

Advent 2015 Reflections Shared by the Methodist Liaison Office in Jerusalem

First Sunday in Advent

²⁹“Then he told them a parable:
‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees;
³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves
that the summer is already near.
³¹So also, when you see these things taking place,
you know that the kingdom of God is near.’ ”—*Luke 21:29-31*

In late February in Palestine the sprouting of buds on the fig trees and the flowering of pink blossoms on the almond trees announce the advent of spring. They are physical promises of abundance, of a fruitful and prosperous future—for all. For millennia, single fig trees often were planted at the entrances to villages or along well-traveled roads. These trees are still considered “common,” belonging to no one, and anyone is welcome to eat the fruits of these trees in order to share in God’s gifts and sustain oneself for the journey ahead.

The season of Advent is like the blossoming of the fig and the almond trees; a time of promise and anticipation, a time of encouragement for a future that will be abundant and sustainable. Advent, the “coming” or “approach,” gives us time to reflect on the coming of the birth of Jesus and the kingdom of God on Earth so that we can be prepared to do God’s will, to follow the message of Jesus through his parables and teachings, to follow Jesus’ command to seek this kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33). Advent is a time to remember what Jesus tells us in John 10:10—“I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly”—and to know that God’s abundance is reborn in each budding tree and in each new day.

As we await the celebration of the birth of our Lord, let us remember that we are also called to share that abundance with others; to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, and to do all we can to let the oppressed be free.

Generous and loving God, during this time of Advent we thank you for this opportunity to reflect on the importance of the birth of your son, Jesus Emmanuel, God with us, and the gift of your presence among us. We ask that you help us to follow the teachings of Christ, to remember to share your bounty with others, and to do your will in all things so that we may know the Kingdom of God. Amen.

*—Janet Lahr Lewis, UM Mission Personnel
United Methodist Advocacy Coordinator for the Middle East*

Second Sunday in Advent

⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”—*Luke 1:68-79*

Advent is a time of waiting and anticipation. Preparations are made to welcome in the birth of our savior, and we join in spirit the wise men on their original journey to meet the Christ child. They followed the star, and we count down the days. They brought gifts to honor Him, and we buy gifts to honor one another. However, we, like they, are called to look towards that day with not just hope, but *expectant* hope—a hope that grows out of belief in God’s faithfulness to restore all of creation to peace and harmony.

This concept of waiting takes on a whole new meaning here in Palestine, for it is a country that is all too familiar with waiting: waiting for an end to the occupation, waiting for recognition from the international community, waiting for equality, waiting for peace from persecution. It can be a challenge here, as in other places where real human suffering occurs, to lift our eyes up and see the star shining us a way forward.

Despite this present darkness, though, we hold onto the promise that “the dawn from on high will break upon us,” and we anticipate this coming light. In this season of Advent, we wait for Christ’s birth, and also for the making of all things new in and through Him. We wait, not simply with hope, but with *expectant* hope, knowing that our God is good, and that we are not forgotten.

Waiting is hard. We long for justice, we long for peace. Give us patience, God, and give us strength. When we feel overwhelmed by the darkness all around us, and despair is close at hand, gently lift our faces upwards to you. Help us to see the light of the Eastern star shining brightly down, guiding our way. Fill our hearts with joyful anticipation, with expectant joy, as we approach the day when we remember Christ’s birth, and how His coming forever connected us with you. Amen.

—*Jessica Lowe, Individual Volunteer in Mission in Palestine
Provisional Elder, Louisiana Conference*

Third Sunday in Advent

Mountains and valleys will have to be made plain;
open new highways, new highways for the Lord.
He is now coming closer, so come all and see,
and open the doorways as wide as wide can be.
“All Earth Is Waiting” (hymn) vs. 3

- ¹⁰And the crowds asked John the Baptist,
“What then should we do?”
- ¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats
must share with anyone who has none;
and whoever has food must do likewise.”
- ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized,
and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?”
- ¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for
you.” ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?”

He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone
by threats or false accusation,
and be satisfied with your wages.”—*Luke 3:10-14*

The mounting excitement in expectation for Christmas in Bethlehem is everywhere you look. You can feel the movement towards Christmas as the Christmas tree starts to go up in Manger Square, then the lights, and then the official lighting of everything. There are concerts, events, and celebration almost every night as Christmas nears. When Christmas Eve finally comes, the Patriarchs of the Church enter Bethlehem by the historic route. However, to enter Bethlehem by the historic route in the midst of occupation, they must enter through a gate that opens in the Separation Barrier.

