

ADVENT 2022

“I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

2 Corinthians 6:16, NRSV





Advent 2022 is a production of the Protestant Center for Pastoral Studies in Central América, CEDEPCA.

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“I WILL LIVE IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM, AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.”

2 COR. 6:16, NRSV

Looking toward the final days of the year 2022, we resume with joy the warm news of Advent, in contrast to the dystopic nuances of our national and international reality. Despite that, the hope fostered by Advent invites us to celebrate life with the certainty that Jesus is born, lives and walks among his people.

In this edition, we rejoice over 30 years of contributing to the celebration of Advent in different contexts. Thanks be to God for this beautiful journey! Thirty years of fostering a space for hope and working for peace for all people.

As a theme, we selected the biblical text of 2 Cor. 6:16. In this text, we hear the echo of the tradition received by the writer, probably from texts such as Lv. 26:12; Jer. 32:38; Ez. 37:27. In these texts, framework of ideas and instructions, radically interpreted in order to establish a clear contrast with other peoples and religious traditions, the cosmivision of choosing the people of God predominates.

In 2 Corinthians, it still doesn't seem possible to assimilate the perception of universal salvation by God in the midst of all peoples. Nevertheless, the writer derives distinct “irreconcilable” contrasts in order to give evidence to the declaration “you all are the temple of the living God.” (16b) a declaration that is the product of the genius, interpretation and the tradition of the author of the text. It is the same declaration that announces the mysterious divine immanence in creation.

In this context, we affirm the certainty of the expression, “I will live in this people, and I will walk among them. I will be their God and they shall be my people.” (16c).

Through the lens of universal salvation in Jesus Christ, and of the economy of the reign of God, “this people” is re-signified in the vital experience of every person who receives the good news of the Savior.

Opportunely, on the eve of Advent, there is good news for all the people, for every language and every nation. God, in the face of Jesus, is born of the people, lives among the people, and walks with the people. Beyond privileges and genealogies, the Savior incarnates life with all of its natural nuances. Her life, his life, the lives of them, of these; of those who are and those who are not; in short, life where the winds of the Spirit make history.

Advent reminds us of the marvelous reality of a God who is near to us, who is among us, who knows how to walk our journeys with us. Alleluia! God descends as if to melt into an embrace with our faith and to encourage our work in the challenging surroundings in which we live. It is what the coming of the Son of God inspires in us, to walk together, in the sweet company of the one who has promised. “I will be your God, and you shall be my people.”

In hope,

Msc. Arnolando Aguilar B.
Coordinator, Biblical Theological Education

Licda. Judith Castañeda
General Coordinator, CEDEPCA



30 years of Advent

HOPE RENEWED YEAR AFTER YEAR (1992-2022)

The work begun by CEDEPCA with churches and communities in different contexts has strengthened friendships and mutual learning over the course of many years. One of the fruit of these relationships, during the last decade of the last century, was the interchange with the Presbyterian Church (USA) that allowed us to become acquainted with marvelous liturgical practices such as Advent.

That motivated us to promote this important liturgy, so full of content and hope, in the Central American context. Thus, in 1992, the advent material “What is it that we are celebrating?” was produced, an Advent guide utilizing the publication “Whose Birthday is it, Anyway?”, published by the Presbyterian Hunger Program in its 1992 edition. This resource was translated and adapted by Luz María Coto de Peña.

The Advent material took on the form of a magazine, disseminated and utilized by various Presbyterian churches in Guatemala and, little by little, among Nazarene and Pentecostal churches in different locations. This was used particularly among the churches pastored by women and men who were involved in processes of the biblical and theological education offered in CEDEPCA.

It wasn't until the 1999 edition, at the initiative of Judith Castañeda, Coordinator of CEDEPCA, that CEDEPCA began to elaborate an Advent magazine, created and grounded in our Guatemalan and Central American reality. This initiative involved the contributions of Héctor Castañeda, Elizabeth Carrera, Verónica Pérez, Alejandra Díaz, Coni Ramos, Eddy Foronda, Angel Román, Rafael Escobar, Anne Sayre, Miguel Ramírez and Jorge Esquivel. From there forward, we have invited the participation of writers, both women and men, who announce Advent, grounded in theology, in the Bible, and in pastoral work or social action in the Central American context.

In this spirit of renewal, from the year 2001 onward, the magazine stopped being entitled “What is it that we celebrate?” and began to take on other titles. We recall a few of them: “Preparing Jesus' birthday”; “Whose birthday is it?”; “Peaceful night?”; “Truly celebrating”; “Preparing the way to Jesus”; “Following in the steps of Jesus”; “Waiting and hope: the meaning and the significance of Advent”; and “Do justice... Love with mercy...Walk humbly with God”, among others.

