

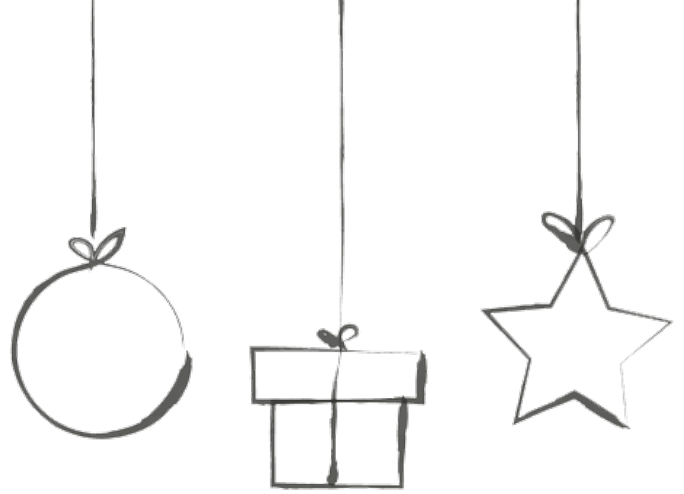
Advent 2021

To hope against all hope




CEDEPCA





Advent 2021 is a production of the Protestant Center for Pastoral Studies in Central America: CEDEPCA.

Biblical contributions: Betsey Moe, Paulo Ueti, Arnoldo Aguilar.

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

Design & Layout: Rebeca Noriega.

Translation: Leslie Vogel.

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“To hope against all hope.”

Another year, in the setting of the COVID-19 pandemic, we celebrate with joy this long-awaited Advent journey. There's not enough time to describe what this year has been: lights, semi-darkness and shadows over our people. Well, in the face of all of this, the unique character of our people and the need to continue struggling for life has been exercised empirically in resilience. Of course, with a “Primero Dios” or “God willing” that springs from their lips, an expression that speaks of hoping against hope.

Hoping against all hope is a concept taken from Romans 4:18-25, that praises the faith of Abraham, a faith that is determined and against-the-current. It is the distinction of a paradigmatic character who will illustrate the attitude of trust required by the people of God through the ages. This is the one who hopes “without guarantees,” the one who believes and walks accordingly. It's the person who doesn't embrace any security, but who is confronted by uncertainties and who continues walking. In the end, to hope against all hope makes of our journey the experience of the God of promises.

We need to wait and hope, to perfect ourselves in that practice. The time of Advent invites us to do so. In the world of immediacies, something more than naivety gestates in our waiting. In some way, human virtues surface through

hope. That which we await anxiously shares with us its echo, and that is music for dancing in the present. That is the dynamic to which the time of Advent invites us; we await Jesus the Savior who comes toward us. The echo of his arrival invites us to the dance of creation that groans while giving birth.

Jesus is coming! Let us rejoice in hope. Hope is the inheritance that the people of God hold onto, and there is no hand nor human system that can snatch that away. That precious Savior, companion on the journey, continues the building of the reign of God, a reign that dignifies everyone.

It has been 29 years now that CEDEPCA's Advent publications have insisted on the hope and consolation of our God. This edition of Advent 2021 is no exception. It invites us to celebrate the tender intervention of God who always brings consolation while announcing a new time. Sisters and brothers, let us celebrate. Let's celebrate, adults and infants; let's celebrate in the small villages and in the cities; let's celebrate in intimacy and in community; let's celebrate the deep mercy of our God, with which the dawn will visit us from on high.

In hope,

Msc. Arnoldo Aguilar B.
Coordination, Biblical and Theological
Education

Licda. Judith Castañeda
General Coordinator, CEDEPCA



“To hope against all hope.”



The christian tradition of Advent

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

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

The Advent wreath

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

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

Eternal life & Hope



The Advent themes

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

In this edition, we thank the Rev. Betsey Moe, the Dr Paulo Ueti and the Rev. Arnaldo Aguilar, for their contributions to the production of these reflections for this Advent season. We hope that each space of Advent time will be a community experience of meditation, hope and commitment, grounded in the mystery of Jesus: God with us.



