

Advent 2024

Walking in the light of God



The good news
of Advent in the
context of migration

“You... are no longer strangers and
foreigners. You are citizens with everyone
else who belongs to the family of God.”
Ephesians 2:19, Contemporary English Version





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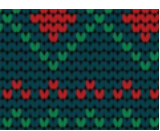
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In Advent, the God who moves beyond all borders

With great joy we come to this special time, the beloved season of Advent, that reminds us of the extraordinary grace of God through God's son Jesus Christ.

Advent gives us an occasion to pause in today's demanding pace of life. Pause to meditate on and encounter the word of God. Pause to take concrete actions that strengthen hope and solidarity that are so urgent in our time. Advent challenges us to a new awareness, of expectation, of faith, of encounter, with the risen Jesus present in the face of our neighbor.

For this edition, we embrace the joy of the season, while remembering and becoming aware of the reality of our sisters and brothers who are considered to be migrants in different regions. We hope that in this celebration of Advent our communities of faith and our families can intentionally show solidarity in this reality that is so personal for many. We understand that the adverse circumstances experienced by many families, mainly in Latin America, force them to leave their places of origin to seek opportunities to survive. When the decision to migrate ceases to be an option and becomes the only alternative, there is no easy path forward.

The challenging journey of migrating people, often misrepresented, finds an echo in various biblical narratives. Perhaps the most significant example is the abrupt flight of Jesus' family to foreign lands; the Incarnate Word is introduced into human history precisely in an experience of forced migration. Jesus is the one who came, the one who comes, in the form of a migrant.

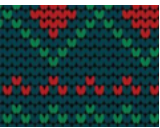
The God of heaven and earth led the Holy Family through different regions, seeking to preserve their lives, and thus fulfill God's redemptive plans. That is why we are so drawn to the idea that in Advent, of all seasons, migrants and their families are encouraged to "walk in the light of God," the God who moves beyond borders.

It is our deep desire that, as we celebrate Advent, our hope and our journey toward Jesus be renewed. At the same time, may we stand in solidarity with the migrant population, our sisters and brothers to whom the scripture says: "You...are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens with everyone else who belongs to the family of God" (Ephesians 2:19, CEV).

In great hope,

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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.

¹ David Riaño, “4 Meditations on Christmas, based on the Christmas sermons of Martin Luther” in Biteproject (23 December 2020). Accessed 23 September 2023. <https://biteproject.com/martin-lutero-navidad/#~:text=Dicen%20que%20Mart%C3%ADn%20Lutero%20pod%C3%ADa,lo%20que%20deseaba%20haber%20dicho>.

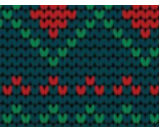
Five candles are inserted in the foliage: a purple one, which evokes repentance; a yellow one, which evokes faith in Jesus; a green one, which evokes hope; a pink one, which evokes joy; and a red one, which evokes the love of God. Other traditions use three purple (the color of conversion, preparation, waiting) or red candles, and one pink (color of joy) that 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 Themes of Advent

Reflections and prayers have been written for the four weeks of Advent and for Christmas Day. Each week you will find an introduction to the theme, a Bible reading, a look at “our reality”, a reflection, questions, follow-up activities, and finally, a prayer. We thank Teresita Matos-Post, Cruz Calles, Mark Adams, Dori Hjalmarson, and Karen González Tally for preparing the reflections for this 2024 edition. We hope that each entry will lead individuals, families, and communities into meditation and commitment based on the mystery of Jesus, God with us.



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, to accompany one another, adds vigor and certainty to our steps in 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.



A Divine Pause on the Migrant Road

Teresita Matos-Post

First week of Advent: December 1, 2024

Reading Matthew 1:18-21



INTRODUCTION

Here we begin the 2024 Advent season, “Walking in the Light of God,” embracing the dynamics of mobilization and migration that has become more frequent in our Latin American contexts. In Advent we prepare ourselves to meet Jesus, the one who walked between towns and villages; but we also prepare ourselves to meet migrating people who walk from their own towns and villages seeking a new dawn. Today we begin this Advent journey with hope: hope for God’s light in the promise of a new day.

READING OF MATTHEW 1:18-21

CALL TO REFLECTION

One voice:

Thanks be to God, we begin the celebration of Advent! We will walk as sisters and brothers, moved in the same direction toward an encounter with our Savior, the hope for all peoples!

All voices:

Today we open our hearts, rejoicing in good news of great joy, which is for all the people of God, whether near or far.

