



Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns



Advent

REFLECTION GUIDE
PREPARING THE WAY

2023

“

God, grant us the grace to work tirelessly for justice, solidarity and peace, so that all your children may enjoy the freedom to choose whether to migrate or to stay

”

Pope Francis

A group of camels resting in a desert landscape. The camels are lying down on the sandy ground, some with colorful saddlebags. The background shows a vast, open desert with some rocks and a clear sky.

First Sunday of Advent

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down
ISAIAH 64:19

The text of the prophet Isaiah that we read on this first Sunday of Advent comes from the third part of the book of the prophet. This section is written since the return from exile and the restoration of Israel.

This was a challenging period for the people since, upon their return, they were not entirely welcomed by those who stayed, and it was not easy for them to reestablish themselves.

Here, the “messianic hope” is born, with the dream of a land where everyone can live, a universal peaceful coexistence between all creatures.

In the paragraph read today, we could interpret that the people have not been faithful, which is why God punished them with Exile and the difficulties they now encounter. The prophet tries to bring comfort and hope to a God who never abandons.

To understand the urgency and importance of that consoling message, we must remember the history of this town.

The people of God have migrated to Egypt in time of famine. There, they prospered and grew, but simultaneously, they were enslaved. God sent Moses to free them, and they began migrating toward the promised land again. While in their land, after fighting to recover it, they were constantly invaded by different peoples and even experienced exile and the destruction of their temple. The Persian king allowed them to

return to their land, and they set out again. When they arrived, they were discriminated against, and it became challenging to establish their roots and reconstruct the city and themselves as a people. Throughout history, and even today, the experience of conquering the land, or suffering its usurpation, continues to be a drama for this region.

Today, we see many migration processes worldwide, for various reasons. Some must leave their land for economic reasons; others must leave as refugees due to violence, wars, or persecution. Many others, increasingly, must migrate for ecological reasons – climate change – or because they live in areas damaged by extractive industries.

People who migrate today have the same experiences as the people of the Bible, whom Isaiah tries to encourage while he nourishes messianic hope.

Therefore, when we hear Jesus inviting us to be alert and attentive, we cannot help but wonder what we should pay attention to today.

Indeed, we are invited to discern the causes that instigate the experience of migration. Humanity must ask itself what changes we should make to build a peaceful coexistence with all human beings and with creation. Finally, we are invited, as missionaries, to bring the same message of hope that the prophet, with his preaching, and Jesus, with his actions, brought to us. ■

- by Father Alejandro Marina, M.M.

Questions for Reflection

In what ways is God inviting you to be alert and attentive to the world around you?

What gives you hope for peaceful coexistence with all people and creation today?

Readings

Is 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7 | 1 Cor 1:3-9 | Mk 13:33-37

Lighting the candle

One purple candle

We light this candle because, like God's people centuries ago, we need a Savior who will forgive our sins and restore our hearts.

Prayer

O God, open our eyes so that we may see the needs of others; Open our ears that we may hear their cries; Open our hearts that we may feel their anguish and their joy. Let us not be afraid to defend the oppressed, the poor, the powerless, because of the anger and might of the powerful. Show us where love and hope and faith are needed, and use us to bring them to those places. Open our ears and eyes, our hearts and lives, that we may in these coming days be able to do some work of justice and peace for you.

Amen.

- *The Sabeel Center, Jerusalem*

Response

Take action to support democracy in Guatemala, a country in crisis as corrupt officials have moved to block presidential election results and tens of thousands of migrants flee to the U.S. border each month. Ask Pres. Biden to take actions to shore up Guatemalan democracy. <http://mogc.info/GuatemalaDemocracy>

Advocate for peace in Haiti, a Caribbean country where gang violence fueled by a flow of

illegal guns from the United States drives thousands of Haitians to flee the country each month. <http://mogc.info/HaitiPeace>

The number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people around the world is at a record high. Learn what is causing people to flee their homes, from where refugees are coming, the top hosting countries, and much more at the UN High Commission for Refugees website. <https://mogc.info/UNHRC>



I always wanted to do this work [providing aid to refugees]. I grew up in the nice suburbs. My father had a great job. We never wanted for anything. I wanted to use what I had to help other people. Not just to give them things, but to help them help themselves.

The best people in the world I've ever met are religious people, people who sacrifice for others. I've been fortunate to cross paths with so many of them over the years, and this place is no different. They strengthen my faith. I don't have a parish. My Eucharist is giving food to the hungry and starving. To me that's the Eucharist.

- Father John Barth
Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers



Second Sunday of Advent

Comfort, give comfort to my people says your God.
ISAIAH 40:1

I see three distinct themes in our readings for today: comfort, preparation of the ‘Way’, and the promise of something better as we walk into the future.

