

Theme for Advent: “Locating Our Lives in the Abandoned Places of the Empire”

Nov. 27, 2016

First Sunday in Advent

About the Theme

A big thanks goes out to Wes for bringing the idea for our theme. It comes from a book, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, that was produced by a network of communities across the US that are part of what is often called, the New Monasticism. But read below in their own words the purpose behind their book as well as a description of the theme and a general note regarding Advent.

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This prayer book is the result of a collaboration of people from many different branches of Christianity, all of which come from one trunk — if you trace the branches all the way back.

Folks are bound to ask if this prayer book is for Catholics or for Protestants. Our answer is, “Yes, it is.” We want the fire of the Pentecostals, the imagination of the Mennonites, the Lutheran’s love of Scripture, the Benedictines’ discipline, the wonder of the Orthodox and Catholics. We’ve mined the fields of church history for treasures and celebrated them wherever we’ve found them. We’ve drawn on some of the oldest and richest traditions of Christian prayer. And we’ve tried to make them dance. Our prayer lives connect us to the rest of the body of Christ around the world; at any hour of any day, many of the prayers in this book are being prayed in some corner of the earth. Using these prayers is also a way of connecting ourselves to the past; we’re talking about the greatest hits not just from the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s but also from the 1800s and the 300s. Many of these prayers and songs are more than a thousand years old.

Excerpt From: Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove & Enuma Okoro. Available for download at: *Common Prayer*. iBooks. https://itun.es/us/q2_gx.l

Everything in our society teaches us to move away from suffering, to move out of neighborhoods where there is high crime, to move away from people who don’t look like us. But the gospel calls us to something altogether different. We are to laugh at fear, to lean into suffering, to open ourselves to the stranger. Advent is the season when we remember how Jesus put on flesh and moved into the neighborhood. God getting born in a barn reminds us that God shows up in the most forsaken corners of the earth.

Movements throughout church history have gone to the desert, to the slums, to the most difficult places on earth to follow Jesus. For some of us that means remaining in difficult neighborhoods that we were born into even though folks may think we are crazy for not moving out. For others it means returning to a difficult neighborhood after heading off to college or job training to acquire skills — choosing to bring those skills back to where we came from to help restore the broken streets. And for others it may mean relocating our lives from places of so-called privilege to an abandoned place to offer our gifts for God’s kingdom.

Wherever we come from, Jesus teaches us that good can happen where we are, even if real-estate agents and politicians aren’t interested in our neighborhoods. Jesus comes from Nazareth, a town from which folks said nothing good could come. He knew suffering from the moment he entered the world as a baby refugee born in the middle of a genocide. Jesus knew poverty and pain until he was tortured and executed on a Roman cross. This is the Jesus we are called to follow. With his coming we learn that the most dangerous place for Christians to be is in comfort and safety, detached from the suffering of others. Places that are physically safe can be spiritually deadly.

One of the best stories of community in the United States comes from the backwoods of Georgia. In the 1940s, long before the civil rights movement had begun to question the racial divisions in the South, white folks and black folks came together to start Koinonia Farm — a “demonstration plot” for the kingdom of God, as they called it. Koinonia survived attacks from the Ku Klux Klan in the ‘50s and ‘60s, tilling the soil and sowing seeds for God’s movement in the least likely of places.

A Note on Advent

Advent, meaning “the coming,” is a time when we wait expectantly. Christians began to celebrate it as a season during the fourth and fifth centuries. Like Mary, we celebrate the coming of the Christ child, what God has already done. And we wait in expectation of the full coming of God’s reign on earth and for the return of Christ, what God will yet do. But this waiting is not a passive waiting. It is an active waiting.

As any expectant mother knows, this waiting also involves preparation, exercise, nutrition, care, prayer, work; and birth involves pain, blood, tears, joy, release, community. “It is called labor for a reason. Likewise, we are in a world pregnant with hope, and we live in the expectation of the coming of God’s kingdom on earth. As we wait, we also work, cry, pray, ache; we are the midwives of another world.

Just as red, white, and blue have meaning in the world (as in “These colors don’t run”), colors also have meaning in the church (though a different sort of meaning, needless to say). Advent is often marked with purple, signifying royalty; in earlier times, purple often marked the coming of a king or Caesar. (Often, members of the royal family were the only people allowed to wear it.) Many Christians celebrate advent by lighting a purple candle each week for the four weeks

leading up to Christmas, and then lighting a “Christ candle” (usually white or red) on Christmas Eve.

As you will note in the morning prayers, many Christians also remember St. Nicholas, who was a faithful man of God before he was a cultural icon. Today, the season between Thanksgiving and Christmas that many of us recognize as Advent is the biggest frenzy of retail spending. More than half of it, hundreds of billions of dollars a year, is spent as we celebrate the birth of the homeless Son of God in that stinky manger. (And he got only three measly presents. One of them was myrrh. What baby wants myrrh?) Hundreds of Christian congregations are now rethinking the Advent season as a time for compassion rather than consumption.

(Check out www.adventconspiracy.org)

Modern Day Saint: Charles de Foucauld (1858 – 1916)

While working in the North African desert after a dishonorable discharge from military service, Charles de Foucauld was impressed by the piety of Muslims and experienced a dramatic recovery of his Christian faith. He spent a number of years in a Trappist monastery before hearing the call to a new monasticism among the working poor.

“I no longer want a monastery which is too secure,” he wrote. “I want a small monastery, like the house of a poor workman who is not sure if tomorrow he will find work and bread, who with all his being shares the suffering of the world.”

Though Foucauld died in solitude, the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, inspired by his life and witness, have started communities of service among the poor and outcast around the world.

May we cry the gospel from the rooftops: both with our words and with our lives

A Prayer for Ourselves

Charles de Foucauld prayed:

“Father, I abandon myself into your hands, do with me what you will. For whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all, I accept all, let only your will be done in me, as in all your creatures.”

Sometimes, Lord, it takes witnessing another person’s commitment for us to realize our own lack of faith. Open our eyes to learn, even from strangers who inhabit other faith traditions, what it means to be committed to you. Amen.

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you: wherever he may send you;
may he guide you through the wilderness: protect you through the storm;
may he bring you home rejoicing: at the wonders he has shown you;
may he bring you home rejoicing: once again into our doors.

Excerpt From: Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove & Enuma Okoro. “Common Prayer.” iBooks.
https://itun.es/us/q2_gx.l

Suggested Reading for the Month

- *Sayings of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman
- *The Beloved Community* by Charles Marsh

Suggested Scriptures

These readings can be used throughout Advent in your time of reflection and prayer:

Luke 6:26-35

O Lord, let my soul rise up to meet you
as the day rises to meet the sun.

Glory to the Creator, and to the Redeemer, and to the One who Sustains us,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Come, let us bow down and bend the knee: let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

May we cry the gospel from the rooftops: both with our words and with our lives.

Psalms 8:4 – 7

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers:
the moon and the stars you have set in their courses,
what is man that you should be mindful of him?:
the son of man that you should seek him out?
You have made her but little lower than the angels:
you adorn her with glory and honor;
you give her mastery over the works of your hands:
you put all things under her feet.

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Isaiah 1:1 – 9

2 Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. 3 The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." 4 Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him. 5 Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. 6 From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness— only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with olive oil. 7 Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers. 8 Daughter Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city under siege. 9 Unless the LORD Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.

May we cry the gospel from the rooftops: both with our words and with our lives

Luke 6:26

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. 27 "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you. 32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.