



# BOUNDLESS

AN ANTI-COLONIAL ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

UNBOUND



# 1st Sunday of Advent

Clara A.B. Joseph

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

## Advent in the Cistern: The Anti-colonial Christian's Call

In many ex-colonies and countries masquerading as free, the prevailing belief is that European colonialism's chief aim was to spread Christianity. But in some places, being Christian has been ironically recast as a betrayal of the homeland—a symbol of colonial oppression.

Kandhamal, India stands as a grim reminder of this twisted logic. While much of the world celebrated Christmas in 2007 and 2008, Kandhamal's death toll climbed 30...100...500.... Self-proclaimed "anticolonial nationalists" brutally attacked Christians. They assaulted women, destroyed houses, and torched churches. Violent mobs falsely accused Christians of murdering a local Hindu leader, Swami Lakshmanananda, a man who proudly proclaimed his life's mission was to "protect the tribals [Adivasi, or Indigenous peoples] from Christian conversion." Later, Marxist groups claimed responsibility for the murder.

Most of the victims of Kandhamal belong to the Dalits and Adivasis—groups harshly marginalized in Indian society. Dalits, once labeled "Untouchables," are condemned to the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy, while Adivasis, though technically outside this rigid system, remain isolated and excluded. Precolonial and colonial history further complicated these identities, with some Dalits tracing their roots to tribal communities. However, to the frenzied mobs, their conversion stood as a glaring mark of treason—a betrayal of their Indian blood and heritage.

Though the Dalits and Adivasis were the primary victims, Thomas Christian leaders—descendants of an ancient Christian tradition in India believed to have been established by the Apostle Thomas in 52 A.D.—were also present in Kandhamal. These leaders became targets, symbolic of the "colonial influence" that the attackers perceived. Thus, in Kandhamal, being Christian absurdly equated to being a colonial traitor, as though faith itself were the imperial invader. This paradox, where the oppressed were branded as colonial agents, echoes the struggles of colonized peoples throughout history.

In Kandhamal, Christians did not meet violence with violence, but instead embraced the formidable power of nonviolent resistance. Nonviolence is an unseen force, quiet yet profound. It is not simply the absence of physical retaliation but a resolute, intentional stance—rooted in love, grounded in justice, and defined by an unshakable refusal to perpetuate harm, even when faced with overwhelming persecution.

### The Prophet in the Cistern

Jeremiah, the "Weeping Prophet," knew this well. He witnessed the conquest of Jerusalem, the destruction of the First Temple, and the exile of the Judeans to Babylon. Betrayed by his people for speaking uncomfortable truths, Jeremiah was abandoned in a cistern and left to die, only to be rescued by an Ethiopian.

Even then, Jeremiah spoke of hope: "In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch

to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land" (Jeremiah 33: 15). These words— "justice and righteousness"—are profound, urging us toward deep repentance and the pursuit of just beliefs and systems. Jeremiah's message was inherently anticolonial, a faith rooted in nonviolent resistance.

This kind of hope raises difficult questions: Can a Christian be anticolonial? Can scripture be read through the lens of justice without becoming entangled in the histories of colonial exploitation?

Long before Jeremiah, the psalmist expressed a similar lament: "Do not let my enemies exult over me" (Psalm 25:2). Shame, trust, and betrayal are the emotional landscapes of any subjugated people. The psalms, written centuries earlier, resonate across eras of conquest, from Babylonian sieges to Roman occupations and into the modern colonial expansions that scarred the world.

The pride of the invader remains a bitter wine for the oppressed, and the psalmist's plea rings as relevant today as it did in ancient times.

The people in the time of David, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul did not float around in spiritual bubbles; their lives were rooted in historical events such as colonial invasions when they strove to bear witness to the right way. Those who followed the Lord's path waited in humble repentance, challenging corrupt rulers. This is the call of the anticolonial Christian.

## A Call to Hope and Justice

This call reverberates throughout history. When the first gunshot echoed across the waves in the fifteenth century, nations were thrown into distress. The Thomas Christians, on whose shores Vasco da Gama arrived, would have called upon the Lord. But Gama was not seeking peaceful dialogue; his goal was control. He pursued retaliation against Muslims and anyone resembling them—including the Thomas Christians. His motivation was not conversion but trade monopoly.

Ironically, centuries later, the Thomas Christian leaders in Kandhamal—alongside other Christian leaders, faced "decolonial" violence from self-proclaimed patriots. The attempt to rid India of colonial remnants made those who had lived on its soil for millennia vulnerable. Their presence, along with that of the Dalit and Adivasi Christians, incited rage and violence from figures such as Swami Lakshmanananda and his followers.

In moments like these, the Christian's call becomes clearer. Being an anticolonial Christian means finding hope in scripture, even amid persecution. Reading Luke 21:25-36 alongside the Christians of Kandhamal during those difficult Christmases brings new meaning to Jesus's words:

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.... Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

At first, Jesus's words seem alarming. But, like Jeremiah's moment in the cistern, they are ultimately a call to hope. Jesus urges us to embrace Hallelujahs not rooted in passivity but in repentance and responsibility, calling for defiant holiness even in times of devastation.

The apostle Paul embraced Jesus' spiritual and historical direction in the Roman port city of Thessa-

lonica, a major trade centre similar to Bombay, Boston, or Halifax. Colonial port cities, whether blest with Pax Romana or Pax Brittanica, witnessed corrupt administrators, revolutions, and subsequent persecution.

When Paul was persecuted in Thessalonica, his attention turned to others—the community. He prayed that they may be strengthened “in holiness” (1 Thessalonians 3:13) and urged them to promote “love for one another and all” (3:12).

Paul’s teachings called for living with integrity and love, even within corrupt systems—an echo of anticolonial movements resisting exploitation and oppression. His call to holiness and “right living” was to resist participation in these exploitative systems. Holiness here is not merely personal piety but a communal and ethical response to injustice. Holiness builds a society grounded in love, fairness, and justice. It stands in contrast to the self-interest and greed often associated with colonial or corrupt administrations.

Living rightly in oppressive environments can also mean resisting corrupt practices that dehumanize others.

### **Kandhamal’s Cistern of Hope**

Like Jeremiah’s cistern, Kandhamal is a place of waiting, suffering, and, importantly, hope. It stands as a symbol of nonviolent resistance. Anto Akkara, a Thomas Christian journalist and recipient of a Titus Brandsma Award for Journalism, reports that Kandhamal not only bears witness to persecution but has also seen an increase in Christian vocations. Furthermore, some of the perpetrators have experienced deep repentance.

The faith of Kandhamal’s Christians endures, along with their unwavering demand for justice. Their lives are a living Advent—a season of expectation and preparation for the coming of righteousness. Kandhamal’s cistern has not yet run dry—it overflows with patience, nonviolent resistance, and steadfast belief in a just God.

And so, we face a stark yet simple truth: faith becomes the most potent form of anticolonial resistance when held by those who suffer. The Advent of hope is not merely a liturgical season; it pulses as the lifeblood of a people who refuse to be erased—a testament to those who, like Jeremiah in the cistern, rise with their heads held high despite the surrounding devastation. The Christians in Kandhamal remind us that Christ’s call is neither passive nor reserved for private piety. It is a collective, defiant, nonviolent march toward justice and righteousness.

This is the heart of the anticolonial Christian’s call: to keep waiting, to keep hoping, and above all, to keep resisting nonviolently until justice and righteousness reign—not just in heaven but here—in Kandhamal and in every space still groaning under the weight of oppression.

*Note: All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.*

# Daily Prayer

## 1st Sunday of Advent

Holy One, the Psalms declare that “all the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,” yet we far too often invoke the Divine in ways that resemble neither love nor faithfulness. Teach us to not only love you and our neighbors, but to love ourselves. May this be the blessing you intended it to be. We pray these things in your name, which is “Love.” Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 2

You who desires neither sacrifice nor offering, let us never forget that which you ask of us; may we cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow, and stand with the marginalized and oppressed at every opportunity, for it is those who we far too often deem “less than” who reflect your image most clearly. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 3

Heavenly Father, you who came long before us and will remain long after we have become memories, may we use our limited time on this earth to do what is right -- to cherish the humanity that we share with others, and to not inflict wickedness upon others. O holy one, who feeds the hungry, liberates the captive, and looks upon those who we may deem “strangers” and calls them by their name, for they are the beloved children of the Divine.

## 1st Mid~Week

José David Rodríguez

*Psalm 90 • Isaiah 1:24-31 • Luke 11:29-32*

### **From Xenophobia To Xenophilia: Witnessing to God’s Presence in the Migrant Introduction**

Today we live in a world where people from all countries experience the need for resettlement. For some, migration stands for an opportunity to find a better life beyond their country of origin. For others, it becomes a desperate need to leave oppressive conditions of warfare, or despotic governments. Yet there are still those for whom migrants become a fearful threat that needs to be confronted and eradicated.

For years, the immigration policy of the United States has been of critical concern for North American society. While there have been attempts to improve this program by representatives of the United States Congress, there have been few and inadequate efforts to resolve it.[1] The dilemma lies in the fact that for politicians, this issue has become a weapon to discredit opponents, instead of an opportunity to strive for a collective approach to include all interested parties, embracing migrants themselves, to settle it.

The lectionary readings for this 1st mid-week of Advent can help us address this challenge. In

Psalm 90 we find that knowledge of God's judgment upon humankind is a source for encouragement and hope. The crisis experienced by the post-exilic people of God portrayed in this psalm becomes a type of response to the problem of exile articulated at the end of Psalm 89. God, the Creator – the one who was before there was a creation – has offered God's people refuge throughout generations. God has been present with God's people and has served as an unfailing and forceful protector. YHWH, our creator and redeemer, is the one who provides hope for the renewal of life characterized by sorrow and misfortune.

In the book of Isaiah, we find an indictment on the people of God. Yet this denunciation is proclaimed with an expression of hope, for the present unfaithful condition of God's people is contrasted with a future time when their righteousness will be restored. To be sure, their present faithless condition claims the prospect of divine judgement. But this sentence is connected with the divine purpose to restore their previous condition of righteousness that will lead to a restoration of justice as perhaps with an allusion to the growing tradition of the idyllic reigns of David and Solomon.[2]

The gospel of Luke reaffirms this belief by making a contrast between the people of Ninive and those following Jesus. If for the former Jonah was given as a warning for their need of conversion, those following Jesus are offered God's very own presence in the Messiah of Nazareth calling them to a faithful vocation. At the time of the final judgement those people of Ninive following Jonah's calling will stand before others as an example of the faithful remnant. Whereas those following Jesus' teachings will shine with their faith among those whose sinful condition led them ashtray to lament and compunction.

As we look back to the continuing debates about migration, let's try to clarify the core of this biblical message as a tool to address this vital social challenge. The biblical readings for this year's first mid-week of Advent challenge us to consider that for God's people in ancient Israel, or those following the teachings of Jesus, this message became a powerful and important foundation to address this and other important queries. While these Scripture teachings have been interpreted in a variety of ways by academic and church leaders, this time around I invite you to consider another important partner in dialogue missing in previous analysis of these teachings: biblical migrants themselves.

In one of his relatively recent books, the Puerto Rican theologian and historian Luis N. Rivera Pagán reminds us that the first confession of faith in the Bible starts with a story of pilgrimage and migration:[3]

*A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with sounds of wonder; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deuteronomy 26:5-9).[4]*

This history of migration, slavery and liberation was so important for the people of Israel that it became the center of an annual liturgical celebration of remembrance and gratitude.[5]

In the Gospel of Matthew, the opening book of the New Testament,[6] we find the story of the holy family's flight to Egypt. This migration journey was led by divine guidance through dreams

and angels, to protect Jesus' life from the infuriated king Herod, who learned from the "Wise Men" the birth of the long-time expected Messiah for God's people.[7] Fleeing from Herod into exile in Egypt, Mary, Joseph and Jesus learned to be aliens in a dominant xenophobic culture.

For Rivera Pagán, a faithful effort in tackling the issue of migration from a Christian perspective is by establishing a difference between xenophobia and xenophilia. The former describes the fear and despise of anything considered foreign (whether people or cultures) establishing a threat to one's identity.[8] The latter designates the opposite, the love and concern for the stranger.[9]

The tormented experience of God's people in Egypt became so troubled, that the concern for the stranger was conceived as a key element of the Torah establishing a covenant of Justice and Righteousness between YHWH and Israel.[10] The prophets constantly rebuke the elites of Israel and Judah for their social injustice and their oppression of vulnerable populations: the poor, widows, orphans, and strangers.[11]

However, the divine order to love the foreigner derives from another important foundation: God's way of being and acting in history. Solidarity with the marginalized and excluded corresponds directly to God's being and action in history.[12]

This being and action of God in history was specifically expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus in relation to the despised Samaritans, and in his dramatic and startling eschatological parable about true discipleship and true faithfulness.[13]

The lectionary readings for today's Advent celebration reminds us that, in spite of our past and present faithless witness to support the migrant, God's gracious being and action in history provides hope and encouragement to transform xenophobia into xenophilia. For the migrant people of God, as for Christ Jesus and his parents who suffered the experience of migration to Egypt, the dreadful experience of xenophobia was transformed by the promise and power of God. This remarkable news is what God's people in the past, present and future celebrate as the promise of the Gospel. As we prepare to rejoice once again with the birth of Christ Jesus during the upcoming season of Christmas, let this period of Advent become a time of active planning for a witness of faith that may address more faithfully our responsibility to the migrant.