God asks through Isaiah that we give comfort to God’s people. Later we are told to speak tenderly to God’s people as we listen to the voice that cries out in the desert: a voice that lifts its song in lament but hope.

In Psalm 85 we are invited to walk along the path, preparing the way for the coming of the Lord, and experiencing what realities lie on the way. We are called to journey and to discover truth, kindness, justice, and peace.

And finally, in Mark’s gospel, we are entrusted with making the path, the way for God, straight. A path leading to a new heaven and a new earth; one free of injustices, violence, injury, and falsehoods.

As I still myself to reflect on the challenge of these readings today, while working at the border of Guatemala and Mexico in the southwest of the country, I see the thousands of migrants from all over the world passing before me. A steady, unrelenting stream of God’s people needing comfort, crying out in the wasteland for a new home free from poverty,

violence, and despair. As the migrating families make their way north to the United States, I pray that our simple actions here at St. Mary’s Hospice can bring some comfort to God’s people. We pass out a care package of soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes, diapers for the babies, sunblock against the searing sun, rubber sandals to protect feet from the scorching tarmac roads, bottles of fresh drinking water, and sweet cookies for the children.

Like never before, the gospel speaks to us of our role in preparing the way for the coming of Emmanuel, God with us. We need to speak out in truth and justice to those who would receive the Lord; those who will receive the migrants. We need to renew our baptismal promises to work always for a better world where everyone is welcomed, and all are recognized as God’s people. Mary and Joseph started on the path and prepared the way for the birth of their Son, the chosen one. Their legacy lives on in all the migrants who leave their homeland and struggle to make the path straight for their children and grandchildren. Let us all join the migrants in spirit; let us comfort them as they look for their new heaven on this earth. ■

- by Sister Dee Smith, M.M.

Questions for Reflection

How is God calling you to prepare a way for God to be with us?

What does a world where everyone is welcomed look like to you?

Readings

Is 40:1-5, 9-11 | 2 Pt 3:8-14 | Mk 1:1-8

Lighting the candles

Two purple candles

We light these candles because, like God's people centuries ago, we need a Savior who will forgive our sins and restore our hearts.

Prayer

Merciful God,

We pray to you for all the men, women and children who have died after leaving their homelands in search of a better life. Though many of their graves bear no name, to you each one is known, loved and cherished. May we never forget them, but honor their sacrifice with deeds more than words. We entrust to you all those who have made this journey, enduring fear, uncertainty and humiliation, in order to reach a place of safety and hope. Just as you never abandoned your Son as he was brought to a safe place by Mary and Joseph, so now be close to these, your sons and daughters, through our tenderness and protection. In caring for them may we seek a world where none are forced to leave their home and where all can live in freedom, dignity and peace.

- Pope Francis

Response

Consider answers to tough questions about immigration provided by the U.S. Catholic Bishops
<https://www.usccb.org/migrationministries>

In my experience as a boarding school teacher of secondary school girls in Tanzania, I was often responsible for discipline, and mercy was always a challenge for me. The school community has rules, and when those rules are not obeyed, consequences follow. But the many times when the rule-breaker threw herself at my feet begging for mercy, that is when I felt conflicted. So many questions would rush through my mind. Do I show mercy or do I stick to the rules? How does my decision affect the rest of the community? What ought to be the relationship between mercy and law? What is fair? How do I decide?

It seems like I can see others experiencing the same inner turmoil when looking at the situation of migrants and refugees these days in Europe and at the U.S. southern border. I suppose there are some people who wish ill, but I am sure there are many more who feel inclined towards mercy, and yet are conflicted on what to do. It is obvious that we, the United States, and other governments need systems changes and immigration reforms, and we, each one of us, need to advocate and work toward this. In the meantime, in our day-to-day living, what do we do now?

- Sister Darlene Jacobs
Maryknoll Sisters





Third Sunday of Advent

I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul.
ISAIAH 61:10

Eating locusts and grasshoppers, wearing camel skins, preaching repentance, living in a desert among wild animals, and facing a gruesome death aren't images that provoke joy. Yet today's readings, connect John the Baptist to joy. Advent joy, which asks us to step back and reflect on a different path to rejoicing.

I think of Gilberto who I know from Casa Betania, an immigrant shelter in Mexicali, Mexico, where I've been working for the past year. Tall, blond hair, blue eyes, from the Mexican cattle country of Durango, Gill fled due to his profile. A drug cartel asked him to transport drugs into the United States. They told him his complexion benefited him, made him more passable. They'd give him all he needed – driver's license, car, documents. He refused. Another chance: lots of money. He refused again. Last chance: do it or die. To save himself he had to lose himself; he fled to Mexicali, leaving behind two teenage sons.