Advent pastoral ministry

As the current year ends, with all of its good and bad news, it is appropriate to cultivate faith and hope through the pastoral work of advent that warns us about “Christmas” consumerism and the renewal of hope.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Faith & Hope



Hope against all hope

Paulo Ueti

Introduction

What a joy to build community again around the celebration of Advent! The announcement of the good news does our beings good, with news that is like the first glimmer of dawn after a cold and stormy night.

Of course, we don't forget the complicated and painful path of our people during this time, but in honor of life, of those who survive in times of pandemic, we celebrate the deep mercy of God. In that, we are able to hope for a different time, a better time, just as we hope for the arrival of the Savior. May this celebration of Advent renew our strength to continue visualizing and acting in the hope of God's reign.

 Reading from Jeremiah 33:14-16

Call to reflection

One voice:

By the grace of God, we begin this time of Advent that invites us to collect ourselves, to find ourselves again in the hope of the God of justice. We sharpen our senses to perceive the good news of the one who comes to his community.

All voices:

Of course we hope, and we will keep hoping, while our feet walk in the love and the solidarity of a new humanity.

FIRST WEEK

Readings: Jeremiah 33:14-16,
Psalm 25:1-10,
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13,
Luke 21:25-36

One voice:

We light the first candle of Advent, a candle that proclaims the light that illuminates every living being. May our community be illuminated in this way, and may our path be illuminated as we walk.

All voices:

Glory to God in the highest! Peace and justice to all humanity, from the city, in the mountains, and unto the plains. Amen.

Our reality:

The religion of wealth and greed has rooted itself among us. This religion sustains inequalities and individualism, provokes oppression and exclusion, and justifies hierarchical relationships and privileges. In our continent, disgracefully, violence on all levels and corruption have increased. The devastation of the environment is accelerating, and we feel its deplorable effects. The pandemic has again made clear that the world is broken, in which the majority of persons and the natural environment find themselves in a situation of vulnerability and destruction.

Despite these signs of death that we have seen, our context has signs of life and possibilities. The pandemic is also

an opportunity to rethink our concepts, review our truths, strengthen our capacity for solidarity and struggle for justice. We learned to live the spirit and life of community in other ways; we keep trying to be connected, supporting one another mutually. We keep advocating for justice and for a better life.

Reflection

Advent is a time of hope. It is a time of hope against all hope. It is the moment to cultivate persistence like that widow in the house of the judge, in the memory of the community in Luke. It is a privileged moment for reviewing our image of God and meditating on our experience of God's revelation. How does the revelation of God (and of which God) influence our lives?

The Lord is our justice (Jer. 33:16). This fundamental memory about who God is for us should be engraved in our hearts. God wants justice and right. God is revealed in the search for justice and right. "Good and upright is the Lord; therefore, he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees." (Psalm 25:8-10 NRSV)

The path or way is the means, the manner, the methodology, the form in which we reach the destiny or the goal. The way is just as important as the goal, the arrival. And the way is the "love that you have for one another and for all"

(1 Thess. 3:12). Love is the method, the way, and also the destination for all of us, because the God who is revealed in Jesus is love and company.

The coming of the Son of Man, God revealed in Jesus, the suffering servant, is a reason for hope and persistence in which a better world is possible. The revelation of God in Jesus, that we celebrate in this time of Advent, is the revelation of a possible and reachable liberation. We are called to be persons who reveal the Reign of God. We are called through baptism to express Christ in our daily lives. That is why we are asked to always be alert: always critical in order not to fall into imperialist, oppressive habits that sustain relationships of privilege. To pray and to keep vigil are imperative actions for the cultivation of our liberating spirituality that reveals the God who becomes flesh and who asks that we work for liberation. And we do that as a community of faith, faithful and committed to the values of the Reign of God.

Questions for reflection

How can we wait attentively and actively for the Messiah, the suffering servant?

Does our behavior in the community, in society, and in our families contribute to revealing that persistent hope that another world is possible?

What should our liturgies and community liturgies be like?



Activity for the week

As we progress through this week of meditation in this time of Advent, we pray for the persons who work for environmental justice and for original peoples.

Prayer

Beloved God, we understand that, in the face of adversities, we can hope against hope. May your Holy Spirit guide our steps toward that construction of a different world where justice shall be bread for everyone. In the name of Jesus, Amen.



