



For To Us

a Child Is Born

An Advent Social Justice Guide

Introduction~

Throughout his ministry, children and young people were clearly important to Jesus. The New Testament speaks of this directly many times (“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Matthew 19:14 or “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” James 1:27).

And it is there in the repeated exhortations to care for the meek, the weak, the poor, the vulnerable.

So you would think we could do a better job of it. Children in the North Carolina, the United States, and around the world continue to suffer disproportionately because of the choices that adults make, political and otherwise, but which impact the youngest among us. The ones with the least money, smallest voices, and no vote.

As we enter Advent, that time of excited, exquisite anticipation, may we never lose sight of that season’s reality. Jesus, the one we await, was the poor, paperless child of immigrant parents, specifically an unwed, teenage mother who gave birth to him in a stable. As we adorn our trees and wrap our gifts, let us be mindful that there is serious disagreement over whether immigrant families should be allowed to stay together, whether children should have health care, whether the U.S. can “afford” feeding programs for poor families.

This Jesus, whom we await and celebrate, was pretty clear on the value of every child. His life – both how he began it and how he conducted it – must be a reminder of that.

The Staff of the North Carolina Council of Churches

First Sunday of Advent ~ November 30, 2014

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!
As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!
For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
You come to the help of those who gladly do right,
who remember your ways.
But when we continued to sin against them,
you were angry.
How then can we be saved?
All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
No one calls on your name
or strives to lay hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and have given us over to our sins.

Yet you, Lord, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord;
do not remember our sins forever.
Oh, look on us, we pray,
for we are all your people.

~Isaiah 64:1-9

To care for creation is a mandate shared by all major religions. The accelerating climate crisis and the consequences of global warming are the most urgent and dangerous symptoms of a failure by people of faith to fulfill this universal mandate. Our faith traditions are equally emphatic in the call to care for our young. So as we rush headlong to bequeathing our children a planet that is increasingly inhospitable to them, we should feel doubly compelled to correct course before we betray two of the precious gifts God has entrusted to us.

It is all too easy to sink into despair as the realities of climate change play out in the news and in our lives, but through the lens of faith, hope trumps despair. As people of faith we believe that love, compassion, selflessness have ultimately greater power than hate, greed, and inordinate self-interest. It is our sense of obligation to stand on the side of the poor, the hungry and the oppressed, and to serve the cause of eco-justice for all. Without these convictions, what future can we offer our children? A toxic planet incapable of supporting future generations?

But to propose that the Earth's rapidly changing climate could be considered the end times disasters prophesied as the wrath of God, pouring out justice on an increasingly wicked world, would be to completely miss the message of Isaiah 64:1-9 and the core teachings of every scriptural text. The realization that might is not right; that human power is not self-sufficient or absolute, and that our trust is in something greater than ourselves.

We have a responsibility that extends beyond our immediate personal needs, and how we act on that impacts the ground upon which we walk, the air which fills our lungs, and the children who hold our hearts and who will live with the consequences of what comes next. Our faith gives us the moral imperative to change our lifestyle and safeguard our environment for future generations and welfare of human life and the integrity of God's creation.

Prayer

Creator God, grant us a spirit of respect, recognizing the value and integrity of all creation; help us to be stewards of the world you made for us; inspire us to protect it as a treasured gift which we then pass down to those next caretakers. May we be an example to them of love, compassion, respect and peace and may we leave for them a home that is healthy, whole, and healed. *Amen.*

Susannah Tuttle
Director, NC Interfaith Power & Light

Second Sunday of Advent ~December 7, 2014

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.
A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."
A voice says, "Cry out."
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever."
You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.
He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

~Isaiah 40:1-11

For those of us who don't think it is truly Advent until we've heard Handel's *Messiah*, today's passage from Isaiah will have us singing along. It portrays the power and the presence of Yahweh God. It is a rich text, which begins and ends with powerful words of comfort.