[1] See, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-immigration-debate-0>. Consulted on September 30, 2024.

[2] See, *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* ((Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 332-33.

[3] Luis N. Rivera Pagán, *Evocaciones literarias y sociales* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Publicaciones Gaviota, 2018) 315.

[4] *The Peoples' Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 328.

[5] See, Rivera Pagán, *Evocaciones literarias y sociales*, 316.

[6] The Gospel of Matthew was considered the first gospel written since the end of the second century, when the formation of the Christian canon began. Now, for most biblical scholars, that place belongs to the Gospel of Mark. See Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz, "The Gospel According to Matthew," in *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible*, edited by Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Wilda C. Gafney, Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz, George "Tink" Tinker, and Frank Yamada (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 240.

[7] *The Peoples' Bible*, 1414-1415.

[8] See, Rivera Pagán, *Evocaciones literarias y sociales*, 317. See, <https://www.britanica.com/science/xenophobia>. Consulted on 9/30/2024.

[9] See, <https://cct.biola.edu/xenophilia-praying-and-working-hospitality/>. Consulted on 9/30/2024.

[10] See, Rivera Pagán, *Evocaciones literarias y sociales*, 319. See also, Exodus 23:9, Leviticus 19:33 ff, Deuteronomy 24:14, 17-18)

[11] See, Rivera Pagán, *Evocaciones literarias y sociales*, 319. See also, Ezequiel 22:6ff, Jeremiah 7:6, 22:3,5.

[12] See, Rivera Pagán, *Evocaciones literarias y sociales*, 320-21. See also, Deuteronomy 10:18, Psalm 146:9, Malachi 3:5).

[13] See, See, Rivera Pagán, *Evocaciones literarias y sociales*, 323-24. See also, Luke 10:29-37, Luke 17:11-19, John 4:7-30 and Matthew 25:31-46.



# Daily Prayer

## 1st Mid-Week

God who holds not only joy and light, but anger and frustration, remind us in this time of waiting that while our lives are ephemeral, the impact we have on others can be everlasting. May we wield our negative emotions in such a way that even our darkest nights give way to resplendant dawns. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 5

May the God of ice and stone and flame and wind guard not only our bodies against all manner of threats - violence, war, injustice, disease, famine - but guard our hearts and minds in times of division and discord that we might increase and abound in love towards all people - even those who may not reciprocate that love towards us. May we remember that there are two types of people in this world: our neighbors, who we are called to love, and our enemies, who we are called to love.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 6

Oh, you who lays claim to every treasure in Heaven and on Earth, remind us in our times of scarcity that you praised the offering of two coins from a destitute woman over those who gave from their overflowing coffers. Likewise, remind us during our times of prosperity to adopt positions of humility and love for one another that we might not exploit one another in the pursuit of wealth, but rather assist one another in our pursuit of righteousness. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 7

Goddess of Peace and Tranquility, as we bear witness to wars livestreamed in real time and hear rumors of war whispered by social media bots and 24-hour news pundits alike, may we remember that your presence is marked by the cleansing of blood from your cities, not by the spilling of blood within them. May we strive for a day when we witness the shining light of flames by night and know that it comes from you, accompanied by the sounds of music and laughter. May we strive for a world where the threat of bombs is nothing more than a distant memory, and may we honor those who have perished on account of our own sins against you and against those who you deemed good, created in your image, entire worlds unto themselves. Amen.

# 2nd Sunday of Advent

Jermaine Ross~Allam

*Baruch 5:1-9 or Malachi 3:1-4 • Luke 1:68-79 • Philippians 1:3-11 • Luke 3:1-6*

## All Flesh

On the Second Sunday of Advent, you may find that—beyond the coming of the Messiah and the repentance of sins—you have forgotten some of the content of John the Baptist's message. Some progressive, socialist, and leftist Christians may also experience difficulty establishing a practical contemporary connection between John's emphasis on individual repentance, baptism, and God's ability to follow through on the centuries old unkept promises to permanently decolonize Judea. Nevertheless, let us try to establish at least one viable, practicable connection.

Luke 1:68-79—also known as Zechariah's Benedictus—is music sung by John the Baptist's father Zechariah. Christians may contemplate this text as testimony of Zechariah's fidelity renewed following a kind of gestation period in blessed silence. His silence is blessed because it allowed him to avoid uttering the wrong words twice on the topic of God's decolonial power.

This part is key.

Zechariah is a priest whose primary role includes performing cultic rituals and offering the prayers of the entire nation to the God of Israel. It is precisely in the very act of performing his cultic duties that Zechariah's disbelief opposes the decolonial power of the God of Israel just when God initiated a process that involved transforming Zachariah into a prophet.

An angel appears, in typical form, announcing wonderful news that Zechariah and his spouse Elizabeth will give birth to a special boy who will mature into a man whose obedience to God will provide a unique contribution to tangible answers to the prayers prayed by generations of oppressed people!

Zechariah—childless against Elizabeth's and his desire—responds by asking for a second layer of verification to supplement the divine promise.

A disappointing and unhelpful response, indeed.

This writer cannot, in good faith, blame Zechariah.

Nevertheless, let us at the very least consider a possibility, collectively.

At first, Zechariah is unable to believe that his own prayers can be answered. He communicates as much when he asks the messenger of God for additional authentication. Do you get the feeling, however, that Zechariah's sin of disbelief bears at least a family resemblance to certain habits of mind and speech whereby socialist, leftist, and progressive Christians sin profusely?

If we can agree that occupying religious space and calling ourselves by the name of the people



first martyred for living that life that is animated by the Spirit of the One who died with the people, while, at the same time, saying aloud or in our hearts that the legacies of colonial plunder cannot be destroyed in historic time, is itself, disbelief—then we are on the right track to understanding what Zechariah's individual disbelief teaches us about how individual repentance relates to ending colonial dominance as a collective.

Consider that Zechariah's time on earth was an era defined by some as a time of divine silence. Zechariah and his contemporaries inherited centuries of collective memory featuring a steady and demoralizing sequence of foreign dominations. The undeniable fact of historical dominance served to highlight the unfulfilled promises of salvation from long dead prophets.

It is fortunate, then, for Zechariah and his community that he is actually prevented from speaking until the Spirit of God deigns to borrow the aging man's body to communicate in public the role that his and Elizabeth's miracle-son, John the Baptist, will play in the realization of God's unfolding liberation of Israel.

Finally, when the time comes, John publicly confirms Elizabeth's spoken word by inscribing the name John before witnesses.

Then, the Spirit takes hold of Zechariah and sings through Zechariah's mouth that John will perform a pivotal role in God's imminent "deliverance for his people," divine "salvation from our enemies," and God's "mercy to our ancestors."

This is the proper function of a priest transformed into a prophet by being possessed by the spirit of God.

Singing through Zechariah, the Spirit announces that the people can finally anticipate in historical time, an era when "we, without fear, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve in holiness and righteousness before God all our days (Luke 1: 68-75)."

But when the miracle child matures into his calling as John the Baptist, his interpretation of God's salvation exceeds the prophecy that entered that community through Zechariah.

Zechariah prophesied concerning those who worshiped the God of Israel and announced that God would create conditions under which the people of Israel could worship their God free from foreign domination in the Kingdom of Israel.

John the Baptist, in notable contrast, invites penitents, sightseers, pilgrims, onlookers, and spies, onto a path that starts with an initiatory "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3)" and ends when God's salvation becomes the lived experience of "all flesh (Luke 6)."

Filled with the Spirit of God in utero, John put on the prophet Isaiah's expansive confidence in God's universal love and power.

In surrender to the Spirit of God, John exhorts those gathered to "bear fruits worthy of repentance," instead of asserting "We have Abraham as our father." "God is able from these stones," John retorts in advance, "to raise up children to Abraham (Luke 3: 8)."

John displays infectious confidence in God's power to realize the long-deferred prophecy of God's universal socioeconomic leveling after which, "every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and

hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth (Luke 1:5)."

But the part regarding "the rough ways made smooth"—this phrase may help us discern a sociopolitical function of individual repentance.

Consider associating Zechariah's initial disbelief with a kind of sociopolitical roughness or friction.

Ask what if, in fact, I am the one—through sociopolitical disbelief in new possibilities, through my laziness, my cowardice, and my selective practicality—who systemically misrepresents the power of God in public by failing to present my body in service to the Spirit of Christ's work to deny former impossibilities of their status as impossibilities?[1]

One scholar says that "God's word effects salvation history when people hear it, love it, and obey it." [2]

In this case, then, it makes sense for us to consider on the Second Sunday of Advent, that perhaps we are among the ones causing friction along God's path to universal salvation.

How might that be?

We obscure what God is doing and cause others to suffer and despair unnecessarily when we act, speak, and think as if the status quo equals or surpasses God's ability to use our obedience to invite human beings to lend their own bodies in service to God's work of universal salvation. Zechariah's sin of disbelief, however, can remind us to practice saying yes to God's invitation. But also allow the witness of Zechariah's transformation from disbelieving priest to singing prophet to inspire you to say yes to God by repenting of individual sins.

It may not be the case that you have sins to repent of the sort committed by Herod Antipas and Salome that ended John the Baptist's life on earth. Your individual sin that creates a distraction from God's work of universal salvation may, instead, involve that fashionable form of disbelief that finds your fidelity to a particular political party devolving into an increasingly evil series of choices between a so-called lesser of two evils because you refuse to endure the pain that accompanies almost all new beginnings.

Or, your individual sin may involve perpetual willingness to sell your labor on the open market while never organizing a series of processes with other workers that results in individual and corporate persons being required to share profits with workers whose indispensable labor makes profit possible simply because you do not believe in the possibility of a world in which progress and the end of economic exploitation coincide.

Perhaps still, your individual sin could be your refusal to combine your public antiracism work with an equally public assertion that reparations for the distinct communities working to heal from a range of colonial harms are right, necessary, and possible, because you do not believe that reparations can be achieved without jeopardizing something you hold dearer than ending racial disparities in historic time.

We all must count the cost of inviting the Spirit of Christ to dwell in us.

John and Jesus's life, work, and deaths do remind us that the empire indeed strikes back!

But once you have decided which spirit deserves to animate your life while you dwell on the earth—the Spirit of Christ or the spirit of capitalism—consider what might happen in the United States and around the world if devotees of Jesus like you took their cue from John the Baptist’s ministry and repented of all patterns of disbelief that make your body into a delivery mechanism through which cynicism, death, and despair delay the historical time when “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

[1] My phrase ‘deny former impossibilities of their status as impossibilities’ in this devotional is my own Christianization of a formulation found in “Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and the Initiation of an African Shaman,” by Malidoma Somé, 299.

[2] Francois Bovon, A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50. Translation by Christine M. Thomas Edited by Helmut Koester, Fortress Press; 2002, 121.

# Daily Prayer

## 2nd Sunday of Advent

Adonai, we remember the fires of hearth and home and candlelight this time of year, but we also cannot ignore those who are consumed by the fires of war day after day after day. May the sacred fires within us refine us and sanctify us that our feet might march towards justice, that our hands might beat swords into ploughshares, and that our hearts might bear witness to the full humanity of our neighbors. Amen.



# Daily Prayer

## Day 9

O Spirit, you who bears alongside us our anxieties and fears and trepidations, as we bear witness to seemingly endless cycles of destruction, death, and vengeance, remind us that even the darkest of times will inevitably bring forth light. Neither darkness nor light can remain forever, as the cycles of the sun and the moon were set forth ages ago. And in that same way, trouble and hardship give rise to new traditions and ways of understanding you, and in the midst of the wreckage of that which we believed to be eternal, we find cows and sheep feasting in the ruins, a testament to life after death. May we remember you in all things as we bear witness to despair, and may we keep you close to our hearts as we watch despair give way to hope.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 10

Blessed One who presides over the changing of the seasons, in the same way that the sprouting of fig tree leaves indicates the arrival of summer, remind us of the telltale signs of your warmth and presence -- respect, love, solidarity, peace, encouragement, patience, rejoicing, prayer, thankfulness, and seeking to do good to one another and to all people. Embolden and encourage us to be similarly warm and present that people might recognize you in us. Amen.

