

ADVENT 2023

He has shown strength with his
arm... He has brought down the
powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly
(Lk.1:51-52 NRSV).



CEDEPCA



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Biblical Reflection Contributors: Rev. Leslie Vogel, Licda. Rebeca Cascante, Ma. Carolina González, Lic. Esvin Sirin and Dr. Willi H. Pérez.

Editing Team: Arnoldo Aguilar, Judith Castañeda, Elizabeth Carrera, Priscila Barrientos, Nancy Carrera.

Translation: Betsey Moe and Cheryl Rowan

Design and Layout: Arnoldo Aguilar

Cover photo: Elsa Olofsson, www.pexels.com

Illustrations: Vecteezy.com

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Advent has come Glory to God for his visitation!

Each time the season of Advent arrives, we are called to resist the inertia of daily living. Putting the wonderful reality of Jesus back at the center of our story gives oxygen to our journey while filling us with hope.

Yes, hope: that which many entities have decisively and systematically tried to snuff out in our Guatemalan context. In a special way, in 2023, it has been particularly evident how the dark forces of corruption have attempted to restrict the slightest possibility of change in our country. It is one more example of the overwhelming power that seeks to steal, kill and destroy the little bit of hope that people still have left.

Faced with this, as if swimming against the current, we once again embrace the hope declared by Advent. This announcement of new times, of expectation and rejoicing, is not a sign of naïveté, but of faith, which nourishes our steps towards the construction of a better world. Before something is built, it must first be dreamed. Advent invites us to dream that even the most difficult stories can be split in two, into a before and after, just as the Savior did.

In joy, Mary, inspired by divine visitation, proclaimed the words: “God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.” The mother who could have chosen only to celebrate the imminent coming of her little one sees beyond, that the

coming of Jesus implied a change of order, an intervention to restore life and hope to those from whom it had been taken.

Glory to God for this visitation! It is good news for everyone, especially in populations suffering like Guatemala. For this reason, in this edition we remember Julia Esquivel, Guatemalan poet and theologian, who, with her subtle pen, shares with us the sensitivity of a Guatemalan who lives waiting for justice on the horizon.

Hope has not been lost, it is not lost, it will not be lost. This is what the season of Advent reminds us. As certain as God bursts into history with the power to reconstruct the world in its unequal relationships, Advent bursts into this time to warn us that divine intentions inevitably endure.

And so, let us celebrate together! Even in the current hostile environment, let us celebrate with Mary, remembering that the God of history still has good news for us.

In hope,

Dr. Arnaldo Aguilar B.

Coordinator of the Biblical and Theological Education

Licda. Judith Castañeda

General Coordinator

The Christian Tradition of Advent

Advent (Lat. *Adventus*: advent, coming, arrival) is the liturgical celebration in which, since the first centuries of Christianity, the church prepared for Christmas Day or the Nativity of Jesus. It is a practice that invites us to share, pray and reflect during the four weeks leading up to Christmas and ending with a special celebration on Christmas Day.

With the Protestant Reformation, different opinions regarding Christmas arose. However, “Luther’s preaching about Christmas was incredibly extensive, considering that every year he preached on the birth of Christ from the time of Advent at the end of November, until the day of Epiphany or the celebration of the three wise men at the beginning of January. He did this for 30 years!”¹

But Advent is a time to respond to the gift of God in Christ Jesus. It is a time of hope-action (active waiting) which implies commitment to humanity and nature; fighting for justice; constant work to build the kingdom of God here on earth; joy, parties, and celebration. Above all, it is a time of tenderness, affection and love, because through our solidarity with other human beings in their needs, we remember the solidarity that God has had with humanity through God’s son Jesus.

The Advent Wreath

To mark the passing of the weeks of Advent and to accompany the reflections and prayers, an “Advent wreath” or other similar liturgical instrument can be used. This symbol consists of a wreath of green foliage. The circular

shape symbolizes eternal life; the color green represents hope and life.

Four candles of varied colors are inserted in the foliage. Colors that may be considered are purple, which evokes repentance; yellow, which evokes faith in Jesus; green, which evokes hope; pink, which evokes joy; and red, which evokes the love of God. Other traditions use three purple (the color of conversion, preparation, waiting) or red candles, and one pink candle (color of joy) which is lit on the third Sunday of Advent.

The liturgy consists of lighting a new candle each week. At Christmas, after lighting the four candles in the wreath, a white candle is lit in the center of the wreath, which 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.

In each instance, the wreath and the candles are an instrument, a symbol, and not an end in themselves. The true richness of the Advent celebration is in our turning towards Jesus, in a warm, renewing and hopeful encounter.

The Advent Themes

The reflections and prayers are divided into five devotional encounters: four weeks of Advent and Christmas Day. Each devotional contains a specific theme taken from the day’s readings from the common lectionary, a Biblical reading, a description of our current reality, reflection, and prayer. We thank Rev. Leslie Vogel, Licda. Rebeca Cascante, Ma. Carolina González, Lic. Esvin Sirin and Dr. Willi H. Pérez for their contributions in preparing the reflections for this 2023 edition. We hope that each devotional of Advent will be a community experience of meditation, hope, and commitment rooted in the mystery of Jesus, God in our midst.

