

The Sacred Season

Advent and Christmas reflections
from sisters around the world

An Advent and Christmas gift from:



GLOBAL SISTERS REPORT

GSR: A PROJECT OF NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER

Seasons greetings from Global Sisters Report

At Global Sisters Report, we offer our readers parallel journeys through the world of sisters.

Our on-the-ground reporting serves as a testimony to the vast ministries that sisters lead in the face of conflict and struggle around the world. But it is the sister-written columns that serve as a window into the prayerful, contemplative lives that fuel those same sisters — sisters who experience God in neglected, impoverished neighborhoods as much as they do in the quiet chapels of their convents.

At a time when finding stillness, peace and hope is as challenging as ever — finding stress or despair, effortless — such wisdom and reflections from the global sisterhood can prepare our hearts and minds for the Advent season: a time when patient anticipation meets the joyful birth of Christ, and when the Liturgical Year begins anew.

To assist with this, we at Global Sisters Report offer this special Advent e-book, drawn from sisters' columns published last year, to provide an extra resource for spiritual sustenance and to thank you for your readership.

We hope these words serve as a much-needed spiritual balm for our dear readers, and that they help you slow down time during a famously hectic season, bringing you closer instead to the serenity and joy of Jesus's birth.

Blessings to you and all those you hold dear this Advent and Christmas, and may you have a happy and healthy New Year!

Soli Salgado
Editor

On behalf of all of us at Global Sisters Report

Reclaim Advent to enhance our celebration of Christmas

BY TRACEY EDSTEIN | DEC. 6, 2023



The color purple is associated with Advent, the season of waiting ahead of Christmas. In Australia, purple jacarandas flower at this time of year. (Tracey Edstein)

It seems that awareness of the Christian season of Advent is at an all-time high — but arguably for all the wrong reasons.

In recent years, the days of Advent — the number of which varies according to the day of the week Christmas falls — have been commandeered for a wide variety of commercial purposes.

For example, a certain retailer of European origin has packaged Advent beer — one to try for each day of the season. Just what we all need.

Fragrances, toys, chocolates, children’s books, celebrity calendars, beauty products — all have been enlisted to the cause of celebrating Advent, the season of preparation to celebrate the nativity of Jesus.

Traditionally, Advent is associated with a variety of symbols: the color purple (or in Australia, the color of jaca-

randas and agapanthus, which flower late in the year); the Jesse tree, which uses symbols to depict the genealogy of Jesus Christ; the Advent wreath, a circle of greenery with four candles marking the four Sundays of Advent. All of these — and other prayer practices and symbols — serve to honor the time of preparing to celebrate the great feast of Christmas.

For many years, it seems to me, Advent simply didn’t exist in the secular world. Christmas was celebrated — with decorations, social events, carol singing, end-of-year concerts, the exchange of gifts, charitable appeals and endless Christmas “specials” on television — for at least a month before Christmas Day. Then it was all over by the feast of St Stephen (Boxing Day here in Australia).

Now the prelude to Christmas is even longer, beginning “officially” after Halloween it seems, and Advent has been seized on for its potential as a marketing device.

I can't help thinking — or am I just hoping? — that there is something in the traditional observance of Advent that is beginning to speak to people for whom Christmas is not a religious event.

Is it a way of countering the relentless commercialism that challenges people from many backgrounds?

Is it a way of imposing a framework on a time that can easily slide into a roller coaster of lists, crowded calendars, competing priorities and chronic exhaustion?

Is it an invitation to find in the season more than ceaseless activity, promises to “catch up before Christmas,” endless indulgence?

Is it an acknowledgement of a growing desire to find the real “more,” the essence, hidden amongst so much “more” of everything?

I want it to be all of the above — and I want it to be found way beyond wily Advent marketing!

How can this happen?

The churches have much to offer, but where I live, their credibility is compromised, to say the least.

It's my strong belief that many people of faith — people of God — have felt compelled to move beyond the institutional church. Like John the Baptist, they're finding their own practices that serve to “Prepare the way of the Lord [and] make his paths straight ...” (Matthew 3:3)

Then there are those of us who remain part of diminishing parish communities, but who also wish to keep in step with the wider local community.

Perhaps one element is simply using the word “Advent” in ways that might subtly counter the commercial aspects. Could an Advent social gathering replace what might normally be seen as a Christmas party assuming it's held during Advent, of course. Some of the symbols listed above could be employed to set a different tone.

Could requests for Advent-toned flowers — prolific in Australia at this time — be posted publicly? I felt guilty when I asked a neighbor if I could pick some of her deep purple hydrangeas. (I went with freshly baked shortbread to exchange.) She was more than happy to oblige, saying, “Is it for the church?” It will be — next Advent!

The annual charitable appeals, sometimes promoted through parishes, could be “branded” as a way of observing Advent and sharing the joy of anticipation.

There are numerous versions of Advent calendars for

children, many with chocolates or toys. What if a simple (homemade?) calendar suggested tasks — practical or prayerful — for each day of Advent? In fact, older students or siblings could easily produce such a calendar for younger students/siblings. Possible tasks might be:

- Make an Advent wreath. Four candles (three purple, one rose) and a circle of greenery are all you need.
- Come up with three highlights of the last 12 months, i.e. since last Advent.
- Offer to help a neighbor with a household task — mowing, weeding or shopping, for example.
- Spend time with a young person doing something they enjoy — swimming, board games, card games, a movie.
- Give some of your pocket money to a local charity.
- Clean out your wardrobe/toybox and donate unwanted items to a local opportunity shop.
- Make a Jesse tree and decorate it.
- Do something your parents would like you to do without being asked!
- Pray for those you know who have lost a loved one during the year — and tell them you're praying for them.
- If you are able, bake treats for people who might be lonely this time of year, or make decorations for the tree.
- Offer to help elderly neighbors or empty nesters to decorate their tree. Sometimes, with no children around, it's simply overlooked.

It seems to me that reclaiming Advent can only enhance our celebration of Christmas, when the time comes.

As Jan Richardson writes in *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*, “... you are part of the path [the blessing] is preparing ... you are how this blessing means to be a voice within the wilderness and a welcome for the way.”

[Tracey Edstein is an associate of the Dominican Sisters, the convenor of the Waratah Associates of the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and the Solomon Islands. For many years, she was a secondary teacher of English and religious studies, and religious studies coordinator in schools with close ties to the Marist and Dominican charisms. She then served as editor of Aurora, the award-winning monthly magazine of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, Australia. She is an active parishioner involved in adult faith formation and a freelance writer.]

Guadalupe and the hope within 'Now what?'