One voice:

We light the first Advent candle, the candle of hope, as a symbolic gesture that illuminates the path of all who are migrating. This is the light of the sun of justice among us.

All voices:

O God, leave your light among us, and accompany your people on their long journeys. May the hope of your presence be in us all. Amen.

OUR REALITY

In the year 2024, we have witnessed new complexities of migration on a global level. Geopolitical conflicts, government dictatorships, and the unsatisfactory living conditions of many countries are key triggers in the rise of migratory movements. In Latin America, extreme poverty, unemployment, violence, and political persecution force thousands of families to face a journey that will tear apart the social and family fabric to which they belong. In Guatemala alone, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicates that in April of 2024 there were 3,256,047 Guatemalan migrants in the U.S., nine percent more than what was registered in 2021. This is an important reality, as it reflects the need of more and more Guatemalan families to seek a source of employment outside of their own country.

Central American countries have seen massive caravans of migrants pass through, raising concerns among immigration authorities. Joining a caravan requires sacrifice, risk, and pain; the security and cohesion of the family left behind is at stake. Therefore, the decision to migrate, to “seek new horizons,” is almost always due to personal, family, and social crises. The migrant journey is undertaken in the simple hope of having a better future.

REFLECTION: “A DIVINE PAUSE ON THE MIGRANT ROAD”

A stop at an intersection is a universal human experience. Whether walking or driving, we pause at a crossroads to navigate our daily travels –to our jobs, school, or visiting relatives. At these intersections, we assess our next steps more clearly: should we go left, right, or continue forward? We become aware of pedestrians and vehicles coming our way, allowing us to make informed decisions. If we rush through without reflecting, we risk taking the wrong path, or worse yet, impulsivity can create dangerous consequences for ourselves and others.

During Advent we pause spiritually to prepare for Christ’s arrival as we reflect on all who stand at life’s intersections. Many families in Mexico, Central America, and worldwide face difficult decisions in their lives, assessing the risks in the search for dignity and opportunity. Similarly, in Matthew 1:18-21, we glimpse the lives of Mary and Joseph, a young couple at a challenging intersection facing struggles that could cost them their lives. Their faith in God offers us the hope that God is with us during the most challenging journeys.

In March 2024, during the Migration and Missions Network gathering in El Salvador, I learned about the impact of migration on families and communities. The families left behind often don’t know of the hardships their migrating loved ones face. Many migrants do not share the full extent of their difficulties: uncertainty about work, low wages, and navigating unfamiliar laws and languages. This raises a profound question: why do people migrate to places where they might face similar obstacles as in their home countries? What can the biblical narrative tell us about families on the move?

Mary and Joseph grapple with an unexpected pregnancy, social pressures, and legal challenges. They likely experienced fear, shame, and anxiety—emotions similar to those experienced by families forced to migrate. Policies and conditions in their home countries often force compromises, perpetuating violence and scarcity.

One reason families flee north is violence, like that which Mary could have faced. Women and girls, in particular, experience “triple inequality,” facing gender-based violence, exploitation, and femicide throughout their migration journey.

Mary, like many women, is vulnerable to economic hardship and social isolation, unable to provide for herself or her child should Joseph abandon her. Financial strain pushes young people to migrate for better opportunities, leaving family members behind, thus disrupting family and community ties.

The decision to migrate is complex and often made with limited resources. However, in the example of Joseph and Mary—who journeyed to Bethlehem and later fled to Egypt—we see how God’s wisdom guides us through life’s crossroads. Joseph’s pause allowed divine intervention, as the angel of the Lord appeared with encouragement and direction.

Advent prompts us to welcome God into our discernment process. How can we discover paths forward for ourselves and for all oppressed communities? With God’s help, we can support families under pressure, bringing hope to those on migratory journeys, and providing refuge to those who arrive at unfamiliar destinations.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Name the “migrations” that have marked your family. How do you see the generous light of God in them?

Have you known cases in which people claim to know Jesus and at the same time forget their migrant siblings? In our actions, how can we incorporate both a knowledge of Jesus and love for those forced to migrate?

ACTIVITY FOR THE WEEK

Take some time to write a brief prayer on the following Padlet wall for a migrant person or family. Use the link <https://padlet.com/arnolagui1/my-prayer-for-the-migrant-population-gfmt863b9ku1q5h8> or the following QR code:



PRAYER

God of our Salvation, we are deeply grateful that you sent your Son Jesus Christ to show us the way and to walk alongside us. His birth, his life, his ministry, and his presence among us, through the Holy Spirit, encourage us to keep walking. Reveal to us your will in all of life’s decisions. We celebrate this day by giving “glory to God in the highest” and by promoting peace for all people, especially for those who, in hope, migrate to faraway places.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.