¹ David Riaño, “4 meditaciones de Navidad, basadas en los sermones navideños de Martín Lutero” en Biteproject (23 de diciembre 2020). Consultado el 23 de septiembre de 2023. <https://biteproject.com/martin-lutero-navidad/#:~:text=Dicen%20que%20Mart%C3%ADn%20Lutero%20pod%C3%ADa,lo%20que%20deseaba%20haber%20dicho.>

The Ministry of Advent

Taking a journey in solitude, without the warmth and words of a companion, makes the path longer and more uncertain. To journey in the company of another adds vigor and certainty to our steps of faith. Therefore, now more than ever, an intentional Advent practice within community is necessary. Such a practice, like Jesus' ministry, is born in the midst of the difficult history of one's neighbor to bring peace and hope.

The time of Advent is a good time to reflect on the true meaning of the arrival of Jesus in our history, putting aside the Christmas consumerism so prevalent at the end of the year. Pastorally it is appropriate to call the people of God to revive the spirit of Advent, to recover the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ and seeing those mysteries as a paradigm of Christian life in our time.

The celebration of Advent then, invites us to participate in community that moves in a direction that is contrary to the hedonistic frenzy of the marketplace. We are invited to form a community expectant of the Savior, one that practices justice, conversion, generosity and love.

From another perspective, observing Advent in community is key to the renewal of hope, especially in the adverse context that we live in our country. "Hope against hope," despite the injustice of a system plagued by corruption, the people of God are called to affirm life as prophetic action. Jesus Christ, who comes to humanity, dignifies life with a mysterious empathy that encourages the building of a better society.

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



Where Will We Find God?

Rev. Leslie Vogel

First week of Advent (December 3, 2023)

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Cor. 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Introduction

Amazingly, we once again find ourselves in the fabulous time of celebrating Advent. Thanks be to God that we may close the year 2023, a unique year, by opening our lips to the words, prayers and praises alluding to the coming of Jesus, the hope of glory!

In this Advent practice, we seek to unite as siblings in Christ to reflect on the mystery of the Son of God who became flesh to walk with God's people. As we evoke this in-breaking of God in human history, we want to keep our particular history in mind as the vital context in which we sense the urgency of the presence of the Son of God, with all the burden of his kingdom of justice and peace for every person.

As we celebrate Advent, may all of us be participants in those divine interventions that, from time to time, and despite the hostile climate we live in, open space in history. As Mary was a witness to and entrusted with that hope, may each and every one of us be so in the darkest of nights. Therefore, with Julia Esquivel, we say:

“To Mary in a Low Voice”

Favored of Life
visited by the Most High,
vessel chosen by Love:

You, whose amazement
turned into trust,
You, the one who believed,
teach me to believe
and to wait.

Pass on the secret to me
of being a weak vessel
plethoric of His power,

Arc welcoming of His Spirit,
womb filled with His Tenderness.

Of living every day
allowing that He
make the impossible possible
in my small life.

Of knowing myself as fertile ground
for his Will.

Repository of the mystery
of seeing fulfilled in me
his promise of Salvation.²

“A María en voz baja”

Favorecida de la Vida
visitada del Altísimo,
vaso escogido por el Amor:

Tú, cuyo asombro
se transformó en confianza,
Tú, la que creyó,
enséñame a creer
y a esperar.
Transmítame el secreto
de ser vasija débil
pletórica de Su poder,
Arca acogedora de Su Espíritu,
útero repleto de Su Ternura.

De vivir cada día
permitiendo que Él
haga posible lo imposible
en mi vida pequeña.

De saberme terreno fértil
de Su Voluntad.



in Spanish

² Julia Esquivel, “A María en voz baja” (extracto) en *Algunos secretos del reino*, Guatemala, Ediciones Clara Semilla, 1997, 51.

Depositaria del misterio
de ver cumplida en mí
su promesa de Salvación.

Reading from Mark 13:24-37

Call to Reflection

One voice:

In this first celebration of Advent, we come with joy before God, the wonderful One who acts for those who wait on him. The One who came down upon hearing the cry of his people, the God of hope who became close, accessible, and personal in the face of Jesus.

All voices:

Amen! God has come out to meet those who joyfully work for justice. We also go out to meet God, fertile ground for God's will.

One voice:

We light the first Advent candle, the first light that guides our steps to meet our Savior. We are ready for this light that visits us.

All voices:

Amen! We begin the celebration of Advent, embracing the hope that Jesus brings to the hearts of this people who need so much light.

Our Reality

Since the second round of general elections on August 20, 2023, there has been a never-ending series of attempts to prevent the president and vice-president-elect from taking office in January 2024.

On a general level amongst the Guatemalan population, there are also serious complaints and protests, demanding the resignation of the Attorney General, Consuelo Porrás, along with other personnel in the Attorney General's office and in Guatemala's department of Justice. In response, dark forces have become very

aggressive, demonstrating their refusal to cede an iota of power.

Parallel and linked to these events, the original peoples (Maya, Xinca, Garífuna and Chortí) have coordinated throughout the country and are leading the forefront of the national protests, even in the urban centers. They are demonstrating a high level of organization and formidable strength.

Meanwhile, on a global level, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has reached desperation-producing levels of hatred and violence, adding fuel to the flames of conflicts in Ukraine and other countries in Africa and the Middle East.

Biblical Reflection

In the midst of these global contexts, perhaps it's not so surprising to find a sharp juxtaposition between the advent of the messiah and an apocalyptic moment.

It is neither typical nor expected. How is it possible to find ourselves in the middle of Mark's gospel, immersed in a small "apocalypse" at the beginning of Advent?

Advent and apocalypse?