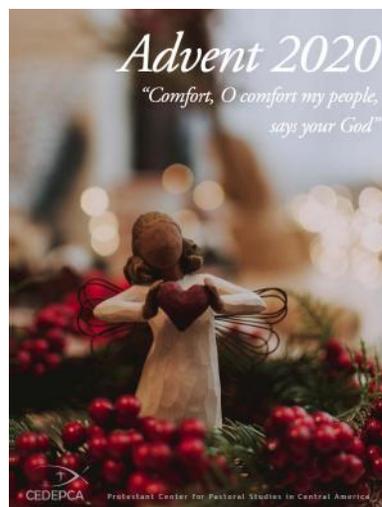
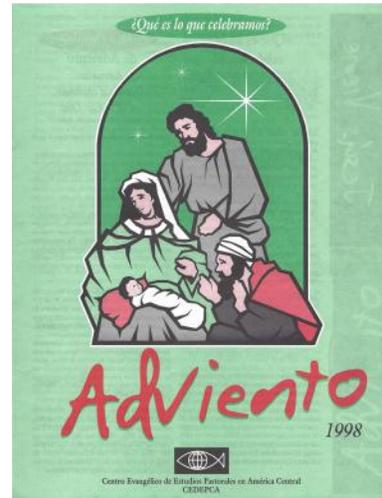
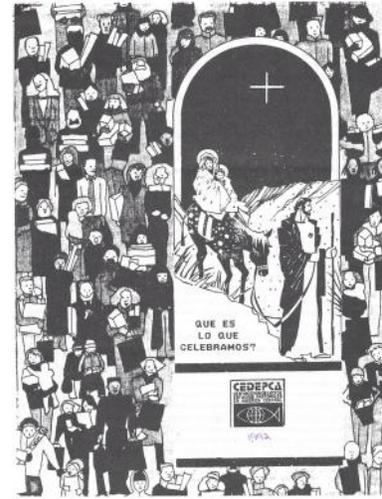
In the 1997 edition, we began the inclusion of an insert to promote the giving of toys that don't encourage violence. For the 2007 edition, the reflections were written by Guatemalan theologian and poet, Julia Esquivel. Beginning with the 2008 edition, reflections were included in a section called “How are we?” that later became known as “Our reality,” in order to situate the reflections in our context.



As the years passed, technology made it possible to produce and transmit the Advent material to different national and international audiences. Because of this, it became necessary to translate the material into the English language, with the understanding that English-speaking communities await this important contribution year after year.

There wouldn't be enough space to enumerate all of the persons who have been part of this history during 30 years, from those who formed part of the editorial teams to those who have written the reflections. From those who do the graphics and design of each production, to those who have shared the publications. It has been an effort in the convergence of gifts and talents, from the people of God, for the people of God.

CEDEPCA celebrates 30 years of providing coherent and contextual input in order to encourage active hope through the celebration of Advent. We fervently hope that every person, every family and every faith community will find in this resource a light to encourage faith and the courage to inspire the presence of Jesus among all of us. Glory to God in the highest for these 30 years of service and walking together!



Voices and gestures

ON 30 YEARS OF ADVENT

“Receiving for a number of years now the CEDEPCA guide in order to move through the time of Advent has meant for me a concrete proposal for how to live Advent as a Christian woman and mother. It has offered me concrete, practical and doable ideas in a time that for many is increasingly less spiritual. It makes me feel that I don’t walk alone, rather that there are many sisters and brothers with desires to prepare the way of the Lord and to enable him to be born in the hearts of others. My best wish for you all is that these 30 years of continuing these publications will last like the sun from age to age.” **Paula Hernández Pérez**, *Catholic church, Guatemala*.

“We have been using the Advent materials from CEDEPCA for a number of years now. It is very enriching material, spiritually, theologically, and pastorally. It has served us as a guide; it’s very instructive and broad as well. We have taught it and preached it in our congregation. It permits us to carry a message of hope in the time of Christmas that is so precious; it has also allowed us to see biblical texts contextualized to the Latin American reality, to our own reality – in addition to having a very balanced connotation with respect to gender, women, social justice, and children. And that has allowed us to enrich the church in that perspective, in that theological cosmivision. I thank CEDEPCA for this production that has enriched us in marvelous ways. Thank you.” **Miguel Vargas**, *of the Divine Savior Church in Calle Blancos, Costa Rica*.

“The important holistic Biblical, historical and socio-economic work that CEDEPCA carries out yearly for the creation/edition of Advent is a jewel that enriches life for those who study and share the material, as well as the edifying message for the persons who listen to and share the material. I sum it up with 2nd Timothy 3: 16-17.” **Priscila Arévalo**, *ruling elder of the Central Presbyterian Church, Guatemala City*.

“For me, 30 years of the publication of Advent by CEDEPCA, means counting on a valuable tool, a study material that we develop in our church, in addition to sharing it with friends in other institutions in my country.” **Nora Montenegro**, *Neo-pentecostal Methodist Church, The Good Samaritan Evangelistic Center; Coordinator, CEDEPCA’s Women’s Ministry, Nicaragua*.