Building Peace with Every Step

Cruz Calles

Second week of Advent: December 8, 2024

Reading Matthew 2:13-15



INTRODUCTION

In some ways, we are all on a journey to find peace in life. First, we seek to meet our basic needs: food, health, shelter, and rest. We desire security, healthy relationships, community networks, work, and purpose. On the path to peace for ourselves and peace for our community, there can be many difficulties, because we live in a world torn apart by sin. However, God has chosen to walk with us on this path. Through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, God is bringing about shalom, peace, total well-being, that God has always desired for the world. All people are invited to join God on this journey of building peace.

READ MATTHEW 2:13-15.

CALL TO REFLECTION

One Voice:

When we must leave the homes in which we belong,

All Voices:

We long for peace. Come, O God, and be our peace!

One Voice:

When the journey is long and the road is hard,

All Voices:

We long for peace. Come, O Christ, and be our peace!

One Voice:

When we face illness, loneliness, or rejection; when we face an unknown future and success is not guaranteed,

All Voices:

We long for peace. Come, Holy Spirit, and be our peace!

One Voice:

We light the second Advent candle, the candle of peace, knowing that wherever we go, Christ the Prince of Peace goes with us.

All Voices:

May the peace of Christ rule in our hearts this day and always.

OUR REALITY

One way to interpret the dynamics of migration is to see it as the movement from one point to another. The plan to leave one place and arrive at another may seem simple. However, the time spent between one place and another is an ordeal for many.

One reason for the hardship is that in many places migration is considered a crime and not a right. Therefore, migrants end up feeling alone, both on the journey and in their new communities. It is difficult, then, for people who migrate, who are between worlds, to find peace.

REFLECTION: “BUILDING PEACE WITH EVERY STEP”

At the heart of the theme of migration is a profound call to Christian reflection, especially in this season of Advent, when we prepare for the coming of Christ, who also experienced migration in his own life. From a biblical perspective, migration is a recurring theme that plays out in the lives of many pivotal figures.

Jesus himself was a migrant. After his birth, the Holy Family had to flee to Egypt to escape persecution by King Herod (Matthew 2:13-15). This event highlights Jesus’ experience as a refugee, forced to leave his home to save his life. During Advent, we are reminded that the Savior of the world understood firsthand the pain of displacement and uncertainty, and we are called to exercise empathy and solidarity with those who today go through similar situations.

Many years earlier, Abraham and Sarah were called by God to leave their home and migrate to an unknown land (Genesis 12:1-3). This act of faith and trust in God reflects the reality of many migrants today, who, forced by hopelessness, must trust in an uncertain future. In Advent, we are invited to share in that spiritual journey, a time of active waiting and faith in the fulfillment of God’s promises in the midst of our own uncertainties.

The exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land (Exodus 12:31-42) is another significant example of migration in the Bible. This journey, through an arduous desert path, represents the search for freedom and dignity, moving away from slavery and suffering. In a similar way, we are invited to prepare for the arrival of Jesus as the Savior and Liberator, who leads us from darkness to light, from oppression to justice, from fear to peace. Just as the Israelites migrated to a place of greater peace and security, Christians today are called to work for a world where everyone can live in freedom and without fear.

The story of Ruth and Naomi, who migrated because of famine and found a new home, highlights the importance of hospitality and inclusion (Ruth 1:1-22). This story, read in the light of Advent, invites Christian communities to extend the same hospitality and support to those who migrate today, seeing each person as a valuable member of the community of the Kingdom of God.

Let us entrust ourselves to God with the faith that a new day is coming when we will live in equality, respect, peace, love and solidarity. Advent invites us to prepare the way of the Lord through works of justice and love, always working alongside the most vulnerable to make the Kingdom of God visible here on earth.

Those who leave do not leave because they want to, but because with each step they build peace in the face of despair. This is the way of Jesus, and we are called to follow!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Jesus faced displacement and uncertainty when he was a small child and his family fled to Egypt. Can you think of other times when Jesus faced displacement or uncertainty?

In what ways is your own future uncertain right now? What emotions are you experiencing because of that?

Think of someone you know who has recently migrated to a new place. What challenges do you know or imagine they are experiencing?

In what ways might God be calling you to offer comfort to another person through solidarity and accompaniment?