Jesus warns of a "desolating sacrilege" that will profane the temple, along with many tribulations, false messiahs and false prophets.

If we take as fundamental the fact that Mark's theology is primarily based on the question: "Where will we find God?" then perhaps we can find responses such as the following:

Not in the glorious temple, but rather on the cross.

Not in the city, but rather outside the city walls - and probably in the countryside among the most humble people.

Not in the centers of power and authority, but rather in the desert - walking under the hot sun, thirsty, alongside the migrants of this world.

Nor will we find God in the shopping malls, full of lights, merchandise, with commercialism and materialism to the max; rather, we will find God in dark, desolate places that are full of anguish and death.

Professor Karoline Lewis, writing from Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, suggests that Mark's main theological question can become a good question for Advent:

"Where will we seek God during this Advent season?"

Even so, Lewis says that we should be cautious in our search, because where we find God could depend greatly on what we are looking for. It is easy to find people and situations with appearances of being "good" that are actually false and full of betrayal. Jesus warns his disciples to be careful and to remain alert for the false prophets and messiahs who can do attention-getting works, but who also do much evil.

Many times, that which is evil and false can deceive and distract us from what is most important, essential, good and correct. Thus, Jesus' warnings: "be careful" or "remain alert" (13:23) and "stay awake!" (13:37) mean a great deal more than the popular saying that "God's timing is not our timing."

Jesus' warnings mean that we must be alert, with discernment, especially when so much chaos and evil abound. It is important and necessary for us to know what it is that we are looking for.

Many times, without knowing it, what we are actually seeking and hoping for is God - our God - who chooses to enter into everything that decomposes, who chooses to become flesh in everything that will die, and who commits to knowing all of this alongside each one of us. We find and discover God in the midst of what it means to be human beings, even in death. God

is no longer far away in the heavens, nor behind a smokescreen high on a hill nor behind clouds in the sky.

God becomes human in order to help us to comprehend and to live out what it means to be human. God becomes human to bring life to that which will surely die and to bring a new heaven and a new earth to the moments when the sufferings and despair of our lives in this hurting world have become unbearable.

Advent offers the time and space to believe in and live again this reality of God's presence and closeness to us. May we succeed in fully living into these times and spaces, and in that way, may we once again encounter God-with-us.

Questions for Reflection

- How and where can you seek, see and find God in these chaotic and confusing times?
- What might it mean to recognize that God is not far away, but actually quite near to us?
- What might it mean that God is not, nor will God be in the place(s) where we typically expect to find God? And what might it mean that God is usually where we least expect to find God?

Activity for the week

- Take time - a minimum of 20 minutes - to be without any social media, without radio, cell phone or computer. What can you see or hear without so much noise and interference?
- Reflect and write some words or phrases - or draw/paint - to express how you felt during those 20 minutes with noise or stimulation.
- Repeat the exercise of being in silence, without any devices or screens. Did you experience anything different this time?

- Again, reflect and write some words or phrases - or draw or paint a picture - to express how you felt during those 20 minutes without noise or stimuli.
- How did that go? Did you feel anxious or fearful to be without devices or stimulants? Were you able to experience any closeness with God?

Prayer

God of life, in the intensity of the announcement of Advent, help us to find you in our daily lives, as close and as palpable as the sound of nature and as the heartbeat of our fellow human beings. Encourage our hope, and make us attentive to the times we live in. Amen.



Emmanuel: God with the one who migrates, with the one who stays, and with the one who hopes for a world where justice dwells

Licda. Rebeca Cascante

Second Week of Advent: December 10, 2023

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Introduction

How precious are the words “comfort, comfort, my people!” When life becomes complicated, comfort invites us to cultivate hope for change. Our second Advent celebration emphasizes God’s intervention through Jesus in the desert, in loneliness, in the valleys, in the mountains, in the crooked or rough places. Jesus is the Son of God who comes to our complex human reality in order to work for and nourish hope. This intervention invites us to prepare the way for the Lord.

And here is the reason for joy in the midst of misfortune! For, even as we have suffered injustice, indignation and helplessness, we also know how to recover hope and hold on to it. We may be stripped of everything, many times; we may be condemned to the desert while migrating; but from the center of that desert we wait for our encounter with the Lord.

“The Baptist”

“Voice crying in the desert”

Double-edged sword buried deep in my flesh
and yours

Deep pain, John, very deep!

Loving cry of the God of Israel
lamp that blazes on the road to the Kingdom,
Friend of the groom, perfect joy.

Yahweh’s jealousy, radical, demanding,
Vision of the Love among loves
converted into a lamb
destined for slaughter

Dove poised above the Perfect Offering.
Consuming Fire of God
setting afire the heart of my people
becoming a bush that burns incessantly.

For my cause, and for yours!³

“El Bautista”

“Voz que clama en el desierto”

Espada de dos filos hundida en mi carne
y en la tuya

¡Hondo dolor, Juan, muy hondo!

Clamor amoroso del Dios de Israel
lámpara que arde en el camino hacia el
Reino.

Amigo del esposo, gozo perfecto.

Celo exigente y radical de Yavé.
Visión del amor de los amores
convertido en cordero
destinado al matadero.

Paloma posada sobre la Ofrenda Perfecta.
Fuego devorador de Dios
inflamando el corazón de mi pueblo
convertido en zarza que arde incesante.