“This beautiful liturgical tool is used in many churches with the material CEDEPCA provides. In our case, we brought the practice to the Mennonite church and, to date, at least two of the congregations have been faithfully developing Advent. It has been a very special contribution that CEDEPCA has offered so far and should not give up.” **Rafael Escobar**, *Professor, Anabaptist Latin American Seminary, Guatemala*.

“Through the annual editions, [CEDEPCA] provides an always fresh and renewing opportunity to encourage hope in society and faith communities around the period of Advent.” **Lubia de León**, *ecumenical group, Women and Theology Nucleus of Guatemala*.

“Preparation in community of the good news of salvation; Jesus was born to bring life and light”. **Bianka Paz**, *facilitator for Women’s Ministry and Disaster Ministry in CEDEPCA; Sunday School teacher in Central Presbyterian Church, Guatemala City.*

“What a blessing it is to carry out this ministry. A time of unity in the family, recalling each time the immense love of Jesus that dwells in our hearts, through his word and these liturgical practices”. **Josué Ruiz Sosa**, *elder member of worship committee of the Central Presbyterian Church, Guatemala City.*

“Thank you, Lord, for the Advent studies. They encourage me to reflect on situations of daily life, like taking care of my relationships in light of the Word of God, like caring for the environment and reflecting on your life, Lord Jesus Christ, your wonderful works in our lives. Amen”. **Vilma Muralles**, *deacon the Central Presbyterian Church, Guatemala City.*

“I give thanks to God for all of you as the CEDEPCA team, whom God-with-us, Emmanuel, has guided, inspired and expressed both on paper and now in another modality, the Word of God brought to life in Jesus.” Yoly Álvarez, *former auditor for CEDEPCA, Julia Esquivel group, Saint John the Apostle Church and Peniel Presbyterian Church.*

“Many thanks for sharing with me this marvelous material. I admire the dedication and work of CEDEPCA. I feel honored to be able to receive this generous gift from you. It will be a pleasure to share it with other seekers of Hope!” **Silke Appel**, *Professor, Rafael Landívar University, Catholic Church of Guatemala.*

“Another beautiful team effort. Many thanks. I look forward to the joy of reading these reflections.” **Rachel Lausch**, *Presbyterian Church (USA).*

“Many thanks. Very lovely material.” **Maribel Díaz**, *Church of the Nazarene in Guatemala.*

“Thank you. Very valuable material.” **Cinthia Méndez**, *Catholic Church of Guatemala.*



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 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 involves a commitment to humanity and to nature; a struggle for justice, on-going 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

To mark the passing of the weeks of Advent and accompany the reflections and prayers, an "Advent wreath" can be used. This symbol consists of a crown 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 liturgy consists of lighting a new candle each week. At Christmas, after lighting the four candles of the crown, a white candle is lit in the center of the crown, it 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. We thank Nery Pérez, Lubia de León, Angel Román, Violeta Rocha and Betsey Moe, for their contributions in writing these reflections for this special edition. 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.



PASTORAL MINISTRY OF ADVENT

A journey in solitude, without the warmth and the word of a companion, makes the road longer and more uncertain. To accompany, to be accompanied, to accompany one another, adds vigor and certainty to our steps of faith. Therefore, now more than ever, a pastoral ministry of Advent is needed. Pastoral ministry that guides the people of God in discerning the times and the hope that can be rescued. This makes active hope relevant, perhaps a counter-current, but visionary and committed to the good news of the salvific work of God.

The Advent season invites us to reflect on the true meaning of the arrival of Jesus in our history, setting Christmas consumerism to one side. 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 humanity, 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.



First week of Advent: November 27, 2022
Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122:1-9; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

TIME OF HOPE AND VIGILANCE: WALKING IN THE LIGHT OF THE LORD

Nery Pérez

Introduction

Blessed be the name of our God, who has made the way over the last 30 years for creating community around the hope our Savior Jesus Christ brings to the world! In Advent, we renew our faith and we recover hope. These are not illusory actions, much less alienating intentions; we bring our hearts from the crucible of our realities so that at least a spark of gospel hope will orient and renew us.

Each year when the time for celebrating Advent arrives, we have the opportunity to reflect, individually and collectively, in order to admire the mystery that, in Jesus, has approached humanity. But beyond expectations, it is a time for us to be participants in those divine interventions that, from time to time, and despite griefs and sorrows, open space in history. May the celebration of Advent this year fill us with joy in believing, in hoping, and in participating in the building of a world of peace and harmony, as has been the desire of our Savior.

Reading from Isaiah 2:1-5

Call to reflection

One voice:

God our Creator, we come to you as a family, under the shadow of your grace and mercy. We know that you have preserved us, and that you have brought us to this moment. Our longing is to hear your call.

All voices:

Yes, Lord God, our Savior. Like the shepherds keeping watch in the night, from this place we are also among those who are longing to hear the news of great joy for all the people.

One voice:

We light the first candle of Advent, sign of our hope, sign of the strength that calls us to hope. May our steps be guided by your light.