## 2nd Mid-Week

Terry Wildman

*Psalm 126; Isaiah 35:3-7; Luke 7:18-30*

### The Dark Side of Advent

While most essays about Advent focus on anticipating the peace, love, joy, and hope that the birth of Creator's Son inspires, I would like first to consider the kind of world Jesus was born into. Let us look at the darker side of this story and then contrast it with the kind of light his birth brings into the world.

This is the birth story of the one prophesied as a man of sorrows (Isaiah 53:3). It tells how the Great Spirit became human and entered our suffering. Creator's good road (the kingdom of God) must come through hardship and suffering (Acts 14:22).

A conflict is anticipated, but what is its source?

Luke tells of a Roman census that creates great peril for Mary and Joseph in the last days of her pregnancy. Luke is setting the backdrop, perhaps a premonition of the conflict between light and

darkness—between flourishing communities and colonial control.

When the time drew close for Bitter Tears (Mary) to have her child, the government of the People of Iron (Romans) ordered that the people be numbered and put on government rolls. This happened during the time when the Powerful Protector (Quirinius) was the governor of Bright Sun (Syria). All the Tribal Members were required to travel to their own ancestral village to register. Luke 2:1-3 FNV

Empires and nation-states must stay in control of the populations under them. Colonization is not just the conquering of a people but the ongoing subjugation of a people to serve the empire. It doesn't matter if families have to travel great distances under hardship and pain, for the empire must exercise its power over those who have been conquered and subjugated.

For the Indigenous of Turtle Island (North America), this is reminiscent of the U.S. government's census of Native Americans, such as the Dawes Roll for the Cherokee. Many of our tribal nations had government-controlled censuses and relocations at a significant cost to Native lives—men, women, and children.

Mary and Joseph were forced to travel a dangerous journey in the last days before she gave birth. But Mystery was behind the scenes, bringing an ancient prophecy to fulfillment in Bethlehem.

Mary and Joseph's long journey of many days, nearly 100 miles over the rough desert and hilly terrain of the Judean region, reminds me of the many forced removals and relocations of our Indigenous peoples. But Mystery was at work there also. Some of them had become followers of Jesus and found value in his message despite what was happening. It is reported that the song *Amazing Grace*, a Christian hymn, was sung by many of the Cherokee during what is commonly called the Trail of Tears.

As we consider the darker side of the Advent story, we can often see the analogies in colonial governments worldwide. Let's take a look at the similarities in North America.

The dynamics of collaboration between Jewish religious groups and the Roman government during Jesus' day share remarkable parallels with the relationships between Christian organizations, Indigenous peoples, and the US government during the colonial takeover of Indigenous lands. In both cases, powerful religious and political entities sought to collaborate with the government in ways that often served their own interests while helping to subjugate or displace Indigenous populations.

During the 1880s, the U.S. government divided up the Native North American reservations between religious groups. For example, the Hopi were assigned to the Mennonites and later the Baptists. When my wife and I were living on the Hopi lands in Northern Arizona, we heard from the Mennonites that the Hopi had learned of the government's plans. They researched the denominations and found that the Mennonites practiced a more peace-loving, pacifistic religion. The Hopi, meaning the "Peaceful People," petitioned the government to assign the Mennonites to them. However, it didn't turn out well, for in 1893, the Reverend H. R. Voth arrived and worked to destroy the Hopi Way and replace it with Mennonite Christianity.

In Jesus' day, the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Herodians were three distinct groups with varying degrees of interaction with the Roman government. Each had its own religious and political views, and their relationships with the Roman authorities reflected their unique positions in Jewish society.

The Roman government used these different Jewish factions to maintain control over the people. The Sadducees, the wealthy priestly elite, colluded directly with the Romans to maintain their religious and political power. The Herodians supported Herod under Roman rule as a means of ensuring stability and political influence. The Pharisees, though less politically engaged, cooperated with the Romans when necessary to maintain their agenda. All three groups opposed Jesus to varying degrees, as His growing influence among the people threatened both their fragile relationship with Rome and their own positions of power.

The collaboration between the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Herodians and the Roman government in Jesus' time has parallels to the roles played by Christian organizations in the colonial takeover of our Indigenous lands. In both contexts, religious institutions became intermediaries between a powerful empire and a marginalized population. By aligning themselves with colonial powers, these religious groups often facilitated the control and dispossession of those they claimed to serve. They participated in systems that benefited the ruling authorities at the expense of the people.

This darker picture of the context of Advent raises disturbing questions about the ongoing legacy of Christian institutions. They presented themselves, both in Canada and the US, as agents of spiritual guidance yet served as instruments of colonial control. Many of these institutions thought they were using the government to help them spread the Gospel, at least their version, but instead, they were duped by the government into giving religious underpinnings to colonial control.

So, where is the peace, love, joy, and hope in this story? It is found in unexpected places where Mystery is at work behind the scenes, bringing a new kind of light into the world's darkness.

When Bitter Tears (Mary), pregnant with this light, visited her once barren cousin Creator is My Promise (Elisabeth), the wife of Creator will Remember (Zechariah)—something unprecedented happened. The seeming barrenness of Creator's promise was ready to give birth! The Great Spirit remembered his promise. Two seemingly powerless women were pregnant with a force that would change the world!

What we now call The Magnificat says it all. Here it is from the First Nations Version:

"From deep in my heart I dance with joy to honor the Great Spirit. Even though I am small and weak, he noticed me. Now I will be looked up to by all. The Mighty One has lifted me up! His name is sacred. He is the Great and Holy One."

Her face seemed to shine as she continued.

"He shows kindness and pity to both children and elders who respect him. His strong arm has brought low the ones who think they are better than others. He counts coup with arrogant warrior chiefs but puts a headdress of honor on the ones with humble hearts."

She smiled, looked up to the sky, and shouted for joy!

"He prepares a great feast for the ones who are hungry, but sends the fat ones home with empty bellies. He has been kind to the tribes of Wrestles with Creator (Israel) who walk in his ways, for he has remembered the ancient promises he made to our ancestors—to Father of Many Nations (Abraham) and his descendants." Luke 1:46-55 FNV



Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesies about the power of this light. It will bring down the high and mighty colonial systems and the rich and powerful who support them. It will topple arrogant rulers, lift the humble of heart and bring freedom to all who suffer under these powers.

This light is embodied in a human being named Creator Sets Free, also known as Jesus of Nazareth.

The Advent story reminds us of the darkness found in the beastly colonial powers, but it also offers the hope of a light that will shine brighter and brighter until the sun reaches midday.

Perhaps this Advent we can all become pregnant with the Light of the World and cooperate with the Great Spirit in exposing and undoing the darkness of colonialism and bring forth his light into our world.

# Daily Prayer

## 2nd Mid-Week

Oh, Divine Spirits across all of time and space, all that is sacred and holy and worthy of light and love (that includes you, by the way):  
May the tears we shed today nourish our dreams for a better tomorrow. Let us create a world that we wish to return to, not one we crave escape from. Let us love one another so fiercely that the line between Heaven and Earth fades into oblivion, and may we finally, finally realize that Death has never had the final word, but has always been a conversation partner in an everlasting dialogue - one that asks, "Who are we? And what do we want to be?" (excerpt from A Heretic's Lament at the End of the World)

# Daily Prayer

## Day 12

You who hears our hearts when they shake like the trees of a forest when besieged by gusts of winds, remind us of the power of faith -- in you, in ourselves, and in one another. We are all one in you, children of the Universe, constructed by the remnants of long-dead stars and sustained by still-living water whose atoms have been present since the dawn of creation. Teach us that faith is not simply a state of being, but an action that we engage in whenever we choose flexibility, love, and trust over rigidity, hatred, and suspicion. Teach us to see you in the world around us and to respond accordingly. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 13

O Servant King, restore in us a spirit of humility that we might be willing to serve a world where power is far too often understood through the lens of oppression, wealth is far too often understood through the lens of greed, and prestige is far too often understood through the lens of condescension. In that same breath, let us refuse to make ourselves small, but rather allow ourselves to make ripples and waves by the ways in which we show up as our genuine, authentic selves to love and serve our neighbor. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 14

O Arbiter of the Stars, the Earth cries out in anticipation for the world to come, a place where those who are righteous will receive their reward and those who are wicked will be judged accordingly. Remind us that even the most righteous among us are not immune to wickedness, and even the most wicked among us are not cut off from the possibility of repentance and transformation. Remind us that we are all masterpieces and works in progress at the same time. Amen.

# 3rd Sunday of Advent

Amy Kim Kyremes-Parks

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

## **Zephaniah 3:14-20**

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival." I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.*

## **Isaiah 12:2-6**

*In your midst is the Holy One of Israel*

*Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation."*

*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*

*And you will say on that day: "Give thanks to the LORD; call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.*

*Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.*

*Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."*

What am I afraid of? What keeps me up at night or causes my body physical and emotional turmoil? Dictatorship, global warming, floods, disease, "those" Christians, our kids being harmed, lack of gun control, white supremacy culture and the list goes on. Notice that God's judgment and wrath are not on this list. Actually I don't know that I have ever been afraid of God. In my lifetime and that of my extended family, fear and judgment is a tool of those in power, not that of a God of abundant love and liberation.

The scriptures we have this week are full of language about fear. The challenge is that English has very little nuance and language matters in conveying the desired emotional impact and investment. Typically we do not distinguish the noun from the verb when it comes to fear. We default to the verb. So it is with empire. Empire uses fear as a sword to cut us off from the awe, from imagining and creating space for mutual liberation and community. The authority of God has been paralleled with that of humans full of spite, hungry for power over not power with.

The whole world is waiting  
The whole world cries  
The whole world is waiting  
For our hope to shine  
For you sweet Jesus  
Will make all things right



The whole world is waiting  
The whole world cries

I am exhausted. I was already exhausted and then a hurricane hit the mountains we live in, homes were destroyed, weak infrastructures collapsed and people perished. It has been more than anyone could have ever imagined and though I see the physical turmoil, it is hard to put into words the emotional shift and impact I am feeling and our community is collectively navigating. Disaster. No moratorium on evictions and the racial disparities that already existed has yielded a humanitarian crisis in these mountains where people have come to abide with one another and hold holy space. This climate disaster created by humans all too consumed by wants over needs and ignoring the interdependence that is essential to liberation for all. This is our doing.

You are the God of justice  
You are the God who sees  
You are the God who heals and  
Who loves the world through me  
We believe our love can change things  
We will not live silently  
You are the God of justice  
You are the God who sees

On the heels of a catastrophic climate disaster we had an election. An election where many of my beloveds found themselves and frankly still find themselves in a state of shock and lament with no clear path to journey.

When we talk about decolonizing our lives, not just advent, we are framing, speaking and celebrating the incarnate love among us. Planting, tending to and yielding more sustainable relationships.

Fascinating but not surprisingly, when we proclaim the prince of peace we also evoke this same language as an avoidance instead of a calling. Conversations do not mean conflict and conflict does not require a winner and loser. Even as things get tense we can reframe these conversations as discovery and learning for the sake of humanity. Reading this may sound dramatic but the stakes are too high for us to not recognize that the survival of God's beloved is at stake.

You oh Lord are with us  
We will not be afraid  
Though darkness may surround us  
And evil have it's way  
Your love has overcome death  
We will stand strong and say  
You oh Lord are with us  
We will not be afraid

I am holding on to reverence. To recognize the holy among the horrible without needing to assign meaning. I am trying to not get distracted by despair and anger-this is what the colonizers want, us distracted and too wrapped up in the sadness to keep pushing toward God's liberating love for all.

Fear never creates intimacy and trust so why would we proclaim that as a value in relationship to our creator?

Join me in choosing to lean into the holy we see in the eyes of one another even through tears and screaming. We can do this- WE. I need you-the survival of humanity depends on it.

I have been using the stanzas of the song The whole world is waiting by Kate Hurley and The Many. It was written for Advent but I find myself returning to it as a prayer. I encourage you to look it up and give it a listen.

# Daily Prayer

## 3rd Sunday of Advent

God of Abraham, as we celebrate you drawing near to us this Advent, may we never forget the signs of your presence -- rejoicing, exultation, gladness, love, singing, liberation, gentleness, peace, fairness, justice. May we receive these blessings from you, O Lord, and may we share them fully and openly with everyone we meet.  
Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 16

You whose name is Love, remind us of the exhortation from 2 Peter that we may make every effort to support our faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. May we never forget that of all things which are good and proper and sacred and true, the greatest of them all is love, without which nothing else we do matters. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 17

We cry out to the one whose throne is the heavens themselves: As we put up walls to protect ourselves from harm and adopt fighting stances out of fear of those to whom we affix the label of “enemy,” remind us that our victory lies not in the strength of our leaders, or our military, or our weapons of mass destruction, but in your capacity for steadfast love and in our capacity to reflect that love in the ways we choose to live our lives. Amen.