ACTIVITY OF THE WEEK

In this Advent season, we must not only passively await the coming of Christ, but also act on behalf of the most vulnerable. Churches and human rights organizations must intensify information and awareness campaigns so that migrants know their universal rights and also so that those who accompany them do so with empathy and solidarity. As Christians, we have a responsibility to advocate for the creation of just laws that protect migrants and ensure that no one is forced to leave their home due to poverty, violence or injustice. In this way, we actively build the peace of Christ.

Write an advocacy letter in favor of migrants in your country as a way of expressing your deepest convictions. What would you say? How would you express your concern and empathy? What could you write that might awaken empathy in others? Then, consider sharing it! Talk with another person about how your advocacy could impact the reality of migrants.

PRAYER

God, you have been our help from age to age. Thank you for faithfully responding to the cry of your people, especially the most vulnerable. Make us instruments of your peace, giving us the courage to accompany and raise our voices in favor of your migrating children. Amen.



Wonders at the Borders

Mark Adams

Third week of Advent: December 15, 2024

Reading Acts 2:1-11



INTRODUCTION

When thinking about the dynamics of migration, one of the main problems is the controversial issue of borders between countries. Nothing is as complex for the migrant as limitations that the authorities over the borders can determine. Borders are guarded to prevent human encounters between the different cultures. Unfortunately, the valuable learnings that can arise at the intersection of cultures, ethnicities, and worldviews are often not perceived. The traditional discourses of citizenship, patriotism, and sovereignty are often superficial expressions of the ethnocentrism and xenophobia that many peoples have held for centuries.

What a great challenge it is to free oneself from prejudices towards the unknown, that which is “foreign,” the stranger! What an opportunity it is to recognize the richness of encounter and the complementarity between peoples.

READ ACTS 2:1-11.

CALL TO REFLECTION

One voice:

God, what a great joy it is to know that we are the work of your hands. We recognize that we are united by bearing your image and likeness.

All voices:

Thank you God, for visiting your people, with their diverse colors, languages, customs, concerns and hopes. The light of your coming shines on all.

One voice:

We light the third Advent candle, the candle of joy, evoking the power of the light that transcends all space. The light of Christ Jesus is the light that gives joy to every person.

All voices:

Amen, Lord Jesus, may your light transform borders between your children into happy spaces of convergence and growth.

OUR REALITY

When God created the world, there were no lines drawn between bodies of water or land, but throughout history borders have been established, fought, moved, and reestablished, often with many conflicts. Borders make us assume that this land is “mine” and that land is “yours,” even though land is something that rightfully belongs to God. This mentality affects the way we view people who migrate to “our” territory; if we hold firmly to a sense of what is “mine” and “yours,” resentment and defensiveness can arise and create conflict and even violence.

Borders, rather than ordering or delimiting, impose ownership at all costs. Often with an attitude that leads us to forget the fact that we are all members of the same humanity, God's creation, worthy because we bear God's image and likeness.

In our migratory reality, what would happen if we saw borders as places of encounter and mutual growth, and not places of self-interest and conflict? What would happen if we saw people who do not speak our same language as full-fledged children of God? What if we were to see these siblings as those who possess wisdom that we do not yet have?

REFLECTION: "WONDERS AT THE BORDERS"

The disciples of Jesus were all together in one place on Pentecost awaiting power from on high. Jesus had gathered these disciples in the hinterlands and small towns of Galilea as well as the banks of the Sea of Galilea. They had crossed the borders of the region of Samaria and Judea on their way to Jerusalem, the religious and political center of their world. Far from their home, they experienced the trauma of Jesus being arrested and crucified, the awe of encountering Jesus resurrected, and the disorientation of Jesus' ascension crossing the Divine/human border. When they received the power from on high that Jesus had promised, "people from every nation under heaven" heard the disciples proclaiming the wonders of God in their own language and the people were utterly amazed: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?"

When I migrated 2,000 miles from South Carolina in the United States to Agua Prieta, Sonora just south of the U.S./Mexico border in 1998, the first place that my colleague Chuy Gallegos took me was to a small yet-to-be finished house on the outskirts of town. There were about sixteen men and women from the rural parts of the southern Mexican state of Chiapas huddled in the living space—all who had crossed geographic, linguistic and cultural borders to arrive in "the big city." All were farmers and only pastor Chuy and I had more than an elementary formal education.