All voices:

Amen! We direct ourselves toward our encounter with Jesus. We await Him with renewed hope and with indescribable joy.

Our reality

We are immersed in a reality in which the business of war and the purchase and sale of weapons are part of what people believe gives them security. In the midst of armed violence that emotionally creates insecurity, fear and violence take a walk through linger in our cities; that is why we need to build peace. The society in which we live is asleep; even the church is asleep, when it molds itself to or follows the current of the world. Instead of walking in the light of God, people seem to live in darkness; they are attracted to entertainment, to parties where they get drunk and act in vulgar ways, in lust and envy, in all kinds of vices, as in the time of Noah, eating, drinking, getting married. They live in manners that are far too relaxed, without thinking about the second coming of Jesus Christ, as though it is not an event that is as imminent as it is sudden.

Reflection

It is Advent Season, the beginning of a new year of celebrations according to the liturgical calendar. Jesus is about to arrive; let's prepare ourselves to receive him with fervor. It is a special time of joy in life; let's celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ. Paulo Freire points out the following: "It is necessary to have hope in the sense of giving hope. (Esperanzar in Spanish.) There are people who hope in the sense of waiting. (Esperar in Spanish.) And waiting is not hope. To give hope (esperanzar) is to get up, to arise, to build, to not give up. To give hope is to carry forward, to unite other people to make a different world."¹

This is the hope-giving message of the prophets according to the reading from Isaiah. In Psalm 122, the Psalmist expresses the joy of going to the house of God, of a life that renounces that which the consumer- and pleasure-oriented society offers, because each time the coming of Jesus Christ is closer. Romans, Isaiah's servant (the community), and the gospel of Matthew, old vigilant in awaiting that imminent return, affirm the same.

For his part, Isaiah invites us to walk in the light of God, with the certainty that God is present in the story of our daily living. This is where we will see salvation. The prophet is concerned about peace, about the well-being of each person, the right to food sovereignty where the weapons of war are converted into farming instruments to produce food and to combat malnutrition. Peace is necessary so that there can be development and well-being.

The Psalm speaks to us of a Jerusalem that evokes peace; alongside peace is the fruit of prosperity and well-being in a holistic manner; peace within the city for its inhabitants and its visitors. The second reading issues an urgent call to awaken from slumber, to be vigilant; salvation is closer that we had thought it was. Walk in the light of day, hope-filled in the imminent coming of Jesus Christ, in the midst of social and political uncertainty.

The Gospel urges us to be expectant and vigilant, because we do not know the day in which Jesus will come. This is the kerygma or announcement of the gospel, which the church has proclaimed constantly. It is a hopeful message and a call to be vigilant, and it is why we need to walk in the light of day, in the light of God.

Questions for reflection

- Is it possible to build an earthly Jerusalem while we are awaiting a heavenly or new Jerusalem?
- Is our faith community asleep or awake with regard to the coming of Jesus?
- Are we covered or clothed with the works of Jesus Christ that are in the service of life?

Activity for the week

Maintain a hope-giving and vigilant attitude through actions that promote the well-being of the family and the community and the fervor of the beginning of a new year of celebrations according to the liturgical calendar. Read and reflect on the daily readings for this week.

Prayer

We thank you, God, for this beginning of the liturgical year, for this time of Advent that invites us to trust in the manifestation of your salvation. It's a hopeful time and a time of vigilance. We want to walk in the light of God. Amen.

¹Freire, Paulo, in *El Diario Bíblico 2022, Para Unir mejor la Vida y la Biblia* [To better Unite Life and the Bible], Misioneros Claretianos de América, printed in China.

Second week of Advent: December 4, 2022

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalms 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12.

GUARANTEE JUSTICE FOR THE IMPOVERISHED

*Lubia de León***Introduction**

Our lives are a weaving: a weaving of our personal and collective stories that arise from diverse events and circumstances. These form frameworks for distinct understandings of the world around us. In this inter-pandemic time of uncertainty, in the face of economic and political problems on a global level, it would seem that hope flickers like an intermittent light that turns on and off, as if on a string of colored Christmas lights.

It could be that the critical conditions that we confront today generate worry, despair or simply indifference, but as communities or groups that identify with making God's reign present, we shouldn't close our eyes, our ears, or our hearts to the cries of the great impoverished majorities.

The prophetic Biblical tradition, in the Old as well as the New Testament, presents an image of God focused on the liberation of the oppressed, that doesn't come about through magic but rather through the efforts of groups of persons who make up true communities of solidarity and justice.

*Reading from Isaiah 11:1-10***Call to reflection****One voice:**

In this second week of Advent, we open our eyes to the horizon of justice and equity that God yearns for every creature. God's coming is so promising that we celebrate with expectation.

All voices:

We celebrate the goodness of God! Let's prepare the way for God's coming and prepare our hearts so that God will find a people who are ready.

One voice:

We light the second Advent candle, invoking the inbreaking of a new conscience that illuminates our actions of justice.