BY ANA GONZÁLEZ | DEC. 12, 2023



Bronze relief of Juan Diego at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City (Molly Brockwell)

On my way home in the Boston transit system after a long day, I sat next to a woman who had worked 12 hours and just had a bad day. I looked at her and smiled, allowing an invitation to tell me all about her experience. "It's been a 'Now what?' day," she said. It all started when she set her phone to charge, but the plug did not connect to the wall, so her phone alarm did not sound. She woke up late, and ran behind all morning, arrived late to work and received her first warning. On the way home, her car died. She had to take the bus home. "Now what?" she exclaimed. Sitting with her, I could not help but offer an ear and a little prayer. As I bid her farewell and wished her the best, she said she looked forward to getting home and sleeping in a warm bed. She was confident that tomorrow was going to be a better day.

On this feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, I cannot help but think of the central Mexico community that Juan Diego called home, an area that experienced more than its share of "now what" moments. Before the arrival of the

Spaniards, Juan Diego had experienced 47 years of familiar and comfortable traditions and beliefs — a sense of "normal." When the Spaniards colonized Mexico in 1521, Juan Diego was part of a cultural apocalypse — his lived experience and set of beliefs flipped upside down, and a new community and culture emerged. The phrase "culture shock" does not begin to describe it. In the 10 years after the colonization of Mexico, Juan Diego experienced the rise of a new culture, war, famine, sickness, and the death of his wife and loved ones. To make matters worse, his only surviving relative had caught a plague probably brought by those same Spaniards.

History tells us that colonization of the Americas featured many acts of evil, notably disrespect of the sanctity of all creation, dehumanization, and unnecessary killing. But at the same time, signs of light could be found. A humanist spirit was present amid the chaos in La Nueva España, led by the Franciscans, Augustinians and Dominicans. Voices such as Bartolomé de Las Casas, Antonio de Mon-

tesinos, and Martin de Valencia called for accountability and the need to respect the sanctity of the lives of the Indigenous. I am sure that Juan Diego saw the worst and best of the human spirit during colonization. I also think that Juan Diego and the early converts to the Catholic faith must have experienced a fraternal approach from the early missionaries. A little light shone amid all the "Now what?" moments.

For Juan Diego, Advent 1531 was a time of mourning the past and coping with an uncertain present. At the least expected moment, Juan Diego received his own "Now what!" In a second, the extraordinary beauty of a song and an unseasonable landscape interrupted an ordinary walk to church. All Guadalupanos know the story of the Nican Mopohua, where unpredictable circumstances surpass the imagination. In this extraordinary interaction with the divine, Our Lady of Guadalupe would summon a simple, colonized, and childless widower as a messenger.

The interaction with Our Lady of Guadalupe transformed Juan Diego. His beliefs moved from the known to the embodiment. When he accepted his mission to carry the message of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Juan Diego moved beyond doubts and insecurity. He gained the courage to do something unexpected; knowing that Our Lady, his mother, walked at his side, always.

In that season of Advent of 1531, Juan Diego never imagined that he, of all people, would be at the center of this message of hope. In his "Now what?" moment, Juan Diego took a risk. Filled with trust in God and Our Lady of Guadalupe, Juan Diego moved forward holding onto the divine gift of love and hope. Moved by Our Lady of Guadalupe, Juan Diego's faith became a radical gift for all of us.

Our Lady of Guadalupe highlights the will of God for the salvation of the Indigenous, mestizos, and all. Her message in Nahuatl, her profound symbolism and image reminds us of the dignity and sacredness of all of people. Mary, the mother of our church, drives home the invitation that all of us are beloved of God: the oppressed, the forgotten, the marginalized, those who keep asking, "Now what?" We are the people of God. We are entitled to God's abundant love. Somos El Pueblo de Dios, y Guadalupe es Nuestra Madre.

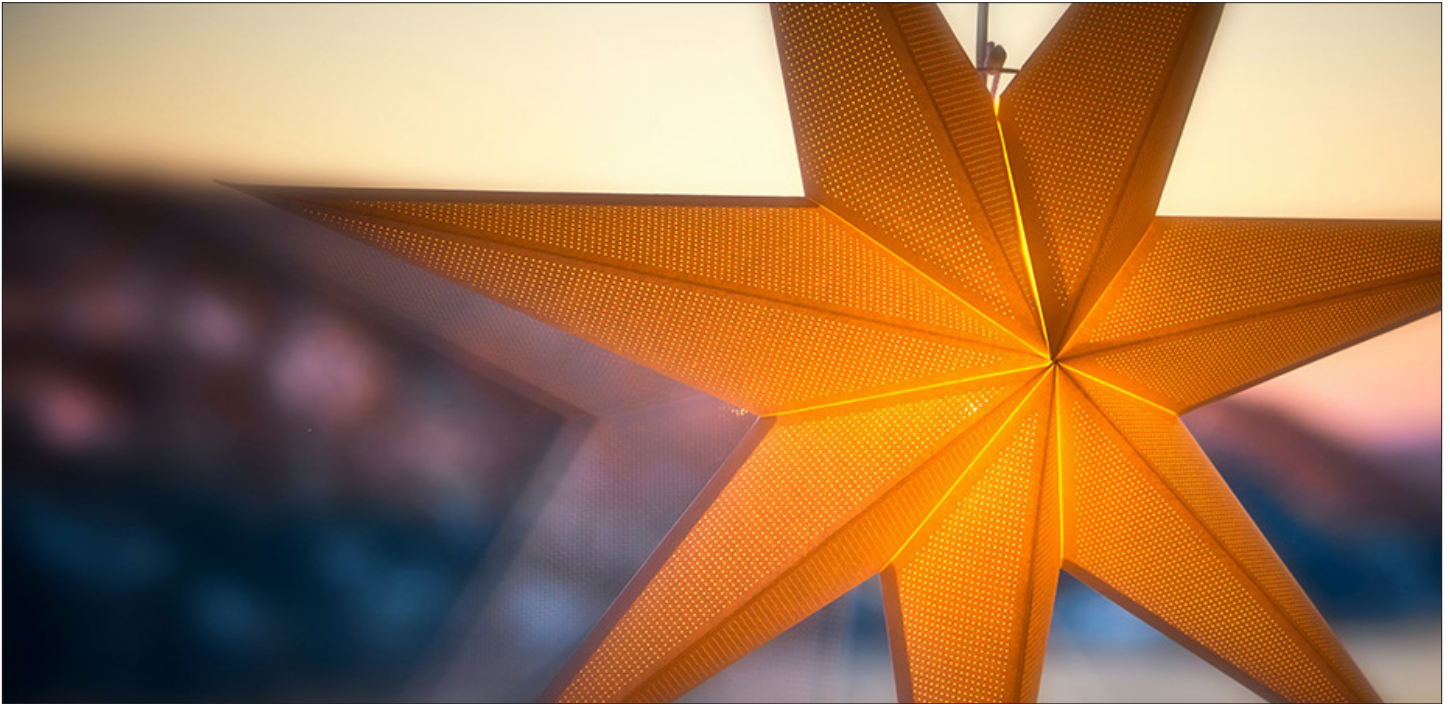
Our Lady of Guadalupe gives witness to the miracle that the ordinary can be extraordinary. During the season of Advent, Our Lady of Guadalupe points to our limitless God, one that does not fit within our human limitations. I think of the lady that I met on the bus, the people facing a hard day, those displaced by war or natural disasters, and all of us — as we ask "Now what?" — we are invited to hold on to the message of hope shared by Our Lady of Guadalupe. This Advent, our "Now what?" includes living the virtues of Advent: hope, peace, joy and love. Like Juan Diego, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe propels us to proclaim the greatness of God and the salvation of Jesus. May our spirit rejoice in God our savior now and forever. ¡Y Que Viva Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe!