¡Por mi causa y por la tuya...!

in Spanish

³ Julia Esquivel, “El Bautista” en *The certainty of spring*, Washington DC, EPICA, 1993

Reading from Isaiah 40:1-11

Call to Reflection:

One voice:

I cry out to you, while I am far from my family and my country. I am seeking a better life and I only find exploitation and suffering. Please God, do not abandon me.

All voices:

We pray for the hundreds of thousands of people who migrate and live in exile, who have left their homes fleeing war, poverty, and devastation. Oh God, walk alongside them, heal their wounds, and tenderly shepherd their lives. May they be close to you, even as they are far from their loved ones.

One voice:

It is in my familiar space (hometown and family) where I witness humiliation, violence and poverty. My hopes are failing and I feel like this will never end. Restore us, O God of our salvation!

All voices:

Show us, O Jehovah, your mercy, may your justice and peace be reflected in our people and families.

One voice:

We light this Advent candle with gratitude that you continue to visit us and walk alongside us in the difficult times we face.

All voices:

Our hope grows, our strength is renewed and our confidence is reborn every time you come close. Blessed are you, because you are our God - the God of all times and in all times. Amen.

Our Reality

Central America is experiencing a hopeless social, political and economic reality. Corrupt governments hold the power, oppressing the weakest. Countries force people to migrate because the poverty is unbearable; and people discriminate against and violate the rights of the migrant.

Violence and social insecurity are experienced at all levels, making fear our daily bread and disrespect for life an anti-value that increases pain in all spheres of life. We live in times of war, exploitation, suffering, disappointment, anxiety, and hopelessness.

What message of hope can we find in the midst of and despite these realities?

Biblical Reflection

During the period of Advent, we celebrate with expectation the arrival of Jesus, "God with us," who comes to bring justice and hope, especially for the poorest people, who must survive on the margins of society.

This week's biblical texts help us live in that context in which we expect that our desires and hopes will come true, even while we find ourselves in the midst of deeply difficult situations - politically, socially and economically.

In Isaiah 40:1-11, the prophet's message to God's people, who were still in exile, is one of consolation and affirmation that what is crooked will be made straight and that things will change radically: the valleys will be raised (like mountains) and the mountains and hills will become flat! Furthermore, Isaiah reminds us that God's forgiving love is always present and that God accompanies us like a shepherd who cares for his flock. Although we are fragile like "the grass and fleeting like the flower of the field," God's word "abides forever."

Psalm 85 is a prayer of a people who returned from exile with joy, but found "at home" only misery, suffering, and even humiliation.

Disappointment flooded them. And in the midst of that disappointment, they raise their lament (vs. 4-7). In their lament, they trust that God will speak to them of peace “so that they do not return to madness.” They know that God is close to those who honor him. They even express their hope in a poetic way: “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky” (vs. 10-11).

The text of 2 Peter is addressed to a church that seems to have lost its fervor due to the delay in the promised coming of the Lord, and because of the mockery and questioning of the people. The author of the letter offers reasons for this delay (giving time for more people to turn to God, v. 8). At the same time, he invites believers to live in a holy and devout way (v. 11), knowing that in due time God will bring judgment and fulfill his promise of “new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells” (v. 13).

The first verses of Mark’s gospel (the oldest of the four gospels), begin with a title that affirms the author’s conviction: Jesus is the Messiah (Jesus-Christ), “the Son of God” (Mark 1.1). And although nothing is mentioned about Jesus’ birth, the evangelist connects the ministry of Jesus with the ministry of John the Baptist, who prepares the way for him in the manner of Isaiah’s prophecy: “Behold, I send my messenger before you, who will prepare your way” (vs. 2-8). Thus, the author of this gospel relates the hope of the people of Israel for a “messiah” who would come to free them from their oppressors and bring peace to the people, with the life and work of Jesus who grew up and lived in Nazareth of Galilee. It is in this human Jesus, and in his service to others, that the kingdom of God has come closer to us (v. 15).

Questions for Reflection

- According to the passages of Isaiah 40 and Psalm 85, how can the experience of “exile” and “disappointment” and at the same time

hope in the God of Israel help us face the difficulties that we as a family, church, and country are experiencing today?

- Although the season of Advent is about waiting for the “first” arrival of Jesus (his birth), what can we do to “prepare the way” for the Jesus who has already been born and asks us to follow him on his path of love and service to others?

Activity for the week

- Make a list of three things in which you would like to see a drastic change or something completely new (it can be a combination of things on a personal, family, church, or country level). Then discuss how this week’s scriptures can help you trust and act as we wait for those changes to come to pass. Think of a hymn, song, or poem that gives you encouragement and hope and share it with others as a “Christmas card.”
- Identify a migrant in your country. Bring them a present that will be useful while they travel, and give them a prayer or card that makes them feel the comfort and strength of God on their path.
- Encourage members of your family or community to think about a family or person who is experiencing suffering and hopelessness. Pray for them this week, and then think of an action in favor of that family that encourages them to continue trusting in God.

Prayer

Dear God, we give you thanks, because you have walked as a shepherd at our side, giving us comfort and confidence at all times. We ask that the hope of seeing your kingdom of justice and love in our world leads us to carry out actions of service to others, allowing them to experience “Immanuel,” God with us at all times. Amen.

Actions of Hope from the Heart of the God of Life

Ma. Carolina González

Third Week of Advent: December 17, 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; Luke 1:46b-55; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Introduction

As we celebrate the third week of Advent, we remember the righteous God who hears the cry of God's people and comes down to save them. We especially remember, from Isaiah 61 and Psalm 126, the unfortunate reality of captivity, which is the dark stage in the midst of which the coming of the Savior shines.