All voices:

Amen. May this candle light our steps that, every day, are aimed at carrying out creative actions designed to resolve current difficulties.

Biblical reflection

On this second Sunday in Advent, the biblical readings especially invite us to take three concrete actions: look, listen and change...

Look at the reality that surrounds us, especially at the impoverished people who are invisibilized (made invisible) by society because they make us uncomfortable. Seeing the hungry, thirsty faces, the naked bodies lacking warm clothing, as well as the places where they live makes it possible to develop the value of empathy, to put oneself in "another's skin," the skin of the needy one. Echoing the readings from Isaiah and from Psalm 72, the Jewish people longed for a reign (government) under the Spirit of God, with wisdom and justice, capable of returning to the oppressed peoples that which had been taken from them so that that they could recover their dignity and their power.

The problem with speaking about the reign of God in religious spaces is that one generally uses a metaphysical paradigm that leaves out the human and day-to-day realities, thus omitting the political force of the Gospel.

The second action is to hear the cries that are emitted in the desert. In order to do this, one must move to that inhospitable place that represents adversity, but that also offers freedom. It is an exercise that requires getting away from the noise in order to discover that which really matters in these nuclear moments of history: the cries of the earth and her suffering sons and daughters who denounce bad treatment, destruction, exclusion and violence. They are the cries of a humanity wounded and oppressed by the effects of the capitalist economic systems that cause inequality and consumerism, systems that dominate, exploit and subjugate all the ecosystems, together with the beings that inhabit them, in the interest of maintaining their hegemony. It even involves tuning the ear to the distinct sounds, the tears, and the wordless gestures of those who cannot raise their voices.

Finally, the third call is to change: a precise and indispensable action that Matthew the evangelist emphasizes in a radical way (vv. 1-3), with the purpose of “leveling out” or “straightening” the way in order to create a favorable atmosphere for the way of living that Jesus proposes. It shows a conversion, not only of personal moral habits and attitudes, but of actions directed towards the practice of justice. That’s why John the Baptist demands of the Pharisees and Sadducees of his time that they show fruits of true repentance, fruits that imply changing social and religious structures, since the religious leaders manipulated ideological power to maintain those structures, with no concern for the resulting oppression of impoverished people. Grounded in this liberatory focus of the gospel, for faith communities, conversion goes far beyond behaving well and not doing evil. Conversion also requires an ethical “bearing of fruit”

in harmony with an authentic involvement of being and proceeding, as “neighbors” with all living beings.

A true government with wisdom and justice can transform realities grounded in the practice of solidarity, keeping in mind that the objective is to guarantee a dignified life for those who have not yet attained one. Only in this way will there be an effective presence of the Spirit of God who acts in defense of those who have no one to defend them, to free them from violence and oppression, taking as a principle that all life has value (Psalm 72:14).

Questions for reflection

- What cries demand justice in our society?
- What does it mean for the faith communities that God’s reign is near?

Activity for the week

- Listen to the song “La esperanza canta” [Hope sings, resource available only in Spanish].

<https://youtu.be/bTw55Dwf5d8>



- Think about a concrete action that this study has aroused and that is possible for you to carry out.

Prayer

God of life, we pray that you prepare us more and more to look, listen and change. Make us part of those who, through your Spirit, prepare the way of Jesus, in the joy of the coming of the reign of God with abundant life for all.

Third week of Advent: December 11, 2022
Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

PRACTICE AND SHARE CHRISTIAN HOPE IN TIMES OF CRISES AND DISASTERS

Angel Román

Introduction

These are favorable times for fertilizing frustration, for ceasing to trust or refusing to get one's hopes up in the face of so many sad, deplorable situations. The frequent and diverse crises and disasters seem unending. These circumstances that interfere with our dreams are nothing new; nevertheless, the Word of God insists on recovering the faith that makes its nest in our existence. That faith that the Creator has demonstrated over and over again, by insisting in the restoration of an obstinate and indifferent people.

In this context, Advent reminds us that the unthinkable is introduced as a possibility. For whom? For the kings of this world? Certainly not! It is God who announces the unexpected, the marvels that affect history in a surprising and unexplainable way. The challenge to human logic is not only presented by arguments but by the blind who see, the lame who leap, the deaf who hear and the poor who receive good news for their situations. This is the God who comes, in the apparel of the child in a manger; the Beloved whom we await with joy.

Reading from Isaiah 35:1-10

Call to reflection

One voice:

Brothers and sisters, large and small, this Advent invites us to return to a simple faith, a faith that is free of the sophistications that our current times demand. God continues to be God despite us; let's go to God with joy.

All voices:

Great are the wonders that God has done! Great is the joy of those who are amazed to see them. In everything God does, the splendor and greatness that our God deserves can be seen; God's justice is always the same.

One voice:

We light the third candle of Advent, raising up the faith that God has made to shine in our hearts. By faith, the people witness to the marvels of our Maker.