[Ana Gonzalez is a Dominican Sister of Peace who grew up in El Paso, Texas. She first met the Dominican sisters while studying in New Orleans, and made her final vows in 2021. She serves as coordinator of international admissions and Latino outreach at Albertus Magnus College, a founded ministry of the congregation.]

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/259876.

An indwelling of the Spirit of Jesus resides in you and me

BY KATHLEEN FEELEY | DEC. 13, 2023



(Unsplash/Vidar Nordli Mathisen)

Over the hillside country Mary went,
Carrying Christ.
And all along the way the Christ she carried
Generously bestowed his grace on all she met.
She had not meant to tell she carried Christ.
She was content to hide his love for her,
But all about her glowed such joy
That into stony hearts love flowed,
And even to the unborn John,
Christ's grace was sent.

Long ago, I learned by heart this stanza of a longer poem by Ruth Mary Fox. It flows through my mind in sync with my steps every Advent. I can imagine the faith-filled, newly pregnant young Mary walking the hills to visit her older cousin, Elizabeth. Who could she tell about her extraordinary experience but one who had also been visited by God?

The God within so filled her being that she spread joy all about her.

"Over the hillside, Mary went." One realizes the power of

poetry.

That womb presence of Jesus in Mary occurred once in human history. But an indwelling of the Spirit of Jesus resides in you and me. After Jesus the Christ returned to his Father, he kept his promise not to abandon his followers. He bestowed his divine spirit on his Apostles, visible as tongues of fire. Since that day, the abiding spirit of Christ dwells in every believer. The Holy Spirit within us is the source of our unending joy.

Abbot Dom Columba Marmion an Irish Benedictine monk who was a prominent writer and teacher at the turn of the century, was abbot of several Benedictine monasteries in succession. He raised the spiritual level of each monastery by his kindness and deep spirituality. One of his most valued books, *Christ, the Life of the Soul*, is a permanent classic. He caught the wonder-filled concept of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in these simple, glowing words: "Joy is the echo of God's life within us."

"Joy is the echo." One believes in the power of language.

In a universal application of the deep meaning of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, theologian and scientist Franciscan Sr. Ilia Delio, expands its meaning in her 2021 book, *The Hours of the Universe*. In a chapter titled "Eucharist and God's Love," she muses: "You are infinitely near us, O God, within us, among us — the depth and breadth of our very existence. ... In you, who is the Whole, we know ourselves to be whole. When you are present, we are one. ... Only when we move toward one another do you emerge as the center of our lives."

The concept of reaching out to one another because we believe in the indwelling of God in all of us and in all of creation is one of Delio's contributions to a new theology of the universe. She states:

Always present, faithful, and empowering in love, God is absolute oneness in love and will not rest until we are joined together fully in love — not just every person but the whole world, the planet, the galaxies, the entire universe—when God is all in all, bound in a single embrace of love.

"A single embrace of love." One honors the power of contemporary theology.

Flannery O'Connor, the Catholic writer who lived most of her life in Georgia, usually created stories based in her Georgia milieu. She wrote only one story with a Catholic setting. It was published in May 1955, in *Harper's Bazaar*, and titled "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." (In that era, the translation of "Holy Ghost" had not yet become "Holy Spirit.")

The story tells of a weekend visit of two 14-year-old cousins to the home of an adult cousin who lives in a nearby town with her 12-year-old daughter. The girls are attending a Catholic boarding school. At dinner the first night, the two teenagers start acting silly, calling each other "Temple One" and "Temple Two." Questioned, one responded, still giggling, that Sister Perpetua had instructed them that, if any young man tried to take liberties with them, they should say, "Stop, sir. I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!" And they laughed and laughed.

The mother didn't laugh. She called them "pretty silly. After all," she said, "that's what you are — Temples of the Holy Ghost."

At the table, the child was listening. "I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost, she said to herself, and was pleased with the phrase. It made her feel as if somebody had given her a present."

The next day, to entertain the guests, the mother called a friend and asked if her two grandsons would take the girls

to the country fair that evening. They came with mouth organ and guitar and sang religious songs (they were going to be Church of God preachers) as love songs to the girls. The girls responded with "Tantum Ergo" in "convent-trained voices." One of the boys, perplexed, called out, "That must be Jew singing."

The child, not included in the gathering, but listening, became incensed that an ancient Latin hymn celebrating the Eucharist was used for entertainment. She shouted, "You big dumb Church of God ox!" and stomped away.

The story moves on, hilarious, but deeply serious, as it illuminates the child's belief in spiritual realities. Just as the presence of God in the Eucharist has been real to the child since her First Communion, equally real is the presence of God within her — that she has just learned that weekend.

The story, with more complications that cause the child's belief to deepen, ends after the mother and child take the girls back to the convent school. They are just in time for afternoon Benediction. "You put your foot in their door and they got you praying, the child thought." But when she saw the glowing monstrance before her, she put aside her "ugly thoughts" and "her mind began to get quiet and then empty."

Back in the car and on the way home, "The child's face was lost in thought." She looked out the car window:

The sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood and when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees.

One feels the power of storytelling.

Poetry, language, theology, storytelling — all illuminate a deep Advent truth: each of us is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Over the hillsides of our lives, we can, as Mary did, carry to others the love and grace that only God can bestow.

[Kathleen Feeley, a School Sister of Notre Dame, served as president of College of Notre Dame of Maryland (now Notre Dame of Maryland University) 1971-92. She has taught college, high school and elementary students. After her college presidency, she taught literature in India, Australia, China, Japan and Ghana. Feeley has a master's degree in English from Villanova University and a doctorate from Rutgers University. She now teaches at Notre Dame of Maryland's Renaissance Institute, which serves lifelong learners over age 50.]