He found work at a recycling company that lasted four months. He went out on a truck at midnight to round up cardboard and finished around 9 a.m. He came to Casa Betania for breakfast. Gill told me that when cardboard is abundant, his round doesn't finish until 1 or 2 in the afternoon. On such days, he arrives for the afternoon meal and makes \$15 for thirteen or fourteen hours of work. "That is a good day," he said wholeheartedly.

When I saw him for breakfast, his earnings were only half that. "Not a good day." But he took it and

often ate leftovers found in cardboard boxes so he could send money to his family.

One afternoon, he arrived at Casa Betania and gave me a pineapple. Other than a few rust spots, it was in pretty good shape. I tried convincing him he needed the vitamins more than me. "I need grace more than vitamins." He stared me down, eyes as big as craters shining with the truth that we are never more human than when we give.

The last time I saw Gill he told me he was returning to Durango. I tried persuading him to see an immigration lawyer, apply for asylum in the United States. He shook the words off, saying he needed to be with his family.

In just a few months, it felt like Gill had become a lifelong friend. His predicament could have made him ask: how can there be joy in a world so full of violence? Yet, despite everything, he is filled with joy, imbuing a well-ripened truth: "It is not joy that makes us grateful, it is gratitude that gives us joy." (Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast)

As I cut the rind from his pineapple, I thought of how Gill often whistled the song *De Colores*. The words filled me as I ate: "All the colors, all the colors, oh how they dress up the countryside in springtime... And that's why a great love of the colors makes me feel like singing so joyfully."

And I give thanks for Gill's friendship. ■

- by Richard Dixon, Maryknoll Lay Missioner

Question for Reflection

How is God calling you into a deeper experience of giving and gratitude during this season?

Readings

Is 61:1-2a, 10-11 | 1 Thes 5:16-24 | Jn 1:6-8, 19-28

Lighting the candles

Two purples candles and one pink

We light these candles because, like God's people centuries ago, we rejoice in the coming of our savior.

Prayer

Merciful God,
Our history as human beings, and even before, has been a history of life on the move. As your sons and daughters, we continue to search for a place to sleep, food to eat, and families and communities to support us.

We are a people on a journey.

We are grateful for the earth that sustains us, but we do not always take time to thank you. Also, we lack compassion for our brothers and sisters who have been uprooted by violence, natural disasters and poverty.

Help us to remember that we are always on a journey with them and with You, to a new way of life in abundance.

Amen.

- Father Paul Masson, M.M.

Response

Tell Congress: Pass the Protect Vulnerable Immigrant Youth Act to move these young people out of a backlogged U.S. visa category and into a safer, more secure legal status. <https://mogc.info/IYA>

Join the Catholic Church in creating a culture of welcome for all migrants in the U.S. through the Justice for Immigrants Campaign. <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/>



Living in El Paso, at a crossroads of the United States and Mexico, is excruciating.

I hear, see and feel the suffering of people who flee for their lives, who flee to protect their children's lives, and have a door slammed shut in their faces. As an immigration attorney, I meet people who pour out stories of torture, police violence, government threats and extortion, and people who talk about the dangers of waiting in Juarez to present their cases. Then my heart breaks again and again each time I hear that a government authority decided that they are not in danger, they do not "deserve" asylum, they are not our problem.

Humanity is resilient, though, and people continue to hope against all odds.

Solidarity and faith-based actions for justice inspire people to protect God among us by putting water in the desert and sheltering the homeless. Thousands of volunteers give time and love, countless others pray for justice and love, and only God knows how many contribute money to support organizations that fight for justice and organizations that shelter and feed the migrants. We don't give up. Our job is to open the door, to welcome the stranger, to give our child a fish and not a snake. We believe in hope and in justice.

- Heidi Cernaka
Maryknoll Lay Missioners



Fourth Sunday of Advent

"Here I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent!"
2 SAMUEL 7:2

When Mary got the news of the incarnation, she ran to her cousin Elizabeth, who welcomed her with even more good news. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the unborn baby inside her moved, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Are we not all cousins? Saint Paul constantly reminds us that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, through the good news of the coming of Christ.

The two women met and rejoiced together. Whenever Christ is present, joy blossoms. With Christ, even in a Christmas without gifts, joy blossoms. With Christ, even in a winter with economic inflation, joy blossoms. With Christ, even in a family experiencing turmoil, joy blossoms. And what do we do with this joy? Elizabeth welcomes Mary a bright smile, with open arms. What a marvel!

How do we welcome the immigrants among us? How do we serve the immigrants among us? With open arms? With a smile? Do we make an effort to learn their languages? Some of us put them on the periphery. We know that they are there, we just pretend not to see them.