Under the impulse of the Spirit of God, the liberating feat of God's messenger has been to respond to the dejected, broken and captive populations. Therefore, there is joy and there is praise, because the Lord does great things for his people. Finally, the long history of bondage has ended, and God has decided to come to God's people to change their tears into joy. Blessed be the liberating God! The God who, without destructive powers, reveals God's presence to us in the tender and bright face of the baby in the manger. The God who, in the face of today's captivities, offers us:

"Certainty"

"They can cut all the flowers
But Spring will always return."
Guatemala you will bloom.

Every drop of blood,
every tear,
every sob extinguished by bullets,
every cry of horror,
every shred of skin
torn away in hatred
by the anti-humans -
will bloom.

The sweat that broke out
of our anguish
fleeing from the police
and the sigh concealed
in the most secret of our fears -
will bloom.

We have lived a thousand years of death
in a Homeland
that will be altogether
"An eternal Spring."⁴

"Certeza"

"Podrán cortar todas las flores
pero siempre volverá la Primavera".
Florecerás Guatemala.

Cada gota de sangre,
cada lágrima,
cada sollozo apagado por las balas,
cada grito de horror,
cada pedazo de piel
arrancado por el odio
de los antihombres,
florecerán. El sudor que brotaba
de nuestra angustia
huyendo de la policía,
y el suspiro escondido
en lo más secreto de nuestro miedo,
florecerán.

Hemos vivido mil años de muerte
en una patria
que será toda
"una eterna primavera".

⁴ Julia Esquivel, "Certeza" en *The certainty of spring*, Washington DC, EPICA, 1993

Reading from Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Call to Reflection:

One Voice:

We come close to the mystery, to the encounter with Jesus, the glorious hope. We walk out of the dark places, from the shadows of captivity, with the certainty that we are getting closer and closer to the light of Jesus.

All voices:

Today we embrace the hope that makes us say: "Yes, the Lord has done great things for us, because of God's actions, we are filled with joy."

One voice:

We light the third Advent candle, anticipating the strength of this light for all people who live dejected, broken and captive lives. This candle anticipates the coming of Jesus who comes and walks with his people.

All voices:

Amen! Now is the time when we are visited. May joy be reborn, and may our voices join the angelic melody: glory to God in the highest!

Our Reality

When reading the news from anywhere in the world we see the struggles and wars to obtain power. Injustices, innocent people suffering and being oppressed, fill the images of the media. We see the faces of girls, boys, women and men full of pain. Faces that reflect their wounded and torn hearts.

This reality fills us with hopelessness and anguish. It's like being in a tunnel and not being able to see the light. The systems that govern our societies are perverse and powerful, which frustrates us and makes us feel helpless. In those moments, questions arise such as: What

does God think about this situation? Is there any hope? How do we talk about spring?

Biblical Reflection

Isaiah chapter 61 was written in a turbulent time. The people had returned from captivity in Babylon and various powerful groups were fighting for control. The political, economic and religious powers were flawed; there was no justice. Of course, vulnerable people were being affected by this situation.

The hope of freedom that was experienced in the Exodus did not seem to be possible in this new return to the promised land. Instead of there being joy because of the return, one can read the denunciations and judgments from God over so much corruption.

In this somber context, verses 1-4 burst forth like an explosion of hope! The prophet appears as a messenger, "anointed," set apart, chosen for a specific and beautiful mission. The prophet makes it clear that it is the Spirit of God who sends him and the message is born from God, from the very heart of God, a message full of love and comfort. The prophet is called to proclaim, to give the message loud and clear. So loud that the message may be heard by all people who need it. It is not to be a hidden message; it is good news, a good message.

The message contains a series of actions of hope for various groups of people. People who suffer from injustice are given good news of hope. Broken hearts are bound up and healed. "La Biblia de Nuestro Pueblo" offers the translation, "torn hearts" which reflects the reality of their state. How many times have we felt how our hearts are torn in the face of so much injustice and evil?

Liberation is announced to the banished and imprisoned. Consolation to those who suffer and cry. Mourning will be transformed into happiness and celebration; there will be no more broken

hearts. The time will come when justice will reign, and every person who now suffers will be called “oaks of righteousness.” The “year,” the time, the era, of justice will come. These actions of hope reflect the heart’s desire of the God of Life.

Verses 8-11 describe the nature of God. God hates injustice, fraud, and evil systems that oppress. These verses also tell us that there is hope for the future, for new generations. The prophet overflows with joy at these actions of hope and the promise of God. He uses a phrase brimming with love and comfort to describe God’s care and how he feels as a result: “[God] clothed me with salvation and covered me with the shawl of justice” (translation from Latin American Bible).

These promises fueled the hope of the people, of the oppressed, throughout their journey and throughout history. They were transmitted from generation to generation, remaining alive in their memory.

Separately, but in harmony, Luke 1:46b-55 presents the song of Mary. She majestically expresses this hope, but now she no longer sees it as something in the future, because it is present. Upon receiving the announcement of the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, she knows that the time is now, and the person who will bring justice has arrived. Her hope has come to fruition and so she sings for joy. Those actions of hope were present in Jesus. So goes the Argentinian song, “Por eso es que hoy tenemos esperanza”⁵ or “That’s why we have hope today.”