Advent reflections from Bedouin hospitality

BY JULIA HURTADO | DEC. 20, 2023



A Bedouin shepherd watches his flock in the Judean Desert. (Courtesy of Julia Hurtado)

Here we are in Advent, the time of waiting, reflecting and preparing for Jesus' birth. I can't help but be amazed by the scenery as we drive in the Judean Desert to visit the Bedouin camps. We see many sheep and one or two young shepherds with their flock. I love seeing the shepherds guiding their sheep and goats. Just a couple weeks ago, the desert was dry, but with two days of light rain, the brown desert is showing signs of life; the brown has turned green as dormant seeds sprouted overnight with just a bit of water from heaven. I think of the dormant seeds in our souls during this Advent and how, like the desert seeds, new growth comes with prayer and God showering us with his love and blessings.

Here we are in the late autumn season. It's a time when it gets dark early, and the days are colder. It feels like a reflection of the times; so much darkness and violence in our world. It's a time when we need the Light of Christ, the Peace of Christ, to see others as brothers and sisters.

As I reflect on my ministry with the Bedouins, the people of the desert, I feel blessed to use my nursing skills to help them. At times, I have made recommendations for some to go

to the hospital or to a doctor. Some do, but others say they can't afford to go to a doctor or afford medical tests, X-rays or MRIs. I am delighted to say that some patients have followed my recommendations. For example, there is one woman, a diabetic, whose blood sugar was very high, sometimes over 300.

Sr. Expedita, a Camboni sister, translated for me, and we did some diabetic teaching. We explained different foods that would affect her blood sugar levels, taught her about her medication, and explained what happens when blood sugar levels are too high and how it can harm the body. She said she understood, and I am thrilled that her blood sugars have been within the normal range the last two times I visited.

We sat in an open wooded temporary covering outside her one-bedroom aluminum and plywood home. The other little building was a kitchen for cooking and making hubus shrak — like an extra-large tortilla, their staple food. Before I had finished, her daughter brought us some very hot sweet tea with sage, as they always do. We sat on the cushions and talked about her health, some of their concerns and the beau-



Sr. Julia Hurtado (second from left) poses with Camboni Srs. Expedita Pérez Leon, Lourdes (Lulu) Garcia Grande, Lorena Sesatty Saenz and Cecilia Sierra Salcido on El Montar, the highest hill, with the Dead Sea in the background. (Courtesy of Julia Hurtado)

tiful scenery. I said that I love being in the desert, seeing the open space and the hills in the distance, and I especially love seeing the animals.

A short time later, her son herded three little kid goats, about a week old, to where we were sitting. I was surprised, and I grinned. True to their culture, even the animals were welcome to their home. Then her grandson brought in a little kid goat whose front legs were deformed and could barely stand. He must have been only a few days old because he still had a small dried piece of the umbilical cord.

The boy carried the goat gently and close to his chest, then placed it right in front of me so I could get a closer look. He was a beautiful little boy with bright eyes and a big smile. He knew their animals and which needed more care. This scene touched my heart deeply and has been in my prayers this week. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). All I could think about was this boy's innocence, his pure spirit of caring for this animal that would die without his love and attention. I thought of our merciful God, his tenderness, and his complete and utter love for his flock; everyone is important and loved unconditionally.

This little goat could easily get separated from the flock, and I could picture this little boy returning to pick him up and carry him back home. Just as Jesus told us in the parable of the lost sheep, as Jesus would leave the 99, so this little shepherd boy would do the same and go after the one who needed him the most. "And when he finds it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices" (Luke 15:4-5).

Each of us is like that little kid, being held and carried by a loving, joyful God who rejoices when we are found and who also weeps when we are hurt or suffering. I can't help but think of all the people affected by the war and all who are being killed and suffering horrific, untold pain and hardships,

trying to cope with loved ones who were killed, so much hunger and thirst, and also those who are being held hostage.

When the people talk about the pain of seeing what is happening, they say, "Ya Rab! Ya Allah!" ("My Lord, my God!") The most common expression among Christians and Muslims is "Al-hum-du-lilla – Praise be to God/Allah." It is said when life is good, and one thanks God for everything, and even when life is terrible and people are in the midst of suffering, it is always Alhumdulilla. Its meaning is embedded in their very souls, even children say Alhumdulilla. It means thanking God because he loves, protects, created, has mercy, is all powerful and knows each one of us. The phrase is even more powerful than death itself; if someone dies as the tears roll down their cheeks, they say Alhumdulilla because God/Allah is greater than death, and they have gone to God, the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep.

Finally, as we prepare for Jesus' birth, I have come to understand why the first people to hear the Good News of Jesus' birth were the shepherds — the Bedouins, people who open their hearts and homes to all. I have seen a strong connectedness with the earth and all the creatures and animals. In Luke 2:8-20, we read:

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

I like to imagine that not only the shepherds but their wives went with them to Bethlehem to help a young woman (as they still do today) who had just given birth. They were the first to see the beautiful face of baby Jesus, the Messiah, our Emmanuel. "Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them" Luke 2:20.

My prayer is that during this horrific time the Prince of Peace may bring peace to his homeland and peace throughout the world.

[Julia Hurtado, a Mexican American from Los Angeles is a Sister of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary who began ministering in the Holy Land in early 2022. She holds a bachelor's in nursing and a master's in ministry in a multicultural church. She worked as a registered nurse in hospitals and served as a community nurse case manager for families with HIV/AIDS. She also served about 10 years as a vocation director.]

Advent brings a clarion call to straighten the crooked ways of our life

BY MOLLY FERNANDES | DEC. 21, 2023



National Highway 66 in Goa, India (Wikimedia Commons/Rajaramraok)

It was indeed interesting to witness the hustle and bustle along National Highway 66 in Goa, India, as Goa hosted the 37th National Games. Potholed roads were carefully repaired. Moreover, the persistent stench in the fish market, which often gave splitting headaches, vanished!

Roads and streets preparations to welcome the delegates and the nation's leader were underway, closing the highway for hours to eliminate obstacles on the roads, with speed breakers. To my surprise, all this was done with eager anticipation for the arrival of the expected guests for the sports event.

My mind sensibly noted the extensive preparations to welcome and please earthly leaders and dignitaries of the states, who are mere human creatures. I pondered how much more preparation would have been necessary to receive the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, who didn't even have a decent place to be born, and no one offered

their rooms!

The 2,000-year-old story is not old and outdated but ever new and ever happening, taking birth here and now on the streets, in slum areas, market places, outside the balconies of our houses, convents or buildings, and on the outskirts and the peripheries of the world. To receive an earthly leader of the nation, the state invested crores of rupees and many hours of work.