The verse I want to focus on is the last one. In the language of Handel's libretto, it reads:

He shall feed his flock like a shepherd,
And he shall gather the lambs with his arm,
And carry them in his bosom,
And gently lead those that are with young.

The image of shepherd and sheep is a frequent one in the Old Testament, which was written in a culture of subsistence living where a flock of sheep was a source of food and of life itself. And the image carries over to the New Testament; we still speak of Jesus as The Good Shepherd.

The shepherd's role was crucial. He (and it was mostly men) was responsible for caring for the sheep, protecting them from the threats that were all around them – getting lost, getting killed by a predator, not getting enough food or water. There is a beautiful image of the sheep being brought into the fold at night, with the shepherd sleeping in the doorway. Sheep couldn't get out without him knowing it. Predators couldn't get in without him knowing it. He could literally risk his life for his sheep.

Most of this Advent booklet is focusing on the sheep – children who are vulnerable and at risk of losing their way, lacking basic necessities, even losing their lives to some form of predator. They are in need of our support and care.

Today I want us to name and honor the shepherds in our midst, the ones lying in the door of the fold:

- Parents, including
 - Single parents
 - Same-gender couples now permitted legal parental rights
 - Adoptive parents, who often take children who are especially vulnerable
 - Foster parents
- Child-care centers and homes and all who work there
- Teachers, coaches, and other school personnel
- Pastors and priests
- Children's ministers, youth ministers, and Sunday school teachers
- Pediatricians and other medical shepherds
- Social workers

These are God's people, God's shepherds, caring for the children in our midst. They need our support, through our churches, in our communities, and, yes, from our governments.

In a world full of danger, predators, and threats, shepherds are the guardians of our future, lying in the door to the fold, occasionally even giving their lives.

Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for those who care for children, who love them, who protect them from dangers, who tend to their daily needs. Grant them strength, patience, and courage to deal with the threats that confront them. Amen.

George Reed
Executive Director

Third Sunday of Advent ~ December 14, 2014

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a]
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendor.
They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations.

“For I, the LORD, love justice;
I hate robbery and wrongdoing.
In my faithfulness I will reward my people
and make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants will be known among the nations
and their offspring among the peoples.
All who see them will acknowledge
that they are a people the LORD has blessed.”
I delight greatly in the LORD;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.

~Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

This particular verse in the book of Isaiah resonates with me because of my work with Partners in Health and Wholeness, which is designed to promote health as a practice of our faith and to improve the health of people of faith through increased physical activity, healthy eating and tobacco prevention.

The stakes have never been higher for our children. Obesity threatens the long-term well-being of too many young people. We recognize the need to ensure the first puff from a cigarette never happens and to shield non-smokers from the tobacco use of others. Reaching them through church youth groups, feeding programs, and tutoring efforts makes sense.

The public health community places great value on this work because it realizes that in order to improve the health of our citizens, we must meet people where they are – i.e., where they learn, work, play *and* pray.

Our Maker designed our bodies to be active and to eat from the earth. In fact, the way a garden grows is so natural and closely connected to God's original design that it's compared to the Sovereign Lord's righteousness springing up before nations. What a powerful analogy!

This passage is rich with themes of renewal, restoration and progression. In the Year of the Lord's favor, it is said that, "They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations... Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples".

My prayer for the next generation is that they will embrace a life of health and wholeness, ultimately reducing their risk of early death and disability. We realize that our future lies in their hands, and in order to be fruitful (no pun intended) as a society, we must cultivate healthy, active leaders.

Prayer

O God, giver of life, lead us on a path of restraint and diligence where our choices show respect for the bodies you have given us. Let us set an example of our faithfulness to you by caring for the temporal frames you have gifted us now and in preparation for the eternal life to come.

Willona Stallings
Former Director, Partners in Health and Wholeness

Fourth Sunday of Advent 4 ~ December 21, 2014

After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, “Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.”

Nathan replied to the king, “Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you.”

But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying:

“Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’”

“Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

“The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you:

Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me^[a]; your throne will be established forever.”