All were disciples of Jesus who had gathered in one place far from home to listen for a word from God. Pastor Chuy told me that they were beginning a study of the gospel of John. I was glad that Pastor Chuy was going to be the one to teach the most theologically complex of the gospels. He read the first eighteen verses and then proceeded to do the exact opposite of what I expected. He did not teach or explain the passage. He asked one simple question: "What did you hear in the reading of God's word?"

After some time of silence, Brother Pedro said: "What caught my attention is that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." After a pause he shook his head and said: "Yes, God knows what it means to be far from home. God left God's home in heaven and came to live with us."

After another time of silence, Sister Flor added: "Yes, God came to live with us so that we can know God and God can know us. God knows our joys and our sufferings."

Weren't these Chiapanecans talking? How can they be proclaiming the wonder of the incarnation, the linchpin of Christian theology, in clearer language than any theologian I had ever read?

In Jesus, God crossed the Divine/human border to accompany humanity and to reveal the fullness of God’s love. From Abraham and Sarah to Pedro and Flor; from Mary and Joseph to María y Jose, God has not only accompanied those crossing borders but has revealed God’s intentions for the world. Even as the authorities of the day wanted to send Jesus back across the Divine/human border, so today many of the powers seek to dehumanize and deport those who have crossed borders.

In this season of Advent, may God grant us eyes to see and ears to hear the wonders of God being proclaimed and lived out across linguistic, cultural, ethnic, religious and economic borders. The presence of Jesus transcends every stronghold that divides and discriminates. With joy, we proclaim that “the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Have you ever crossed a border? What emotions did you experience? What was it like to meet people in that place?

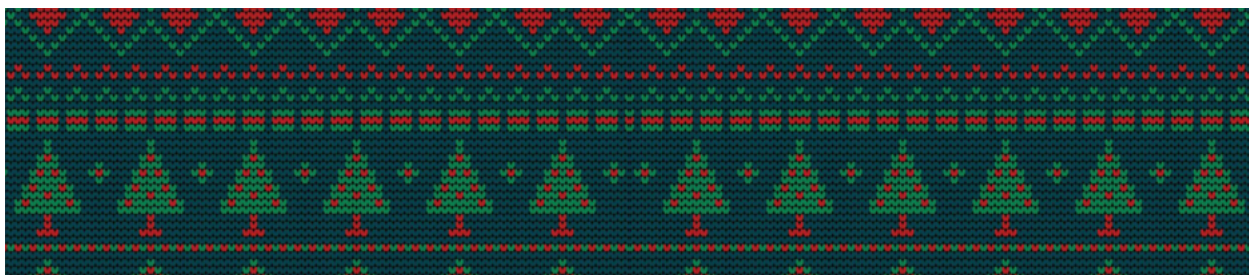
How could embracing the idea that “all the earth belongs to God” help with understanding issues related to borders? How might other ancestral wisdoms regarding the earth contribute to the discussion?

ACTIVITY FOR THE WEEK

Take some time to share with a person from a different country or of a different ethnicity. Ask them how they celebrate the end-of-year holidays in their place of origin and what they enjoy the most? Then compare how many similarities or differences exist between that person’s experience and your own. Celebrate with joy the diversity of life in different places!

PRAYER

God our Creator, all the earth and its fullness is yours, the world and those who dwell in it. We thank you for sharing your good creation with us. We pray that you make us mindful of our pilgrimage on this earth, and of the generosity we are called to show toward all your children, no matter where they come from or where they go. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.



A New Family

Dori Hjalmarson

Fourth Week of Advent: December 22, 2024
Reading Matthew 12:46-50



INTRODUCTION

What is a home? What is a family? These are questions we ask ourselves in Scripture and in our own lives as we move place to place and encounter new opportunities and challenges in connecting with others. Those who have migrated to a home far from their roots must wrestle with these questions every day. When Jesus was “far from home,” traveling as a human being on earth, God was faithful, becoming present in the community, in the most unexpected places. In this way, God leads us to a new understanding of family and home.

READ MATTHEW 12:46-50.

CALL TO REFLECTION

One Voice:

During the season of Advent, in anticipation of the Christmas festivities, we are mindful of the closest relationships in our lives: those we have and those we long for.

All Voices:

As human beings created in the image of God, we desire connection, community, commitment, love.

One Voice:

Today, we light the fourth candle, the candle of love, proclaiming that God’s love shines brightly in the darkest spaces.

All Voices:

God’s love brings us together. Strangers become friends, neighbors become family. Thanks be to God!