The words of the prophet Isaiah kept ringing in my ears (40:3-4):

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord!
 Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!
 Every valley shall be lifted up,
 every mountain and hill made low;
 The rugged land shall be a plain,
 the rough country, a broad valley.

This Scripture was fulfilled by the local government and continues to haunt me in the Advent season.

Indeed, it is a clarion call to straighten the crooked ways of our life, including rational assumptions and presumptuous thinking. We are called to straighten perverse attitudes and inadequate behavioral patterns of communication, addressing situations with those working for us or under us in the various departments.

Furthermore, there is a need to straighten the warped or broken relationships in our families, communities, presbyteries and society.

As we await to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we hear again an echo from Isaiah's words in John's Gospel, where the Baptist preaches, asking the crowds to prepare the way for the Messiah by straightening the crooked paths of their lives.

Then, we hear the call again (Luke 3:1-20) during his preaching, when people asked John for guidance. He advised: "Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages." To the tax collectors he said: "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed." He instructed the crowds to bear fruit and share their goods with neighbors. This was John's way of saying: Straighten your crooked ways!

On our own, we cannot straighten the crooked paths or ways of our lives, but the powerful intervention of God in our lives can work wonders, as exemplified in the lives of Matthew, Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman and others in the Scriptures. Their stories serve as a motivating force, urging us to examine those areas in our lives that need our attention.

Our crookedness or faults, failures and inordinate behaviors, pointed out by our colleagues, friends or family members in moments of anger, call us to straighten our paths. The letters of St. Paul are tools for us to reflect on our ways, to choose the fill up the potholed spaces and walk straight.

In our pursuit to straighten our paths this Advent season, we are called to wait upon the Lord, much like the

aged Simeon and Anna in the Bible. They waited for years with eager expectation and their desire was fulfilled. The season of Advent prepares our hearts to receive the Messiah gracefully.

We don't need to wait for God to act, but we need to play an active part, like Isaiah advises to "widen the space of your tent" (54:2). To widen the space requires accepting our shortcomings, making the choice to give up our old ways, and cleaning the dirt or the murk that stains our soul.

I need to do my part, just as space was made to take shelter in the stable. Joseph "widened the space" — cleaning up the mess and freeing space. This involves addressing the mess in relationships and clearing the collection of unwanted garbage stored in our hearts and minds.

In media language, it would be akin to "formatting" as even our gadgets call for freeing space! Therefore, I must ask, is there space in my heart or is it cluttered with worldly concerns, clutter that calls for unloading, letting go, formatting?

As we approach the celebration of the birth of Jesus, I realize that just as speed breakers were leveled and the highway roads were made straight for the delegates and dignitaries to pass by, the prophet Isaiah calls us to mend our crooked ways and, by our way of life, be a forerunner to our lay collaborators, neighbors, workers, family and our members with whom we live.

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Christmas in the ecozoic era

BY MUDITA MENONA SODDER | DEC. 25, 2023



Sr. Mudita Menona Sodder created the icon “The Cosmic Christ” in 2020. The piece, which took eight days to complete, represents the belief that all are icons of God, crafted in His image. The process emphasizes the profound spiritual significance of this representation of the second coming as the Cosmic Christ in all His splendor and glory. (Mudita Menona Sodder)

We live in the toughest, most challenging times in human history, and our humanity is studiously on the wane. With the collapse of the global industrialized civilization, speaking the unvarnished truth, we all need to release the inner gorilla; and hunger for wholeness. In today’s age of the image, scarred by wars, climate change and religious fanaticism, embracing struggle and walking with hope is the need of the hour.

Ecology is the new theology today, and theology is all about relationships. There is a close relationship between the universe and all of us. How we live the present moment this Christmas in today’s gun culture, global climate change and religious disharmony is vital. We all need to be a pillar of focus about reality and accept fragility and the possibility of death with sacredness. We also know that evolution wants humanity to learn to achieve a critical mass of predicament consciousness. We thus need to serve life, which is precious. For this to materialize, we all must experience life to grow in these enigmatic-laden times. The guiding force or the right direction then becomes the practice of compassion toward

each other, all sentient and non-sentient beings and life. Love in action will then have to be our working guide.

Janet Erskine Stuart, a Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, once said, “The way to do much in a short time is to love much. People will do great things if they are stirred with enthusiasm and love.” We know that ideas are bullet-proof, spirituality is our true nobility and we are all aristocrats born of the inmost ground of divinity. Mother earth, our common home, can no longer wait for us to remove our shoes and recognize that we live on holy ground. Can we dare to follow the methodology of love this Christmas by removing our shoes of greed, ignorance, individualism, consumerism and apathy? We all stand on holy ground, living off each other. In the web of life, we are all dependent on each other — sharing, sacrificing and reaching out to others in need, a bonded duty toward society.

Perhaps somewhere, somehow, we have simply lost direction. And yet, we all know that we can change direction and veer on to the right path. Our knowledge and resource-

fulness as an earth community are phenomenal! Christmas is a call, an invitation and a challenge to interior conversion, communal transformation and external revitalization, letting go, to let emerge and to re-create. Knowing our responsibility as co-creators with God, we know that we have to work from within the recent horrors of war, climate chaos and destruction to birth into being a new creation. Inclusive love that is ready to suffer and surrender is the only response. We all know that this, in essence, is the true meaning of the paschal mystery and Christmas.

Crisis is an opportunity, and survival trumps bickering and war. Regeneration can restore our broken and wounded planet. We need to unleash the transformative power of communal wisdom to gestate, incubate and cultivate deep listening within our mega-galactic planet. This will need an action plan for the world to come together, end the climate crisis in one generation, and put life at the center of every decision we make.

This will demand lifestyle changes. A minimalistic lifestyle, or at least a lifestyle of moderation, will then become necessary. Solar farms and green energy, stopping/cutting down fossil fuels and food waste and geoengineering are the keys to stopping out-of-control warming. Turning apprehension into action by getting involved and searching for solutions is important. Uruguay, for example, produces 98% of its electricity from renewable sources.

Thinking out of the box, being innovative and more flexible this Christmas, can we buy less and make do with what we have? Reducing beef, cheese and milk consumption, can we help even in a minuscule way? Modest portions of meat like chicken often produce less greenhouse gas than vegetarian diets. Our health will be better with no

red meat. Global biodiversity will rise. Insects like bees and butterflies will increase and help pollination, and in turn, crops will produce a higher yield. Regenerative techniques to preserve the soil, and more connection with our clothes for value and longevity will show us the right direction, give us purpose and lead us along the right pathway. We have to stop our insatiable buying, our throwaway culture and our seeds of conflict.