Refining a Community

Betsey Moe

Introduction

Our faith invites us to lift our gaze and our hearts to heaven. But not to forget the earth and the gaze that we owe to our surroundings. The Christian community is inspired by the God of life, but at the same it participates in the mission of that God of life in the present time. In every time, of prosperity or adversity, the community faces the challenge of knowing the signs of the times and of recognizing where the footprints of God manifest themselves. Small task! that also invites the community to look inward so that it may be capable of contributing to the good news of the One who comes with his eternal light.

 Reading from Malachi 3:1-4

Call to reflection

One voice:

Dear brothers and sisters, with much joy we advance in this celebration of Advent. Today in the second date, we are looking forward with hope in the opportune actions of God, our Savior.

All voices:

Yes, we walk seeing hope against hope; even in the dark panoramas, we find the light and the strength of God in the warmth of our community.

SECOND WEEK

Readings: Malachi 3:1-4,
Luke 1:68-79,
Philippians 1:3-11,
Luke 3:1-6

One voice:

We light the second Advent candle, evoking the good fortune of being your community: this people of sisters and brothers who celebrate your arrival as light that fills everything.

All voices:

Amen. This candle lights up this gathering, as we want the human community to be illuminated, especially the community that suffers and weeps.

Our reality

During the season of Advent, we are invited to step away from our normal routines and reflect on ourselves and on the communities in which we live - holding up a mirror to our realities. As we look in the mirror, what do we see? In this year which has been an extended time of isolation and loss, we may see under our eyes the dark circles of hopelessness, fear, and weariness in the face of so many injustices and disappointments. And when we hold up the mirror to our local and global communities, we may see the disheartening image of people turned in on themselves, stuck in systems of inequity, distrust, and frustration with each other.

Yet, the message of Advent is that One is coming - in fact, One is here among us -



who will not let us and our communities remain as we are. God comes to us to refine us into the image of Jesus the Christ. May we embrace the opportunity in this Advent season to prepare ourselves to receive and to live out this good news.

Biblical reflection

The prophet Malachi wrote a message to the people of Israel after the exile. As a community, they were weary of asking, “Where is the God of justice?,” wondering why God would let evil people and systems get away with so much (Mal. 2:17). They longed for God to bring change and hope to their communities.

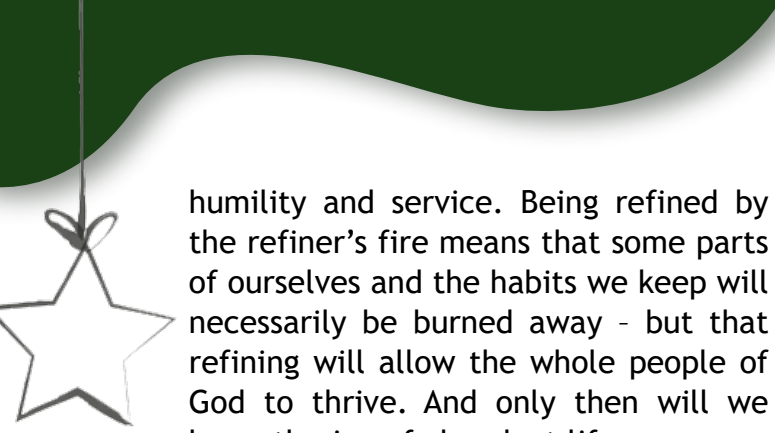
Malachi’s message was that change was indeed coming: “the Lord...will suddenly come to his temple” (Mal. 3:1). But the people of Israel would not be passive observers to the Lord’s coming. Malachi said that the coming of the Lord would be like a refiner’s fire that purifies precious metals, refining and purifying the people of Israel so that their offerings and gifts would be pleasing to the Lord. The changes that Israel was longing for would not begin externally; the change would start internally, within the community of faith - because ultimately, the justice they were longing for would come through them.

The “refiner’s fire” theme was picked up by John the Baptist generations later. Like Malachi, John the Baptist also announced the arrival of One who would be like a purifying fire. “I baptize you with water,” John said to the crowds,

“but one who is more powerful than I is coming....He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk 3:16). The message of both Malachi and John the Baptist was clear: humanity would not find righteousness on their own. A process of refinement was needed in order for human beings faithfully to reflect the image of God to the world.