OUR REALITY

The family nucleus, a social base that can provide an environment of development, security and affection, is in crisis due to the need to migrate. For different reasons and in different circumstances, many families are forced to fragment as one or more members sets out seeking opportunities. Stress looms over those who leave, as well as those who remain waiting and hoping for correspondence.

For those who leave, the responsibility to have a good job and to support the family that stayed behind weighs heavily. For those who stay, the uncertainty and fear about the wellbeing of their loved one is constantly at hand. Family separation may lead to an even greater lack of basic resources or an overload of responsibility for those taking care of children who require support and education. The toll on the family, despite the benefit of remittances sent, is considerable. Families affected by migration face serious tensions that may weaken or irreparably break the ties that united them. At

best, they will need to reconfigure their original bonds.

REFLECTION: “A NEW FAMILY”

When I first moved from the United States to Honduras, one of the most marked cultural differences I noticed was family dynamics. I am single, moved out of my parents’ house at age 18, and have lived alone ever since. Nearly everyone I met in the Honduras church, where I had been called to serve, asked me dubiously about my family, my living situation, and whether I wasn’t afraid to live alone in a new city.

In Honduras, meeting someone at the airport is a family affair; in the United States, I had occasionally had to take a cab from the airport to my parents’ house. In Honduras, the norm is for children to live with their parents or grandparents at least until the children are married; in the United States, the norm is to make fun of adult children who still live in their parents’ basement. In Honduras, I am nearly always asked “And how is your family?” even in the opening minutes of business meetings.

Never were the distinctions starker than when the COVID-19 pandemic led to my United States supervisors’ calling me and other mission co-workers back “home” so we could be with our families and stay safer. I had to seriously wrestle with what “home” and “family” meant to me.

As we await the coming of Christ in this Advent season, I wonder about the wrestling God Incarnate might have done to make the decision to migrate into a new way of relating with creation. I wonder about how people today who are forced to migrate make sense of “home” and “family” as they leave their places of origin, often leaving beloved family members behind.

Ruth and Orpah wrestled with the decision to choose a new family (with their mother-in-law Naomi) or return to their former families after the death of their husbands. Neither choice was easy or clear—in both directions lay grief, joy, suffering, security. All three women “lifted up their voices and wept” repeatedly even as they each made different decisions.

In the Gospel of Matthew, after a series of miracles, healings, and confrontations with demons, a woman and siblings approach Jesus, seeking, perhaps, recognition or an audience. Jesus answers his disciples, possibly scandalizing a public with God-ordained definitions of who are “mother” and “brothers” and Jesus’ responsibility toward them: “Who is my mother? Who is my brother?”

I do not think it is coincidence that in the subsequent verses, Jesus retreats to a lake and begins to speak in parables. I wonder if the gospel writer is trying to convey some anguish and anxiety about making clear, definitive statements about family, about choosing one family over another. What is the gospel saying about our definitions of family? Does God dictate a clear definition of family in these two passages? What might a new definition of “family” mean for us during this season of Advent? I invite you to wrestle with me, with those having to make a home in another country, with Ruth, with Orpah, with Jesus, this week. We await a savior, yes, and the King of Kings, and the Prince of Peace. We also await our brother. For what Jesus said is true: Whoever does the will of our Father in heaven is Christ’s mother, sister, brother.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What does “family” mean to you?

In your life, have you experienced new forms of “family” created by God, even with people who are not blood relatives? What have you learned about love through those relationships?

ACTIVITY FOR THE WEEK

In communities where people have left or in communities where migrants end up settling, families take on new forms: for example, grandparents raise grandchildren, aunts and uncles care for nieces and nephews, neighbors help neighbors with tasks that may have previously been done only by family members.

Think of a tangible way you can “love your neighbor” this week by being like a family member to them: sitting and listening for a while, finding some way to provide for a specific need, and/or praying for them throughout the week.

PRAYER

Faithful God, we love you because you first loved us. You called us to be a family of faith, caring for one another, teaching one another truth, defending one another, and providing for one another. Help us to be your loving presence as we wait for your light to shine brightly and unite us all. In the name of Jesus, our brother, Amen.



My Favorite Advent Tradition for a Weary World*

Karen González Tally

Celebration of Christmas: December 24, 2024
Reading Luke 2:1-20



INTRODUCTION

On this Advent journey, we have migrated together from the first week's reflection on hope to this joyous day in which we celebrate Christmas with new eyes. When we began we may not have had the same perspective on migration that we have now. You may notice new insight, growth, or sensitivity on the subject. This small "cognitive migration" shows how good it is to keep moving toward greater understanding. We may have overcome internal obstacles to reach this point of proclaiming that the good news of the coming of Jesus knows no borders.