We humans have erased half the planet in the last 200 years. What we need now is reciprocity. Can we begin to stitch together the patchwork of living entities by connecting to each other this Christmas? Happy generative Christmas 2023, planting seeds of understanding and building compassionate human communities of living hope.

[Mudita Menona Sodder of Mumbai belongs to the Indian Province of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Presently the JPIC coordinator of the Indian Province for her congregation, for the past 10 years, she has been an active member of the Justice Coalition of Religious, president of Fellowship of Indian Missiologists, and has been engaged in full-time eco-spirituality work: retreats, conferences, seminars, and similar activities. Her academic background was in history, sociology, and anthropology, and she did 50 years of teaching and administration as a teacher, social worker, guide, principal, manager and adviser, with much experience in faith-based justice work and religious life.]

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/260656.

Parallels between Christmas and Holy Week narratives in the Bible

BY NAMEETA RENU | DEC. 26, 2023



“The Holy Women at the Tomb” by Dutch painter Jan Baptist Weenix (Artvee)

Local churches in Asia are in great need of peace amidst challenges faced in our multireligious and multicultural contexts. The haunting memory of the 2008 persecution and displacement of tens of thousands of Christians in Kandhamal lingers not only in that region but also in other places.

Hence, I felt hopeful when the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences released its Bangkok Document in March, titled “Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia ... ‘and they went a different way’ (Matthew 2:12).” This document advocates for renewal through discernment of new pathways. Meditating on the words, “a different way” from this Gospel verse, has given me a lot to reflect on.

To begin with, I feel amazed how the prophet Micah (5:2) points to the birth of Jesus: “O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be the ruler of Israel.” So, too, the Magi from the east see his star rising and follow it — journeying all the way to Judea in search of him (Matthew 2:1-2). As the news of their arrival spreads, King Herod feels threatened and calls them in secret to gather more info, asking them to report to him with good news after they’ve found him and

share the location so he, too, can worship the newborn Messiah. I wonder why he doesn’t send spies to follow them instead!

Anyway, to his great shock, the wise visitors bypass him by taking “a different route” back home after being warned in a dream not to return to him (Matthew 2:3-12). Of course, they don’t have smartphones and internet to use GPS or have their location tracked by the local authorities. They do seem well-connected with the divine, though. Not only the Magi but even Joseph is instructed in a dream to flee with his family from Herod by taking “a different route” leading to Egypt instead of his hometown (Matthew 2:13). The massacre of innocent infants that follows is harrowing:

A voice was heard in Ramah,
sobbing and loud lamentation;
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she would not be consoled,
since they were no more (Matthew 2:18).

Pondering deeper on these biblical passages, I realize that the baby boy’s life is in danger even while he’s asleep



"The Adoration of the Magi," by Italian painter Gentile da Fabriano. The painting is housed in the Uffizi Gallery, Galleria degli Uffizi, in Florence, Tuscany, Italy. (Dreamstime/Gianni Tonazzini)

or crying in that humble manger in Bethlehem. The familiar Christmas crib with the little one wrapped in swaddling clothes (Luke 2:7) and the wise visitors offering him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11) reminds me of a parallel Holy Week scene when Jesus is wrapped and buried in a tomb after his early death as a young man (Matthew 27:59-61), and the wise women go to anoint his body with spices (Mark 16:1-2) because both myrrh and spices are used for embalming bodies after death.

These infancy and Resurrection narratives in the Gospel of Matthew seem like a sandwich with a deeper message. Jesus is very special to the wise men (Magi) and the wise women as they search for him. They seem to have similar personalities and sense of discernment. Both see Jesus and worship him. Both receive instructions regarding the direction in which they must journey because of the possibility of attacks by enemies of the Messiah (Matthew 2:11-12; 28:9-10).

Hereafter, the Magi return to their gentile nations, Joseph is further guided to move to Galilee, a land of the gentiles (after returning from Egypt) and, after the Resurrection, the apostles too are directed (away from Jerusalem) to Galilee where they had first encountered Jesus and will receive the great commission to reach out to all the nations (Matthew 28:16-20).

However, compared to the Gospels of Luke (2:7) and Mark (16:1-2), Matthew paradoxically fails to mention wrapping with clothes in the infancy narrative but includes them in the death and Resurrection narrative and omits myrrh in the death and Resurrection narrative while including it in the story of his infancy. What is his intention? Perhaps he is subtly pointing to a connection between these two phases of Jesus' life for a community going through a crisis, as it is becoming increasingly gentile in its membership because of the rejection of Jesus by the Jews.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, the apostle emphasizes the divinity of Jesus Christ and the importance of not losing the Jewish traditions. By inserting the infancy details about the quest of the Magi from gentile territories of the east, which mirror the events at his death and Resurrection, Matthew not only wants to show that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament but wants to convey that the people of other nations have also been awaiting the coming of Jesus Christ. He uses midrash in the infancy narratives, which have a close resemblance to incarnation stories found in various other religious traditions of the east and west.

In the context of increasing intolerance between various religions, I strongly feel that we as Christians and persons in consecrated life, especially missionaries, need to introspect and find "a different way" of seeing various religions in relation to our own.

Moreover, since colonialism of the past has left deep wounds on the psyche of our country, we desperately need to develop a postcolonial theology that respects the ray of truth in various other religions — as also mentioned in *Nostra Aetate*, a declaration of the Second Vatican Council. Unfortunately, ideological polarization within the church all over the world is making certain sections of the local Christian community seem to be part of the problem of fundamentalism and communalism rather than part of the solution to peace and the reign of God.

That said, somehow, I've never been able to separate the meanings of Christmas-Epiphany and Holy Week narratives in the Bible. One always reminds me of the other. Both bear the mystery of suffering and God's intervention, which offer courage and hope during ordinary times of the liturgical year as well as our personal moments of crisis.

Thus, Matthew, the apostle, tries to show that the community is trying its best not to break from Judaism but is justified in doing so as it widens the horizon of its mission to communicate the Gospel to include the gentiles. In this endeavor, he offers assurance that Jesus is always with the suffering disciples and to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

[Nameeta Renu is a member of the Order of Consecrated Virgins in Bombay. She has studied the pastoral care of liminal migrants and refugees, and has a doctorate in theology on spiritual guidance and integral formation based on viriditas (greenness) in the spirituality of St. Hildegard of Bingen. She has published articles on consecrated life in various newsletters and theological journals.]