All voices:

Amen. It is God who walks with God's people, who knows the dry paths, but who leads the people to places with delicate pastures, places of life and peace.

Our reality

Currently humanity faces various problems stemming from bad political decisions made by those who govern the world, by our lack of solidarity with those who suffer, by our mistreatment of nature, and more. Even though these problems affect all of humanity, they have the greatest impact on vulnerable and excluded persons. That's right: bad political decisions have caused wars, injustices, poverty, violence, and harm to the environment. But above all, they have caused us to lose our sensitivity to the needs that the weakest persons suffer. And, as if that weren't enough, we have neglected nature.

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It's hard for us to see the effects of the inadequate care of the environment: extinction of species (flora and fauna), natural disasters, global food crises and global warming.

In the midst of this devastating panorama, Christianity has an unavoidable challenge: to practice and share Christian hope in times of crises and disasters. The Advent season is a propitious moment to slow down and reflect on our Christian ways of acting and to take responsibility for promoting solidarity and commitment to nature and to persons who suffer. The biblical texts for this week help us to prepare ourselves to witness to the message of love and justice for humanity that the birth of Jesus brings us.

Biblical reflection

The biblical texts for the third week in Advent center around the hope of those of us who believe in the God of life, and who, therefore, believe that our active hope will have the liberatory effect that the prophet Isaiah communicates to us: Those who don't see will see, those who don't hear will hear, and those who can't walk will walk; pure water will flow, and nature will once again be at peace and will smile upon humanity (Is. 35: 5-7). In effect, practicing hope in the God of life means committing ourselves to actions oriented toward recovering the dignity of those who suffer hunger, loneliness, infirmity, persecution and exclusion (Psalm 146: 5-10).

The entire letter of James, as well as the text for this week (James 5: 7-10), is an invitation to live "authentic faith" through our manner of producing, consuming and comporting ourselves with those around us. James invites us to have "patience until the coming of the Lord," and he uses the metaphor of a farm laborer who "awaits the precious crop from the earth." This waiting is definitely active, as the crop requires seeds, the water that makes them grow, and constant care. This message has strong implications for Christians, as it challenges us to be the seed, the water and the one who tends. That is, it demands that we forget

our denominational differences and that we dedicate our energies toward what really matters: practicing justice as the model of Christian hope.

The gospel text (Mt. 11: 2-11) is the corollary to the previous readings; it confirms for us that Christian hope is not passive waiting for the coming of Jesus. On the contrary, it is the affirmative response that our actions of solidarity bear witness to Jesus being "the one who was to come." In other words, it is our job as Christians to be instruments of justice in the world and, in order to do that, we must be the eyes of those who don't see, the ears of those who don't hear, to be medicine for those suffering illnesses, bread for those who are hungry, freedom for persons who are captives, help for those who suffer poverty, home for those who migrate and open arms for those who suffer discrimination for being different.

This season of Advent is a time to pause and reflect on our Christian commitment. It is a time to take responsibility for leveling the way in order to receive the child who will soon arrive, who is the reason for our Christian hope, and the symbol of peace, justice and liberation.

Questions for reflection

- How can I bear witness in my context that Jesus, the child who will soon be born, is the Messiah whom humanity waits and hopes for?
- How can I practice and share Christian hope with the persons who need and wait for it?

Activity for the week

“And blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me.” This week, work on raising awareness and sensitivity about the damages suffered by nature or in the face of the needs of those who suffer any kind of injustice. To do so, talk with a person from your own surroundings about your concern for these issues and about the Christian responsibility (hope) of building a more just and humane world; which is the message of the nativity that is coming.

Prayer

God of life, we unite our hearts in prayer that this celebration of Advent may be transformed in sensitivity and commitment. Sensitivity to understand and walk with persons who don't walk, who don't see, who don't hear, who suffer different crises and disasters. Commitment to undertake concrete actions that contribute to improving the ways of life for our fellow beings. In the name of Jesus, may this be an Advent that renews us. Amen.

Fourth week of Advent: December 18, 2022

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

CURDS AND HONEY IN SPACES OF JUSTICE AND PEACE!

Violeta Rocha

Introduction

During the fourth week of Advent, we direct our attention to one of the most painful realities that we live in current times. We refer to the suffering that adult decisions inflict on children, condemning them to violence, abandonment and underdevelopment. In the face of this reality, the biblical reflection places emphasis on the scriptural references that dignify childhood, including to the point of making children bearers of the saving project of God for all of humanity. Of course, the prophetic announcement recovers the new, tender and joyful face of childhood, especially in the child in the manger, an ironic narrative that opens the way among the older people of this century.

Reading from Isaiah 7:10-16

Call to reflection

One voice:

We thank you, oh God! for Jesus made human, Emmanuel made a child who, with his coming, constituted an a holistic message of God's faithfulness.

All voices:

We recall those who are the greatest in the reign of God, the children, to whom we have not been capable of passing on a better world.