Today we admire God's miracle, Emmanuel, the Incarnate Word that has brought heaven to earth. We rejoice, calling siblings from far or near to join the angelic song that gives glory to God in the highest, and while we sing, to build peace.

READ LUKE 2:1-20.

CALL TO REFLECTION

One voice:

The time has come! A Savior has been born to us, who is Christ the Lord! Today we celebrate with joy that God comes to meet us. Hallelujah!

All voices:

Welcome to our time in history, Jesus! Welcome to our journey! You will see that we do not have a manger for you, but our reality cries out for your presence.

One voice:

As we light the Christmas candle, we also light hope for all the people who live constantly searching for a new land, where justice dwells.

All voices:

God of all justice, may your sweet presence and your love be the homeland that embraces your pilgrim people, while your Holy Spirit sustains us all with peace.

REFLECTION: "MY FAVORITE ADVENT TRADITION FOR A WEARY WORLD"

My first experiences of Christian sacraments, including baptism and the Eucharist, were mysterious and somewhat confusing. As a Catholic little girl, I didn't remember my infant baptism and could

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never quite wrap my head around eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood. What's more, these solemn events happened within the confines of a giant, cavernous church – a place where I had to be still, quiet, and serious. During weekly Mass, I learned implicitly from the nuns that reverence and fun do not go together.

I understood these sacraments were important for a life of faith, and as I grew older, I learned to appreciate the embodied practices of breaking bread, baptism, pilgrimage, and anointing with oil. As a kid, however, these practices made me feel that God was cold and remote, just like all the rigid statues of the saints who peered down at me during Mass with somber faces. They failed to engage my heart and mind as well as my body.

The one Christian tradition I understood was the sung liturgy of Las Posadas. Every December, Las Posadas invites participants to become pilgrims on a journey, reenacting the long-ago story of Joseph and Mary seeking shelter, or posada, as Mary's belly swells with the imminent birth of Jesus. Unlike other liturgies, Las Posadas never took place inside the church – and it still doesn't. The entire drama of the holy parents' search for shelter takes place in neighborhood streets as the candle-carrying procession, often in costume, knocks on neighbors' doors seeking posada. They sing, but at each door, everyone is turned away...

Representing Joseph and Mary, the pilgrims outside seeking shelter sing:

Venimos rendidos (We are worn out)
desde Nazaret, (coming from Nazareth.)
yo soy carpintero (I am a carpenter,)
de nombre José. (Joseph by name.)

The neighbors inside, who represent the innkeeper:

No me importa el nombre, (I don't care about your name,)
déjenme dormir, (Let me sleep,)
pues que yo les digo (because I already told you)
que no hemos de abrir. (we shall not open up.)

... until the last home. There – finally! – the doors swing open for Mary and Joseph, and we celebrate with traditional foods, candy, and piñatas.

As an adult I still love the accessibility of Las Posadas throughout many Latin American countries and among Latine immigrants in the U.S. It doesn't matter if you can read or speak Spanish; you can still understand what's happening, marching along with the procession and celebrating at the end-of-evening party. Even at the darkest moment in the liturgy, when the innkeeper threatens Mary and Joseph with violence, everyone knows how the story will end: with a joyful entry and, eventually, the birth of Jesus who brings the hope of peace and justice into a jaded world. Everything about the experience – the slow walk through the neighborhood, the cold December air on your face, the singing of the liturgy – invites you to join this sacred story of hope.

And this is the power of Las Posadas: These liturgies are not just traditions, but a way to live into the hope that burst into the world with Jesus's birth and resurrection. And in these tense and tender times, I love that a tradition embodying that hope doesn't require us to go to a particular building or even have a clergy person. It's hard to hold on to hope amid the dehumanizing rhetoric about migrants that we hear in western countries, the ongoing war in Ukraine, the invasion and bombing of Gaza, and the rise of fascism around the world threatening democracies many of us were sure would never fall. Yet amid all this, our faith passes through church doors and moves right into the streets of our neighborhoods! Emmanuel, God with us, isn't born again in Mary, but in the hearts of all of those who await his arrival with hopeful expectation and joy as they reenact the story of his coming year after year.