Make no mistake: the raw material of humanity is beautiful to God. When God created human beings, God declared us “very good.” But the world around us and the broken systems in which we live mar the image of God within us, and we are not only complicit in evil, we are weary in trying to bring about change. The good news is that God has not given up on humanity. In Jesus Christ, God comes to us, claims us, and refines us. We are still living in a world marked by injustice, but because we bear the image of Christ, our “offerings” of ourselves are pleasing to God; in other words, they have the power to effect change.

At CEDEPCA, we are seeing how God is refining communities of people into the image of Christ for the glory of God. Young women in the Tamar project come together to learn that they are beloved of God, that they have rights to education and good health, that their voices matter, and that they have gifts to share with the world. Young men participating in the José Project are also coming together to examine what it means to reflect the image of Christ. . They are committing to the hard work of breaking free from the harmful systems of patriarchy and embrace lives of



humility and service. Being refined by the refiner's fire means that some parts of ourselves and the habits we keep will necessarily be burned away - but that refining will allow the whole people of God to thrive. And only then will we know the joy of abundant life.

God loves us so much that God will not let us remain as we are, but will keep refining us in the midst of our contexts, determined to use us to bring about salvation for all.

Questions for reflection

What problems in your community are you especially aware of that cause you to cry out to God?

What within you needs to be "burned away" so that you may offer your gifts in service?

Where do you see others recognizing and claiming the image of God in themselves?

Activity of the week

Each day this week, write a word that represents a quality or feeling within yourself that needs to be refined or "burned away." (Examples: fear, timidity, self-righteousness, apathy). At the end of the week, choose one word to focus on and write about. What would life look like if you were to let go of that behavior or thought?

Prayer

O God, who knows your people and understands our deepest needs, guide us to this introspective view that will help us to build your reign in our interior beings and in the interior of our faith communities. Only in this way will we be able to aspire to be that community that perfects itself along your paths. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.



Mercy transforms and gives relief

Paulo Ueti

Introduction

This next step on our Advent journey calls us to reflect on the generous face of the God of life. While it is true that there are many religious masks that present a God custom fit for just a few people, the true face of God presents the expression lines of Jesus Christ, the Savior.

We remember Janet May, in her text “Corporality,” referring to gods who are worthless. Standing out among these are the warrior, the shield, the magician/wizard, the capricious god, the inquisitor or judge, the executioner, the sexually obsessed, and the gender police. In none of these perceptions is the God whose values promote life and joy for all persons. Thus, in Advent we await Jesus, the face of God among us.

 Reading from Zephaniah 3:14-20

Call to reflection

One voice:

Going to the encounter with Jesus, we are warmed by the joy of contemplating the living and revitalizing face of our Creator God. In our community, we celebrate the image of God that manifests itself in our sisters and brothers. Alleluia.

THIRD WEEK

Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-20,
Isaiah 12:2-6,
Philippians 4:4-7,
Luke 3:7-18

All voices:

We walk towards you, our beloved God; your Holy Spirit has convened us. Our hearts open to your voice and to the warmth of your presence.

One voice:

We light the third candle of Advent, in honor of the mercy and the joy of our salvation. As we come closer to the divine mystery, God comes to meet us! Alleluia!

All voices:

May the joy of this communion accompany us always. Today and always, may the love and the mercy that we have received unite us with those close to and far away from us. Amen.

Our reality

Threatening situations on many levels are multiplying in our day-to-day lives. One of the relevant aspects for our religious environment, and that influences other areas in our lives, is the image of God that is propagated and preached in the churches and in social media. The presentation of a divinity who demands sacrifices and who gets angry and takes vengeance when its desires aren't fulfilled, serves the interests of privileged and oppressive groups.

This kind of preaching, so far away from the Gospel, also provokes behaviors of religious intolerance and violence against non-Christian groups and spiritualities. We are in need of more dialogue and more mutual respect, more curiosity and loving presence, like Jesus, toward those who are different from us.