A taste of Christmas in Hawaii, Filipino-style

BY TERRI LAURETA | DEC. 27, 2023



A plate of pancit canton is pictured. On special days like Christmas, pancit was a favorite holiday dish that Terri Laureta's aunt would make, a savory combination of egg noodles, rice noodles, meat and vegetables. (Flickr/Joost Nusselder, BiteMyBun.com, CC BY 2.0 Deed)

"Can you cook? Everybody from Hawaii knows how to cook!" people from the continental United States would often exclaim to me. Well, I don't possess any remarkable culinary talents, but I am grateful for others that have that gift and graciously share it.

When I was 9 years old, my parents decided that I was going to learn how to cook — by myself. All alone in the kitchen, I decided to create "deviled eggs," because the cookbook was not a Filipino cookbook. Not aware of the quantity that a dozen eggs would yield, I boiled all 12. My efforts yielded a total of 24 "deviled egg" halves, to be served at a meal for three people. To make matters worse, I had added too much salt, resulting in eggs that were difficult to eat. My parents ate their fill of the eggs, as though nothing was wrong. I'll never forget their loving acts that day.

Although I was not the prize cook of the family, my father was an outstanding chef. My father had been a

cook during the war. It was in these circumstances that he learned to cook for many hungry soldiers. Our family consisted of my father, my mother, and myself. Therein lay the problem. My mother was neither a cook nor an enthusiastic eater. That left me to taste, eat and appreciate my father's "army" portions — rice, meat or fish, and an assortment of Filipino vegetables, often accompanied by the delicious Haden mango for dessert.

Dad took an instant liking to the electric wok, and cooked everything in it, from fried rice, to scrambled eggs, to chicken hekka, and more! When I was already in the convent, he insisted on giving me an electric wok, which then traveled from Hawaii to Central New York. Being a father's daughter, I eventually became enthused over the potential of the electric wok. After the standard experiments, I decided to cook a pineapple upside-down cake in the wok for Christmas dinner. The ingredients were scrumptious, with pineapple slices, walnuts, cherries, brown sugar and a "butter batter"! The "baking" was suc-



Terri Laureta celebrates her father's birthday upon arriving from Syracuse, surrounded by friends and relatives at their home. The image is approximately 40 years old. (Courtesy of Terri Laureta)

cessful. The faux pas was my not remembering how heavy the wok was, how really heavy the cake was ... and how difficult it was going to be turning the wok and the cake right side up! I tried, I really did. The cake did not make it. It fell off the tray, onto the counter, onto the table, onto the floor. I believe I learned my lesson.

I vividly remember one Christmas when my parents decided to celebrate with one of my 12 godfathers at one of the island's pineapple plantations, leaving the house saturated with the unforgettable aroma of garlic. He had cooked pork adobo. Adobo is pork, beef, or chicken marinated in soy sauce, vinegar, garlic, ginger, and peppercorns. Then it is deep fried. To this day, the scent of these ingredients transports me back to that joyous Christmas celebration!

However, my Aunt Rose was undoubtedly the culinary maestro of our family. She achieved prestige during her days in a village in the Philippines for her exceptional cooking and served hearty meals to soldiers visiting the village. One of her more common dishes was *dineng-deng*: the base of the dish being "bagoong," which is a sauce made from fermented anchovies. To this base are added chicken, pork or fish, and lots of different vegetables: tarong (eggplant), saluyot (spinach), marunggay

leaves, sweet potatoes, squash and bitter melon as some of the common vegetables. With this dish is served white rice. On special days (like Christmas) a favorite holiday dish made by my aunt was *pancit*, a savory combination of egg noodles, rice noodles, meat and vegetables. This Filipino dish is often likened to the popular Chinese dish called *lo mein*.

When Aunt Rose relocated to Hawaii, she continued to showcase her culinary prowess. She would enlist her brothers to climb coconut trees, providing her with fresh coconuts to create delicious desserts for special occasions.

It was always a treat visiting my Aunt Rose, especially when she baked Portuguese sweet bread. Baking Portuguese sweet bread takes a lot of time and effort, but my aunt was a hard worker. One day, my aunt was going to bake a large amount of bread. Those of you who bake bread know that unbaked bread takes at least two times to be kneaded and allowed to rise. Well, Portuguese sweet bread needs three times to be kneaded and allowed to rise before it can be baked.

The rising bread sat on the dining room table that morning, waiting for its final rising. In my eagerness, I hit one of the pans of dough, which fell to the floor. I quickly picked up the pan and stuffed the dough into the pan, patting the edges so that it looked like the other pans of dough. I was so anxious about the outcome of that particular loaf I could hardly concentrate on my schoolwork. St. Martha, the patron saint of cooks, was good to me that day. The bread turned out very well, despite several creases in its otherwise smooth surface. Auntie Rose made no comment.

My memories of Christmas in Hawaii are filled with love, heritage and the joy of sharing food and love around the table. Each dish made by my father and my Aunt Rose holds a special place in my heart, reminding me of the simple pleasures that make this season truly special.

[Terri Laureta traveled from topside Molokai in Hawaii to enter the Sisters of St. Francis in Syracuse, New York (the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities). With an academic background in music with a concentration in church music and liturgy, she ministered in several Catholic churches as music director. She currently serves as music director at her residence, the Franciscan Villa in Syracuse. She is also a professional artist.]

This Christmas season, consider that 'hope is the memory of the future'

BY NANCY SYLVESTER | DEC. 28, 2023



(Depositphotos.com/MattLphotography)

Christmas lights sparkle through the neighborhoods. Christmas music fills the stores. Wrapping paper and ribbons create festive gifts. Parties are planned. Families and friends gather. It is the Christmas season once again.