One voice:

We light the fourth Advent candle, recalling that Emmanuel, God with us, invites us to respond to Jesus' coming with full willingness to receive into humanity the children of today.

All voices:

¡Alleluia, alleluia! What a blessed time our God gives us. Even in the face of our challenges, God encourages us to walk with God in order to build a better world.

Our reality

It happened in the City of Bethlehem, that paradoxical name of a popular neighborhood, where the 10 and 7-year-old sisters were kidnapped, raped, and assassinated. Their assassins are young males aged 19 and 16 years old, along with the complicity of a young woman, partner of one of the perpetrators. This event took place in Managua, Nicaragua, last September; it rubs in our faces questions about the reality of "childhoods" in the way some call them for their plural or multiple characters.

So many lives lost! So many childhoods cut short and families grieving, that we should call for a national mourning, a global mourning for the girls and boys whom we will never see grow up, who will no longer go to school, who won't play in their yards, parks and streets, whom we can never embrace, nor kiss, nor tell Bible stories, nor hear them shout, laugh and cry, nor can we feed them, nor care for them when they are sick, nor await Christmas time to celebrate with them. These realities are present in many other places, and the huge question is how we situate ourselves before them.

Biblical reflection

This text in Isaiah is set in the eighth century b.o.e. (before our era), so well-known for this time of Advent and projected from the joy of the announcement of Emmanuel, "God with us;" we approach it from the childhoods presented there, and the scenes of the conflicting powers: the message of Yahweh for Ahaz, king of Judah, will be the occasion of joy or of warning. The sign that Isaiah gives us is the arrival of this child who will be called Emmanuel, and the young woman who will give birth to him (7:14). In the gospel of Matthew, we hear that she is called "virgin" and that the child will be called "Jesus" because he "will save the people from their sins" (Mt. 1:21-23). Although there are differences in these two texts, what they have in common is the prophetic sign.

What Yahweh says through the prophet to Ahaz is key: "If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established" a warning to a King with "a shaken heart" (7:2). It is an announcement, a judgement and a promise, and the signs are the child and the young woman. The prophet tells us that the child is fed "curds and honey", food that is typical for two- to three-year-old children being weaned, until they know how to discard the bad and choose the good. During this time period, the threat that Syria and Israel represent for Judah will have been overcome (v.15-16), by the attack of the King of Assyria, including the kingdom of Judah (17-20).

Our childhoods should generate joys and hopes; nevertheless, the truncated lives of children that are even erased from daily stories by the cruelty of mistreatment, abuse and violence, should firmly revive that faith in the God who also became a child, and in that Young woman who gave birth, who nursed him and followed him. The powers of this world enjoy conflict; they sustain themselves by violating fundamental human rights, by objectifying the lives of persons, by invisibilizing childhoods, children and their needs.

Maybe to eat curds and honey at the time described by the text Could be thought of as a permanent process for those of us who are adults. Perhaps it is a process of achieving discernment, of recovering the good sense that we have lost amidst the violence and indifference. Perhaps it is allowing ourselves to be given hope and to be judged for the childhoods that should be lived fully, of ensuring that those childhoods write their own stories, that they may give us back the courage to defend and protect them.

Questions for reflection

- How does the text of Lk. 2:32 portray the child Jesus? In what way does this text challenge me?
- How does the text of Lk. 2:34-35 portray Mary? In what way does this text challenge me?

Activity for the week

Make a bag of cloth or colored paper, and each day of the week, place into it a phrase, a prayer, a candy or simple toy (preferably one that you have made), and give it to a girl or boy, adding a colorful tag with the child's full name.

Prayer

God of life, looking toward the coming of Emmanuel, God with us, we ask for forgiveness for the indifferences that have tinged our relationship with children. We beg for your help to actively engage in building a present and a future worthy of the childhoods and the children of our time. Amen.

Christmas Celebration

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalms 96:1-13; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

**WHERE IS JESUS
BORN TODAY?***Betsey Moe***Introduction**

The night of nights has arrived! There is no better news on this day than the news of the Word made flesh, of Jesus being born in a humble manger. The joy overflows, it resonates louder than the cannons of war. Let the whole world know that there is an eternal kingdom that does not require nuclear force, but will by the force of love, make this earth a place where life, peace and freedom flourish. Where does such a statement come from?

It is Jesus, being born and living among His people! Not necessarily among the banquets and expensive decorations that the market offers, but in the humble home or in the human encounter where the fraternal and sisterly warmth renews joy. In the supportive embrace, restorative forgiveness, and deliberate generosity, Jesus is born once again. Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth!

*Reading from 2:1-14***Call to reflection****One voice:**

With joy, we come to this special moment in our Advent celebration, the celebration of Christmas. We remember and embody the child Jesus, with all his tenderness, and with his deep love in our human history.

All voices:

Amen! As on that beautiful night, the earth and the sky unite in deep praise. The great work of God is real and active. Today, Jesus is the Savior!

One voice:

As we light the Christmas candle, we evoke the light that comes to this world, Jesus the hope of all peoples, so that darkness will not prevail forever.