Biblical reflection

The prophetic movement in the Bible appears as a strong reaction against the monarchy and the ways that it impacted life and the environment (1 Sam. 8 and Gen. 3:13b). It also seems to ensure that the image of God that continues and is remembered is of the One who accompanies and defends vulnerable persons. God will rejoice over you with gladness, will renew you in his love, and will exult over you with loud singing (Zeph. 3:17b). God is salvation; God is healing and joy. This memory of the prophet Isaiah about the extent of God's love is very important for prophetic spirituality and for us today.

Christian spirituality has to configure its existence with the life of Jesus. Jesus, the Verb of God made flesh - body, spent his life in two fundamental ways: Revealing the Reign of God and Revealing the Mercy of the Father. It seems to us that our task and our journey on the path of the Spiritual Life in Jesus is clear. This was and is the original meaning of the incarnation.

It is the experience of this option that is understood as an indispensable translation of the following of Jesus in our time. This experience makes room

for the experience of God that is at the root of the spirituality that will concern us during this time of Advent, through the power of the Spirit.

In Advent, we await this Messiah, this God incarnated in Jesus who reveals liberation and mercy, who rejoices and walks together with everyone. We are called to continue his work and to bear fruit. We will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, which is to say, we will be imbued with the power of the mighty wind and the tongues of fire in order to challenge the systems that are against the Reign of God.

Questions for reflection

How are distorted images of God obvious in our surroundings?

What do we need so that joy will become a sign, a symbol of the Reign of God?

Activity for the week

- Identify the signs in our community and in our behavior that test the Reign of God.
- Pray for the commitment of Christian persons and communities to work for the Reign, for Justice and for the Law.
- Place a study about the justice of the prophets into the Sunday School curriculum.



Prayer

Eternal God, we celebrate knowing you in the face of Jesus the Savior. We pray that you will also help us to know you in the face of our sister, our brother, our sibling. In this Advent celebration, the Holy Spirit offers us the clarity we need to comprehend you in the person who is hungry and thirsty, in the one who is a migrant, who is naked, who is ill and who is imprisoned. In the name of Jesus, Amen.



In the Company of the uncertain

Betsey Moe

Introduction

En la celebración de esta cuarta semana In the celebration of this fourth week of Advent, we focus our attention on the multiple and diverse uncertainties that make the present time stand out. We don't ignore them, but we see them through the events that have marked the story of salvation. In that sense, the uncertain turns into limitless possibilities, every time that divine grace intervenes in our favor.

→ Reading from Luke 1:46b-55

Call to reflection

One voice:

We hold in common the uncertain times in which we live, and nothing is more opportune than to rekindle hope through the celebration of Advent. Unanimously, the Spirit of God itself calls us together here to be on the lookout for what is about to be birthed by God.

All voices:

Today we gather together in your name, o God, like those blessed women, with the complete willingness that it be done in each one of us according to your word.

One voice:

We light the fourth candle of Advent, remembering that “our God, in God’s

FOURTH WEEK

Readings: Micah 5:2-5a,
Luke 1:46b-55,
Psalm 80:1-7,
Hebrews 10:5-10,
Luke 1:39-45 (46-55).

great mercy, brings to us from on high the sun of a new day.”

All voices:

Great and wonderful are your works! Your presence, o God, is our strength and our rest at all times. By your grace, we place ourselves before the uncertainties, trusting firmly in your great faithfulness.

Our reality

Since the beginning of the pandemic, uncertainty has marked our days. At first, we wondered how long the pandemic would last and when our routines would return to normal. We wondered when we would be able to travel again, when vaccines would come, and how we could get our food and basic necessities safely. As the pandemic has progressed, the uncertainties have only multiplied. How protected are those who have been vaccinated? What new variant will be next? How will my family recover from so much loss? Is this much virtual connection the new normal? Add to these pandemic-related uncertainties the compounding climate-related and political uncertainties, and it is hard to know how to move forward at all. Uncertainty is all around us, and living with it can be debilitating.

Uncertainty has always been a part of the human experience. We cannot know the future. As people of faith (not certainty), we will always be required to move forward without knowing exactly what is coming next. The question is, when the future is not clear, where do we find our strength?

Biblical reflection

For any woman, pregnancy is a time of great uncertainty. A woman with a child growing inside of her has nine months to ponder a host of questions: “How will my life be different? What will this child look like? Will the child be healthy? (Am I eating the right things?) What will this child be like as an adult?” For a pregnant woman, the future is unknowable; the only certainty is that everything is about to change. It seems fitting, then, for Luke to begin the story of God doing a new thing among God’s people with the accounts of two pregnant women.