~2 *Samuel* 7:1-11, 16

Often we make promises with the best intentions of keeping them; meanwhile circumstances change and we may find we are unable to fulfill the promises that we have made. Advent is a time in which we are reminded that our God always fulfills promises. In today's Scripture, David wants to build a house, which will be a dwelling place for God, a temple. However, God cannot be contained in any one place or restricted to time or space. Therefore, God does not allow David to build a temple, but rather God makes a promise to David that his lineage would be established forever. The temple that David would have built would have been fleeting; however, a lineage lasts forever.

This promise to David is fulfilled when the angel comes to Mary and tells her that unto her a child will be born. God is fulfilling God's promise by coming in person. Emmanuel, God is with us. Advent is a reminder that God keeps promises, though not always in ways that

we expect. The baby Jesus is unlike any king that had been predicted before. Jesus is born to an unwed girl from a second-rate town. He is a nobody, born in a cattle stall in the middle of nowhere. Moreover, he is a refugee. The Holy Family is forced to flee their home in Judea to escape persecution and death. Jesus' parents were denied shelter when they entered Bethlehem, just as many undocumented immigrants now are turned away from social services that they need.

The fact that Jesus was born a poor, immigrant child with nothing to call his own is quite radical. God also reveals himself to have a dual identity in Jesus, who is both a child born in a manger who grows to care for the poor and marginalized, and also king in the House of David of whose rule there will be no end. Jesus, the refugee child forced to flee his homeland, challenges our basic assumptions about how we relate, befriend, love, consume and vote, because in God's promise to Israel there is a surprise. In Advent we are continually surprised as Jesus upsets what we thought we were supposed to be doing and how we were supposed to be living. God's plan to fulfill the promise made to David and to reconcile the world was not about wealth and power, but about welcoming immigrants among us and opening ourselves up to new and surprising relationships with those who are different from us.

Prayer

In this holy season of Advent, we pray for trust in God's presence as we navigate our way to unity. For trust in God's presence as we celebrate the diversity in our communities of faith. For trust in God's presence as we ask for the grace to be hospitable to others and grateful for help when we are in need. For trust in God's presence as we look for just solutions to our national security needs and the needs of those searching for stability and a better life. For trust in God's presence when we feel alienated or unwelcome. Amen

(Adapted from I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me, Diocese of Little Rock, 2008)

***Jennie Wilburn
Program Associate***

Nativity of the Lord ~ Christmas Eve 2014

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.
For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

~Isaiah 9:2-7

Very pregnant with our first child, I read this passage as a lector at our church's Christmas Eve service more than 20 years ago. Breathless because of the squirming baby pressing against my ribs, breath-taken by the reality that so much had been expected of another mother's child: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Yikes.

I have read and heard that passage more times than I can count. Yet I think we all sometimes forget that Jesus, the one they were anticipating, was also a son (lower case s) to Mary and Joseph. What we know of his childhood is limited but, at least some of the time, he was a handful. Staying behind in the temple while his parents headed out of town? When they turned that caravan around and went back for him, I can imagine their anxiety, but he didn't quite see what the big deal was about. He'd just been hanging out in his Father's house.

Those of us to whom children have been given are not raising the Messiah, but I draw some comfort that the Son of God gave his parents at least a little grief. What we also have in common with Mary and Joseph and with the prophets is that we see in our children the potential for something great, the chance to make a difference, the possibility of bringing light to the world.

All children, whatever family they are born into, however the world is aligned for them, deserve the opportunity afforded by high expectations and by a society willing to give them a well-fed, safely housed, properly educated beginning so that those expectations are achievable. Time and time again, Jesus calls us to care for the children, the orphans, the vulnerable. This son of immigrants, this paperless border child, would have us commit our hearts and minds to creating a place where the youngest among us are valued so that their leadership in future years reflects our loving investment in them.