All voices:

May the peace of God be with all of us, amen.

Our reality

It is Christmas! The day we've been preparing for in our homes, in our churches, and in our Advent reflections. On Christmas, many of us look forward to encountering God at church, where candles are lit, the story from Luke is read, and songs are sung. At their best, our church communities are places where God is present and where faith is born, fed, and rejuvenated.

On the other hand, our homes, our workplaces, and the public square are places where we may have given up expecting to see God's activity. We may wonder where God is, and the extent to which God is involved in daily struggles involving mental health, climate disasters, and corrupt or ineffective government systems.

Longing to encounter the living God, we may wonder, where is Jesus born today?

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Biblical Reflection

First, we need to consider where Jesus was born 2000 years ago.

In fact, Luke gives more attention to the setting of Jesus' birth than to the delivery itself. And that setting included no temple, altars, or candles. Instead, we are told in detail about a census that prompted a journey, a manger in a back room where the newborn Jesus first laid his head, and an open field of common shepherds.

The Christmas story opens with Luke describing a census mandated by Caesar Augustus, the representative of the imperial power that occupied Palestine. Census-taking in an oppressive regime is a tool for taxation and military conscription and produces significant anxiety for an occupied people. By setting the story in the middle of a census-taking, Luke was emphasizing that Jesus was born into political upheaval to parents under excessive stress.

After describing the census, Luke shares one sentence about the exact place where Jesus was born: "And [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room." Jesus' first crib was a manger, a feeding trough for animals – which has led scholars to believe that the room Mary and Joseph were offered was a space in the back of a house designated for animals. This lowly place offered to a woman in labor becomes more shocking when you consider that the house may well have belonged to a relative of Joseph. Jesus was born in a setting of rejection.

After the birth, the setting shifts to the site of the dramatic birth announcement. The angel of the Lord could have gone anywhere to proclaim the coming of the Savior of the world – perhaps the halls of power or the temple in Jerusalem. But the angel appeared in an open field to a group of shepherds. Shepherds were considered unworthy and unwelcome in religious circles because they were "unclean." However, they were chosen to be the first humans to hear the good news of Jesus' birth.

Where was Jesus born? Precisely where people felt oppressed, fearful, fatigued, rejected, and unworthy. In other words, Jesus was born where people most needed him.

Jesus' entrance into difficult settings, where people most needed him, would characterize his whole ministry. Jesus walked to the outskirts of towns to engage with lepers and those plagued by demons; he purposefully journeyed through Samaria, where people were despised for their ethnicity; he taught unruly people on hillsides and roads and on the temple steps; he shared meals in homes with men and women regarded as sinners to be avoided. It was this preference that prompted Jesus to say, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Luke 5:31).

Jesus was born where people most needed him, and he would continue to go to those places where people most needed hope, healing, and salvation. Jesus would even go into the darkest place – death itself – to bring resurrection life for all people.

Today, despite our best efforts to keep Jesus confined to religious settings, Jesus is born where people need him: on migrant trails, in abusive homes, in communities where disaster has struck. In the middle of our spiritual deserts, our moral crises, and deepest griefs. Jesus will live in us and walk among us, and be our faithful God.

In the season after Christmas and in the new year that comes, may you know that Jesus is with you. And may God send you as a member of the Body of Christ to be born alongside the fearful, the overly-stressed, the marginalized, and those deemed unworthy, until all people experience God's good news of great joy.

Reflection Questions

- In what area of life do you most need the presence of Jesus Christ?
- In what ways do people in your community most need the presence of Jesus Christ?
- Jesus is being born in those places! What signs of Jesus' presence do you already see there?

Activity for the Week

At home or at church (perhaps during a candlelight service), light a candle for a person in need of physical, emotional, or spiritual help, and pray that Christ be born in them and in their context today.

Take one simple action this week that shows your solidarity and love for another human being: take a walk with a neighbor, call a relative or friend who may need companionship, or volunteer with a church or community group.

Prayer

In the night of nights, we return to the profound meaning of the birth of Jesus, in its context of humility and simplicity, in its interest in the poorest and most marginalized people, and we pray that this is the meaning that nourishes our faith. In full consciousness, we pray that today every Christian may show forth the presence of Jesus where there is only darkness and fear, hunger or affliction. Amen.





GIVE CREATIVELY, WITHOUT VIOLENCE, DISCRIMINATION, OR ECOLOGICAL DAMAGE

In this time of gift-giving, let us consider sharing what expresses, more than economic value, our appreciation for the lives of people and the planet.

Let us avoid gifts that incite violence, discrimination, war, sedentary lifestyle or damage to the environment, in the understanding that we are all responsible for building a culture of peace and respect among human beings and towards nature.

Let us give with creativity, stimulating life, fraternity, peace, care for the planet, and thus, hope in a better world.

If the greatest gift humanity has ever received was given from a common manger, maybe we will find a way to give under that same inspiration.



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