The two pregnancies resembled one another in the respect that they were both miraculous, but they were also different. Elizabeth, married to the priest Zechariah, had longed for a child, but the couple had never been able to conceive. Now elderly Elizabeth was carrying a baby -a prophet! - in her aging body. Elizabeth went into seclusion after she became pregnant, pondering God’s favor and the years of disgrace she endured as a “barren woman” (Luke 1:25). Mary, on the other hand, was not yet married when she found out that she would bear a son; her pregnancy was bound to bring with it a different kind of disgrace. Mary was young, joining the

ranks of so many innocent underaged women throughout history who did not choose to become pregnant. And her promised son was to be called “Son of the Most High.” (What would that mean?!) Elizabeth and Mary had different uncertainties swirling inside them as their bellies grew.

With a nudge of divine insight (and perhaps compassion for a girl who was pregnant and alone), the angel Gabriel mentioned to Mary that her own relative Elizabeth was also expecting a child. And so instead of remaining alone, Mary hurried into the hill country to visit Elizabeth.

What happened next is remarkable. The two pregnant women who had been isolated in their uncertainty now shared it. And the Holy Spirit transformed their uncertainty into joy-filled faith. The text says that upon hearing Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child “leapt in the womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” (Lk 1:41). Elizabeth not only blessed and affirmed Mary, she made the first faith proclamation in Luke’s gospel, saying, “Why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” (Lk 1:43). Mary’s words were equally Spirit-filled and hopeful. She burst into song about God’s faithfulness to the lowly, fearful, and overlooked.

In a way, Elizabeth and Mary were precursors to the faithful women who would walk together in silence and uncertainty to Jesus’ tomb, only to be entirely surprised by new life.



Elizabeth and Mary - two pregnant women who embraced one another in their uncertainty - form a picture of what the church is called to be: people who cannot see what is next, but who hold within themselves the promises of God. By the Holy Spirit, may we speak those promises to each other and find joy.

Questions for Reflection

What questions do you imagine swirling in the mind of pregnant Elizabeth? Pregnant Mary?

What does their coming together represent for you?

How is uncertainty related to faith?

What friendships and connections are life-giving for you during this season of uncertainty? What makes them life-giving?

Activity of the Week

Call a friend this week and spend time listening and sharing. Ask how they are really doing. In your conversation, include a blessing or affirmation for them.

After your conversation, reflect or journal about the power of sharing in uncertainty.

Consider praying this “Prayer for An Uncertain Season” by Thomas Merton:

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

Prayer

God of life, God of Elizabeth and Mary, we recognize that you are always gestating salvation from and for those who become the smallest in your reign. Find among us those wombs from whence, in their time, glimmers of your glory appear. In your name we pray. Amen.



The message from the manger

Arnoldo Aguilar

Introduction

Step by step, celebration by celebration, reflection by reflection, we reach the final moment of Advent: the celebration of Jesus' birth. Although it appeals to an aged story, it is renewed before our eyes, inspiring us to a new time. This is our faith, our hope, that which propels us to walk in the Spirit of Jesus, from the periphery of history being part of the good news of salvation. In this final Advent journey, we engage again in the joy of counting on the presence and inspiration of the Savior among us. Glory to God for this indescribable gift!

→ Reading from Luke 2:1-14

Call to reflection

One voice:

Thanks be to God, we have reached this special moment in our Advent celebration. It has been good to walk as siblings, moved in a single direction, toward the encounter with our Savior, the hope for all peoples!

All voices:

Yes; amen. Our four previous gatherings have prepared our hearts so that today we can receive good news with great joy, that are for all the people of God.

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION

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

One voice:

We light the Christmas candle, as a gesture that symbolically illuminates all the dark scenes created by human avarice and greed. This is the light of the sun of justice among all of us.

All voices:

Faith embraces us, amazement enfolds us; the God of hope is so real. Glory to God in the highest! And on earth, peace, good will for and with all of creation. Amen.