## 3rd Mid-Week

Fadi Al-Zoughbi

*Isaiah 11:1-9; Micah 4:8-13; Luke 7:31-35*

There it is—the little town of Bethlehem, which has witnessed many challenges and opportunities for over 2,000 years. Yet it continues to be remembered as the town that welcomed the Lord of Light, where Christ has built His tabernacle in our midst. Two thousand years later, as we approach Christmas, these scriptures resonate deeply with the anticipation of salvation, the dismantling of oppressive structures, and the ushering in of a new era of justice and peace. Each passage reflects hope for the marginalized, a promise of redemption for the oppressed, and the restoration of a kingdom where true righteousness reigns.

### **Isaiah 11:1-9: A Vision of the Just King**

This passage foretells the coming of a leader from the stump of Jesse—Jesus, the Messiah. Isaiah’s prophecy offers hope to a people worn down by empire and injustice. It speaks of a ruler filled with the Spirit of God, embodying wisdom, understanding, counsel, and might, who will judge not by appearances but with righteousness for the poor and the meek of the earth (Isaiah 11:4).

This imagery is striking. Earthly kingdoms and powers are often ruled through exploitation and injustice, but here, a new kind of leadership is promised. Jesus does not conform to the world’s stan-

dards of power, domination, or oppression. Instead, His reign brings peace where there was once violence, justice where there was inequity, and healing where there was brokenness. The vision of the wolf living with the lamb and the leopard lying down with the goat (Isaiah 11:6) speaks of the reversal of oppressive dynamics. In Jesus, we see the possibility of reconciling relationships, not just between individuals but between peoples, nations, and even the natural world. His kingdom offers a radical alternative to the violent systems of power that have long dominated human history. We are at a time when we are in dire need for reconciliation, and only Jesus can fulfill this.

As we celebrate Advent and Christmas to come, let us reflect on Jesus' kingship, which subverts all forms of empire and injustice. How does His leadership challenge the power structures of our world today? In what ways can we embody His vision of peace and justice in our own communities? How can we bring reconciliation to a divided world?

### **Micah 4:8-13: The Promise of Deliverance for the Oppressed**

Micah speaks to a small, seemingly insignificant people who have been humiliated and oppressed by foreign powers. The prophet describes Jerusalem as a "tower of the flock" (Micah 4:8), a remnant people who will one day be restored. The language of labor and pain (Micah 4:9-10) resonates with a people suffering under the yoke of exile. Micah's message speaks to the heart of those oppressed by systems of domination. The imagery of a woman in labor points to the pain of transition—both personal and collective—as the people of God move from subjugation to liberation. The promise that God will redeem His people from the hands of their enemies (Micah 4:10) is a source of profound hope for all who long for freedom from oppressive systems.

In the context of Advent and Christmas, we remember that Jesus' birth is the beginning of this deliverance. The humble birth in a manger echoes the experience of the lowly and marginalized. Jesus Himself, born into a context of Roman occupation, would grow to lead a movement that confronted the religious and political systems of the day.

How does the promise of God's deliverance speak to communities still grappling with the legacy of oppression? This Christmas, let us reflect on the ongoing struggle for justice and remember that God is present in the midst of pain, laboring with us toward freedom and restoration.

### **Luke 7:31-35: Challenging Norms**

In Luke 7:31-35, Jesus confronts the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of His day. He compares the generation to children in the marketplace, unsatisfied with either mourning or celebration. John the Baptist came in asceticism, and they called him demon-possessed. Jesus came eating and drinking, and they called Him a glutton and a drunkard.

Jesus' critique is a challenge to those in positions of power who refuse to engage with truth. He is full of truth and grace. The religious elites, complicit in the systems of their time, were more concerned with maintaining their status than recognizing the revolutionary message of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus, born into a humble setting, continuously challenges the systems that dehumanize and oppress. His ministry does not conform to societal expectations or power dynamics. Instead, He befriends tax collectors, sinners, and the marginalized, embodying a new social order that upends the hierarchies of His day.



The accusation that Jesus was a “friend of sinners” is an indictment of the religious authorities’ failure to see God’s justice in action. Jesus’ ministry offers a radical critique of those who perpetuate exclusion and marginalization while presenting a Kingdom where those on the margins are brought to the center. As we prepare for Christmas, how might we confront the ways in which societal and religious systems continue to marginalize the vulnerable? How can we, like Jesus, stand with the oppressed and challenge the status quo?

## **Conclusion**

Born and raised in this beautiful little town of Bethlehem, I do not take celebrating Christmas here for granted. Life has been too precarious and dangerous, yet every day we find strength in the hope that Jesus gives us. As we meditate on these passages in light of Christmas, we see that Jesus’ coming is not merely a sentimental story of a baby in a manger but the inauguration of a kingdom that dismantles oppressive power structures and brings true peace and justice. Through Isaiah, Micah, and Luke, we are reminded of the deep connection between Christ’s birth and the hope of salvation for the oppressed. This Advent, let us seek to live out the radical message of Jesus, working toward justice and reconciliation in our broken world.

Through the eyes of faith, I see a radiant future emerging for my nation—a future where the darkness that has clouded our streets is pierced by the brilliant light of hope. It is as if a ray of sunshine, sent from heaven, begins to break through the heavy clouds, and with it, the King of Glory, Jesus, walks among us once again. His presence, humble from the moment of His birth, radiates the love He poured out during His earthly life, and the victory He claimed in His death and resurrection is our beacon of hope.

In Him, there is the promise of healing for our wounded lands, restoration for broken hearts, and justice for those oppressed. Jesus, who conquered death, is the assurance that no matter how deep the darkness, His light cannot be extinguished. As He walks our streets, He brings peace where there is strife, hope where despair has taken root, and life where there was only barrenness. The King of Glory is reclaiming every corner, every heart, every life with His unstoppable love.

This vision, inspired by faith, fuels the work we do, knowing that our labor is not in vain. We live in expectation of a divine transformation, where Jesus reigns as Lord over all—over our communities, our families, and our entire nation.

# Daily Prayer

## 3rd Mid-Week

O Sacred Mother, remind us in these times of divisions, as we race to condemn one another in the pursuit of our own self-righteousness, that the Kingdom of Heaven is rooted in unity -- not the sort of unity that crushes diversity, but the sort of unity that envisions wolves and lambs living side by side, both safe and sound. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 19

Creator of relationship and covenant, oh how we long for love to be written on our hearts - a love that knows no boundaries. As we journey through the wilderness of this life, hold us in our anger and in our tears. Shine your loving face upon us so that we may also shine your love into this world. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 20

Holy songwriter whose melodies and harmonies fill our souls, dwell among us and within our creation. Remind us of the holy within our lands, the waters, the air that surrounds us, and the creatures of this world. We know too well our own complicity in the destruction of this earth. May we be transformed this season to reorient ourselves from destroyers to stewards of your creation. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 21

O Womb that nurtures and heals us, that holds us in the darkness of growth and safety, bring forth the birth of newness and imagination. May we be sustained by your abundance as we endure pain, oppression, mourning and evil. Amen.

# 4th Sunday of Advent

## William Yoo

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

In the scriptural passages from Psalm and Micah, we encounter the honest yearnings and hopeful desires of ancient Israel for liberation from oppression. The former takes the mode of a prayer and the latter the promise of a prophecy. In Psalm 80:1-7, the prayer beseeches God to bring salvation to an afflicted people through the act of restoration. It is important to remember that the focus of this restoration in Psalm 80 is not only spiritual, such as the freedom from sin to experience God's love in the human soul, but it is also directly about seeking God's justice in an actual human community. Restoration entailed both reforming impure practices of worship and repairing unjust social structures.

In Micah 5:2-5a, the prophetic message foretells of a just and powerful ruler who will "feed his flock in the strength of the Lord" and ensure that the people of God experience security and peace. As with Psalm 80:1-7, the aims in Micah 5:2-5a address spiritual, moral, social, and material components of life. God's deliverance entails the provision of both healthy food to sustain human bodies and spiritual food to nourish human souls. The promises of security and peace on earth enable the people of God to construct faithful communities marked by holiness, righteousness, love, and mercy.

As a seminary professor who teaches the history of Christianity in the United States, I am mindful of how Christians in this country have interpreted these and other biblical texts in different and sometimes contrasting directions. Luke 1:39-55 narrates a poignant encounter as two pregnant women, Elizabeth and Mary, support one another as both anticipate the new rhythms, joys, surprises, and challenges of motherhood. Mary praises God and specifically emphasizes the following divine attributes in Luke 1:52-53: God is the One who "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" and "filled with hungry with good things." Just as Mary deliberately chose to orient her faith with these truths about God at the center, Christians in the United States have discerned how to apply the message of Jesus Christ, the baby in Mary's womb, in their various cultural, racial, and social contexts.

When we speak of deconstructing, or decolonizing, our faith, we are choosing to study how Christians in our past and present ages have interpreted, misinterpreted, and enacted the religion in the churches and contexts they inhabited. In doing so, we find inspiration in the ways that Christians in the abolitionist movement two centuries ago applied the good news of Jesus Christ to pursue a more racially just church and nation. For over thirty years, William Lloyd Garrison appealed to the ministry of Jesus Christ in his abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator* (which was in circulation from 1831 to 1865), as the reason why he and others in the movement were advocating Black emancipation. When other Christians criticized him as an instigator of disorder whose activism imperiled the union of the Northern and Southern states, Garrison invited them to open their Bibles and read texts such as Matthew 25 and Luke 4. Garrison insisted that he simply sought to follow what Jesus taught. Garrison believed the presence of Jesus Christ resided within enslaved persons as "the least of these" due to the racial oppressions of slavery, and the abolitionist also contended that he was beckoning Christ's literal call "to set free those who are oppressed."

But the work of deconstruction and decolonization also requires an examination of harmful mis-



interpretations and horrible manipulations of Christianity. Renowned church historian Justo L. González reminds us that we must do more than say that these false enactments of the gospel were not Christian. In addition to comprehending how Christians dared to proclaim vile messages of hate with scriptural texts to justify their evil actions, we must also consider these historical realities: These false Christians believed that they were truly Christian, others believed that they were Christians, and some Christians today belong to the same traditions, and in some cases worship in the same churches, as these terrible ancestors of our faith.

In 1834, one white Presbyterian abolitionist, Arthur Tappan, invited his Black friend, Samuel Eli Cornish, to sit next to him in worship at a church in New York City. Tappan and Cornish were colleagues who served together on the executive committee of the newly formed American Anti-Slavery Society, one of the first national organizations to mobilize and connect activists from various states. Tappan rented a pew as a member of the church where he worshiped, and he therefore sat in the same pew every Sunday. He was also a wealthy merchant, so it is likely that the pew that Tappan rented was in a highly desired area in the sanctuary. Tappan's family members regularly joined him for worship, and he also sometimes had friends sit alongside him.

Many church members, including several ruling elders, vehemently opposed Tappan for welcoming Cornish to sit in his pew. The state of New York outlawed slavery in 1827, but racial discrimination persisted and even intensified in the years following Black emancipation. White individuals and institutions implemented legal and extralegal measures to enforce racial segregation throughout the state, including in schools, businesses, neighborhoods, and churches in New York City. Predominantly white churches practiced segregation with designated areas in their sanctuaries, such as in galleries above or in rear sections of the main floor, for Black worshipers, and they also served the Communion elements to Black worshipers after all the white worshipers had partaken of the bread and wine that represented the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Tappan deplored the racism that pervaded every part of American life, and he especially detested how churches upheld racially discriminatory practices that stood in contradiction to the liberating message of Jesus Christ. But many white Presbyterians in his own church despised him for having a Black man sit next to him in worship. They rebuked Tappan, and requested that he desist from inviting Cornish, or any other Black worshiper, to sit in his pew in the future. The pastor of the church, Samuel Cox, attempted to serve as a mediator between Tappan and his detractors. Cox asked everyone in the church to consider that the incarnate Jesus Christ was a man of color from Palestine, and the pastor subsequently wondered aloud whether those in opposition to Tappan would also deny this Jesus Christ a seat in Tappan's pew. Cox's words further enraged some in the congregation. One local newspaper lambasted Cox for insinuating that Jesus was not of the white race, and white Christians within and beyond this congregation denounced Cox for suggesting that their Savior was a Black man.

Whereas Psalm 80:1-7, Micah 5:2-5a, and Luke 1:39-55 all precede the birth of Jesus Christ, Hebrews 10:5-10 presents a theology of Jesus Christ after his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The biblical author of the Epistle to the Hebrews chooses to accentuate one component of "when Christ came into the world": The profession of Jesus emphasizing the importance of doing God's will over fulfilling sacrifices, offerings, and other rituals. Christians have since interpreted this passage as providing a theological rationale for the discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity in adherence to the liturgical rituals and dietary regulations of the Hebrew Bible.