Not quite three weeks after I stood before the congregation and read words foretelling the Chosen One, I became a mom. In the decades since, I have been reminded with him, and with his two younger brothers, that even Mary and Joseph had moments when they were sorely tried. In hindsight, we know that their precious child, their first-born son, had come to bring about change. Can we not have the foresight to recognize the potential in every child for greatness without end?

Prayer

Loving God, who calls us all your children, help us to provide and care for those whom you entrust to us. Guide our decisions and our choices so that we prepare them for a future of generosity and peace knowing well that our expectations of them rest on our commitment to them. Amen

Aleta Payne
Deputy Executive Director

Nativity of the Lord ~ Christmas Day 2014

I have posted watchmen on your walls, Jerusalem;
they will never be silent day or night.
You who call on the LORD,
give yourselves no rest,
and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem
and makes her the praise of the earth.

The LORD has sworn by his right hand
and by his mighty arm:
“Never again will I give your grain
as food for your enemies,
and never again will foreigners drink the new wine
for which you have toiled;
but those who harvest it will eat it
and praise the LORD,
and those who gather the grapes will drink it
in the courts of my sanctuary.”

Pass through, pass through the gates!
Prepare the way for the people.
Build up, build up the highway!
Remove the stones.
Raise a banner for the nations.

The LORD has made proclamation
to the ends of the earth:
“Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your Savior comes!
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.’”
They will be called the Holy People,
the Redeemed of the LORD;
and you will be called Sought After,
the City No Longer Deserted.

~Isaiah 62:6-12

The birth of the Baby Jesus represents the return of the light into a darkened world. It's a new chance to start again and to become more mindful of the light that is already shining in the world. On this Christmas Day, let us remember that the innocent Christ Child, born without fanfare, speaks to our shared experiences of marginalization and neglect.

In Luke 2, the angel appears to the shepherds, those at the end of the social order, to announce the birth of the Baby Jesus. God's decision to deliver the Good News to the

shepherds first reminds us that the God is with the marginalized. By appearing at the margins, God makes the margins holy spaces, and the economically and socially marginalized holy persons. The message of Christmas is one of welcome, in which we are called to welcome the marginalized, the stranger, and those at the lowest end of the social order into our communities. This includes farmworkers who, like the shepherds in the Christmas story, have few assets and occupy one of the lowest professions without pay or dignity, often receiving little notice from our society. The incarnation can occur anywhere and we are called to incarnate our highest values, reaching beyond fear and habit into chances for new possibilities.

At the time Jesus lived, three families owned almost all of the agricultural land in Palestine. Because of their powerful position, the best crops were exported to Rome for these families to eat, while families in small villages like Nazareth often did not have enough to eat. Similarly, today nearly five out of 10 farmworkers in North Carolina cannot afford enough food to feed their families. In the scripture passage today, the prophet Isaiah speaks to this unjust system. He describes the economic justice of the Kingdom of God, saying, "The Lord has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have labored..." In the Kingdom of God, no one is exploited for profit, cooperation replaces competition, and everyone has enough to succeed.

This Christmas Day let us remember that the church is the manger where new light enters the world. Angels appear in unlikely places--to a young girl and dirty shepherds, to farmworkers toiling in the fields, to a family struggling to find a safe place for their child's birth. And yet the angel's message is always, "Do not be afraid." As people of faith, we are called to cross barriers of race, class and language in order to enter into new relationships without fear. This Christmas Day, let us gather the Infant Jesus into our arms and hearts and go forth in the spirit of hospitality to welcome the marginalized in all areas of society.

Prayer

You came into the darkened world as a new light, O God, so still our hearts now by the wonder of your incarnation. Make us wise with the wisdom of the prophets, that truth and compassion might be born afresh in us. Let us not be busy inns with no rooms, but open our hearts to welcome a Holy Guest who is Christ Jesus, and help us to remember that in welcoming Jesus we welcome the poor, the lowly, the stranger and the immigrant. Amen.

*Jennie Wilburn
Program Associate*