As a community of faith, we have also been called to transmit that message of hope, to carry out the actions of hope, that come from the heart of the God of Life.

⁵ Seminario Bíblico Latinoamericano, “Tenemos esperanza” en *Himnario Celebremos Juntos*, No. 93. San José, Costa Rica: SEBILA, 1989.

Reflection Questions

- How can we be people who carry out actions of hope?
- What actions of hope can we carry out for people who are heartbroken, grieving, and in need of freedom? Remember that these actions are not limited to the spiritual.

Activity for the week

- Make a poster using markers, clippings, crayons, cardboard - whatever you like. On the poster write a phrase of hope that comforts the heart and then place it in a visible place. You may make several: one for the home, workplace, or other place where you see a need.
- Let us remember that as a community of faith we are called to carry out actions of hope. Get out of your comfort zone and take an action of hope for a person or group of people who need it!

Prayer

God of life, we join our hearts to yours knowing that as we celebrate Advent, a new time is upon us. Considering all the broken hearts of your people, give us the sensitivity and creativity to undertake concrete actions that contribute to improving the lives of our fellow human beings. Amen.



There is the Lord, where we least expect

Lic. Esvin Sirin

Fourth Week of Advent: December 24, 2023

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

Introduction

We reach the fourth week of Advent, on our journey towards our encounter with Jesus. Our expectation is fed by the words that prophets, psalmists and evangelists proclaimed so that we would not abandon our ability to dream.

The stories that point to a new time are full of wonder: stories of the child being born and stories of the inbreaking of an eternal kingdom, totally different from the rapacious kingdoms of this world. With faith, imagination and certainty, the scriptures encourage us to celebrate what is expected, because in time, it will surely come: the coming of the Son of God to the world, the coming of a kingdom of peace. With sufficient reason, we cry out with the sky, the earth, the sea and the countryside, “Thy kingdom come.”

“The Our Father from Guatemala” (an excerpt)

Let your Kingdom come,
your kingdom which is Freedom and Love,
which is Life and Rights,
which is Truth and not lies.

Your Kingdom which abolishes
all that destroys Life in the world,
your Kingdom which eradicates
all that causes humans
to live like animals.

Your Kingdom which does not make deals
with the interests of those who force
the poor to work like beasts,
nor with those who institute violence
in the juridical system,
in the judicial system,

in the educational system,
in the economic system,
now approved by men
who call themselves Christians.

Your Kingdom, which abolishes all that turns
people into machines
and their lives into merchandise.

Your Kingdom, which abolishes all that
makes people
become their own slaves and the slaves of
others.

Yes, Lord, let your Kingdom come,
for in your Kingdom,

We set aside our egotism
and seek for others
what we want for ourselves,
the people join forces
and discover new paths of hope.⁶

“El Padre nuestro desde Guatemala” (extracto)

Que venga tu Reino,
Tu Reino que es Libertad y Amor,
que es Fraternidad y Justicia,
que es Derecho y Vida,
que es Verdad y no mentira.

Tu Reino que acaba
todo lo que destruye la Vida en el mundo,
Tu Reino que quema
todo aquello que hace que los hombres
vivan como animales.

⁶ Julia Esquivel, “El Padre nuestro desde Guatemala (extracto)” en *El Padre nuestro desde Guatemala y otros poemas*, San José, Costa Rica, DEI, 1981.



in Spanish

Tu Reino que no hace transacciones con los intereses de quienes hacen trabajar como bestias a los pobres, ni con quienes instituyen la violencia en la estructura jurídica, en la estructura judicial, en la estructura educativa, en la estructura económica, aprobadas ahora por hombres que se dicen cristianos.

Tu Reino que acaba con aquello que hace que el hombre se convierta en máquina y su vida en mercancía.

Tu Reino, que acaba con todo aquello que hace que el hombre se convierta en esclavo de sí mismo y de los otros.

Sí Señor, que venga tu Reino, porque cuando tu Reino viene:

Salimos de nuestro egoísmo y buscamos para los demás, lo que queremos para nosotros mismos; el pueblo une sus esfuerzos y se van encontrando caminos de esperanza.

Reading from Luke 2:1-14

Call to Reflection

One voice:

Now we know that there will not be darkness forever! Our Advent practice prepares us to know the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

All voices:

We eagerly await, O Lord, your kingdom and its justice. Open to a new time, we are here in expectation of your coming.

One voice:

We light the fourth Advent candle, a light that shines for the people who have walked

in the shadow of death.

All voices:

Hallelujah, hallelujah! How can we not celebrate with joy, if, in Jesus, we have good news of great joy for all the people?

Our reality

Christmas seems to be coming sooner than expected!

God has been present with the poor and suffering people.

We remember the arrival of Jesus in our midst, giving dignity and power to the poor. A power that cannot be manipulated, a power that restores life. This season it is even more significant, given our context. Through the efforts of indigenous peoples and peasants - humble and simple people, but with a commitment to collective well-being and common good - an awakening of justice, dignity and life has been born among the Guatemalan people.

Pettiness, selfishness, and desire for power alienate those who do not want to see God in their sisters and brothers. They do not want to see the people who have been marginalized by the system, who cry out every day to be seen and taken into account, whether under a traffic light or a corner that gets smaller every day.

The unjust and greedy "powerful" who have kept us in marginalized manglers and in darkness now feel that their privileges are threatened and respond with the power of repression. The fear and division that they wish to inflict on us to confront each other are scenes that we have experienced before, and we are learning to analyze them and look for alternatives, which include unity and resistance.