Another interpretation is for Christians to take seriously the call to discipleship. As the redeemed people of God, we seek to enact the love and justice of God through the work of restoring broken

pathways to human dignity and reconstructing our churches and communities to ensure that all may flourish with abundant access to food, clean water, security, and peace. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## 4th Sunday of Advent

How our souls magnify the Lord! O God who brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly, we long to feel your presence in such a time as these. Make our ancestors known to us as we continue to stand on their shoulders to change this world just as Mary did. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 23

To the invisible God, make yourself known to us in the incarnation of your people and your children. You are the God that uplifts the lowly to their thrones, the God who walks alongside us in our fears and troubles, the God that swirls around us in our moments of joy and despair and the God of the oppressed. Appear to us in our everyday lives so that we are reminded of who you are. Amen.

## Christmas Eve

Grace Al-Zoughbi Arteen

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

Reflecting on the profound significance of Christ's birth, particularly within the context of Bethlehem, invites us to contemplate not just a historical event but a divine intervention that forever changed the course of humanity.

Bethlehem, a humble town, was chosen as the birthplace of the Savior, a place almost overlooked by the grand empires of its time. Yet it is here, in this small and quiet setting, that the most powerful act of love and humility unfolded. Jesus, the Son of God, entered the world not with earthly grandeur but in simplicity, disrupting human expectations of power and influence. His birth heralded the dawn of a new era, one in which worldly values and structures were turned upside down.

Jesus' coming brought transformation, not only spiritually, but socially and relationally. Through the hope that Jesus brought forward, the weak were empowered, the lowly were exalted, and the marginalized were given hope. This inversion of earthly standards still speaks to us today. The world often glorifies power, wealth, and status, yet Christ chose to uplift those on the fringes—shepherds were the first to receive the good news, and the manger, not a throne, was His cradle. In this way, His incarnation became the foundation of an eternal kingdom, one built not on human merit but on grace, mercy, and divine love. The light that dawned in Bethlehem continues to shine, illuminating the darkness of the human heart and calling all to experience true transformation.

The serene scene of Bethlehem's hills evokes a sense of peace, yet the silence holds within it the powerful reminder of God's redemptive work. While the world may have moved on in its busyness, those who pause to reflect on this birth are drawn into its eternal significance. Christ's incarnation wasn't just an event of the past—it is a living reality, continuing to inspire and change lives today. He remains the beacon of hope for all who are weary and burdened, offering the promise of rest, renewal, and restoration.

As I reflected on the "glimmers of light" over Bethlehem, I considered how this light represents not

just the physical illumination of the town but the spiritual light Christ brought into the world—a light that dispels darkness and offers new life. His kingdom advances not through earthly conquest but through love, humility, and sacrifice. This profound truth echoes through history, inviting us to join in the ongoing work of transformation, lifting up the lowly and strengthening the weak in His name. As we reflect on the birth of Jesus, the light shines into our world. These readings remind us of a deep, transformative hope that enters history in a time of oppression. As we meditate on the story of Christ’s birth, we see not only a celebration of God’s love but also a challenge to the systems of power and domination that deny the fullness of life for many. As we open our hearts to the Christ who brings freedom—not only spiritually, but in every aspect of our lives, may we ask ourselves how the birth of Jesus continues to challenge the systems of empire, oppression, and injustice that still affect many today, particularly in the Middle East region.

### **Isaiah 9:2-7: The Light Breaking into Darkness**

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light...” (Isaiah 9:2).

In the time of Isaiah’s prophecy, the people of Israel were oppressed by foreign powers. This passage speaks of a coming Messiah, a child who will bring light and joy to a world filled with despair. This light is not just an abstract hope, but a concrete promise of justice, peace, and freedom. Further, this prophecy challenges us to see the birth of Jesus as more than just a spiritual event. It speaks to oppressed people today—those living under political, economic, and cultural domination. Jesus comes as the Prince of Peace to break the yoke of oppression, to overturn unjust systems, and to bring strength and value to the marginalized. His kingdom is not of empire, but of justice and righteousness.

### **Psalms 96: Singing a New Song**

“Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth...” (Psalm 96:1).

Psalm 96 is a call to worship, a declaration that God reigns over all creation. Yet this proclamation takes on profound meaning when we consider the historical context of oppressed peoples. In a world where empires claim absolute power, this Psalm declares that it is God who reigns, not Caesar or any earthly ruler.

The call to “sing a new song” is an invitation to imagine a new reality, one in which the empires of the world do not have the final word. For oppressed communities, singing to the Lord is an act of declaration that their identity, worth, and future are not defined by the powers that oppress them but by the God of justice. In Christ’s birth, we have a new song of hope and restoration for all creation.

### **Titus 2:11-14: The Grace of God that Brings salvation**

“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people...” (Titus 2:11).

Paul’s letter to Titus declares that the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. This is not a selective salvation for the powerful or privileged, but a universal offer of grace that reaches beyond social, economic, and ethnic boundaries. This grace is deeply subversive. It dismantles the hierarchies established by oppressors, calling all people to live as a redeemed community of equals. The “blessed hope” that Paul speaks of is not just an expectation of spiritual salvation, but the restoration of dignity and justice for all who are oppressed.



As we reflect on the birth of Jesus, we recognize that His incarnation is the embodiment of God's grace—grace that liberates from both spiritual and worldly powers of domination. Jesus' life and ministry would go on to challenge the systems of the Roman Empire, offering a radical alternative vision of community marked by love, equality, and justice.

### **Luke 2:1-14, (15-20): The Birth of a Subversive King**

"Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people..." (Luke 2:10).

The familiar story of Jesus' birth is filled with political tension. It begins with a decree from Caesar Augustus, a reminder that Jesus was born under the shadow of Roman occupation. The census itself was a tool of empire, a way to control and tax peoples. Yet in this moment of imperial power, something revolutionary happens: a child is born, not in a palace, but in a manger; not to the elite, but to poor, marginalized parents. I went down the stairs that historically lead to the manger where historically it is thought Jesus was birthed and was reminded again of how much of it truly is a lowly place.

The angels announce the birth of Jesus, not to the rulers, but to shepherds—lowly workers who symbolize the dispossessed. The "good news" of Jesus' birth is a direct challenge to the status quo, declaring that the true King has come to bring peace on earth, not through conquest or domination, but through humility, service, and sacrificial love. This story resonates deeply with those who continue to live under unjust systems. Jesus' birth signals the beginning of a new world order—one where the last will be first, where the marginalized are lifted up, and where the kingdoms of this world are turned upside down by the kingdom of God.

### **Closing Reflection: Living the Christmas Story Today**

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus this year, let us remember that His coming was not just a spiritual event but a radical disruption of the powers of His day. His birth, life, and ministry speak to the oppressed, the marginalized, and those longing for justice.

In our world today, many still live under the shadows of empire—whether through political domination, economic exploitation, or cultural marginalization. The message of Christmas is that God has come into this world to stand with the oppressed, to bring light to those in darkness, and to proclaim a kingdom where justice and peace reign. How can we be bearers of Christ's light in a world still marred by the darkness of injustice? As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, let us commit ourselves to living out His radical love in our communities and in the world. Because our Savior was born in our land, because he proclaimed signs, miracles and wonders in our land, and because He lives in us through His Spirit, we can be assured that we can have hope in Him.

# Daily Prayer

## Christmas Eve

God of justice and peace, we thank You for the gift of Jesus, born into our world to bring hope, healing, and repair. As we celebrate your birth tonight, fill us with the courage to resist systems of injustice and oppression. Help us to be Your hands and feet in the world, bringing Your light into the darkness, and proclaiming the good news of Your kingdom. Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

# Christmas Day

Sarah Augustine

Isaiah 62:6-12 • Psalm 97 • Titus 3:4-7 • Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20

## **If Jesus came from White Swan**

*Instead of a manger  
He spent his first night in the back of a 1986 Ford Aerostar  
surrounded by a menagerie of mule dogs and a few unbroke horses.*

*He loves basketball.*

*He's good for a stealth joke told with a straight face, the kind that  
sneaks up on you,  
and leaves you laughing a long time*

*He hitchhikes  
hugs the shoulder of Fort Road after dark  
wearing basketball shorts and an XL hoodie,  
hands buried deep in the front pouch pocket.*

*He doesn't look you right in the eye  
ends his sentences with "ay..."*

*and white folks peg him right off:  
look the other way, lock their car doors as he walks through  
the parking lot at hometown buffet.*

*He can run a long way, and in winter might jog  
home to grandma's to keep warm,  
if he can't catch a ride.  
Since his mother was an unwed teen when he was born,  
Jesus naturally lives with Grandma.*

*His first miracle is turning wine into water.*

*Even though he belongs to a small band of confederated tribes  
you've never heard of  
surrounded by a mighty empire,  
he is still the son of God.*

*He could but doesn't heal  
Celilo falls of the dam  
that divides the land of his people.*

*At rock creek,  
he feeds thousands with  
dip net and digging stick.  
Together, he and his people  
gather the bounty of the promised land.*

*He takes a few friends with him  
To the top of Mount Adams,  
where he is transformed:  
His clothing becomes light,  
His face as hot and bright as the sun.*

*If you, unbelieving, are there  
the lightening coursing down your spine  
drops you to your knees,  
your face pushed against the cool grit of blessed earth.*

*He speaks with Kamiakin and Strong Heart*

*and a voice from a cloud  
says*

*"This is my beloved son;  
hear him."*

### **To Whom did the Messiah come? For whom is his birth good news?**

I authored the poem printed here while living among the Yakama people on the Homelands of the Confederated Bands and Tribes of the Yakama Nation, the Yakama Indian Reservation. I am a Tewa woman, not Yakama, but lived as a relative on the Yakama's healing lands for 18 years. White Swan is the small, reservation town where I and my family lived.

The people I lived among bore a startling resemblance to the tribe into which Jesus was born. The Yakama Nation is a People seeking to retain their own homelands and unique identity in the cosmos, while surrounded on all sides by empire and structural violence. The lands of the Yakama Nation that were guaranteed by treaty to be their homeland forever are now primarily owned by White settlers, and by corporate farms in particular. This reality is the result of more than a hundred years of laws and policies designed to remove the Yakama from their homelands.

It is easy to imagine Jesus born to the Yakama people, a people of Spirit who have practiced their culture, language, and spirituality for uncounted generations. This reality causes me to wonder, to whom did Jesus come?

The Magnificat is the text from Luke where Mary reflects on her role as the expectant mother of the Messiah. Think about this. Mary is an unmarried, working-class girl, a nobody, a member of a colonized people. The arrival of a child to her certainly meant shame for her in her community, and yet she rejoiced because the Creator of the universe chose not a princess or an empress to parent the Messiah, but a working-class girl belonging to an oppressed people. Mary's words in the Magnificat give us insight into just who Jesus was born to:

God has performed mighty deeds with God's arm;  
God has scattered those who are proud.  
God has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.  
God has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

### **Jesus is born to the oppressed**

Luke chapter two confirms this idea. An angel of the Creator appears to shepherds caring for their flocks. The angel of the Creator says, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great



joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Think about this. The liberator, the Messiah, is born in a barn. The angel instructs the workers that the Messiah can be found with his parents in a barn.

Why is this announcement made to the lowest workers? A heavenly host appears not to emperors or to kings, but to the workers of the bottom-rung job who are laboring throughout the night. I say again, the heavenly host appears to shepherds, workers who live among animals, who sleep outside on the ground. Which people will be joyful with the arrival of a Messiah for shepherds?! The angel of the Creator is announcing a Messiah for the oppressed, the colonized. This angel appears to his people to tell them the Creator has sent relief in the person of Jesus.

The lectionary text from Isaiah 62 reinforces the idea that the Creator of the Universe is committed to freeing the oppressed. The prophet Isaiah recounts the Creator's liberatory commitment in the following passage:

"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 Creator, and those who gather the grapes will drink it in the courts of my sanctuary."

This is truly good news to Indigenous peoples whose sacred lands are now occupied by foreigners, by settlers. Often people in the dominant culture do not see themselves as "foreigners," but as citizens, those rightly entitled to the land and its bounty. But from the point of view Isaiah speaks from, a point of view shared by the Yakama Nation, the mighty who now occupy Yakama homelands will be removed. The Yakama will again be free to benefit from grain, wine, and safe pasture in their own homelands.

What does this mean for the beneficiaries of empire, those who eat the grain and drink the wine of the oppressed? Many Christians from the dominant culture read these texts and believe it is vindication for them, a retelling of victory and conquest. I challenge this idea and assert that this text in Isaiah is the announcement of jubilee, the just reordering of human systems -- the return of land and security to the vanquished, self-determination for the conquered.

