;” that no matter how dense the darkness may seem, no matter how strong or very stable, it will not be forever. The prophet invites us to dream of the end of the dark empire of evil. He invites us to dream of that moment when the yoke, the flagellant rod and the oppressive scepter are broken.

Darkness will be no more, because God has prepared a new time of “great light” that will change the gloomy tones into a wonderful prism of bright and cheerful colors. The irony of the prophet includes such a protagonist of this new time as a “a child”, in contrast to the scepter of the oppressor and the warrior. That infant will be the guarantor of a reign of peace, judgment and justice for all the people.

In the Gospel of Luke, the coming of that light is materialized, breaking through the dense darkness. The context of the birth of Jesus is also distinguished by its dark and gloomy nuances; once again there is a population groaning under deplorable conditions. We refer to that state in which it seems as though dawn will never come, there is no good news, and there are no encouraging expectations.

However, the darkness will be overcome because God has arranged a new time. As Walter Brueggemann stated well in the book *The Prophetic Imagination*: “The birth of Jesus supposes the abrupt end of a Herodian reality

that seemed to be destined to last forever, creating for marginal people a new historical situation that, due to the prevailing despair, no one could have foreseen.”

For his part, the evangelist Luke presents some details of the birth of Jesus (Lk.2:1-7) which also occurs in deplorable conditions. Beginning with his birth, the story of Jesus is grafted into the history of the suffering people. This mysterious intrusion is incarnated under an established regime, although not to perpetuate it, but to displace it. The time of “great light” had arrived and the birth of that child spoke of it.

The marginal collective of shepherds would be the first recipients and witnesses of the birth of “the Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk.2: 8-14). The luminous angelic manifestation aroused among them amazement and reverence, but above all, “news of great joy for all the people.” For those who thought that the night would never end, now right in front of them was the saving presence of Jesus, the hope and the light for all humanity.

All the people would be summoned to this saving grace, for God “... scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty (Lk.1:51-53).”

At last, God’s comfort was coming, as it does today, through his kingdom of peace, judgment, and justice for all the people. Jesus the Savior, the life-giving word and presence, all the way from the prophets and the evangelists to today’s communities of faith; for women and men, adults and infants, citizens and foreigners, Jesus continues to be life and the way to life.

Properly, the angelic vision inaugurates a song that must be perpetuated forever: “Praise God in highest heaven! May there be peace on earth for people who please God!” (Lk. 2:14 PDT) May

this praise be reborn every day, as a product of hope in Jesus the Savior, the hope that invites us to join in the efforts of peace in every tribe, language and nation.



Let us unite, brothers and sisters. Let us celebrate with joy the birth of Jesus in our midst, that blessed intrusion that allows us to dream and work for a different world. May the Holy Spirit breathe life into each person at this time, in such a way that we become light and good news for all creation.

*Arnoldo Aguilar*

- Questions to deepen the reflection:

What darkneses do you identify as the most threatening at this time?

In what way does faith in Jesus make itself relevant to our social reality?

- Activity for the week:

Plan or participate in a Christmas celebration around a table; include an “empty chair” to represent all those people who are currently suffering the ravages of the pandemic. Pray for these people, that the hope of the deepest Christmas may shine in their lives.

- Prayer:

God, we recognize your struggle for life and the extraordinary way in which you break into history to rescue the joy of living. Thank you for Jesus the Savior. Thank you for exchanging the empire of darkness for a kingdom of light and hope for all people. We give glory to your holy name, as we celebrate Jesus, living word and life-giving presence in our midst. Amen.



Give a gift  
with creativity,  
without violence,  
nor discrimination,  
nor ecological harm.

When giving gifts, consider sharing that which expresses, more than an economic value, our appreciation for the lives of persons and of the planet.

Avoid gifts that encourage violence, discrimination, war, a sedentary lifestyle or damage to the environment, with the understanding that we are all responsible for building a culture of peace among and respect for both human beings and the natural environment.

Let's give and gift with creativity, stimulating life, sister/brotherhood, peace, care for the planet, and thus, hope for a better world.

If the greatest gift that humanity has received was given in a common manger, perhaps we can find a way to give with this same inspiration.



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