In the third verse of “All Earth Is Waiting,” the very shape of the earth is changing in expectancy of the coming of the Messiah—the mountains and valleys are levelling, new pathways are opening. How can our lives shift and change with expectancy of the coming? John gives instructions to those who seek to be baptized. His instructions reveal an expectation that those with plenty share their abundance and those with power do not use it to exploit those without. It is a vision of reducing the distance between the haves and the have-nots.

John’s instructions for actions of repentance and redemption are still relevant in our modern world. Some live with abundance while many live with very little. Power and privilege continue to dominate, creating oppression and exclusion. Yet, in Advent we celebrate that the Lord is near. Let us prepare for Christ’s coming through opening doorways to justice, peace, and hope.

Coming Messiah, help us prepare for your arrival through repentance that leads to change in ourselves and in our world. Empower us to action through the expectancy of your coming. Amen.

—*Grace Killian, former United Methodist Global Mission Fellow in Palestine*

Fourth Sunday in Advent

⁴⁶And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on
the lowliness of his servant.”—*Luke 1:46-48*

Mary, a girl servant child. God used the least expected person to become the mother of Jesus. God did not overlook the girl servant child, but God included her during a specific time and in specific places... from Nazareth to Bethlehem, places of no great note. How will God inspire you?

In the midst of hunger and disadvantage, in the midst of the Roman occupation of a people, God used a girl servant child to bear Emmanuel, “God with us,” the Joy to the world, Jesus. In the midst of hunger and disadvantage today, in the midst of the greatest refugee crisis in the world, in the midst of the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine, what does it mean that God chooses you and me to seek justice for all humanity?

These past days, images of refugees and immigrants, images of occupation—from uprooting of trees, to home demolitions, to separation/apartheid walls and refugee camps in Bethlehem—fill my mind. My faith reminds me that God will never leave us, nor forsake us. God responded through the life and ministry of Jesus, and God continues to respond in us.

Are you among the least expected to respond to God’s call? What does it look like when we humble ourselves, so that we can be used by God in the midst? Are you ready?

Amazing and loving God, may we seek to be lowly servants, men and women, girls and boys, who respond to Your call upon our lives. We give you praise that You use ordinary people in extraordinary moments to stand in the gap, in the midst of life. We remember Your children who continue to live under

occupations, in refugee situations, and other moments of injustice. Help us bear the light of your amazing grace through Jesus Christ. Amen.

—*Rev. Kristen Brown, United Methodist Mission Personnel
Methodist Liaison, Israel and Palestine*

Fifth Sunday of Advent*

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.—*Isaiah 9:2-7*

This past fall, my wife and I crisscrossed the U.S., receiving hospitality in a wide variety of homes as we itinerated in churches in more than a dozen different states. This provided us an opportunity to make new friends and revisit old friends, exchanging with all on a wide array of topics. We enjoyed this fellowship with friends both old and new. There was one subject, however, that we shied away from openly discussing with anyone: who we or they planned to vote for during the upcoming presidential elections. This despite the fact that candidates from all parties were being featured daily on media and news outlets. This despite viewing and listening in close proximity with our friends in their homes as each candidate sang from the screen his or her own praises and promoted his or her worthiness as future president of this great country. Why the silence on this subject? Perhaps we are finally old enough to know that most politicians running for office promise much more than they can or will possibly deliver.

Fortunately, for those of us who have given up on the political promises of politicians, Isaiah tells the faithful of all generations in whom they can safely cast their vote. Isaiah promises us that the child born in Bethlehem will be the true king, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Jesus Christ is the only king guaranteed not to disappoint his people. His commitment to truth, justice and love; his power to change individuals, communities and nations; and his empathy with the poor, the weak and the oppressed stand today as they did during his lifetime. His followers are nourished in wisdom and comfort that will always be available to those who make Him king over our lives.

This Christmas, let us take time out from all the cultural and religious activities that dominate our societies to cast our vote for Jesus.

Child of Bethlehem, Everlasting Father, King of Peace, this Christmas we cast our vote for you. Come to our troubled hearts and world and usher in the principles of your Kingdom. Make us your loyal subjects and faithful servants. Amen.

*—Rev. Dr. Alex and Brenda Awad, United Methodist Mission Personnel
Bethlehem Bible College, ret.*

**Generally, Orthodox Christian churches follow the Julian calendar for Advent, which begins earlier, on Nov. 15, and lasts longer (40 days rather than 4 weeks).*