This is what Las Posadas mean to me now: hope is lived out in my body and not just in my head. As I celebrate the birth of Christ this Christmas season, as I remember and re-enact that world-changing event, I will live into this hope. Welcoming God in the flesh gives my own flesh hope for another day.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Have you participated in a tradition like Las Posadas? What elements of it speak to you about the situation of migrants?

How can we find and promote hope in the midst of the insecurity and instability that migrants experience? How can we talk about Christian faith in this context?

ACTIVITY FOR THE WEEK

In the spirit of the tradition of Las Posadas, visit a family who must live at a distance this Christmas from a relative who has migrated. Bring them gift or a present, and add a note with a word of blessing for the their relative, encouraging hope.

PRAYER

We praise you, O God! Your goodness and mercy exceed all expectations. We are grateful for your coming, and that you walk patiently with your people, especially with those who migrate. Your mere presence and your message of love teach us that, on the journeys we take to survive, you continue to be the shepherd who guides us on paths of justice for the love of your holy name. In the name of Jesus, Amen.



Biblical Reflection Contributors



Dr. Teresita Matos-Post is a dedicated Christian leader committed to supporting Latinx immigrant communities. As Executive Director of Beth-El Farmworker Ministry in Wimauma, Florida, she leads efforts to nurture farmworkers' minds, bodies, and spirits through education, hunger relief, health care access, and spiritual growth. Teresita is a leader in the United Methodist church, and in 2023, she earned her Doctorate in Ministry from Drew Theological School, specializing in Women's Religious Leadership.



The Rev. Cruz Antonio Calles Guillén of Guazapa, San Salvador, is an ordained pastor in the Salvadoran Lutheran Church. He is a member of the ACT Alliance, Coordinator of Migrant Ministries, and Pastor of the Iglesia Apóstoles de Cristo and of the Palabra y Bendición Lutheran Mission. Cruz works in political advocacy on behalf of returned and displaced migrants, and provides therapy for psychological trauma. He loves seeing transformation take place in the lives of others.



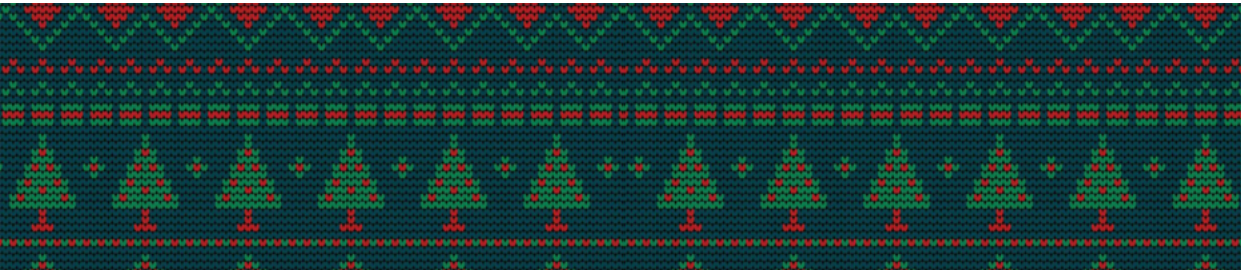
Since 1998, the Rev. Mark Adams has served as a Pastor and Mission Co-Worker for the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the U.S. Coordinator of Frontera de Cristo, a binational ministry located at the border of Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico and Douglas, Arizona. Mark and his team at Frontera de Cristo bring together people from both sides of the border, ministering through prayer, education, humanitarian aid, economic development, and advocacy.



The Rev. Dori Hjalmarson has served as a Mission Co-Worker for the Presbyterian Church (USA) and as theological education and leadership development facilitator at the Evangelical Presbyterian Mission of Honduras since 2017. In her work, she participates in efforts to study regional migration and to attend to migrants and refugees. Dori grew up in the southwestern United States and previously worked as a newspaper journalist and medical chaplain. She loves learning about a diversity of cultures by meeting the people who practice them.



Karen González Tally is a speaker, writer, storyteller, and immigrant advocate, who herself immigrated to the U.S. from Guatemala as a child. Karen is a former public school teacher and attended Fuller Theological Seminary, where she studied theology and missiology. For the last 17 years, she has been a non-profit professional. She wrote a book about her own immigration story and some of the immigrants found in the Bible: *The God Who Sees: Immigrants, The Bible, and the Journey to Belong* (Herald Press, May 2019). Karen's second book is *Beyond Welcome: Centering Immigrants in our Christian Response to Immigration* (Brazos Press, October 2022). She is currently working on a novel about migration.



Give creatively, without violence, discrimination, or ecological damage

In time of gifts, 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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