To the people who have been denied education, health, work, freedom, the basics of a dignified life, especially in rural areas (the unmentionables

that do not even exist for the government in power), hope has been born. We believe that this is a historic time that can help us begin to build a movement that generates equality and opportunities for life.

In our neighborhoods, villages, towns and urban areas, we see solidarity, resistance, unity, and a search for a dignified life and better future for everyone.

Biblical Reflection

Jesus was born in a time of upheaval and uncertainty for the Palestinian people. Emperor Augustus had given an order with which all people were expected to comply, to register in their own town to continue carrying the burden of paying taxes that would sustain the empire. While the empire continued with its census plans, the birth of a baby, the son of humble peasants, burst into Bethlehem in Palestine to transform history forever.

It seems the same in our days that, just as the emperor had everything under his absolute control at the time of Jesus' birth, so do the powerful now. But Emmanuel had different plans for his people, to return the joy and hope that had been denied to them.

Following the logic of Jesus' social reality, the news of the birth of the Messiah should have been delivered to the guarantors of the status quo of the time - to the small group in power. However, the good news was announced to poor and simple shepherds who had been marginalized by their profession, their lack of education, and by the reputation of being thieves for grazing their sheep on other people's property. The Lord, who is born among the unexpected, challenges and disrupts that logic of power.

The glory of the Lord continues to shine, announcing and giving joy to the poor, women, peasants, girls and boys, because the good news

of hope continues to break the powers of the world and restore humanity and dignity.

It was in the manger where history was reversed. It was in the least expected place, where the economic, social, political and religious powers were never imagined, where the birth of Jesus disrupted and reversed history. When celebrating the birth of the Savior, may each of our nativity scenes be a sign of change, well-being, and joy to the most vulnerable around and among us.

God tells us clearly, "Do not fear, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." Not for a single group, but for all the people. In the midst of every uncertainty we experience, we can receive and give good news because the Lord is born and dwells in our midst.

God continues to accompany God's people, removing the powerful from their thrones and giving the power of service and reciprocity to the poor. That continues to be God's good news for our day.

Emanuel is born with the poor!

Reflection Questions

- How can we see Jesus born among the poor in our day?
- In what ways can we accompany with dignity the poor in our neighborhoods, communities, and churches without dehumanizing them?
- Share a lesson that you have observed or experienced from the indigenous peoples in Guatemala.

Activity for the week

Take an afternoon to spend time and share with a family that you know is facing difficulties in having a dignified life. Listen to their hopes. How is God being born, how is God living, among them?

Prayer:

Thank you, Jesus, for dwelling among the little ones who need you most. Today, faced with the challenges of the present time - the threats of injustice, misery, and death - we embrace with hope your coming and your staying in the midst of our struggles and our desires for freedom. Amen.



With the tenderness and simplicity of a child, he came bringing hope and peace

Dr. Willi Hugo Pérez

Celebration of Christmas: December 25, 2023
Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97:1-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-7; 8-20

Introduction

There are pleasant surprises that change life, surprises that the God of salvation brings to his people. Proof of this is the magnificent announcement of the greatest redeeming act of history that was delivered right in the middle of daily life. The shepherds, watching over their flocks, were worried about the dangers, dispossession, and the loss they could suffer. Then, suddenly, they were surprised by the angelic announcement. In God's time, God arrives on the most problematic scene, perhaps to raise from the ashes the best news of joy and hope.

There is good news of great joy for all people! The routine is broken by the news of the birth of the Savior; the world stops before the Lord who is born and lives among us. The heavens and the earth will never be the same again. Amid the glory of God and God's good will, a story immersed in hope begins to be written.

Glory to God in the highest! The goodness and mercy of the Savior has reached us. Today the Lord is also born among us. God's presence moves us to human warmth, celebration, and the active hope that sows life among all people.

“Sowing”

Because you cannot
kill death with death.

Therefore, sow life
and kill death with life,
but in order to harvest it infinitely, full and
perennial,

It must be about your own death,
loving everything you can.

Because you can only
sow life with life
For, this, like love,
It is stronger than death.⁷

“Siembra”

Porque no se puede
matar la muerte con la muerte.

Por eso, siembra vida
y mata la muerte con la vida,
pero para cosecharla infinita, plena y
perenne,
ha de ser sobre tu propia muerte,
amando todo lo que puedas.

Porque sólo se puede
sembrar vida con la vida
pues ésta, como el amor,
es más fuerte que la muerte.

Reading of Luke 2:8-20

Call to Reflection:

One voice:

The most anticipated moment, the culmination of our Advent celebration! We have been given news of great joy, that according to the divine will, the Savior has been born among us. What joy!

⁷ Julia Esquivel, “Siembra” en *Algunos Secretos del reino*, Guatemala, Ediciones Clara Semilla, 1997, 19.

in Spanish

All voices:

Welcome to our Christ and Lord! We remember you wrapped in swaddling clothes, but today you live wrapped in our appreciation and our hope.

One voice:

We light the candle of Christmas, announcing Jesus, God with us, showing us all God's tenderness and profound love, the paradigms of our faith.

All voices:

May peace and goodwill come among all people. May Jesus incarnate be visible in the faces of our brothers and sisters. Amen.

Our Reality

Guatemala is going through a dark, turbulent and uncertain time of sociopolitical conflicts. So much violence, injustice, corruption, exclusion, lack of equitable access to opportunities for well-being and a dignified life. These evils are felt most in the impoverished and marginalized strata of society - while powerful groups take advantage to plunder, enrich themselves, and benefit in immoral ways.