Our reality

As we conclude another year, we are witnesses to different situations that have generated anguish in the Guatemalan population. In the midst of everything, the time for year-end celebrations and parties arrives, a time of celebration that will be impacted by the mourning of so many families affected by the pandemic. It is to be expected that sadness, nostalgia and frustration predominate in many people, as they miss that person who has died.

It is so hard to find meaning in things when our system of life is de-structured. During such turbulent times, among murky outlooks, the resource of hope becomes urgent. But...where do we obtain hope? How can we celebrate and sing?

Biblical reflection

Like a longed-for dream, like refreshments in the desert, human expectations of new and better times are reflected in many ways. And it is that way, particularly when fatigue, despair and frustration are constantly prowling. Dr. Córdula Langner states that a recurring literary theme arises in different ancient religions and cultures: the birth of a divine son (from a virgin woman) as an extraordinary representation of a hero or savior.

In the same way, she reminds us that, in biblical narratives, the proclamation of the arrival of a son under adverse or impossible conditions, points towards “a new beginning on God’s part.” Therefore, the prophet in Isaiah 9:6 announces, “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” We can barely imagine what this announcement represented for Isaiah’s listeners during their times of adversity.

The announcement of a new time, just as Advent also suggests, cultivates the longings and dreams that give meaning to us in our actions. The sayings about the child who would come, the most tender and human expression of God, would turn the expectations based on power and domination on their heads. Now, the barely-announced new time is motive for joy, for celebration, for belonging to the community of God and, at the same time, for the restoration of all things.

In the fulfillment of the times, that announcement materialized in the face of Jesus Christ, the baby. Centuries of artistic expression have tried to give artistic expression to the scenes referred to in the biblical text. Nevertheless, the very fact of the birth of the Savior brings with it a sublime message that increases our amazement. Luke, the evangelist, synthesizes in the birth story the universal vocation of the Messiah. The Messiah is the one who enters the human plane from the periphery, among those who were outside the established social and religious frame of reference in Palestine. The pilgrimage, the shepherd, the manager, are elements that belong to the reality of the majorities.

Identifying the Savior who was born was never a simple task, above all for the prejudices of power and authority predisposed by the human mind. Luke indicates that the angel needs to give a sign to the shepherds, so that they could find him. Luke 2:12 states, “This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” The Rev. Darío López states the following:

What is the theological significance of this sign that has two key elements: wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger? The phrase “wrapped in bands of cloth” indicates the identification of the Messiah, from his birth, with every human being and with all human beings, and it constitutes a clear signal of the universality of the mission. The phrase “lying in a manger” expresses the identification of the Messiah with all

¹Córdula Langner, “Evangelio de Lucas, Hechos de los apóstoles”, España: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2013, 75.

²Darío López, “La misión liberadora de Jesús, el mensaje del evangelio de Lucas”, Perú, Ediciones Puma, 2004.



the destitute and defenseless people in the world. By having as his cradle an animal feed trough, a container located in an environment of sweat and work, the Messiah is in solidarity with those who are poor and excluded.

That is why the waiting is so important, because in the new time of God's grace, there is space for everyone, but especially for all who suffer in different ways. Advent encourages universal salvation, that which invites us to receive the child who is born, and to incarnate him in his saving trajectory until the end of the times.

Finally, the fulfillment of God's long-awaited promises inaugurates the universal festival / party. Jesus Christ among human beings, his presence among us, is the reason for lifting our praise: "Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth, peace, good will to all people." (Lk 2:14).

Questions for reflection

How do we visualize that new time that we so long for?

In what way can the presence of Jesus Christ create a favorable atmosphere for this longed-for time?

Activity for the week

Share the joy of the Advent of our Savior, with gestures of love and generosity, especially with those persons you don't know or from whom you know you won't receive anything in exchange.

Prayer

God of our Salvation, we are deeply grateful to you for the gift of Jesus Christ. His birth, his life, his ministry and his presence among us, through the Holy Spirit, encourage us to continue the project of salvation. We celebrate by giving glory to God in the highest and by fostering peace for every person on earth. In Jesus' name, Amen.





8a Avenida 7-57, Zona 2, Guatemala City.
Cedepcausa / www.cedepca.org / cedepca@cedepca.org
Telephone: +502 2254-1093

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