God speaks to us through King David, saying, "it was I who took you from the pasture and from the care of the flock to be commander of my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you went, and I have destroyed all your enemies before you." Do these words sound familiar to us? It is God who brought us here through our fore parents. It is God who gave us the ability to work, earn and develop this nation. We

must extend the generosity and the welcome to others. Extend our helping hand and make them stand on their feet. They have already suffered enough, let us not make their burden heavier.

The same God of residents and citizens is the same God of the immigrants. The word of God that reaches us says :

"The Lord will establish a house for you, for me, for all God's children, (for all the immigrants). And when your time comes, and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your heir after you, and I will make their kingdom firm. Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever."

But it is through you and me that this shall be realized. It is through you and me that the Lord finds a shelter for immigrants. It is through you and me that the Lord feeds God's children. It is through you and me that the Lord protects God's children.

Let us all encounter the body of Christ on the periphery. Let us embrace the living body of Christ, left under the bridges. Let us open our doors for those knocking for a meal, a coat, a shower, a glass of water. It is you and me whom Christ must use to reach our brothers and sisters, joining us from afar. Do not oppress a stranger. Remember, you were once strangers too.

May the joy Christ born to us blossom among us, our neighbors, and to all those who love Christ. May the joy of Christmas dwell in us, for ever and ever. ■

- by Deacon Joshua Maondo, M.M.

Questions for Reflection

Tell a story of a time when you felt joy despite hardship.

How is God calling you to welcome others?

Readings

2 Sm 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16 | Rom 16:25-27 | Lk 1:26-38

Lighting the candles

Three purple candles and one pink

We light these candles because, like God's people centuries ago, we trust in the coming of the Messiah.

Prayer

Creator God, your loving care is a home for all. No one is a stranger to you. With your generous blessings, watch over migrants and all who leave their homes to escape oppression, poverty, persecution, trauma and violence. Help us to also be sources of blessings through our acceptance and valuing who they are as persons eager for wholeness of life.

Creator, you taught us to welcome all. Help us to remember that the land we call ours is a gift to be cared for and a gift to be shared with all who come. May we be open to all those searching for a safe and peaceful life.

R: Help us to pour out your love and compassion to all our brothers and sisters.

- Sister Elizabeth Knoerl, M.M.

Response

Follow the Vatican's website on migrants and refugees, to join the Church's efforts to ensure that those forced to flee are not left behind.
<https://migrants-refugees.va/>



For a long while, I had been anxious to be more actively involved in border ministry. Then, Venezuelans began to arrive by bus in Chicago in very large numbers. The border was now here. The city-run shelters soon filled and the overflow asylum-seekers were sleeping on local police station floors. That's it. For those in the police station, the city provides NOTHING – no food, no bedding, no change of clothes, nothing. The migrants, mostly Venezuelans, stay in the station until a space opens up for them in a shelter.

Through a connection with Catholic Workers, I joined an ad hoc group forming on a WhatsApp chat to meet the needs of the migrants sleeping on the floor of a Chicago police station less than a mile from our house. Over the last several months, I have been deeply involved with the group and have been able to make further connections, not only with our local Catholic parishes, but also with other faith-based organizations and individuals, to assist in the ministry.

- Celine Woznica
Maryknoll Affiliate

About this resource

In this Advent Reflection Guide, we offer reflections, questions, prayers, and actions based on each week's Scripture readings in light of Catholic social teaching and Maryknoll mission experience. Use this guide individually or in small groups to reflect upon your life patterns, to pray more deeply, and to renew your spirit to face the realities of our world.

Cover image: Photo of Advent wreath by KaLisa Veen via Unsplash <https://unsplash.com/photos/7bLgllTvnXQ>

Quotes from Maryknoll Missioners are from the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns online Scripture Reflection series and Maryknoll Affiliate blog posts.

First Sunday of Advent: Photo of camels in Negev, Israel by James Ballard on Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/photos/aJNyKBJVUqI> Photo of Father John Barth, MM holding mass in Ugandan refugee camp courtesy of the author.

Second Sunday of Advent: Photo of Sister Dee Smith, MM, delivering aid to migrants on the Guatemala-Mexico border courtesy of author. Photo of Sister Darlene Jacobs, MM, from the Maryknoll Sisters website.

Third Sunday of Advent: Photo of pineapples for sale by Antonella Moltini via Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 https://www.flickr.com/photos/profondo_rosso/19537343596/ Photo of Heidi Cernaka courtesy of Heidi Cernaka.

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Photo of mother holding disabled child by Father John Eybel, MM. Photo of Celine Woznica with students from Guatemala, public posting via Facebook <https://mogg.info/Celine-Woznac-Photo>

About us

The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns (MOGC) represents Maryknoll missioners, who are Catholic men and women serving in impoverished communities around the world. The MOGC provides analysis and advocacy on issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation that affect the countries and communities where Maryknoll missioners serve.

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