Titus chapter three explains that the oppressed need not earn salvation. We the oppressed are not offered salvation because we are righteous, or just. Titus writes, rather, "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." Jesus' birth is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy, the promise of freedom for the oppressed.

The Psalmist in chapter 97 explains that the coming of the Messiah is a reason for celebration not just for humanity, but for all of creation. Let the earth be glad, the distant shores rejoice! In today's context, the earth itself is held in bonds of oppression. Jesus brings justice for all of creation. The Creator's reign is righteousness and justice. Those who worship idols are put to shame: those who put their hope in capitalism, the protestant work ethic, the American dream, those who believe the theft of land is justified.

### **What does this mean for the Church?**

Those of us who are the descendants of settlers are settlers ourselves. We are the beneficiaries of systems of oppression. This includes the church institutions, which have gained land, wealth, and

security at the expense of the oppressed. Yet we have the opportunity to stand in true solidarity with Indigenous peoples by seeking right relationship. Right relationship balances power where there is an imbalance of power. For the beneficiaries of colonization, this means giving up power. We can join with Indigenous land and water protectors by putting our bodies next to theirs, by following their leadership in Indigenous movements for liberation. In this way, we can become relatives to the oppressed and claim the coming of Jesus the Messiah as good news for us. If we choose to remain in an advantaged position as the beneficiaries of empire, then the coming of the Messiah cannot be for us. For the mighty, the coming of the Messiah, and the establishment of the kingdom of God means being brought down from our thrones and sent away hungry.

## Daily Prayer

### Christmas Day

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom God favors! God of the most high, you came to us this day as a child. A child that transformed this world and showed us that power resides in the shepherds of the field, in the everyday people trying to survive, in the hearts of all who long for a just world. We rejoice and give praise to the God who throws tyrants from their high places, who clears our paths filled with stones, and who never forsakes us. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 26

All creatures under, within, and above this earth, we praise the God who dwells in the fields, flowers, and grasses, who wades in the waters and swims with the waves, who speaks through the winds and the sounds of birds singing, all praise to you O God! We praise you, the God of the mountains and high places, the God of nations and all people, the God of newness and the God of our ancestors. Praise be to you, the God who loves us. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 27

Holy Listener, hear our prayers through our whispers, our laments, our praises, and our screams. You, oh God, are always with us. Make yourself known to us so that we can feel your presence, know of your love, and fully understand where you would have us to go. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 28

O God of Light and Darkness, bringer of hope and joy and peace, we await the coming of your manifestation of love. A love that knows no bounds, that stretches from generations gone and generations to come, that forms and molds us in the darkness of the womb, and pushes us into a world to bring about justice and light. May that love consume us, embolden us, and create within us the eternal longing to love all. Amen.

# 1st Sunday of Christmas

Claudia Aguilar Rubalcava

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

Luke 2:41-52

*41 Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. 43 When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents were unaware of this. 44 Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents[a] saw him they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you." 49 He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"[b] 50 But they did not understand what he said to them. 51 Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them, and his mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years[c] and in divine and human favor.*

This is the story of two revolutions. The first one started over two thousand years ago when a tween, one who had not gone through a bar mitzvah, the coming-of-age ceremony in Jewish tradition when the person becomes responsible for their own actions. Jesus wasn't quite an adult yet. And definitely not a child anymore. Jesus was becoming his own self and that process can be painful for parents, as they see the control they exercise over their children fizzle out faster than an open bottle of soda. This is the beginning point of our story. Both of our stories.

Jesus, the not-adult-yet-but-not-a-child-anymore tween, gets lost (or did he run away?) from his parents. In the midst of the chaos caused by the festivities, his parents don't notice the child is missing. A full day later, they decide to go back to the city and look for him and when they found him, they found him schooling the teachers in the temple. Parents got anxious.

Our second story comes from Southeastern Mexico, in the state of Chiapas which borders Guatemala. For centuries, indigenous communities in Mexico (and all over the world, but that is the topic of another conversation) had been treated like little children. European colonizers used the imagery of children to describe and prescribe how the local communities behaved. It is an incredibly helpful metaphor. Because, just like a boy before going through his bar mitzvah, it can be said that indigenous communities cannot be responsible for themselves, so they need a parent.

Unlike God-appointed Mary and Joseph as the designated parents, European countries – and the United States of America – appointed themselves as the parents of Latin America, especially of the indigenous communities, imposing a culture, a language, a religion, an economic system... deeming original cultures, languages, religions, and ways of political and economic organization as childish.

In the second half of the 20th century, the "children" became tweens. Not only due to the growing presence of Marxist scholarship in the area, but out of the ancestral wisdom of indigenous communities. And these children were ready to get out and speak their minds. And just like the teachers in the temple, astonished by the questions, the words, and the responses of Jesus, the experts of the world were amazed by what came out of Latin America, mostly in the work of the Second Vatican Council and Liberation Theology. Parents got anxious.

When they found him, Mary recriminates Jesus asking him: "why have you treated us like this?" As if all of the growth and change he was going through was about them. As if the child wasn't smart enough to take care of himself and navigate a world of teachers who thought themselves much wiser than him. Instead of centering on the child and his experience, they made it all about themselves. He owed them. "After ALL we have done for you, how could you?" (I can hear Mary saying).

When Latin American countries and indigenous communities rebelled against the systems the West had imposed on them, the parents reacted similarly to Mary and Joseph: recrimination and scolding, using the how could you language. These parents, unlike Jesus' parents, went farther and got into physical abuse, training military in the School of the Americas, implementing strategies like Operacion Condor and the Dirty War in Mexico, silencing the growing voices of the tween communities. Many lives were lost in this scolding.

Jesus, trusting his belovedness and relying on his before-the-beginning-of-time wisdom, responds, kind of snarkily: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" To me, this sounds a lot like a: "this is not your business. It never has been. (Let me be)." That was the exact moment Jesus became an adult, an advocate for his own life and ministry. He took control of his life. Self-determination.

In Chiapas, Mexico a similar story brewed over decades. Inspired by their faith, grassroots communities found in Jesus' words the key to liberation and self-determination. They organized and the result was the 1994 Zapatista revolt (the first day of the implementation of NAFTA, which furthered poverty among poverty-stricken communities). The guerrilla-style movement was quickly suppressed and hundreds died, but people found a way. Like Jesus to his earthly parents, the indigenous community in Chiapas said to the world: "this is not your business. It never has been. Let me be."

Growth is inevitable. Jesus, even when Mary tried to keep him from growing, grew up. She couldn't protect him from the heartaches that life and history would bring. She couldn't keep him a child forever. She couldn't control him anymore or determine his whereabouts ever again. We hear that "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years." He was wise all along, but he needed to try things on his own for that wisdom to increase.

When the peace treaties that would recognize the autonomy of Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Mames, and Choles (among other Mayan groups) were rejected, the communities realized that neither left nor right nor anything in between would help them. Liberation was not coming from a political party of an economic system created by the West but from their internal wisdom, that had been growing since the beginning of time. They re-organized. This time, not as a military movement but as a whole new system of governance, of providing for each other's needs, of feeding everyone. They called each micro-community caracoles (snails), where, like the spirals in a snail, everything is connected, everything depends on another part. They are governed by boards that "operate through the principles of rotation, revocation of mandate (recall) and accountability." [1] Women are a big part of the system. Everyone has their basic rights respected: a home, education, healthcare. When I visited two of the caracoles earlier this year, I was amazed by the peaceful rhythm of life, the free health-care clinics, the schools. Nothing was fancy but everything was enough. They have been wise since the beginning, they just needed to try things on their own. The ways of ancient indigenous communities had the seeds for this new system, one that is not perfect, but it is adequate for the people it serves. They have only increased in wisdom and years ever since.



We don't know anything else about Jesus' childhood or teenage years. Maybe this story is here because it was such a ground-breaking moment in his life and in the life of the earthly parents. He realized what he was capable of, learned to be responsible for his own decisions, and learned to draw a line between himself and Mary and Joseph. The parents learned to let go as they realized that that life was never theirs to begin with. It was an aha moment for both entities.

And while Latin America and her peoples have never been children but have definitely been treated as such, the aha moment has come. We know what we are made of, what we need, we can be held accountable for our own decisions and we are learning to draw a line between us and the self-appointed parents. My question and my prayer is will the "parents" let us go? Will they realize our lives were never theirs to begin with?

May it be so.

[1] Chiapas Support Committee, "The Zapatista Caracoles," Chiapas Support Committee, accessed November 1, 2024, <https://chiapas-support.org/2019/09/05/the-zapatista-caracoles/>.

# Daily Prayer

## 1st Sunday of Christmas

God of the Sun and Moon and Stars, your vast universe consumes us with beauty and unknowing. We are so small and yet, you call us to understand, to know and to find our place in our calling for justice and peace. Keep us humble, o God, but also keep us curious so that we may know the wonders of your world. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 30

Borderless and gateless God, oh how our souls dim in the presence of fear. Create within us a movement of the soul that destroys barriers and bindings so that all can live in dignity. Stir within us the ability to break from our evils of demonization and move us to act. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 31

Love Incarnate and Wielder of Justice, make pliable our hearts that have hardened to rigid stone so that our minds may absorb the cries of your people. Cries that ring out through the generations of trauma and pain. Shine upon us your light, melting away our coldness and opening us up to a new day of justice and peace. Amen.

# New Year's Day

Amaury Tañón-Santos

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Psalm 8; Revelation 21:1-6a; Matthew 25:31-46*

## Advent and Christmas Must Be About Community

The coming of an anointed leader – a leader chosen, selected, and conferred a purpose – is a hope, an expectation, of many of us. According to our holy scriptures, this hope has been in the minds and hearts of Jews for millennia. For Christians, however, the advent of an anointed leader seems to have been reduced to a time of remembering what was. The liturgies many of us have participated in reminded us of old promises about what, how, and for whom an anointed leader would come to live out a purpose for hope, peace, joy, and love to the world. Come Christmas day and the remembering ends abruptly, if not haphazardly. Many celebrate the birth of Jesus as the sole fulfillment of those promises of an anointed leader. And we move onto the next season. And it is very convenient. It is convenient liturgically because this interpretation facilitates the connection of Jesus and the Christmastide with Advent. As to the Christian witness, this interpretation will injure the church's identity as a community of co-laborers with Jesus. Advent is not about promises fulfilled. Advent is about the continuing fulfillment of promises of a better world, a promise fulfilled

through time and space through the committed partnership of humans and the divine. Christmas is not about the birth of the anointed leader. Christmas is about the commitment of the divine to work with the oppressed to foster communities of solidarity in the face of enmity, of well-being in the face of violence, of dignity in the face of marginalization, of life in the face of death.

Worshipping, reading scripture, and engaging in mission and witness in a decolonial way requires an understanding that hope, peace, love, and joy are not the works of the divine alone. A liberationist lens for reading scriptures will affirm these are the actions of a community of humanity and the divine. The lessons of Advent and Christmas, the telling of the history of hope and expectation for the incursion of the divine in earthly affairs, is also a reminder that this is an incursion of divine solidarity with creation, of God coming alongside the created order to repair and reconcile.

Often described as the “suffering servant,” Isaiah 53 speaks of a person who takes on pain and suffering for the sake of the world. The people for whom Isaiah 53 was originally written were people oppressed – denied the possibility of living in their motherland, which was under colonial rule. The narrative of liberation in this portion of the Book of Isaiah is one of the restoration of the dignity of the people of Judah, a dignity that is implied in the return of the people to Jerusalem. In Isaiah 53, however, we see something else. The work of restoring dignity for those forced into physical (cultural and liturgical) exile is acted by a person who shows presence and solidarity in the suffering of the people.

It is not difficult for Christians to read the description in this chapter and see connections with the story of Jesus. I want to invite us to consider that Jesus is one possible fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53. The people of Judah in the time of Isaiah hoped for liberation. Judeans of the first century hoped for liberation. There are many today in the United States and throughout the world who hope still for liberation. There are Jewish and Christian theologies that suggest that the person described in Isaiah 53 can very well be a person (or a community of people) committed to presence, solidarity, and liberation. The church affirms in the Christmastide that Jesus was a committed leader for first-century Judeans. I believe such wholeheartedly. As a minister who seeks to read the times through a decolonial lens and to strategize for an abundant life that liberates people, I have to believe that today other servants of and in the community gather in solidarity to find ways to live up to the promises and challenges of Isaiah 53. Said another way, the work of Jesus in the first century, perhaps in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53, calls the Church to collaborate with the community and with the divine in fulfilling the prophecy today. The Church, then, is liberated from thinking that the work of Jesus is the only and final fulfillment of the promises of old. Moreover, the Church is challenged to understand itself as a part of this community for the fulfillment of the promises of liberation.