Surprisingly, in the recent electoral process, a glimmer of hope emerged with the triumph of candidates who were closest to the people. But dark forces reacted by trying to annul the electoral result and disrespect the popular decision. This worsened political instability and weakened democracy. The people, tired of so much abuse and corruption, are raising their voices to defend their rights and demand changes toward truth, justice, and peace. But the powers that be persist in silencing the popular cry of a people who continues to cry out and long for a better and more just society where everyone has a place and everyone flourishes.

Where do we find hope? How does the Word minister to us? What is the role of Christian faith in this reality? We live in times of crisis. But it is also a favorable time for renewing faith and hope. The Word continues to be Good News with its calls, teachings and inspirations that renew our hope and guide our Christian role in this reality. The biblical texts for this occasion encourage our faith by evoking the birth of Jesus and move us to testify to his message of life, hope, and peace in this hour in which we live.

Biblical Reflection

May we receive what the Spirit wants to say to us. Isaiah 62:6-12 comes out of a time of crisis for the Jewish people. Having returned from exile, an impoverished people struggles to survive in an environment of scarcity, trials, and difficulties. With the aim of reviving their hope, the prophet announces that a new time is coming in which God will act to save God's people, restore Jerusalem, and bring well-being. With enthusiasm, he announces that the Savior is near. It is necessary to pave the way and prepare to receive him with praise and celebration.

Psalms 97 is an acclamation to the Lord and his divine power. His glory and power rise above other thrones and powers, tearing down forces of evil. Justice, right actions, and righteousness are the foundations of his reign. It is a hopeful message for his faithful ones, who will not be left at the mercy of the dark powers, because above all earthly situations rises the Lord and Savior in his greatness and mercy. The light of his justice is already appearing. We must prepare ourselves with faithful, just, and happy hearts to receive his light and share it in a dark and needy world.

Luke 2:1-20 tells us about an unusual event where the biblical threads of salvation history come together in the birth of the Savior. With

Palestine under Roman domination, Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem to comply with the imperial mandate to register, an order that generated concern and unrest among the people. In Bethlehem, the city of David, Jesus is born, for from David's family in Bethlehem the Messiah would come, according to prophetic tradition (Micah 5:2).

In a despised city, in a precarious stable, the young Mary gives birth to the Son of God. God views with disdain the ostentation and arrogance of earthly thrones and powers and identifies with humble and marginalized people. The Savior comes "in swaddling clothes," like a tender baby, weak and innocent. A little child, born to a poor woman, comes with the sole purpose of drawing us closer to divine love and bringing us salvation and hope.

While the world is immersed in the night, divine light shines for some poor and despised rural shepherds. Instead of shining in palaces of luxury and power, the glory of God shines among simple and marginalized people. What news they receive! "A Savior has been born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Jesus is born among those who need him most. On the margins and in forgotten places, he becomes present among those who most need his love.

"Grace and peace" the angels proclaim. God who loves and wants to save approaches to lavish his benevolence and mercy on everyone. Paul says: "God, our savior, showed us that he is good, and that he loves everyone, and he saved us... he loves us and wanted to help us" (Titus 3:4-5). Because of his great love, he comes to us in the baby Jesus. His gift is peace. Peace that is salvation, justice, collective well-being, life in fullness. Peace that is born from divine love to manifest itself in his loved ones. There is so much need for this peace in our violated, divided, wounded and suffering peoples. Receiving this peace and sharing it, embodying

it and recreating it, is a call and task for the daughters and sons of God.

The shepherds hurry to Bethlehem. They find Mary, Joseph and the child in the manger. They confirm the truth. There are no longer doubts or fears in their hearts. Excited, they tell what they experienced. And they return glorifying God and sharing everything they have seen and heard. A few humble shepherds are the first witnesses and messengers that God has come to show us his loving and merciful face. Simple people are the ones who first grasp the message of the gospel because they have a more receptive heart than those who believe themselves to be self-sufficient and secure in their power.

What a mystery! God, Creator and Lord, enters our life and reality as a tender, simple, defenseless child; he is born among poor, humble and marginalized people. In this way the greatness of God is present to give us light, love and peace. Today Jesus still wants to be recognized among simple, needy and despised people. And he wants us, in a dark world threatened by evil powers, to be agents of hope, justice and peace.

Reflection Questions

- What does it teach us that God wanted to be born a humble and defenseless child and among poor and despised people?
- How can we testify that the Savior has been born to us and proclaim his hope and peace in dark times of trial, conflict, and uncertainty that we live in?

Activity for the Week

- This Christmas, share a gift, preferably made by you, with someone in need. Share a time of friendship with one or more people facing difficulties, anxieties or needs to share the love and hope of Jesus.

- At home or in your community of faith, say a prayer for Guatemala, for Palestine and Israel, or some other region in a situation of conflict and violence, asking that the light, hope and peace of Jesus be manifested in those places.



Prayer

We cannot help but thank you, kind Lord, who, since the birth of Jesus, our Savior, has given us the greatest lesson of showing love and devotion toward our fellow human beings. Thank you for the challenge of coming together, under the guidance of your Holy Spirit, to maintain hope as we work for peace. 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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8 Avenida 7-57, Zona 2, Guatemala City.
CedepcaUsa / www.cedepca.us / cedepca@cedepca.org
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