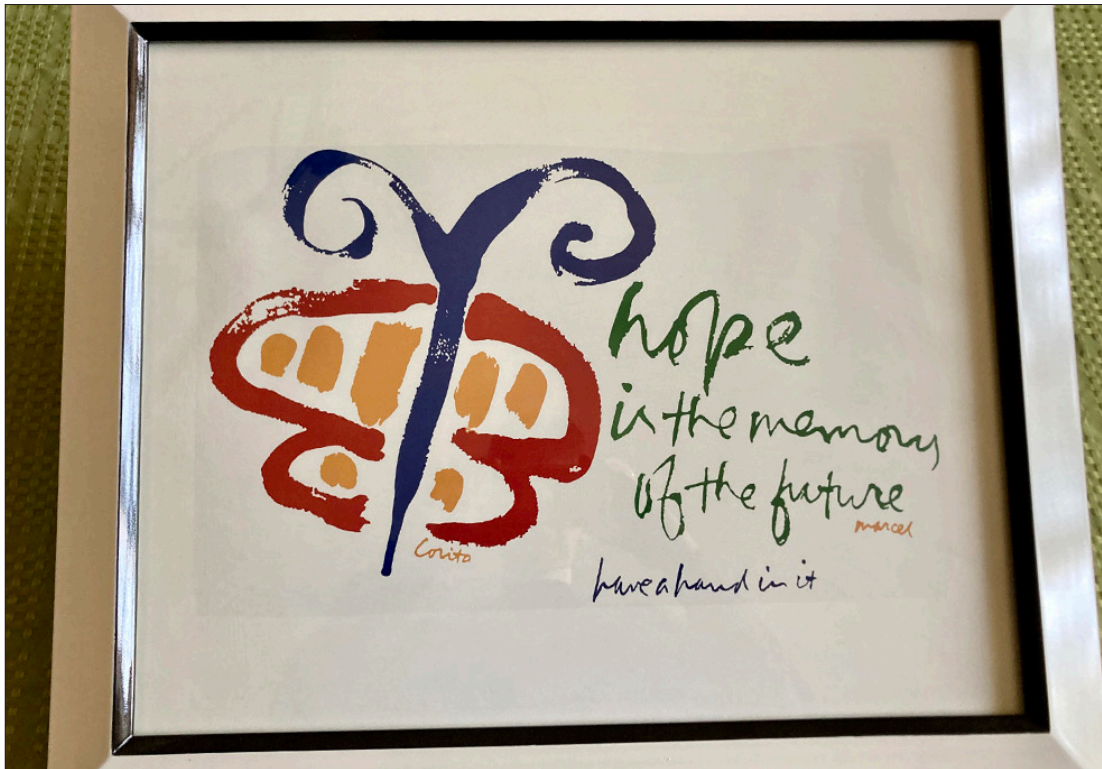
As preparations for Christmas begin earlier and earlier what is becoming more overlooked is the season of Advent. It is a quieter time; a time of waiting; a time to prepare oneself. Advent invites us to reflect on the historical birth of Jesus and the future yet to be — the second coming. Advent is a time of hope.

Given the world we live in “hope” is certainly needed. We are surrounded by violence among nations and within nations, hunger and famine, the dislocation of thousands of people now refugees in search of a new home. The anger and negative rhetoric that fill the airwaves also create a sensation that that is all there is. Why wouldn't

you imagine the future reflecting a dystopian perspective where there is great suffering and injustice?

And yet, Advent is a season of hope celebrating a historical moment and a yet-to-be cosmic event. Advent invites us to reflect on the insights of our ancestors in faith and continue to deepen that experience, freeing us to encounter anew the gifts of the Incarnation and the second coming.

The Scripture readings in Advent are filled with the prophet Isaiah's hopeful vision, beautifully expressed in images and words that stir our hearts with possibility. We hear: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again” (Isaiah 2:4); and “Justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips. Then the



Artwork by Corita Kent reads "Hope is the memory of the future ... have a hand in it." The poster was given to Sr. Nancy Sylvester by Kent's Immaculate Heart of Mary community in Los Angeles. (Courtesy of Nancy Sylvester)

wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them" (Isaiah 11:5-6). Psalm 85 poetically captures that vision: "Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss."

For the Hebrew community, Jesus embodied that vision. He became God's love incarnate.

There was a deep understanding that the Divine and the human were connected; that God was personal and intimate, as well as transcendent and omnipotent. Decades after Jesus' death the priests and scholars would debate how this could be and over time they articulated within the philosophical and theological framework of their historical time that Jesus was both human and divine.

The religious imagination offered us a sense of that intimate, loving God in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth. We are brought into the birthing room where Mary delivers the infant Jesus to the world. We can sense his vulnerability, his innocence, his beauty. He grows up and the Gospel parables, sermons and miracles reflect and amplify the prophetic hope of the prophets. We even witness Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Unjustly accused, we sense the agony of a mother, friends and followers. Jesus,

divine love incarnate, has lived and died.

The situation seemed pretty dire after Jesus' death and yet there was an impulse, a mystical knowing that divine love was still present and, in fact, would come in fullness at the end of time with the second coming.

Today, over 2,000 years later, we continue to remember the birth of the historical Jesus and celebrate it at Christmas. However, the very world in which Jesus lived we now understand in new ways thanks to the James Webb telescope, the insights of evolution, quantum physics, the development of consciousness and other social sciences. These insights reveal to us that we are all interconnected across space and time, that evolution continues, and that this next emergence is dependent on our consciousness — a consciousness that for Christians involves putting on the mind of Christ or Christ consciousness. What each of us chooses to do affects the future. The Incarnation of divine love continues through us and the second coming depends on us continuing to live the prophetic vision fulfilled in Jesus. The "hope" of the future is emerging as we remember Jesus' life and choose to live accordingly.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest, evolutionary thinker, paleontologist, mystic, and theologian lived

from 1881-1955. He understood the implications of these scientific shifts in relation to our faith. He also understood the suffering and horror of war having been a stretcher-bearer in World War I. His writing poetically gives voice to a renewed understanding of the Incarnation and the Second Coming; of the experience of the vastness and intimacy of God; of the hope that is calling us from the future.

Teilhard writes:

- God is as pervasive and perceptible as the atmosphere in which we are bathed. He encompasses us on all sides, like the world itself. What prevents you, then, from enfolding him in your arms? (The Divine Milieu);
- We shall never know all that the Incarnation still expects of the world's potentialities (The Divine Milieu);
- We are inevitably approaching a new age, in which the world will throw off its chains and at last give itself up to the power of its inner affinities. Either we must doubt the value of everything around us, or we must utterly believe in the possibility, and I should now add in the inevitable consequences, of universal love (Human Energy);
- As the transformation follows its natural line of progress we can foresee the time when humanity will understand what it is, animated by one single heart, to be united together in wanting, hoping for, and loving the same things at the same time. The humankind of tomorrow is emerging from the mists of the future, and we can actually see it taking

shape: a super-humankind, much more conscious, much more powerful, and much more unanimous than our own (Toward the Future).

Advent affords us the time to remember the birth of the historical Jesus and to remember his life as showing us how to live. In that memory is hope, a hope that finds its fulfillment in the yet-to-be cosmic event — the second coming. A poster of Corita Kent's captures this as well. She says: Hope is the memory of the future ... have a hand in it.

This Advent and Christmas season take some time to ponder both the Incarnation and the second coming through the lens of these words. Let them stir your heart. Then deepen them through your contemplative practice. Our future is in need of us. May we all have a hand in creating it.

*[Nancy Sylvester is founder and director of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue. She served in leadership of her own religious community, the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan, as well as in the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Prior to that she was National Coordinator of Network, the national Catholic social justice lobby. ICCD is beginning its third decade with new resources and programs. For information go to www.iccdinstitute.org. Her new book, *Journey-Faith in an Entangled World* is now available.]*


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