The relationship of Jesus with prophesy and actions in the world are models of how the church should go about its own relationship with the promises in our sacred scriptures and how we discern our presence and action in our communities. At the height of Mark 6, the gospel writer narrates Jesus’ return to his hometown and teaching in the synagogue. The parallel narrative in Luke 4 has Jesus read scripture from Isaiah 61 and affirm that the prophecy was fulfilled in the hearing of the congregation. Although many Christians can say simply, that the fulfillment of the prophecy means that Jesus was it, what follows after in the narratives of Mark and Luke, I think, suggests that in both occasions, the gospel writers were witnessing an invitation to the early church (and I suggest to us as well) to join in the redemptive and reconciling work of God in the world as described in the prophecy of Isaiah. That invitation is not to expect an ultimate divine solution to the problems of the world. Rather, the invitation is to work and act in the world here and now.

As we keep reading the narratives of Mark and Luke, what I see is Jesus shifting the understanding of the prophecies as the act or commitment of an individual to the call and commitment of a whole community. In Mark 6:7ff we see Jesus convening a community of practice. In Luke 5 and on, we see Jesus gathering a community of learning. As we begin a New Year and journey through the last days of the Christmastide (Happy Three Kings Day on January 6!), as the United States is in dire need of focus and peace, as the whole created order requires an intervention that ushers in dignity, solidarity, and reconciliation, the Church is called to embrace the promises of Advent and the witness of Christmas by responding to the call of God to become communities that learn and practice the ways of hope, peace, joy and love.

Becoming communities of learning and practice, also requires the church to be intentional and committed to understanding itself as being a part of the broader context. I am of those who believe that, for decades, the US (and more broadly Western) Christianity has spent too much of its resources believing it has an exceptional position in society. There are many in our congregations that still grapple with the fact that the Church is no longer the moral center of American society. Perhaps it never was. However, as followers of Jesus, we do have a responsibility to be with and alongside the disenfranchised and marginalized in society. What Advent and Christmas remind the Church is that it is a community convened to practice hope, peace, joy, and love, and is gathered to learn from the communities we have been set aside to sojourn in. The Church can do this following the call to Christian communities like those in first-century Galatia to reject uniformity and embrace diversity (Galatians 3). The call to action and witness for liberation the Church today is called into is certainly to and with the world. To be able to engage in that work, however, the Church (especially the US Church) must be willing to be liberated. May the promises we remember in Advent and the witness we commemorate in Christmas free us in spirit, body, and soul to be learners and practitioners of liberation.

## Daily Prayer

### New Year's Day

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! A name above all names! Remind us that in our naming as your children, we are fully and wonderfully loved because we are created in your image. In this new year, every time we proclaim your name and your love, hold us to account what it means to follow you. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 33

God of Mind and Heart, knowledge without feeling and feeling without knowledge is inconsistent to your Word. God, keep us on a path of feeling, keep us on a path of knowing, keep us on a path of empathy. For without these things we are nothing and empty. Amen.

# Daily Prayer

## Day 34

God of Job, remind us of these words: ""For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight."

# Daily Prayer

## Day 35

To the ancestors who walked through wildernesses, who stood up for injustice, who placed their bodies in the face of oppression, pour your energy upon us this day. Prop us up, steady us, keep us on the path, comfort us and confront us. Amen.



# 2nd Sunday of Christmas

Niveen Ibrahim Sarras

*Jeremiah 31:7-14 or Sirach 24:1-12 • Psalm 147:12-20 or Wisdom of Solomon 10:15-21 • Ephesians 1:3-14 • John 1:(1-9), 10-18*

## Incarnation and Resistance: John's Prologue Through a Palestinian Anti-Colonial Lens

As we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is appropriate to reflect on the Gospel of John's prologue, as it addresses the existence and incarnation of the Word. This passage places Jesus not only in the historical context of first-century Palestine—where oppressed Jews struggled under Roman imperial power—but also within the eternal, divine sphere. Here, Christ's birth presents a transformative contrast to Roman colonization, a system that perpetuated poverty and hardship among the Jews.

The prologue begins with the profound statement, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). This opening affirms the Word's existence before creation, establishing the Word as both distinct from and fully divine with God, the Father. John highlights the Word's co-eternal relationship with God, reflecting God's vision of a world marked by communion and harmony, free from imposed hierarchies. Viewed through an anti-colonial lens, the unity between the Son and the Father serves as a call for oppressed peoples to embrace solidarity against imperial powers that create divisions and hierarchies between native communities and colonizers. Drawing from my own Palestinian experience of Israeli settler-colonialism, I recognize this contrast deeply. My people have endured displacement, land dispossession, and daily segregation. Israelis occupy a position of privilege and power, while Palestinians, the indigenous people, are often treated as outsiders. Instead of peaceful coexistence, we find ourselves in a state of intense conflict. The harmony between the Word and God the Father calls for decolonization and reconciliation by recognizing the value of all communities and their histories. This harmony challenges the foundations of settler colonialism by advocating for relationships, respect, and justice among diverse peoples and the environment.

In the opening verses, the evangelist portrays the Word as not merely a distant concept but an active, dynamic force in creation. Jesus, as the Creator, is uncreated; creation itself is an intentional act, rooted in divine purpose rather than chance. Everything within creation holds purpose, order, and significance, reflecting the very character of God. This inherent order in creation stands in contrast to colonial narratives that impose foreign systems of governance and exploit indigenous lands and cultures to advance imperial power. Each indigenous community, with its unique culture and land, is part of God's creation, deserving respect rather than exploitation. However, the Israeli government frequently claims Palestinian land as "state land" or for "security purposes," later allocating it to settlements that displace Palestinian communities. The Israeli Apartheid Barrier further restricts Palestinian movement, securing Israeli control over critical resources such as fertile land and water. This environment marginalizes Palestinians, treating them as outsiders within God's creation, while asserting Israeli ownership over the land's divine purpose.

John then moves from the theme of creation to that of light and life, both symbols of liberation

from oppressive forces. The phrase “In him was life, and that life was the light of all humanity” embodies the inherent dignity of colonized peoples—a worth that colonial powers frequently attempted to suppress. Christ’s arrival as light brings hope and stands in defiance against the darkness of oppression. In the Gospel of John, this light, representing Christ, penetrates the world’s darkness—a metaphor for sin and spiritual alienation from God (Martin & Wright, 34). In this context, darkness represents colonialism, exploitation, and dehumanization, which the light of Christ overcomes. The assurance that “the darkness has not overcome it” symbolizes the resilience and enduring hope of those resisting oppression. This “true light” empowers the oppressed and reclaims the dignity that colonial forces sought to deny them.

Continuing this theme, John portrays the Word as the true light that the world rejected. Though Jesus, the Word, created the world and came to his own people, they did not recognize or accept him. This rejection makes apparent the denial of all that the Word embodies: love, justice, and mercy. For Palestinians, whose right to dignity is threatened by Christian and Jewish Zionists, this rejection parallels their struggle. Israelis and their allies who demonize Palestinians, denying their right to dignity and self-determination, exemplify the darkness that resists light and justice. In this way, the Word embodies an identity that defies conformity to imposed standards, instead affirming the true worth of each person, especially those oppressed, such as Palestinians.

John’s language evolves from “the Word” to describing those who accept him, offering them the status of “children of God.” John’s choice of the term “children” over “sons” underscores an intimate, affectionate bond, evoking the vulnerable yet trusting relationship between young offspring and their parents (Klink, 165). Both being “children of God” and anti-colonialism affirm an identity founded in divine love, affirming worth and belonging that transcends societal hierarchies. As God’s children, we are empowered to resist the imperial forces that deny identity and impose a foreign, denigrating identity upon us.

Emphasizing God’s closeness, John reveals that the Word became flesh and dwelled among humanity. The infinite God embraced the limitations of human nature, humbly taking on flesh. The Greek term *eskēnōsen*, meaning “to dwell,” literally translates as “to pitch a tent” or “to tabernacle,” evoking God’s presence with the Israelites in the wilderness. This intimate dwelling reflects God’s deep commitment to humanity. The Word did not enter from a place of dominance but with humility, choosing to side and live with the oppressed rather than with those in power. This presence challenges colonial ideologies by advocating solidarity, respect, and mutual dignity instead of domination and exploitation. The Word, through incarnation, offers a model of engagement rooted in love rather than control.

The incarnation of the Word signifies God’s solidarity and humility as it enters a broken world marked by suffering and sin. Rather than aligning with power, the Word embodies a profound identification with the oppressed. Jesus, born during Roman colonization, lived in solidarity with the colonized Jewish people and ultimately faced death at the hands of Roman colonizers. This challenges settler-colonial ideologies and offers an alternative vision based on respect and love for humanity. The Word came to support the oppressed and to confront both personal and systemic sins inflicted by those in power.

The evangelist portrays the incarnation as the revelation of God’s glory through Jesus, a tangible expression of grace and truth witnessed directly by the apostles. In the mindset of colonialism, however, “truth” is often distorted to demonize indigenous peoples, portraying them as threats, as is seen in the portrayal of Palestinians. Israel’s media narrative casts Palestinians as security risks and barriers to peace, justifying military presence and diverting attention from Israeli settler colo-

nies (settlements) expansion. Western audiences often accept this portrayal as reality and truth. Yet, the truth of the gospel, embodied in Jesus, reveals God's nature and redemptive purpose, calling believers to live lives transformed by God's love and justice. This gospel truth, offering "grace upon grace," stands in stark contrast to the colonial mentality of control and displacement. It challenges ideologies that seek to subjugate others, advocating instead for systems grounded in justice and respect for all.

In conclusion, John's prologue offers a powerful vision of the Word incarnate as a force for love, liberation, justice, and truth. This vision challenges both the Roman imperial power of Jesus' time and modern systems of oppression that deny the dignity and rights of indigenous peoples. By emphasizing the Word's eternal unity with God, his active role in creation, and his light that overcomes darkness, the prologue speaks directly to those who experience displacement and marginalization. In embodying God's grace and truth, Jesus invites all to a life transformed by justice, mutual respect, and solidarity. As followers of Christ, we are called to resist systems of hierarchy and division, embracing instead the divine vision of a world rooted in love, equality, and co-existence. Through this lens, the birth of Christ not only heralds hope but also serves as a call to dismantle structures of oppression and affirm the inherent worth of all people.

Klink III, Edward W. John. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016.

Martin, Francis, and William M. Wright IV. The Gospel of John. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture.

# Daily Prayer

## 2nd Sunday of Christmas

Wisdom that swirls around us, fill our cups, make us whole, and teach us the ways to light in our world that is shadowed by hate. Offer us the wisdom to see places of hope, spaces of love, the work of peace and the holiness of joy. Amen.

# Epiphany

Lee Catoe

*Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12*

## Another Road...

*Matthew 2:1-12*

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, 2:2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east, and have come to pay him homage." 2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, 2:4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet: 2:6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" 2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 2:8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 2:9 When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 2:11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

Space, the final frontier, has been an obsession of mine since I was small. There were times that I would look up to the sky and imagine what exactly was up there. And it wasn't until later on in life that I actually found out what is up there and that what we all actually see is light from years and years and years ago. A light traveling from billions of miles away, emitted from a star that no longer exists or a planet or a galaxy. It's truly fascinating to know that we are all a part of something so vast and intricate like the universe. And that one of those lights, one of those stars, led some of the smartest folk of their time to the humblest setting where the Christ child laid.

The magi, folk of a multitude of different backgrounds, were called upon by Herod, a pawn and tyrant empowered by the Roman Empire. The goal...track down this child so that Herod could get rid of him because the babe possessed far too much of a danger to Herod's political power. Mary proclaimed what the coming of the babe meant in that kings would be thrown from their thrones and the oppressed would be set free. This Messiah would be the one to save his people and that was far too much for a greedy, sell-out like Herod. So, he enlisted his intellectual officers to track that child down by following a star which they did so perfectly. But what Herod did not count on was that an emotional response erupted within them.

Joy took over their bodies, moved past their pursuit, consumed their analytical minds, and opened their treasure boxes to offer this Joy-Bringer gifts of the most prized possessions of the earth. This emotional and spiritual response then opened up the angelic and heavenly world, entered into their sleep, and transformed their journey away from a tyrant toward a new road.

O how the colonizer detests emotion! O how the colonizer demonizes joy!

As a barer of the colonial legacy, as a white person birthed from the oppression of the Scottish

people, as a white queer person, this specific message goes to the worshipers of the Herodian gods of whiteness and colonization. Simply put, this goes out to you white folk...all of you. Just as Herod relied on his intellectual army to gather information and to think his way out of a possible coupe, we white folk often assume that we will think ourselves out of the damage we have done. We read our anti-colonial books, our anti-racist books, we read our Bibles and any text we can to gain knowledge. Or we don't do any of that and we remain ignorant, so we don't have to think and especially feel. Or we simplify faith. Or we over complicate faith. All the while, the historic legacy of colonization, predominately backed by religion, still lingers, still oppresses, still robs everyone of their identity and rootedness, and still carries on day after day, and then the numbness sets in.

The road of numbness is an intentional road we are placed upon so that with every bump, every crack, every detour, every emotion is bypassed so that our minds and bodies can handle the damage we do. This road is filled with billboards: "Mass deportation", "Ban Books", "Queers Go to Hell", "No to They/Them", "Manifest Destiny", "Oil Over People", "This Land is My Land and Not Yours". As we travel this road, we consume empty calories and road snacks the best being, racism, white supremacy, homophobia and the like (doesn't matter the brand). Sometimes, we think we see the star and we follow it. We take our exit and we find it, a plastic blow mold that towers over a little white boy child. And we stay there, worshipping a being that does not exist for Christ was anything but white.

The stasis and the unmovable stance many of us take in front of this white child will never be moved by intellect alone. You see this road of numbness is predominately for white folk, it's only open to the people who look like you do. And the trap that keeps us in front of the white Jesus is contagious because it's simple. We just needed to find him ... we don't need to follow him.

But the true epiphany breaks forth when we are overcome, when we are moved inwardly and outwardly, when we FEEL. Herod didn't count on the Spirit to move the magi. Herod didn't count on God With Us to be more contagious than whiteness. For the magi were moved to joy seeing this Palestinian, Jewish child who would rock the world with love. Moved to joy so much so that they chose to take another road. ANOTHER PATH. ANOTHER WAY.

So what does this new way, this new road mean for us?

It means that the colonized Christ, that old blow mold from the 70s, must be melted down like the idol it is. It means repentance is first and foremost the entry way to this new road. This new road is long, wide, filled with hard conversations, guilt processed in white only circles, education, trust building, and most importantly, action.

Our world is full of Herods, in mirrors and in our neighbors. And the only way we will break from this evil is not only through thought, but through the emotional responses when we see our fellow likeness of God suffer. It's called empathy.

When our Palestinian siblings suffer, when immigrants suffer, when our queer and trans siblings suffer, when Black and Brown bodies suffer, when our earth suffers, when our Native and Indigenous siblings suffer, our bodies should be moved, our minds should be consumed with holy rage that catapults us into action. That is the Epiphany story!

The beauty of the universe and the beauty of creation is due to its resilience and its mobility. It evolves. It changes. It never stays the same. Our urge and our resistance to control creation and destroy it goes against the very nature of our being. For we are a part of the stars, we are a part



of the universe. When we look up, we can still see that star that shined over the Christ child. That same star shines over us all connecting us to that moment in history when a group of people went against a tyrant and chose another road - a road to liberation, a road to repentance, and a road where all shall inherit the light of goodness, dignity and love.

# Daily Prayer

## Epiphany

Holy Instigator and Troubler of Tyrants, we have followed the star and have seen the Christ child. We have seen his journey, seeking refuge in a foreign land as an oppressor seeks to end his life. We have seen it through your Word and in our lives as your children flee from fear and danger. Move us to have an epiphany of heart, blow our minds with your love so that we may end suffering, violence, tyranny and war. Amen.



**Clara A.B. Joseph** is a practising Christian from the ancient community of the Thomas Christians of India. She is a professor of English and an adjunct professor in Religious Studies at the University of Calgary. Her recent academic works include *Christianity in India: The Anti-Colonial Turn* (Routledge, 2019) and *India's Nonviolent Freedom Struggle: The Thomas Christians* (Routledge, 2024). She has also authored poetry collections such as *In the Face of the Other: A Long Poem* (IP, 2016), *Dandelions for Bhabha* (IP, 2018), and *M/OTHER* (Wipf & Stock, 2024). A recipient of the University of Calgary Students' Union Teaching Excellence Award, she is recognized for her dedication and effectiveness in teaching. For more of her works, go to [Amazon.com/author/clara-ab-joseph](https://www.amazon.com/author/clara-ab-joseph).



Born in the city of Fajardo, Puerto Rico **José David Rodríguez** was ordained in 1975 to the ministry of Word and Sacraments in the Caribbean Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He served congregations in Puerto Rico and Chicago; held visiting appointments at the Seminario Evangelico de Puerto Rico and the Comunidad Teologica de Mexico, and was an adjunct faculty member at Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, Ill., and Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Lombard, Ill., before joining the Lutheran School of Theology faculty in 1990. His service to the church includes membership on a number of boards, including the editorial board of the *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology*, and editor of the online journal *Fe en Acción*. He was co-chair and planner of the first meeting of Hispanic-Latina theologians and ethicists held at Princeton Theological Seminary. He is also member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). From 1997 to 2001 he was coordinator of EATWOT's U.S. Minorities Region. Rodríguez is the author of several books and numerous articles, including *Caribbean Lutherans* (Fortress Press), *La Vocación* (Abingdon Press) *Romanos*, the latter with David Cortés Fuentes, (Augsburg Fortress), as well as *Martín Lutero descalzo* with Carmen Rodríguez (Editora Centenario: República Dominicana). He received a BA from Universidad de Puerto Rico in the area of Philosophy (with honors). He earned Master of Divinity, Master of Theology and Doctor of Theology degrees at LSTC. He also completed the requirements for a PhD in History at the University of the West Indies (Jamaica).



**The Rev. Jermaine-Ross Allam** serves as the inaugural director of the Center for the Repair of Historic Harms at the Presbyterian Mission Agency, PC(USA) where his team is focused on growing the number of human beings working to share the Good News that restorative justice and Reparations make common sense for the common good as soon as possible and for as long as it takes. Jermaine was ordained as minister of Word and sacrament by the Presbytery of the Twin Cities in 2013 where he began ordained ministry as executive director of 21st Century Academy at Kwanzaa Community Church PC(USA) in North Minneapolis—renamed Liberty Community Church—and Associate Pastor for Social Justice at Oak Grove Presbyterian Church. In addition to serving as the Center for Repair's director, Jermaine is a Ph.D candidate in Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan where he is completing a book tentatively titled "Trammeled by the Bonds of Union: Social Ecology of anti-Black Violence and Impunity after Emancipation." Jermaine is also the author of two recent articles on reparations entitled "Breaking the Miller Cycle and Reparations and the Ministry of Planetary Peace."



**Terry Wildman**, of Ojibwe and Yaqui ancestry, is the Lead Translator and Project Manager of the First Nations Version. He serves as the Director of Spiritual Growth and Leadership Development for Native InterVarsity. He is also the author of *Birth of the Chosen One*, a children's book based on the First Nations Version of the Bible. Terry and his wife, Darlene, live in Maricopa, Arizona, on the traditional lands of the Pima and Tohono O'odham.



**Amy Kim Kyremes-Parks** is the Director of Formation for Children and their Family's at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, North Carolina. Originally from Salt Lake City, Utah she is a cis Latiné woman with deep roots in the Presbyterian Church USA. As a daughter of an immigrant from the Dominican Republic and an Indigenous Latiné she finds grounding and strength from the ancestors and seeks to be an advocate for the marginalized and unseen. Amy Kim loves creating space for folks to interact with the Holy and one another through art, opportunities for disruption and surprises. Her life is shared with her amazing spouse, Justin, children, Natalily & Isaiah, Herbie the Poodle and 5 chickens!



**Dr. Fadi Al-Zoughbi** was born and raised in Bethlehem. He holds a B.A. in Biblical Studies, an M.A. in Christian Missions, and a Doctorate in Church Ministry. Fadi Pastors at the House of Bread Church in Bethlehem, where he is passionate about teaching God's Word to the local Palestinian Christian Community. His heart is especially drawn to guiding children and youth toward spiritual maturity in Christ, and encouraging them to place their trust in God while living in a highly volatile context. Fadi and his wife Amani, are dedicated parents to two children, Yoanna (7) and Andrew (5).



**William Yoo** is Associate Professor of American Religious and Cultural History at Columbia Theological Seminary and author of several books, including *What Kind of Christianity: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church* and *Reckoning with History: Settler Colonialism, Slavery, and the Making of American Christianity*. He and his spouse, Sarah, a middle school educator in Atlanta Public Schools, reside in Decatur, Georgia with their two teenage children and two cats.



**Grace Al-Zoughbi Arteen** is a Palestinian theological educator, with expertise on Arab women in theological education. After several years on faculty at Bethlehem Bible College, including as head of the Biblical Studies Department, she is assistant professor at Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, and is the accreditation officer of the Middle East and North Africa Association for Theological Accreditation. Grace also serves as Review Secretary for the European Council of Theological Education. She holds a PhD in theological education from London School of Theology. She is the author of numerous articles as well as the Esther Commentary of The Arabic Contemporary Christian Commentary. Grace is married to Rev. Michael Arteen, and together they serve God's kingdom in the Middle East region.



**Sarah Augustine** is the Executive Director of the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, a national coalition with global reach. From 2017-2022 she directed a Dispute Resolution Center in Central Washington. She has served on the faculty at Heritage University, Central Washington University and Yakima Valley College, and has served as Adjunct faculty at Goshen College. Sarah received a BA in Sociology and Psychology (1996) and an MA in Whole Systems Design with an emphasis in group conflict transformation (2006). She has represented the interests of Indigenous community partners to their own governments, the Inter-American development bank, the United Nations, the Organization of American States Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, The World Council of Churches, the World Health Organization, and a host of other international actors including corporate interests. Sarah Lives with her husband, Dan Peplow, and their child in Central Washington.



**Rev. Claudia Aguilar Rubalcava** is the director of engagement at More Light Presbyterians. She grew up in Mexico City, with her parents and two siblings. Rev. Aguilar believes words and everyday actions have the power to shape people's lives and the world's future, a belief that led her to author liturgical resources and articles for numerous publications. She has served the church as campus minister, pastor, associate dean of students, and seminary admissions staff. Being bilingual, bicultural, and binational is part of her call to build bridges among different groups of people. She is interested in ecumenical and interfaith efforts to bring justice and peace to every sentient being. When not working, she is spending time in her garden with her husband Doug and their dogs, hiking with friends, or cooking.



A pastor by vocation, a historian by training, and a networker by calling, **Amaury Tañón-Santos** (él/he/him) serves as the Executive Director/CEO of the Sycamore Collaborative. A half-century-old network of faith communities in the greater Schenectady, NY, area, they seek to address the injustices that emanate from and perpetuate systemic poverty through food access and community resilience work.



Before his call to social NGO/not-for-profit leadership, Amaury served as pastor of congregations in urban contexts of New York and New Jersey. He also served in higher theological education as program director in multicultural ministry, faith and public life, and Latina/o leadership formation, and as staff in regional church ministry. His journey in religious vocation, community engagement, and urban life began in his native Puerto Rico (the traditional land of the Borikén Taíno).

Amaury has degrees in Spanish Caribbean and Latin American history from the Universidad de Puerto Rico en Cayey (BA), in religion and society from Princeton Theological Seminary (MDiv), and in urban studies and intercultural engagement from New Brunswick Theological Seminary (DMin). He is also an alumnus of Duke Divinity School's Foundation of Christian Leadership, and part of the Glean Network through its SHIFT and START programs.

Amaury lives in the Capital Region of New York State (in the traditional land of the Mohican people), is the spouse of Jeannette, and the parent to Aiden Paul and Sebastián Mikel.

**Rev. Niveen Ibrahim Sarras**, born and raised in Bethlehem, Palestine, is the first Palestinian woman ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her passion for the Bible began at the Lutheran Church of the Reformation and school in Bethlehem. She earned her Master of Divinity from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in Old Testament from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Rev. Sarras loves teaching Scripture and theology. She has taught feminist, womanist, and mujerista theology in the ELCA East-Central Synod of Wisconsin and courses on feminist theology and interfaith introductions through the University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension. Her scholarly work challenges traditional biblical interpretations, including "Jesus Was a Palestinian Jew – Not White" and "Refuting the Violent Image of God in the Book of Joshua 6-12," published in *\*The (De)Legitimization of Violence in Sacred and Human Contexts\** (2021). Outside academia, Rev. Sarras enjoys hiking, biking, canning, reading on politics, faith, and Scripture, and watching documentaries. As both pastor and scholar, she advocates for critical thinking and deeper faith understanding.



**Rev. Lee Catoe** is the editor of Unbound and co-host and co-producer of A Matter of Faith: A Presby Podcast. He is a native of the small, rural town of Jefferson, South Carolina. Lee is a graduate of Presbyterian College (2010) with a B.S. in Biology and a graduate of Vanderbilt Divinity School (2019) with a Masters of Divinity. His thesis work incorporated the intersection of songwriting and Queer Theology with a focus on incarnational theology and embodiment. Lee is a songwriter, plays guitar and, occasionally, performs. He also freelances as a graphic designer and Instagram manager for his beagle, Rupert (yes, he has an Instagram). Lee and his husband, Will, now live in Nashville, TN with their beagle, Rupert.

